

Ephesians 4:17-24 - Witness Protection Christianity, Part 1

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

We're going to be back in Ephesians chapter 4 this morning. As Paul applies the truths of the gospel to the lives of the Ephesians, we come to what can be a fairly complex passage this morning.

So listen closely as I read beginning at verse 17 and then we'll talk about it together. Ephesians 4 starting at verse 17. Now this I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their minds.

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of heart. They've become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

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.

[1 : 26] Thus far God's holy, inerrant, and infallible Word. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, we come to your Word and ask that as we look to it, the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts would be acceptable in your sight.

Oh God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Our trust is in you. Our hope is in you. Help us now by your Spirit. Amen. Amen. We've talked already a little bit this morning about the reality of sin in the life of a follower of Christ.

It's a perplexing issue, isn't it? And one that's raised again in these verses when we see things like the old man and the new man, and the putting off and the putting on, and what is it that's going on?

When does that happen? How does that happen? What are the results in my life? How does it actually play out? Why is it, in other words, that I can have a new heart given me by God, my heart of stone replaced with a heart of flesh, so that I actually desire to, for instance, love people sacrificially?

And of all the people in the world actually would want to love my wife, right? Why is it that that can be true and then that just this week I sin against her?

[2 : 57] I love myself instead of her. I was insensitive, unthoughtful. Instead of listening to her, I wanted to propose my own solutions and have her understand my wonderful plans and great ideas.

And in my own desire to have things my way, I sinned against someone I really wanted to love sacrificially. Why?

Why haven't I quit doing that? Why haven't you quit doing that? Hang with me for just a minute. We're going to dive into a little bit of theological investigation.

We're doing this at the beginning while you're still awake. So I intended to be helpful. Look a little bit at what the Bible says about ongoing sin in the life of a follower of Jesus.

Because this can be difficult to wade through. It says first that victory has been secured and a new life begun. This is the clear teaching of Scripture.

[3 : 59] 2 Corinthians 5.17, you probably have heard this one. If anyone's in Christ, he's what? A new creation. Old gone, new has come. Galatians tells us, or Romans, we know our old self was crucified with him.

It's been killed, that old self, so that we're not slaves to sin. We've been set free from sin, right? Keep going. Galatians 5.

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh. It's dead. And then Colossians 3, which is a parallel to the passage we're looking at this morning, says, you have already, it's saying, put off the old self and put on the new self.

That's already happened. There's been victory won for you by whom? By Jesus. He has crucified the old self and brought to life something where in the past there was death.

The song we sang a minute ago, my sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin, not in part, but the whole, all of it was what?

[5 : 08] Nailed to the cross. And I bear it no more. I don't carry that burden. Jesus has nailed it to the cross. And so we might say, perhaps the Bible's teaching Christians won't sin anymore.

Is that what that means? Well, no. The Bible also says, the same human author Paul, by the way, all the verses we'll look at this morning, the Bible also says that there's an ongoing war against that new life.

Romans chapter 7, I do what I don't want to do. I keep doing the evil that I don't want and there's a law of sin that's waging war against the law of God in me.

There's a war going on within me. Look at the next one. Next chapter of Romans says there's maybe an old self that's been put to death, but by the Spirit, you still need to put to death the deeds of the body.

There's something that still needs to be put to death, a battle that still needs to take place. Galatians 5, desires of the flesh against the Spirit, they're opposed to each other, fighting with each other, warring inside you.

[6 : 24] Colossians 3, even though your old self is gone and your new self has come, there's a putting to death that still needs to happen. Always, always a war ongoing.

Even though victory's been secured, the Bible says, there's also still a war. It's what we talked about with that catechism question earlier. That even though sin is defeated, that it's been nailed to the cross and we bear it no more, there are remnants of sin in every part of us, right?

That's what's going on. That's at least part of what's happening and why I would not love my wife as I should. Why we don't love God as we ought to.

See, Jesus delivered us once for all from the penalty of sin on the cross. One day He will deliver us forever from the presence of sin at all in our lives.

Amen? But now, sin still plagues us even though it doesn't have authority over us. We're not slaves to it anymore. We have new hearts, new lives.

[7 : 29] G.K. Chesterton says, sin in the life of the believer is like a rhinoceros in a restaurant. It's a vivid image, isn't it? He says, if there's a rhinoceros in a restaurant, Chesterton says, I'd be the first one to rise up and assure him he had no authority whatsoever in the restaurant.

