

Ephesians 4:17-24

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 January 2017

Preacher: Greg Hendrickson

[0:00] Ephesians chapter 4, we're looking at verse 17 to 24. It's page 978. If you're looking in the Pew Bible, we've been going through the book of Ephesians this year.

We started in the fall and we're going to continue until Easter. So, I'm going to read Ephesians chapter 4, verses 17 to 24, and that is what we'll be looking at tonight.

These are the words of the Apostle Paul here, God's Word. 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 their hardness of heart. They have 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.

[1:41] So this evening's passage is about the power of God and Jesus Christ to transform us, and it's about living in light of that transformation.

So let me start by giving a couple examples of transformation. There are some examples of transformation in nature, and the one that comes to my mind is a caterpillar, ugly gray caterpillar slithering along the ground, and somehow it goes into that gray little cocoon, that ugly cocoon, and comes out a beautiful, colorful butterfly gracefully fluttering through the air, spreading its wings.

Or think about some examples in human life. Think about an athlete who's on a losing team where everyone's miserable, and everyone argues, and they all hate the coach, and they're all blaming each other all the time, and that's why they're a losing team.

And suddenly that athlete gets traded to a team where that's really a team, and people have each other's back, and they're not just trying to be the superstar, but they're trying to work together and be more than they could be on their own.

And because of their attitude, and they listen to their coach, and they have a coach that encourages them, and that's why they're a winning team. And you go from one team to another. Or think about a child who, for whatever reason, is orphaned.

[3:16] Their parents die or can't take care of them. The child is alone, hungry, afraid. And then they're welcomed into a stable and loving family with people where all their needs can be met, and they can feel secure.

Here's a story of transformation. This week I was reading a story of a man in Scotland who's a pastor now named Mez McConnell. And he came from a very rough background.

He had never lived in a stable and loving home growing up. His mother abandoned him, and he was abused at different times in different households. And as a teenager, he became addicted to drugs, started dealing drugs, eventually was sent to prison for violent crimes.

But just before he was sent to prison, he had met some Christians while he was playing soccer on the street. And these Christians shared the gospel with him and then came to visit him in prison.

And then when he came out of prison, some of them actually welcomed him to live with them in their home. Even some people who hadn't known him for very long. And he wrote about what it was like to finally, for the first time in his life, be welcomed into a stable, loving, and Christian family.

[4:32] But here's the thing. Even though he had become a new person in Christ, he'd become a Christian, and he had been welcomed into a church, and even into someone's home, it was very hard for him to adapt to this new way of life.

So this is what he wrote. He said, In the beginning, when I moved into this couple's home, it was an older couple whose children had all left the home, and he lived in their attic. He says, In the beginning, I was paranoid and suspicious of their motives.

Why would they let me into their home? What were they getting out of it? He says, I knew they weren't looking for money because I didn't have any. I was so scared of them kicking me out that I didn't unpack for months.

I slept on the floor next to the bed so I wouldn't get too comfortable. I would hide up in that attic for hours on end and creep around so as not to make a noise. I would sneak food into my room and eat alone.

Listening to the conversation from their dining room table as guests joined them for meals. They always asked me to join them, and I always refused because I was too embarrassed. Then he says, Over many months, took some time, I began to relax, and so did they.

[5:46] It started when I joined them for breakfast one morning for five minutes. My conversation was one-word answers. It progressed to a lunchtime bowl of soup and a few sentences of chatting.

Then supper and a funny story. Then they asked me about my day. They showed me how to cook a meal, how to use a washing machine, how to budget my finances. I learned to help around the house.

I spent less and less time locked away in my room and more and more time sitting at that dining room table joining in the family conversations. You see, what he's describing is this journey where he began in a place of fear and shame and isolation and over a long period of time began to live in this sense of security and belonging and being loved.

And he had experienced a transformation, but it took time to live into that. And I think that's true in nearly all transformations that human beings experience.

