

The Path of Christian Growth

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[0 : 00] I would like you to turn your Bibles this morning to Ephesians chapter 4, verse 20 through 24.

! Let me read the passage to you, and then we will pray together and study the Scriptures together. But that is not the way you learned Christ, assuming that you have heard about Him and were taught in Him as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Our gracious Father, we are thankful this morning for the blessing of your grace, and for the distinct privilege we have, those of us who know Christ as our personal Savior, to have not only the assurance and encouragement of our salvation and the confidence in our eternal destiny, but also to know the ministry of the abiding and indwelling Spirit.

And this morning, we ask that your Spirit would enable us to understand the Word, to delight in the Word, to be drawn to live out the Word, and in doing so, to exalt the Savior who is our blessed Lord and the one that we are growing to love.

We pray, Father, also this morning for those that may be among us that do not know Christ, that even this morning as we study the Scriptures together, as they have listened to us sing with the power of the Spirit of God, that their hearts would be struck by an emptiness and a fearfulness of the eternal condemnation of sin, and that they would be drawn to the cross and to the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom alone is salvation.

[2 : 28] We're thankful that the Scriptures make it clear that we are absolutely dependent upon you, and that you are absolutely trustworthy.

And so we look to you and give you glory in advance for what you will do in our lives through the power of the Spirit and the Word. Now help us in our studies.

For Jesus' sake, amen. I want you to understand that this is not the first time in history where the church has found itself faced with a mixed multitude.

And when I speak about the matter of a mixed multitude, I remind you that actually, if you were to go back into the book of Exodus, you'll remember that when the nation of Israel finally came out of the land of Egypt, it speaks of them as a mixed multitude.

Not all of them who left Egypt and were interested in moving away from that horrible circumstance and situation really had any faith at all.

[3 : 41] They were just kind of traveling with the crowd. And ultimately, over a period of time, it became quite evident that not all of them were really believers in any way, shape, or form.

Furthermore, Jesus, when He was speaking to His disciples, He talked about the fact that Satan, the enemy of our souls, actively is engaged in sowing tares among the wheat.

And while the church is obligated to work at keeping a clear testimony, nevertheless, we recognize that there will be those in every fellowship whose lips and lives do not really reflect their supposed faith.

And it was evident, as it has been evident, as we've been working our way through the book of Ephesians, that Paul was concerned about the fact that there were those who were there in the congregation who were involved in the body life of that people, nevertheless, that really were not living according to the profession that they had.

Look back, if you will, just for a moment to verse 17 of chapter 4. I read verse 20 through 24, but look at 17. Now this I say and testify in the Lord, and I reminded you last week that that's a very sober kind of a bang.

Hey, listen, guys, get this. He says, I testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their mind. He's saying, listen, don't be doing that.

[5 : 08] Your believers don't live like the unbeliever does. And so we find there in verse 17 kind of a little punch with a statement that follows, you're not to be like unbelievers.

Then he takes a number of verses to explain clearly and carefully what does the unbeliever's life really look like. And as we studied last week, we saw that the unbeliever's life is not a happy predicament.

It's complicated by sin. It's messy. It's in turmoil. It is in disarray because when a person refuses the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ, the unintended consequences of that are that life kind of devolves around that.

Now we look here in this passage and we understand that Paul is following up his teaching about the fact that believers are not to be like the unbeliever. And he explains to us there in verse 20 through 24 that while we understand the past that we came from, we need to take a look at our future.

And I want you to understand this morning that every believer, every single believer here this morning has a past. All of us have things in our past that are indicators of where we used to be.

[6 : 24] But I want you to understand while all of us have a past that reflects our pre-conversion state, every believer is also different from that past.

And that's one of the reasons why when Paul reminds the Corinthian church in chapter 6 that fornicators and adulterers and homosexuals and thieves and drunkards and all of those kind of individuals are really not going to inhabit eternity.

He then goes on to say a profoundly encouraging little statement. He says, but such were, were, past tense, such were some of you.

And our lesson today is going to make it clear that genuine conversion is union with Christ and an upward journey of faith.