But he would exert a lot of power. He would make a big difference. It would certainly disrupt, wouldn't it? That's what sin is like. Even though it has no authority in the life of a believer, it still exerts a lot of power.

Isn't that more than just theological speculation? Isn't that your personal, practical experience? Haven't you lived that? Can't you relate to what I shared about with wanting to love my wife and then this ongoing battle and disappointment of, I've failed again?

Where in this battle, it does feel like I keep doing things I don't want to do. Where I think I've got this sin under control and I've declared victory over it and then it comes back or I've got this area of weakness under control and two more pop up over here and I've got to fight against them.

Can't you relate to that? Haven't you felt that in your own life? Has it ever made you ask why? Why, God, didn't you just get rid of sin once and for all on the cross and make us perfect immediately?

[8 : 55] Have you ever asked that question? I've asked that question. Man, that would have been such a good idea, it feels like. Just be done with it. Why do I have to struggle with this if Jesus came to defeat sin?

Why am I still battling against it? We won't take that theological rabbit trail. We've taken enough this morning. The Bible doesn't always thoroughly explain why and answer every question we might have, but at least part of the answer is that our ongoing struggle with sin is a constant reminder of our need for Jesus.

that He wants to be in relationship with us, not just give us a gift. More on that later. We turn to our passage in Ephesians 4.

Finally, I know you're glad to get to Ephesians. We're back. And look at it and see how it says at the beginning, you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do.

Verse 17. You must no longer walk that way. Don't live like the old man because that's not who you are anymore. You learned, Paul says, when I came to you and told you about Jesus, you learned that the new life, that following Jesus was not just a mere tweak, that it was life-altering.

[10 : 14] That old man was gone and new man was coming to life. That happens when you first trust Jesus, he says. That's what it meant to be baptized into Jesus. That it wasn't just buying eternal life insurance.

Jesus was a wholesale change of identity and life. So our passage this week talks about that reality theologically and generally. While the next several verses, the rest of the chapter, we're going to look at next week and they talk about this specifically and practically.

Don't live like the old man because that's not who you are anymore. That's what it's saying. I want to give us an imperfect, but I think helpful analogy for the next couple of weeks.

We'll use this for both of these conversations. And it's about witness protection. Imagine, if you will, that you are Philip Ptolemeo.

Philip Ptolemeo was involved with the mob, a very sinister group known as the Calabresi Crew in Chicago in the 1980s. But Philip had a falling out with the boss.

[11 : 21] And so Philip ran off from the mob and took a lot of money. And he also took tons of evidence. All of the illegal stuff that they were up to, Ptolemeo walked away with enough stuff to put them all behind bars.

Well, they didn't, as you might imagine, take real kindly to him going to the FBI. And so he would have been in grave danger, facing almost certain death at the hands of the violent mob if they found him.

And so what happened? He became a part of the witness protection program. His former identity was erased. An entirely new identity created for him in a different city with a different occupation so he could live life free from harm.

The most important part of the program, they say, is that you must embrace your new identity, not reach back into the old life that you had.

And according to the U.S. Marshals Service, no witness who has embraced his new identity has ever been killed. That's what they say. They do a good job protecting witnesses.

[12 : 28] It wouldn't be safe, would it, to go back to the old life? Imagine you're Ptolemeo. It would be absolutely essential, wouldn't it, to embrace the new life that you've been given, to say, this is who I am now.

I'm somebody different. It wouldn't be safe any longer to go to dinner with friends and decide to tell a few interesting stories from your mob days, you know. My new friends will like what I used to be.

That wouldn't be safe. It wouldn't be a good move to go back to Chicago just because you're a big Cubs fan and wanted to catch a game. It wouldn't be wise to throw around your old name anymore.

You have to be completely your new identity, not living like the old Ptolemeo any longer. That's what Paul's saying here in Ephesians 4.

Walk in a way that is consistent with your new identity. Live in a way that's fitting with your new life in Christ. Because there's been a drastic change, right? We've been talking about this for weeks and weeks now.

[13 : 30] What God has done for us in Christ is that He's taken us from being enemies to Him and made us sons. In the very first chapter of Ephesians, it's our union with Christ, our being connected to Him that's made that change in us.

We're no longer dead, no longer far off, no longer by nature objects of wrath, facing certain judgment and death. No, rather we've been made alive.

