

New Life in Christ - Ephesians 4

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Preacher: Dan Oosthuizen

[0 : 0 0] chapter 4 and we'll start at verse 17 and we'll go all the way down to chapter 5 verse 2. So Ephesians 4 17. So I tell you this and insist on it in the Lord that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity with a continual lust for more. You however did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught with regard to your former way of life to put off your old self which has been corrupted by its deceitful desires to be made new in the attitude of your minds and to put on the new self created to be like God in true holiness and righteousness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor for we are all members of one body.

In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer but must work doing something useful with his own hands that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling and slander along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God therefore as dearly loved children and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

May God bless the reading of his word. So as I was preparing for today by looking through the text I was reminded how easy it is for us to misjudge something that's right in front of us. So I was reminded years ago, you believe this or not but it's true, I used to work in a funeral home and on one particularly wet day I was attending a grave site and there was a group of men over to one side of the cemetery on this wet day trying to use a cloud of cigarette smoke as an umbrella apparently and all of a sudden one of them slipped on the wet limestone and upended himself 180 degrees. So being the closest person to the group I walked over to see if everything was okay and without missing a beat one of the man's friends said, yeah he's grand sure he only landed on his head.

So it's a funny story but when I reflect on it now I often wonder if the man's friends appreciated the severity of how that situation could have developed. So this guy slipped, took a blow to his head, the sensitive part in his body and the first response of his friends was to make a joke out of it.

Now when we look at logically I don't think a head injury or a potential head injury is something we necessarily joke about but I think there are times when we can all misjudge a situation where we can see a situation or look at something or read something, we can misinterpret it and therefore we can apply it in a way that's counterproductive or even dangerous. So when we look at the text this morning my prayer is that first of all as we look at what it means to live this new life in Christ that we wouldn't misjudge that, that we'd take it for what the text says it is, that I would preach the full counsel of God as I do so and that the Holy Spirit would quicken the meaning of the text to our hearts and our minds. So rather than telling you all the background of the text we're just going to dive right in and as we go along I'll explain. I'm not going to read out every verse as we go, I'm just going to allude to most of it so you can just follow along in your own Bible. Verse 17 says, so I tell you this and insist on it in the Lord that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do in the futility of their thinking. The most interesting thing about that verse is Paul's audience so he's written here addressing the readers of the text not to live like Gentiles and the text is written to Gentiles.

[4 : 34] So if you have a King James or a New King James it'll say the other Gentiles are the rest of the Gentiles but the point is the same. He's talking to a group of Gentiles not non-Jews and he's saying no longer live like Gentiles. So it really captures this point that if you are in Jesus Christ you don't belong to the Gentile world, you belong to the family of God. So back in chapter 2 Paul wrote that while the Gentiles had been separated from Christ and excluded from the promises of God, because of the work of Christ on the cross you who were once far away have been brought near.

God spoke through the prophet Hosea and said I will say to those called not my people, you are my people and they will say you are my God. And in Romans 8 that we looked at this morning we're told that by the Spirit we have been made children of God and therefore we are co-heirs with Christ in his kingdom. Belonging to the family of God according to Paul isn't a question of having the right skin color, it's not a question of having the right social class, it's not a question of having the right education or the right upbringing. If you come to God through Jesus by the power of his Spirit regardless of where you come from you are part of God's family. So with that in mind Paul moves on and he exhorts the believer to no longer live as the Gentiles do. In verses 18 to 19 we're told exactly how they live. We're told that they have hard hearts, they've lost all sensitivity, they live for sensuality, they embrace every kind of impurity and they continually lust for more.

It's not a great list really is it? It's not the most encouraging thing you read in your New Testament. In his usual direct way Paul is describing the opposite of godly living. What each of these descriptions has in common is something very simple. They all involve focusing not on other people but focusing on yourself and making an idol out of the things that you want in your life.