I want you to have that stuck in your mind. Genuine conversion is union with Christ and an upward journey of faith. And not having that fixed in our mind, I want us to kind of begin as we work our way through this by understanding, first of all, in verses 20 and 21, that we are radically different in Christ.

[7 : 32] That's a fact. The believer is radically different in Christ. Verse 20, it says, but this is not the way you learned Christ.

By the way, when you see that but, it follows that you need to stop and consider just a little bit about what Paul was saying previously. And that little word connects the thought that will follow, namely, what is a believer like, with that horrible description that Paul gave of our past, that the unregenerate state that we were in, and the messiness, the unhappiness, the profound bleakness that is characterized by an unbeliever's existence.

And as we recognize, one of the things that Paul does is he gives us this contrast as a good teacher does. Often, we learn things by comparison, don't we? We really learn by, no, I don't want to be like that.

I want to do this. I don't want that to happen. I want this to happen. And so, gives us the picture of what the unbeliever's like, and then steps over here, and verse 20 through 24 explains what genuine conversion looks like.

As we look at the statement, Paul says this in verse 20, it is not the way you learned Christ, assuming that you have heard about Him and were taught in Him as the truth is in Jesus.

[8 : 54] Now, let me break that down for you by explaining, first of all, that the believer has a different understanding. The believer has a different understanding. There in verse 20, it says, this is not the way you learned Christ.

Our culture puts a great deal of emphasis on feeling. In fact, when you ask a person a philosophical or a question of eternal significance, most of the time, there's a natural inclination to say, well, I feel this way.

And the truth of the matter is, is that feelings, if we're thinking about it factually, have to do with what? They have to do with emotion, and they have to do with tactile sense.

But underneath the matter of feelings is a more significant and more important issue, and that is namely, what's our thinking like? And Paul explains the fact that conversion is a matter of thinking.

Now, when I say that conversion is a matter of thinking, I don't mean to suggest that conversion is simply a matter of kind of, well, arbitrarily figuring it out and coming to a reason.

[10:05] The truth of the matter is, the unregenerate can't think properly apart from the power of the Spirit of God, and we have looked at that on a number of different occasions, but Paul here is speaking of the fact that the believer has a different way of thinking.

He speaks of conversion as something that you've learned about Christ, and he's talking about the fact that at the heart of our conversion is discernible or understandable truth.

Genuine conversion takes place when our mind is rescued from the deceitful lies of Satan, and we are given light and life through the power of the Spirit, and we are able to understand the truth.

I want you to recognize in simple terms that every one of you, whether you're here this morning, converted or not, have had moments where what you did at one time that really was incredibly boneheaded and foolish or wicked, either by circumstances or the power of the Spirit of God, you came to realize, man, that was really dumb.

And you kind of, huh, I can't believe I did that. For the believer, it's not merely the working of consequence that leads us to that position, but it is the work of the Spirit of God.

[11:24] And He is the one that opens up our understanding and helps us see that. Now, it's true that we are called to love Christ, but I want you to understand that that love for Christ does not rise on hollow emotions.

True faith and the love for Christ that follows really comes out of what we have been given by grace to know about our sinfulness in Christ. I want you to look at another passage that helps us understand this.

Go, if you would, to 1 Timothy 2, verse 4. 1 Timothy 2, verse 4. Very interesting statement about conversion. Paul is encouraging the church to recognize the importance of prayer and praying for people coming to Christ.

One of the joys that I had this previous week was to share the gospel with clear opportunity in two different situations. I'm sad to say that in neither situation did the individual come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But what a blessing. First, to be able to have the opportunity. Secondly, to be able to ask other people to pray for my doing that. And then third, people coming up to me and saying, Pastor, how did it go?

[12:42] I was getting texts. I was getting emails. How did it go when you were talking with such and such a person? And I trust that one of the things that we grow in is that all of us are engaged in those prayer requests and we're engaged in that activity.

Isn't that right? I mean, after all, why are you here and not up there? I am here to bring glory to Christ and to draw attention to a wounded and broken world that there is hope in the Lord Jesus Christ and there's nothing that is more enjoyable and more significant than lifting up the testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ who can save sinners and transform them by the power of His gospel.