We've become objects not of God's wrath, but His mercy, been drawn near to Him and made into a temple where God would desire to dwell in us. An amazing identity change, right?

Incredible what God has done for us all because we were wonderful. No. All because of being in Christ. There's the Cliffs notes on the first three chapters of Ephesians in case you missed it.

You've entered witness protection. You've been given an entirely new life to live. And now Paul says embrace that. Live consistently with this new identity.

[14 : 40] That's what He's telling us today. And He warns us of some things we have to remember if we're going to live this new life. Two things in this particular passage. The first is that He warns us not to underestimate the danger of sin.

He's going to be pretty direct in His words about sin. But be assured, this is not Paul forgetting what he's taught us about grace and all of a sudden lapsing back into something else and legalism.

No. This is Paul preaching grace strongly. Grace allows us to be. In fact, it demands that we be serious about sin and honest about its destructive nature.

That's why we need grace, right? Grace should never lead us to treat sin lightly but rather seriously. Paul's telling us here we must not walk in the ways of sin that characterized our old man.

He's saying don't declare a truce with an enemy Jesus died to defeat. Don't make friends. Don't declare a truce with an enemy Jesus died to defeat.

- [15 : 51] We saw a few weeks ago God's 4D love for us. It's width and breadth and height and depth. Today Paul gives us a 3D look at sin.
- It's dangerous and destructive nature. The first D of how sin works is that sin is deceitful. That word itself is used in verse 22 to describe our desires.
- The sinful desires of the old man are deceitful. And in fact, this whole section begins with talking about our faulty thinking and our old way of life.
- Notice how he starts in verses 17 and 18. He talks here about the futility of their minds. Darkened in their understanding. Ignorance.
- He's talking about the brokenness in our thinking. The ways that we've been deceived. Sin by its very nature has always been full of falsehood and deception, hasn't it?
- [16 : 53] We're led away by believing the lies of Satan and sin. What are some of the ways that sin deceives believers? What are some of the lies that we believe where we think, oh yes, that's true.
- How does sin take us in and drag us away? It tells us to go ahead and indulge in sin because what? Maybe you've thought this.
- Indulge in sin. No one will get hurt. It's just harmless. No one will get hurt. You can do that. Maybe sin has told you, you know, you can stop when you want.
- It won't really be something that lasts very long. It'll just be a little sin. You know, do it and then stop whenever you feel like it. A lot of us have believed this next one.
- You deserve better. Sin tells you that. whispers it in your ear. You deserve better than that spouse. Than that kind of salary.
- [18 : 02] Than that kind of life. You deserve better than that. Then there's the twisted truth into a lie that we hear a lot.
- God will forgive you. Grace is there for all your sins so it's okay. Sin will even make grace seem bigger to you if you just indulge a little bit. Right? And that's true.
- Grace is there. God does forgive. But the lie we're buying into is that we're seeing grace is more beautiful. What's going on in my heart is that it's actually losing sight of the beauty and the wonder of the grace of Jesus even as I allow sin to become more attractive to me.
- So we believe one of these lies or one of many others. We're deceived. We indulge in just a few clicks on the computer.
- You know just a few minutes lingering there. We allow our lips to gossip and it feels good in the moment because I just needed to get that off my chest. I just needed to say that about him or her and it just felt so good just to say it.
- [19 : 10] We indulge in a few minutes of daydreams about what life could be like or would be like or yes if only I had yes that would really fulfill me then yes that would be so wonderful then I'd be happy.
- And we indulge in sin except we we often don't take into account verse 19 the second D about sin is that it is deadening.
- Here's what happens when we believe the lies of sin they become callous and given themselves up. That word callous a deadening of the senses right?
- Sin makes us calloused. It deadens or desensitizes us to the damage we're causing ourselves. And so what do we do when our senses are deadened?
- We indulge more and more. You know that wasn't so bad was it? No one really found out it was true there weren't any negative consequences. That felt good.
- [20 : 19] And so our senses get deadened. Calloused. And looking for pleasure and fulfillment which we're longing for we begin to want more.

It says we're greedy. The word there is covetous. We're greedy to indulge and practice every kind of impurity. Why? Because our senses are deadened and it takes more to get the same feeling and I don't feel fulfilled and all of a sudden this doesn't feel as wonderful as I was hoping I need more and more.

And we covet what we think will satisfy our longings. The Bible tells us we covet our neighbor's wife, his house, his life, his assets, his status and we want more of it.