So if you think about it, if I have no sensitivity I don't care about other people. If I'm concerned with sensuality I only want what brings me pleasure. If I desire every kind of impurity I'm completely taken up by what's bad for me and if I continually lust for more it's the sole reason for my being. Not serving God, not serving other people, just myself. And now I want to make this clear. Paul isn't describing every unbeliever out there. There are unbelievers who do good work for their fellow man and they seek out opportunities for service. So this isn't, if you like, a list of things of how not to get to heaven. It's simply a description of the opposite expectation that God has of us when we come to Christ and we are filled with his spirit. When Paul instructs us to no longer live as the Gentiles do, he's reminding us of the expectation that God has of us. When we say we follow Jesus, we cannot also follow our baser fleshly instincts. To borrow the language of 1 John 2, we cannot chase after the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life, and call ourselves children of God. If we do chase after those things, friends, we don't know God and God doesn't know us. So okay, thanks for that, Paul. I'm nice and encouraged now. We can get on with the rest of the day. But how do we really know whether or not we are God's people? Well, in verse 20, we read that we did not come to know Christ in that way. In what way? Obsessed with how God can be a ticket to material and fleshly pleasure, and also at the same time, a ticket to heaven. On the contrary, in verses 21 through 24, Paul makes three key assumptions about those who are genuine believers in Jesus Christ. Verse 21, that we have heard about Christ, that is, we have been exposed to the gospel message, and that we have responded to it in faith. Verse 22, that we have put off our old selves, in that we have rejected those selfish passions that defined our lives prior to our response to the gospel message. And verses 23 to 24, that through a change of mind guided by God's Holy Spirit, we have put on our new self and refocused our priorities away from the selfish and towards the serving. Now, I'm probably preaching to the choir, and all of that is very familiar ground for most of you, but I just want to focus on the last point as being the most crucial one. Paul has used this analogy of putting on and putting off, or in other words, undressing and redressing. You see, once you've taken off your clothes, the generally accepted principle in our society is you can't just walk around with nothing on. You have to put something on. When you take off your old self, Paul is saying, you put on something else, and that something else is the righteousness of God that comes through

Christ, empowered by his Spirit. You know, the church doesn't like much to talk about repentance these days, and I think part of the reason for that is, for centuries, the church did such a terrible job of explaining what repentance really is. But Paul has really very simply laid out what it is in this text. He's given a very simple definition of it. Literally, repentance, metanoia in Greek, means to change your mind. Or, as it says in verse 23, to be made new in the attitude of your minds.

[10:01] In Romans 12, a familiar passage to all of us, verses 1 and 2, Paul urges us not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we might prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. And Jesus himself said, if we hold to his teachings, then we really are his disciples. And that this truth would set us free from the slavery to sin. And I want to make this very clear. All of this isn't just to be penitent for the sake of it.

You know, it's not to be walking around with glum faces and sour attitudes because we're depriving ourselves of our fleshly pleasures. Because we don't judge our Christianity by how miserable that we look.

You know, that's what the Pharisees did. They fasted, and they put on sackcloth and ashes, and they went around praying loudly and fasting and saying, look at me, I'm so godly, look how miserable I am. That proves how godly I am. That's not it at all. We're not called to be dour disciples. We repent, and we change our minds, and we make a Christ-centered U-turn. Because as Paul says in verse 24, we were created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Friends, that's not a cause for misery.

That's the source for the greatest joy that you can imagine. We are created to be like God in true holiness and righteousness, and by coming to Christ and receiving the Spirit of God, we are set free, and we become the righteousness of God. It's not something we do righteousness. It's who we become by the work of Jesus on the cross. Then you have the opposite of the dour disciples, the ones who tell you, and we all know these people, the ones who tell you that Christianity is some kind of spiritual formula, some kind of pattern for success. They'll tell you that if you follow the instructions in the Bible, then you receive all sorts of material blessing. So in exchange for following Jesus, God will give you health, God will give you wealth, and God will give you happiness and success, because God wants to give you, in the words of one quote-unquote preacher, your best life now.

I didn't do the accent. I'm sure you're all thankful for that. So much has been devoted to debunking that particular strain of spiritual sickness. I'm not even going to address it. I'm just going to say this. It misses the point completely. We prove our faith in Christ not by how much treasure we have. We prove our faith in Christ by how much we treasure Christ. Christianity isn't about what we get out of God, friends. Christianity is what God gets out of us, a new creation made in his image. We were created, Paul says, to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

[12 : 54] So those are the principles. What about the practice? Well, in verses 25 through 29, Paul gives us some good guidance for specific situations, and I'd love to be able to exposit them all thoroughly and fully, but I'm sure you all want to get out of here before the sun sets this evening.

So instead, I'll just quickly explain each one, and then at the end, I'll underline why they're important. So verse 25, one example Paul gives, not simply telling the truth, but being truthful.