And I want you to understand that that is part of why we gather together is to lift up the Lord Jesus Christ and then walk out of here doing what? Hope.

Give me opportunity. I want to talk about it. Well, we look here in 1 Timothy 2, verse 4, and listen to what it says. Who desires all people to be saved.

Oh, yeah, that's good. And to come to the knowledge of the truth. Conversion is not just an emotional surge.

[13:58] It is an understanding of biblical fact that is reality against the scope and backdrop of eternity. And I want you to understand as you think about the issue of the way you think as a believer that it's fair to say, and one of the things that you ought to ponder as you look at this passage in Ephesians, if you really don't think differently about Christ and sin, you have a good reason to do a little bit of research and check your own birth certificate.

How many of you understood what I just said? Let me say it again slowly. If you really don't think differently about Christ and sin, there's a good reason to kind of double check your birth certificate and say, hey, maybe my profession really doesn't amount to anything.

So, one, the believer thinks differently, has a different understanding. Number two, the believer is in a different relationship. Both the King James Version and the English Standard Version translate this little passage here with a little note of uncertainty.

The King James says, if indeed. And the ESV, which I happen to be using, says assuming. The underlying idea in the Greek is that of seeing something to be a fact or sense would be another way of translating it.

And it points to the fact that the teaching that Paul was referring to here, remember he says, you learn Christ, is not really talking just about a list of rules.

[15:37] There are several clear indications of what that actually is that he is referencing. And we see it in the sequence of words that he uses.

And I want you to mark them, if you will. One is that there in Ephesians chapter 4, it speaks about the fact that you heard him. It also refers to the fact that you were taught in him.

And then it says that the truth is in Jesus. Let me summarize those three different phrases together and bring them together so you can understand the overarching statement that is being made.

For one, behind every lesson and the words that you hear from the pulpit or that you read in the Scriptures or you hear in a class should be the work and the words of Christ.

Do you understand that? At the heart of what all teaching that brings you to the cross and brings you in your journey should be the Lord Jesus Christ. Gospel preaching and Christ honoring, sin converting teaching flows from the Scriptures themselves.

[16:43] And it is not that which is the recipe of a current guru who in six months or so is going to have his hot book sitting out on the discount bin because it only had a very short shelf life.

That which honors Christ comes from this book that we value and that we look at and has the mark and the power of the Spirit of God actively involved in bringing it into your heart.

For another, the teaching that is of the Spirit and is faithful to the Word draws sinners into relationship with Christ and sweetens the believer's relationship to Christ.

Let me say that again so you understand what I'm pointing out. Paul, as he's teaching, he's saying, listen, you guys, you're not to be like you used to be. And I want you to understand that the reason you're not to be like you used to be is because you've learned Christ.

I cannot imagine going to a place where the sum and the focus of the teaching and the singing and all that is actively involved in ministry does not keep on coming back to the Lord Jesus Christ and to Him who when we get to heaven will occupy all of our affection.

[18:05] It is Christ. And Paul, when he says those words, you heard Him, you're taught in Him.

The truth is in Jesus. He is referencing the fact that at the center of our understanding is really the person of Christ.

I want you to understand this. The construction is a little kludgy for our modern mind perhaps, but I do want you to understand that what Paul is pointing out is that behind all Bible teaching is the person of Christ and relationship with Christ.

I love what Jesus said over in John chapter 39. John chapter 39. Try that one. Let's try a 5 in front of it and I want you to go there. John chapter 5 verse 39.

John chapter 5 verse 39. You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life and it is they that bear witness about me.

[19:17] Do you know what Jesus is saying? That He is the center of the Scriptures. If He is the center of the Scriptures, then whenever someone teaches the Scriptures, guess what you should see and be drawn to?

What should it be? It should be the Lord Jesus. One of our Sunday school teachers came to me earlier this morning and asked me a question about the tabernacle. I get cold chills when I think. I get cold chills a lot. Just bear with it. But I get cold chills as I'm thinking about that question this morning. I'm walking across the parking lot. Oh, pastor, let me ask you. And I love that.