Just a little sin doesn't satisfy does it? We become deadened and we long greedy, greedy to indulge every kind of impurity. One of the respectable acceptable sins of the American middle class is gluttony.

I struggle with this. And when we describe it it's so acceptable to us that we can actually think it's light-hearted or funny sometimes but it can really be serious.

[21 : 36] It's a serious heart issue. On Wednesday mornings here at the church a group of men have Bible study. They come early and they very kindly leave almost every week a dozen or so Krispy Kreme donuts behind.

And so I get to the office on Wednesday mornings and typically one of the first things I do is locate that box and have one when I get it. It's so good. I love Krispy Kreme and then James Parker walks up and says something like a moment on the lips forever on the hips and so I slink back into my office and wish I hadn't even had the one but they're really good and then I get to working on my sermon or something like that and things are coming slowly.

It's just really struggling and really frustrated with myself and so I'll wander back out for another donut and through the day each subsequent donut is actually what we call in order again mostly to make ourselves feel okay about it we call it what?

Eating my feelings. Am I the only one in here who eats my feelings? I eat my feelings and so that's actually usually what's going on and that's funny and when we say it that way we laugh but what's actually happening?

In my need I'm turning to a donut instead of allowing my need to drive me to God and I should be seeing danger danger this is spiritually treacherous I'm finding my need the longing that I feel fulfilled somewhere that's not God doesn't seem so bad it feels good to turn back to that box one more time feels especially good if you cut it in half first and come back and eat the other half later because you save calories that's an extra tip for free but as you go back it leaves you wanting more doesn't it?

[23 : 33] You begin to realize I'm not fulfilled by just having a donut in the morning there's something else I'm not quite satisfied now you fill in the blanks maybe it is gluttony food for you maybe it's drink maybe it's body image maybe it's bank account and we just need a little more than we used to in order to feel good because sin having deceived us has deadened our senses and it's like the proverbial frog in boiling water where eventually you will realize the third D of sin that it's not just deceitful and deadening but it's actually deadly enough donuts would do that that's not usually the way we experience it verse 19 they've given themselves up like in Romans 1 God giving us over the same concept to our sinful desires in other words taking it to its fullest extent it's the nature of sin it brings death

James chapter 1 desire when it is conceived gives birth to sin and sin when it's fully grown brings forth death by its very nature Proverbs 14 12 there's a way that seems right to a man it makes sense it feels good and in the end it's the way to death it seemed so good but it began to choke the life out of me that's why Paul warns us against underestimating the destructive nature of sin of the old life he doesn't want us dragged away to death just like Philip Tolomeo Brenda Potts entered witness protection with the U.S.

Marshals she was 17 in 2002 when she began to turn in members of the violent street gang she'd been a part of she was relocated with a new name and a new social security number from Virginia to Kansas City Missouri right where she'd be safe but Brenda never embraced her new life she repeatedly called old friends and even invited them out to visit her she was relocated time and again to try to keep her safe but only one year after entering witness protection she returned to Virginia and was found dead within a few days there's death at the end of your old way of life Paul says sin is not as pleasant as it promises to be don't make friends or declare a truce on an enemy that Christ had to die in order to defeat sin is treacherous it deceives you it deadens your senses and it's deadly and Christ had to die to defeat it his death shows you the seriousness of sin you've been rescued from sin by his grace not rescued to indulge in sin in self destroying lusts he's rescued you for something quite different so finally and much more briefly there's something else we shouldn't underestimate besides the danger of sin if we're going to live our new life this passage warns us not to underestimate the scope of God's work let me show you what

Paul says verse 20 this running headlong after sin that he's talked about in these first few verses he says that's not the way you learned Christ that's not what you were told when you met Jesus rather as we've seen you were taught that following Jesus was life altering trading old desires for new old thinking for new old living for new Jesus changes everything right and remember that old self put off and the new self put on is what happened when the Ephesians first met Jesus that's what they're new but there's even more God's up to in our lives and it's good news because the danger of what happens if we underestimate the scope of God's work there's a danger when we hear a sermon like this or read a passage like this that talks about the dangers of sin and the importance of a new life you know what the danger is what do you begin to feel it's all up to me it's all on me now