Right? The caterpillar to the butterfly is a smooth, complete transformation. Right? I have never seen a butterfly acting like a caterpillar. Have you ever seen a butterfly pretending to be a caterpillar and slithering along the ground?

[7:00] No. It just, once it's a butterfly, it's a butterfly. It doesn't go back into the cocoon again. But I think people, when people like us experience transformation, it's not smooth and simple and easy and a finished product.

We sometimes tend to revert. We tend to go back to our old ways. We tend to go back into our caterpillar skin, if you want to put it that way.

We carry our past with us. Sometimes we go back to our old mindsets and our old attitudes and our old habits. And that's what the Apostle Paul's talking about in this passage.

Earlier in Ephesians, he's talked about how in Christ, everyone who has turned from their sin and put their faith in Jesus Christ and believe that he has died on the cross for their sins and received them into their life, it says we are new creations.

Chapter 2, verse 10, we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works. Chapter 2, verse 15 says, not just individually, but God has made of us all one new humanity, reconciled to God and to one another.

- [8:11] 2 Corinthians 5, 17, another great verse about this. If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old is gone. The new has come. Or in this passage, verse 24 talks about the new self.

We have a new identity. We're a new person in Christ. But the problem is we don't always live like that new person who's been adopted into God's family and forgiven of our sins and set free from our bondage.

We sometimes go back to the life we used to live or just the old habits of our sinful nature. Even if you grew up like me in a Christian family and you can't remember a time when you didn't believe in Jesus, we are all born with a sinful nature.

So there's always something for us to revert back to. It doesn't just mean you had to have this dramatic conversion experience at some point in your life. We all have a sinful nature that we tend to default back to.

And that's what Paul's talking about. Paul says, no, live into your new nature in Christ. So there's two commands Paul gives in this passage. And then there's three areas of our life where we need to practice those commands.

- [9:33] So let me briefly look at the two commands and then we'll look at the three areas. So the two commands are, number one in verse 17, you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do.

And Paul's very serious. He says, this I say, I testify in the Lord. It's like he's speaking under oath in court. If you're speaking, if you've ever had to speak under oath in court, you think twice about what you say, right?

You're not going to make a careless joke or say something you don't really believe or say something that's not really true. You're under oath. And that's how Paul is speaking. He says, I testify to you in the Lord. I'm serious about this.

You must no longer live as the Gentiles do. Don't go back to your old way of life. When he's, that word Gentiles just means the nations.

And it's a word that's sometimes used in the Bible. Sometimes it's just used to talk about all the nations of the world. But sometimes it's used specifically to talk about people who don't know God. Sort of the people who aren't yet part of God's people.

- [10:36] Who know him and love him. And this is people who haven't, who don't believe in, who don't believe or trust in God. So Paul says, don't live like people who don't know God.

Instead, live as a new person that you are in Christ. That's the second half of the passage. Verse 20 to 24. And there's actually three commands in this part. But I think it's basically all one. Put off your old self.

Be renewed on the inside. Put on the new self. So we might summarize. Put off the old. Put on the new. And it's sort of like Paul's saying, if you're that athlete, you've been traded to a new team.

So don't behave like you did on that dysfunctional team where nobody listens to the coach and everybody tries to take shortcuts and nobody does workouts on their own because they're all just being lazy.

Right? Don't, and everybody's cutting each other down and talking behind each other's back. Don't behave like that. You're on a new team. And the new team doesn't work that way. And the coach isn't out to get you.

- [11:37] The coach is on our side. And he wants us to win. And he wants us to work as a team and work together. Live as part of this new team. Don't live like you're on that old team. You have to change those habits.

Or it's like Paul's saying to somebody who's been, it's like he's talking to somebody who's been released from prison and they're still walking around every day wearing prison clothes. And he's saying, what are you doing?

You're free. You can wear whatever you want now. You don't have to wear prison clothes anymore. It's like he's saying, you're part of a new family now. God's welcomed you into his house so you can unpack your bags.