But you know what the tabernacle is all about? It's an Old Testament illustration of the coming of the Savior. It reminds us that there is no hope of salvation apart from the shedding of blood.

And Jesus died in my place. And beloved, He alone is the one who is both the preacher of righteousness and the priest of righteousness.

[20:24] The veil of the temple was torn apart when He died on the cross and He paid the penalty for my sin and I have access into the presence of the Almighty because of the finished work of Christ.

Isn't that good? That's the tabernacle. There's a whole lot more in the Bible. Do you understand that? And so every time you teach the Bible, every time you open that Scriptures, one of the things that you ought to plead with the Spirit of God is say, I want to see Jesus in this.

Well, as we look at the passage, please understand, going back there to Ephesians chapter 4, that if verse 20 and 21 are true in your life, that you're converted, that verse 22 through 24 will also be true.

Do you like things that are logical? I have to confess that I am limited in that range, but I'm very thankful that careful study of the Scriptures brings about a discovery of the fact that God communicates logically.

If this is true, then you can follow this and see it. And so Paul says, going back to verse 17, hey guys, don't be like the past.

[21 : 54] All right? Then in verse 20 he says, listen, the reason not to act that way is because conversion brought you into this understanding of Christ and this relationship with Christ.

And then he explains in verse 22 through 24 that being in Christ means that we become progressively different in Christ.

I may be a little bit like a broken record. And then there are some of you here that are thinking, what does a record mean? I understand that.

I don't know enough about technology to see if iPods or iPads or MP5 players, if they skip back and forth.

But in a previous generation, for you who are younger, when you put a scratch on a record, it meant that it kept on repeating the same thing, right? Okay?

[22 : 51] It was pretty irritating. So I said, maybe I sound a little bit like a broken record. What is that? Ask your dad. Okay? But Paul is all about hammering his point home.

And so we need to understand and remember, because Paul is reminding us of something, and it's written here to remind that the genuine believer is someone that has conversion, and that brings change.

In fact, if you're sitting here today, and you cannot see, and I want to say this carefully because I think it's important. If you're sitting here today, and you cannot see the upward path that he is taking you on, I would say again, hey, listen, you don't want to get to the end of life and then begin to question whether or not you know Christ for real.

Do you understand that? I want you to know, it says in Scripture over in Matthew, it says, not everyone that sayeth to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom. Hey, I was a member of a good church.

I was even baptized. I read my Bible four times a week. I even participated. I was in the choir. We're supposed to be doing that, aren't we, Jeff, in the choir? Okay, I was in the choir, and I even was in the praise team, and I get to the end of life, and God says, what are you doing here?

[24 : 11] I want you to understand that these verses challenge us to think carefully about the authenticity of our conversion.

They're also a classic illustration of why we need the Spirit's help to be a good student of the Word. These verses are commonly used to teach how a believer goes about changing, and I think the verses can appropriately be applied to that truth.

But they also say something else that I think is important, and the two pieces go together. One is that conversion is transforming power. Two, that we can see the transformation taking place.

And we look at three little statements that Paul makes here in Ephesians chapter 4, 22 through 24, and just let me mark these off for you. He gives us a set of infinitives.

He says that we are to put off, we are to be renewed, and we are to put on. And these are not actually commands, but they are indicators of what Christ is doing in our life.

[25 : 17] And another way, it refers to things that we'd be working on. An abbreviation would be, to put it this way, being in Christ leads to putting off, to renewing our mind, and to putting on.

So how do you know if you are in Christ? Is that an important question? It will be someday. I visited an individual earlier this week that is dying of cancer.

I don't know how many days the individual has to live. And a very practical question in an individual's life, when they are towards the end of life, is, hey, do I know for certain that I have a relationship with Christ?

Well, how do I know? Being in Christ leads you to putting off, to renewing your mind, and to putting on. Let's think about these three words in broad terms.

The believer puts off the past, the old man. The believer puts off the past, the old man. Your old vocabulary, your old attitudes, your old prejudices.