I gotta get it together sin is dangerous I've got to live differently then at the end of the day it's all up to us now yes Jesus thank you for forgiving my sins that was wonderful but now it's up to me to try harder to just do it be new lifey enough I don't even know what that would look like but I need to drum up enough willpower the next time to close my mouth or the computer screen or whatever it is I'm gonna do it but you know it doesn't work I know that doesn't work and God's word tells us it's not even what he designed you see sometimes we underestimate the scope of God's work even while we think we're making much of the cross of Christ while we think we're celebrating it and the grace and forgiveness of Jesus there we think of what God did in sending Jesus for us was for the goal of forgiving our sins and getting us to heaven that in between he was just gonna leave us on our own between now and heaven it's up to us and we think that's saying a lot about the cross it's actually selling it short this passage paints a broader and a higher goal not just a gift of eternal life insurance but look at verse 24 created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness where does that take you back to

[29 : 25] Genesis 1 right created after the likeness of God he designed you in his image to be in relationship with him to be in a relationship where you trusted him and followed him true righteousness and holiness that's what God made you for and it's what he's remaking you for even though that perfect image and true relationship has been broken he hasn't given up on that and he hasn't decided to leave it up to you either he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ right he will he will see it through he is recreating remaking you in his image yes he forgives your sins yes he guarantees your eternity and he's also working on us today and he won't stop he's not going to quit on us he actually wants not just to give you the gift of a get out of jail free card one day someday when you die he wants to live in relationship with you now that's what he wants he wants you to have a relationship where you walk with him talk with him where you abide in him depend on him for everything that you need maybe that's part of why you sin so that you'll remember how much you need him that's his heart that he would desire not just to save you but that he would desire to know you now can you believe that do you really really think that's true does he feel that way about you the new life he's designed for us is not one of minor improvement on our own but of true righteousness and holiness in Christ his grace may be even bigger than you imagined

Christian God intends to give us new life not just one that's slightly improved but that is rich and free and abundant exactly as he always intended it's why he made you it's what he longs for for you so be clear that this passage isn't hoisting the burden of true righteousness and holiness on your shoulders it's God's desire promise and commitment it's why when we're told to put to death the misdeeds of the flesh it's only by the spirit that we put to death the misdeeds because you're not on your own right he dwells in you by the spirit by the one who's there with you who hasn't left you put them to death he lives in you sometimes we think of avoiding sin in terms of witness protection and we mean protecting our witness our testimony our good name that's not what

I mean witness protection is about protecting whom the witness himself and no matter what struggles a witness may have embracing his new identity no matter how hard it is for him to live out the way that he should there's always in witness protection a safe house it's often protected by U.S.

marshals where the witness can go and be safe the only safe house for us is in Christ connected to him he's the place of refuge where struggling witnesses find abundant life by pushing back into him it's why the Bible tells us to do what to abide in him to dwell connected to the vine close to Christ gazing on his beauty because in Christ here's why you're safe in Christ the deadly effects of sin can never reach you why why can in Christ the deadly effects of sin never reach you because he took them all for you right you're in a safe house it's a place where the truth about sin is never downplayed the perfect son of

God died because of the danger of sin but it's a place where the truth about the scope of God's work is never downplayed he died for you to reestablish relationship with you and to remake you after his image so that when you're confronted by the seemingly attractive offer of sin you will by the spirit who lives in you what does the spirit love to do the spirit loves to point you to Jesus but that's his favorite thing the spirit that lives in you would want to point you to Jesus so that you see him again in the midst of that temptation and struggle with sin and it seems so attractive the spirit says what about Jesus look at him again see the beauty of Christ true righteousness and holiness not the counterfeit version that sin would offer abide in him gaze on his cross again this morning you know what you'll see as you look at the cross see him become sin for you so that in him you would become the righteousness of

[34 : 47] God then in the shadow of the cross seeing that you'll think rightly and see clearly the horror of sin what it did to Jesus and you'll see the beauty of your Savior at the same time and your heart will long more and more for the abundant new life that he's created you for pray with me Holy Spirit show us Jesus if we've never seen him as more beautiful than our sin then for the first time let us see him beautiful if we've lost sight of the glory of his cross for us and we've been taken in by the deceptiveness of sin show us Jesus again today that we may walk in newness of life Jesus guard this church and this community from the deceitful and deadly attacks of

Satan who even now would want to devour us show us Jesus we pray draw our hearts again and again to him we ask in his name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org what us what happens this is the way a was when get robbed and food wasDaniel Keys