You don't have to sleep on the floor anymore. You can relax. You can be at peace because Jesus loves you. And he says, come to me and you'll find rest.

You can rest now because you've come to him. Put off the old, put on the new. Now in the coming weeks, in the next three weeks, we're going to look at some specific applications of this idea of put off the old, put on the new.

[12:43] And they come in the next paragraph, the rest of chapter four. So we're going to look at our words. Paul talks about speaking truth and speaking in a way that builds others up. I think that's next week.

Then we're going to talk about, Paul says, do honest work. Don't steal from others. But instead of stealing, do honest work. So we're going to talk about work instead of stealing or sort of mooching off others.

And then third, he talks about anger and forgiveness. Right? And these are all very practical things that in probably in all of our lives at some level need to change.

The words we use, the work we do, and how we deal with anger and forgiving others. So that's the next three weeks.

So come back to the next three weeks. We'll look at each one of those one by one. But today, I want to, today's sort of the big picture of what it looks like to put off the old and put on the new.

[13:45] So Paul points us to three areas of our life where we need to do this. And I'm going to briefly go through each one. Our mind, our heart, and our behavior.

So Paul starts in both sections. There's sort of two sections of this passage, verse 17 to 19 and verse 20 to 24. And they both start by talking about our minds.

That is our thinking or our understanding. And Paul, in verse 17, he says, the Gentiles, people who don't know God, walk in the futility of their minds.

They are darkened in their understanding. Later in verse 18, he says, they live in ignorance. That is without true knowledge of God. Now I wonder, have you ever talked to somebody who sincerely believes something that you knew to be completely false and misguided?

Right? Probably all of us, right? You've heard somebody say something and they're like, I know this is true. And you're like, I actually, but I know it's not true. Now, of course, one of you is wrong. Now maybe, right, maybe you felt that and then realized that you've been wrong in the end.

[14:58] But right, but still then, then you're that person. Right? Okay? But Paul says, you know, this is our human condition. Right? We believe, not just other people, but all of us, at some points, believe all kinds of things that aren't actually true.

And we might believe them very sincerely and very strongly. But we believe things that aren't true or at best, they're only partial truths. He says, our minds are darkened.

Our perspective's limited and not just limited, it's often distorted. This is one of the effects of living in a fallen world. And Paul says, living life apart from the light of God is like stumbling around in a dark house where there's no lights on, there's no light coming in, there's not enough light coming in from the windows to see where you're going.

It's like being in a basement with no windows and the lights are off and you're stumbling around and tripping over things and bumping into things and things are poking you in the eye and you don't even know what's going on.

Paul says, that's sort of our human condition. But he says, and you might say, well, what are some examples of this darkened understanding or this feudal mindset?

[16:17] Well, a couple examples that Paul points to elsewhere specifically. One would be idolatry, right? That was characteristic of the Gentiles, pagan nations back then, people worshiping created things rather than the creator, superstition and fear.

And even if we don't bow down to statues like people did back then, there are still ways that we can replace God with other things. But that word futility in verse 17 is also the same word that's used over and over in the book of Ecclesiastes.

And if you've ever read the book of Ecclesiastes, basically here's what the writer says. The writer says, I tried everything in the world. I tried making a lot of money.

I tried gaining a lot of knowledge. I tried enjoying a lot of pleasure. He said, I thought money would make me happy. I thought knowledge would make me wise.

And I thought pleasure would bring me peace. But it didn't. None of them delivered on those promises. It was all empty, futile, vain, fleeting, meaningless.

[17:36] Paul says, that's not the way you've learned Christ. Christ has shined his light into your mind and he's taught you to think a different way.

Notice in verse 20 and 21, all the words that refer to thinking, how we think. he says, you learned Christ. It's actually a very unusual expression. Right?