[26 : 20] I watched, Judith and I watched, how many times have you heard me recommend a movie? Anybody here? Can you remember the last time I recommended? I watched it on Redbox. But here, I watched 42, Jackie Robinson.

Anybody else seen that one yet? I tell you, old prejudices. You put off. When you come to Christ, your attitudes better change. Because of Christ, we put off old prejudices.

The things that we used to think were entertaining began to change. The things we laugh about should change. And the things that once you found profoundly important in your life, you began to recognize have the aroma of death, and they have nothing to do with the journey that you're on and the place that you're going to.

Paul calls the old nature and its fruit something that is corrupt and deceitful. Look at what we find there in verse 22. Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life, and is corrupt through deceitful desires.

Now, what does deceitful mean? What does deceitful mean in verse 22? It means it's not honest. It's deceitful. It misleads you, right? Right?

[27 : 42] Satan offers something to us and promises some kind of gratification, some kind of satisfaction, and the truth of the matter is, he can't produce that. He can't bring it into your life. You hope it would be, but he only deceives.

And so it tells us there that we are to put these things off. And how do you do that? For one thing, and I think this is important to follow the track of it, for one thing, you begin to remind yourself of your new position in Christ.

Are you in Christ Jesus? I'm in Christ Jesus. I am in Christ Jesus. I'm different than I used to be. You're no longer who you were. You are new. You're a different person.

For another, you set your affections on Christ. And when we set our affections on Christ, guess what happens to the other things that we used to be attracted to?

What happens? They begin to fall away. They begin to fall away. And so if you are here this morning and you are a believer, I want you to understand that for one thing, positionally, because of conversion and the power of God, you're not who you used to be.

[28 : 48] Your past is gone. Also, we are in the process of putting off that past and saying, man, that's not where I want to go.

That has nothing to do with the future that I have ambition towards. Secondly, we find there in that Ephesians passage that the believer is to be renewed in his thinking.

I'm struck by the fact that the Scriptures make so much out of thought and thinking. It says here that we are to be renewed in the spirit of your mind, in the spirit of your mind.

He is reminding us that salvation doesn't give us just another set of rules that we're to practice. Salvation changes our heart, and it begins the process of transforming the thoughts that we have associated with life.

The ministry of the indwelling spirit works in us to understand the word, and as we grow in understanding the word, our thinking is transformed.

[29 : 54] Paul says, listen, look at the passage again. Be renewed in the thinking of your mind. The idea that our faith is principally an emotional status or state is untrue.

The foundation and the bedrock of Christian living is the thoughts that come in our life as a result of our relationship with Christ, and the power of the word of God that changes the way we think.

How do I stir that up and grow as a result? Over in 1 Peter 2, verse 2, it says, As newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word.

Judith and I were babysitting Friday night while my son and daughter-in-law were helping our youth bowling.

I understand that he threw the fastest ball there. You know, it's an important little detail for the sermon, but, you know. And they have four children.

[31 : 09] The youngest one is a little bit of a challenge because when she wakes up, there's only a couple things going on. Guess what they are? I'm dirty, or I'm hungry, or I'm both.

And my wife had been taking care of Annalise quite a bit, and at one point she thought it would be appropriate that I participate. She handed Annalise off to me, and Annalise decided that snuggling was appropriate, but I wasn't equipped to respond.

That's code. So I said to my wife, Honey, I'm not asking you to take over, but I am asking you to go out in the kitchen and do something to help with the situation.

Because, you see, that little baby only had one basic thing on its mind. It's just, feed me. Feed me. And one of the things that characterizes the new believer is what?

Wants the Word. And by the way, it also characterizes the growing believer, right? And it characterizes, are you listening to this one? Huh? It characterizes the more mature believer.

[32 : 32] Oh, how I love your law. It is my meditation all the day. I want to encourage you this morning, as you think about how you renew the mind, I want you to understand that happens through the Word.

The transforming power of the Word is what changes the way we think and act and affects us from the inside out. Go back just a little bit to Romans 12, verse 1 and 2, and mark what Paul says after he's spent basically nine chapters talking about salvation, what it is, and three chapters talking about the sovereignty of God.