Live a life without deceit. Represent who you are in a true and a real fashion. As the Lord himself said, simply let your yes be yes and your no be no. Verses 26 through 27. Anger itself is not necessarily sinful. The fact that the apostle tells us here not to sin in our anger implies there is a time and a place to be angry. In other words, be angry at appropriate things. Don't be angry because you wanted to watch the soccer match, and now your toddler is throwing a tantrum, and you have to assume your parental responsibilities instead of watching 22 overpaid prima donnas pretend to be hurt for half an hour. Be angry at sin. Don't become a sinner as you get angry at it, but when people sin, pray for them.

Witness faithfully to them the gospel of Jesus Christ about how they can be set free from slavery to sin. Even witness to the prima donnas. They need it too. Verse 28, and this one's easy. If you're a thief, stop stealing. Stop robbing other people of their labors, and start laboring yourself.

Don't do it because you should provide for yourself, although you should, but because it gives you the opportunity to share what you have with those who are in need. Everything you have that you earned through your own efforts that God has graciously allowed you to keep is an opportunity or a potential for blessing somebody who is less fortunate than yourself. Verse 29, unwholesome talk. That word unwholesome, it's the Greek *sapros*. It's the same word translated as bad when Jesus talks about good fruit and bad fruit in the Sermon on the Mount. So in other words, he's not necessarily talking about swearing or curse words, although that certainly comes under it. What he's talking about is letting your words match your status as a child of Christ. So when the world looks at you, it should see a Christian, but when the world listens to you, it should hear a Christian. Your actions and your words should match up and demonstrate that you have been redeemed. You have been made new by the Spirit of Christ.

[15 : 50] Now, can you see the contrast from the beginning when Paul talked about the unbelieving Gentile? These acts of righteous behavior are all fundamentally relational. In other words, they involve relationship with other people. To do each of these things, these examples that Paul has given, requires you to focus your attention and your energy on another person. And that means Paul has framed the lifestyle that defines this new life in Christ as one which fundamentally focuses on other people. He even says it in verse 25, Speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. Verse 28, Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him work so that he has something to share with those who are in need. Verse 29, Let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building up others according to their needs, that it might benefit those who listen. So having come 180 degrees from the beginning of the text, we find that we are not to live lives of self-centeredness, seeking only to gratify our own sense of pleasure, gain or success, but we are to live lives, this new life in Christ, into which we have been set free in order to focus on other people. Connor was here a few weeks ago talking about being filled with the Spirit and what that means, I understand, and he went through each of the relationships that Paul has given as an example, each of the relationships that God created to model out the love he has for us, husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and masters.

Those are all fundamental examples of how you demonstrate that you're filled with the Spirit. It's the same thing here. All Paul is saying is, if you are filled with the Spirit, you focus on others.

As Jesus said, if you love me, you love my children. The two greatest commandments are these, that you love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and love your brother your neighbor as yourself. So we've walked the hard yards through the text, and we scale the side of the hill, and now we come to the peak of the passage. We've come to one of the most misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misapplied verses in the entire Bible, verse 30.

Rather than telling you what that doesn't mean, which could easily take me over an hour, I'll simply try and stay positive, and I'll explain its true meaning. So if you follow the logic, Paul started off this passage by describing the behaviors that Christians should avoid, and then he moved on to describing the assumptions about true Christians, before finally giving some practical guidance on what this new life looks like. And finally, Paul lands on this exhortation not to grieve the Holy Spirit. This is really the crescendo of Paul's symphony on the new life in Christ. It's the summation of everything that's gone before up to this point, and it simply means this.

If you claim to follow Jesus Christ, and yet do not submit to him in obedience, then you grieve the Holy Spirit. That's all it means. It doesn't mean some over-spiritualized, you know, otherworldly, ghostly kind of thing. It simply means if you love Jesus, you obey his commandments. If you read Isaiah 63, and you don't have to turn to it, I'll just read it out to you, you find the same phrase, grieving the Spirit. So describing God saving the Israelites out of Egypt, the prophet writes in verses 9 and 10 of Isaiah 63, in all their distress, he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy, he redeemed them. He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

[19 : 40] Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy, and he himself fought against them. This is serious stuff. To disobey the commands of a holy and righteous God is to grieve his Spirit. And to grieve his Spirit is to walk in rebellion against him. But Paul isn't just talking about the individual here, and this is the broader point. Remember the examples he gave for righteous living, how each one of them involves a relationship, or focusing on somebody else?