You, how do you, where do you ever heard you learned another person? But he's talking about you learned Christ. You have heard about him. You were taught in him. The truth is in him. Paul says, we need to put off our old ways of thinking.

Whether it's idolatry or superstition and fear or one of those things that the writer of Ecclesiastes talks about. Thinking that money is the thing that's going to make you happy or thinking that pleasure is the thing that's going to bring you peace or thinking that knowledge, just knowing a lot of facts is going to actually make you a wise person.

Paul says, no. None of those things are true because God is really what you're looking for and your heart is going to be restless until you find rest in the true God.

[18:45] So Paul says, put off your old way of thinking. You need to begin to think differently. You need to think differently about yourself. You need to think differently about the world that God has made. You need to think differently about God himself.

So you need to hear and listen. That's, you know, that's why we preach from the Bible every week and have teaching, Bible teaching as a core part of what we do.

It's not the only thing we do, but it's a core part of what we do because our minds, we need to change the way we think and understand things. And when we read the Word of God and listen to it, that's part of what happens.

We start to think differently. So that's the first thing we need to put off some of our old ways of thinking and put on new ways of thinking that are in line with the truth of Christ. But Paul doesn't just talk about our minds, right?

It's not just about our thinking and understanding alone. He goes on to our hearts, our desires, our attitudes. So verse 18 describes our desires and attitudes apart from the saving grace of Christ.

[19:51] Talks about being alienated from God. Talks about hardness of heart or stubbornness. Verse 22 talks about deceitful desires that corrupt us.

But verse 23 says, be renewed in the spirit of your minds or that is in the attitudes and the desires of our minds, right? Not just our thinking and understanding but also our attitudes and desires need to be renewed.

He says, be transformed in your desires and attitudes. So think, what are the desires and attitudes that need to change in my life? I'll just throw out a few examples.

Put off self-sufficiency that is thinking that I know best and I'm fine and I don't need any help and I don't need any advice and I don't want anyone's input.

Put off that and put on humility. What was the first of the Beatitudes that Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount? Blessed are the poor in spirit.

[20:58] That means those who are humble before God and who come before God with open hands and say, I need you, God. I need your help.

I'm not self-sufficient. I can't do this on my own. He says, blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. That's where it starts. You can't go anywhere further unless you start there.

How about put off taking people for granted and taking things for granted and put on gratitude toward God? A lot of the first half of Ephesians is about how amazing are the gifts that God has poured out upon us in Jesus Christ and how even though we don't deserve any of them, how lavish and amazing God's gifts are and part of the response to that is simply gratitude and that's probably why we sing.

that's probably why we sing songs of praise every time we get together because that fosters gratitude. It reminds us of what God has done for us.

That's what the songs speak about probably more than anything else is the greatness of what he's done for us and I think particularly through music it sort of fosters a gratefulness in our hearts if the Holy Spirit is working in us.

[22:20] And so that's as we sing let gratitude well up in your hearts toward God. Put off taking things for granted or feeling entitled put on gratitude for his grace.

Or third put off hardness and stubbornness Paul talks about hardness of heart. He actually says some of he actually talks about ignorance being the result of hardness of heart.

Sometimes the reason why we don't see things clearly is because we're being stubborn and hard hearted. And if we would be receptive to God and his word then we would begin to see things more clearly.

So Paul says be renewed in the spirit of your minds and that's you know that's very interesting how he puts it because on the one hand it's a command be renewed. On the other hand who's the one who's doing that renewing?

Right? Does Paul say renew yourself? No. He says be renewed by God the Holy Spirit working in you. So we need God to be working in us.

[23:35] He's the one who renews us but Paul also says be renewed. There's a command to us but it's also a reminder that we're not alone.

We're not alone in seeking to be transformed. We're not just trying to transform ourselves. It's God at work deep within us transforming us. So our minds that is our thinking and our understanding our hearts our desires and attitudes and third our behavior our habits and practices.