And then he comes there in chapter 12 to how we put it all together in practical daily living, and he says this, The world is constantly trying to force us to think the way it thinks.

Do you understand that? The world is constantly forcing us to think the way it thinks. When you listen to music that is of the world, it is trying to get you to think the way they think.

When you turn on the television, it's challenging you to think the way they think. And Paul says, Listen, it's the Word that helps us do that.

[34 : 14] Over in 2 Corinthians 3, verse 18, it talks about the fact that we with unveiled face, seeing the Lord Jesus in essence, are changed from glory into glory.

And so here's the deal. If you are a believer, you understand that His interest is that you grow to look more like Him, right?

And how does that come about? It comes about when the Word of God affects the way you think, which then affects the way you act.

Finally, we come to that statement that is made there in verse 24, to put on the new self. The new man. The idea is not suggesting that we just pick up some new habits or we get a little neater in the way we take care of our room.

The Word is really talking about something that involves the whole person. Talking about who we are. The concept here in Ephesians connects with what we read over there in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 17, where it says, If any man be in Christ Jesus, he is what?

[35 : 25] He's a new creation. We're something different. And we see in the remainder of this verse that this new man is created according to what God is. That's what the actual rendition is.

Look at chapter 4, verse 24. And put on the new self, created after the likeness of God, or according to what God is. Isn't that amazing? Your conversion has made you after the character and nature of Christ.

And he is interested in seeing that all play out in very real time. As I was studying this week, I came to an illustration that John MacArthur used about this passage, and he actually pointed out that there are places where there are homes for men who have been destroyed by sin and rescue missions.

And he says, When a man comes in off the street and he really wants to change, one of the things that will happen in the rescue mission is that they will ask him to go into a room that is attached to a shower, and when he's in that room, they ask that he take all his old clothes off and set them over on the side, and that he delouse himself, and then that he take a shower.

They also put a package, after that's all taken care of, they give him a package of brand new clothes. And he puts those on. And it would be entirely inappropriate then for that man who has been deloused and bathed and cleaned up to turn around and go rooting through that old pile of stinky clothes that are infected with lice.

[37 : 07] Do you understand that? Why would we do that? Conversion takes and changes our past.

It takes out of our life the old way of thinking, and it brings into our life a new way of thinking.

So here's what I want to leave you with as you walk away today. I want you to ask yourself the question, Honestly, am I a believer? Am I a believer?

Here's how you can know. It's not, hey, I said the prayer. I was baptized. I'm a member. All those things can be true, and you not be a genuine convert.

A genuine convert is someone who has come to faith in Christ and is on an upward journey of growing to be more like Him. Is it fair for you to do that evaluation in your heart whether or not

you're of Christ?

[38 : 10] Absolutely. That's what Paul is encouraging us to do. Don't be like you used to be, he says. Get it clear. You are to put off the old man and to put on the new man.

As it says there in verse 24, Created after the likeness of God. Let's close in prayer.

Father God, this morning as we study the Scriptures together, we are reminded of the fact that salvation takes that which has been destroyed and broken and ruined by sin.

And by grace we are brought to the cross where we confess the absolute darkness and blackness of our heart and we cry out to Jesus admitting, Yes, I am a sinner that justly deserves the wrath of God, but I understand Jesus died for me and I claim what He has done and I call out for salvation. And we're thankful that with salvation comes transforming power that allows us as believers to look back across the road and say, I am not who I used to be and I'm not what I will be, but I am by God's grace what I am.

[39 : 44] So Father, this morning as we come to this moment and we consider the call of the Scriptures, we recognize that the Scriptures call those who are here that do not know Christ to the cross.

And I would plead with you that you would work in their heart that they would be humble enough to declare their need and to call upon the Lord Jesus Christ who is their hope and salvation.

And Father, I would plead with you that you would work in the lives of those who are believers who have become indifferent to their high and holy upward calling that today would be a day of rededication and renewal.

We ask this in your precious holy name. Amen. Amen.