Well, he follows that up with reference to the Holy Spirit as a seal of redemption. And then he repeats, verse 31, those actions and attitudes which have effects on other people, bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, malice. And he gives the remedy to grieving the Holy Spirit, in verse 32, as kindness, compassion, and forgiveness for one another. In chapter 1 of Ephesians, the Holy Spirit is described as the guarantor of our inheritance. In 1 Corinthians 12, we're told that to each one has been given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. The Holy Spirit is the common bond between all believers in Jesus Christ, uniting them in faith and purpose. Friends, there's another element to grieving the Holy Spirit. We grieve his Spirit when we don't practice love for each other, for our brothers and sisters in the church. Let me illustrate by way of an example, and then we'll start to come to a close. When I was a young lad about a quarter century ago, two and a half feet and a full beard ago, my little sister and I fought constantly. We just, we were completely different. We couldn't get on the same wavelength about anything. We were constantly arguing and tearing strips out of each other. And I remember my mother telling us on more than one occasion, just how sad that made her. The fact that we weren't loving each other, and that we weren't modeling out the love that she and my father had for us to each other, was grieving her spirit. And that's what it means, to grieve the Spirit. Well, two years ago next month, my sister took her own life.

So I don't get to see her anymore. I don't get to model out love to her anymore. I don't get to demonstrate the love that my parents had for us to her anymore. And we were made family by blood. But friends, each of us in this room who follows Jesus is made family by the blood of Christ. And we're sealed by the Holy Spirit of God. When we meet together, we should grasp onto the love of God, the love that sent his son to die for our sins, and meet each other with our arms stretched out and welcoming, just as Jesus stretched his arms on the cross at Calvary. We love God when we love one another. And we serve God when we serve one another. But Dan, some might say, you don't know my relationship with other people in this church. You know, they're all so different to me, and we have nothing in common, and many of them are from other countries, and they don't speak the same language as me, and they're kind of funny looking, and they kind of smell, and, and, and, and. But, you know, listen to this.

If Jesus didn't subject himself to the full wrath of the Father, just so you and I can put up our heels, and kick back, and live the rest of our lives aimlessly in some kind of splendid isolation, he did it so that we would be co-heirs to his kingdom.

That we would be united to one another by the common bond of his Holy Spirit, and that in that unity, we would live lives that glorify him, and edify one another.

[23 : 44] As we finish, verses 1 and 2 of chapter 5 tell us, when we walk in love with one another, and we live sacrificially for one another, we follow Christ's example. Just as his sacrifice on the cross was a fragrant offering to God, Paul says, when we walk in love with one another, friends, we perform the greatest act of worship.

I love worshipping with music, I'm sure we all do, but that's one element of worship, to truly worship, as Paul says again in Romans 12, is to present your body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

The truest act of worship is when we walk together in love, and serve one another in love. There is no sweeter fragrance to the Father than when his children follow the Son in obedience, and by the power of his Holy Spirit, we walk together in love.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for the freedom that you have given us to meet together here, free from harassment, free from persecution.

We give you glory and praise for that freedom, Father. And thank you for effectually calling each one of us into the freedom of the glory of your children, as Romans 8 puts it.

[25 : 12] Grant that we would recognize what is right in front of us, that we have been saved, we have been created to be righteous and holy, as you are righteous and holy.

Quicken the meaning, Lord, of this text to our minds, and press our understanding to our hearts and to our souls. Send people into our lives, Lord, to whom we can be faithful witnesses of your gospel.

And even in this local congregation in Carrigaline and my own in Middleton, Lord, may we be presented with opportunities to serve one another. Remind us daily, Lord, of the love that sent your Son to die on the cross, and help us to remember that love as we seek to proclaim the good news of your gospel to other people.

Wherever anybody is at this morning, Lord, please meet them. Where people are feeling downcast this morning, where people are feeling alone, where people are feeling that they don't have anybody around them to lend them assistance, please be the comforter to them that your word describes you as.

Please speak immediacy into their lives through your word, and through other people who you send to them. Father, may we all recognize that we all need each other.

[26 : 38] May we all recognize that we depend on you, that your spirit alone is the source of our strength. May we acknowledge this truth, and as we leave here today and go out into the workplace, or to the school, or to the home, or wherever we're after the week, Father, may we remember that, and may we walk deeply in love for one another.

And may not our will be done, Lord, but may your perfect and good and acceptable and pleasing will be done. In Jesus' name, Amen. I believe we're going to sing one last time, and we're going to sing that wonderful song, Speak, O Lord, where we meditate on the quickening of God's word to our hearts.