So if you notice each of these three sections or sorry each of the sections of this passage when he describes the behavior of the Gentiles people who don't know God it starts with the mind goes on to our heart desires and sort of outflows in our behavior and it's the same way with the 20 to 24.

So verse 19 and 24 both talk about our behavior how we live. Okay verse 19 talks about people who've become callous that is they don't feel anything anymore and they've given themselves up to sensuality greedy to practice every kind of impurity unrestrained by honor or shame or pain people are just sort of giving themselves up to sensuality and impurity and never satisfied always being greedy for more there's sort of a downward spiral you want more and more and so you I mean this is a good description of what we often call an addiction right whether it's to food or drugs or alcohol or something else where we sort of latch onto something and just want it more and more and get deeper into it and part of the reason that we're in there in the first place is because we don't want to feel right we're dealing with some deep pain and we look and we try to find something that numbs us that makes us feel callous that makes us stop feeling that deep pain or grief or loss and what

Jesus says is I don't want I want you to learn to feel again and you know what you don't have to be afraid to feel those things even though they're really hard because I'm gonna I'm gonna take you by I'm gonna take you by the hand I'm gonna hug you and embrace you and say you're not alone in what you're feeling and so you don't have to try to numb yourself and run away from these hard things but you can begin to experience my grace you can start to live a life of what verse 24 calls true righteousness and holiness we begin to feel compassion and empathy for others that's part of part of what God does when he makes us a new creation and does that renewing work on the inside as we begin to have different feelings another example of this would be you know maybe there's someone that you've held a bitter grudge against for years and years and I've known some situations where someone's held a bitter grudge against someone else for years and years and gradually the power of the Holy

[27 : 02] Spirit usually this doesn't happen all at once but usually happens over a period of time sort of like if you burn something in the oven on a cookie sheet and you can't just throw it in the dishwasher because the dishwasher is not going to do it and you can't just scrub it off because it's black and coat it's all burned to the cookie sheet right and you have to soak it in the water hot water and soap and leave it there for a while and then you can scrape it down and then maybe you got to do it again and scrape it down that's a little bit how God's Word and God's Holy Spirit works we need to soak in it so that our deep rooted sin and impurity can gradually get washed away it doesn't all happen all at once with one experience usually it usually takes soaking for God to do that renewing work but I've known people and I've experienced this myself there was a situation where I was holding a bitter grudge against someone else and through a period of time

God worked to change my heart and I actually felt differently toward that other person sometimes it starts with just saying okay I need to stop wronging this other person I need to speak in a kind way to them or not speak to them but actually over time God works even deeper and he gradually begins to change even our feelings those things that are sort of burned into us deeply as we soak in his word and spirit so that's a behavior change it goes from this downward spiral always being greedy for and more never satisfied but then when we put on Christ when our minds and thinking change when our desires and attitudes change then our behavior can change and we can live a life of true righteousness and holiness that's pleasing to God so we might ask what in our behavior needs what in each of these three areas needs to change what in our thinking where do we need to put off the old thinking put on the new in line with

Christ put off the old attitudes and desires put on the new in line with Christ put off the old ways of behavior put on the new in Christ and again all of this all of this comes from the Holy Spirit working in us through the word of God and renewing us day by day so that's Paul's message tonight you're a new creature in Christ remember who you are and live like it more and more and if you haven't experienced this saving grace this cleansing power of Christ turn to him today you can say Jesus I haven't I haven't I haven't experienced this being becoming a new person in you I need you to forgive me of my sins and send me your Holy Spirit so that I can I can be new by your power and then help me to live that way let's pray

God our father we thank you for your mercy and grace that through Christ you have made us new creations through faith in him Lord we pray that we would continue to look to you and that you would do this renewing and transforming work in us that we would and help us to be decisive in putting off the old and not going back and not reverting to our old ways of thinking and and our attitudes and our ways of living but help us to live as the new person that you've made us in Christ we pray this in Jesus name amen