

Off With The Old, On With The New

REVIEW: Well I trust that everyone had a good Christmas! Welcome back to Ephesians. We have been taking a break for the last four weeks for Advent, and now we are going to jump back in where we left off.

Before we do, let's do a little review. When we left off in Ephesians Paul was beginning to tie things together. The front half of Ephesians is very theological in nature. The back half is more practical. Many people like to just skip to the practical parts of things, and I understand why. I tend to be a bottom line kind of person too. But Christians have actually gotten themselves in trouble by skipping the theology and just going to the practical. The reason: theology drives practice. It is out of our theology that we understand what we are supposed to practice.

A practical example. The issue of gay marriage and homosexuality is in the news a lot. Christians seem to be running scared on this issue in large part because we have championed the practical end of "This is right this is wrong." What we have failed to do is understand the theology behind it beyond, "God said so." That is one contemporary example, and I can hand you several others on why it is so important to understand the theology behind our practice.

I say all of this because where we left off, Paul had just asked us to "walk worthy of the calling we received." The calling was all of the first three chapters: that we were chosen before the world began, that we were dead in our sins, and Christ made us alive. Then Paul describes what walking worthy looks like in relation to each other: living at peace, our unity, the same Spirit we serve, the ministries He has called us to.

TRAN: Today, Paul gives us the fourth of five "change of life" sections in Ephesians. In other words, "You were like this, but now you are like this." In large measure this section centers around two things: how we think, and learning Christ.

INTRO: There is a persistent lie out there about Christianity. Sadly, the lie is believed by both Non-Christians and Christians alike. The lie is that religion, faith, Christianity is about making your body do certain things and not do certain things. That is faith. The reality is, according to our passage today, it is not about the body, but about the mind. The mind drives the body. We said this once already today - did you hear it? Theology drives practice.

Ephesians 4:17-24

I. The Background

Off With The Old, On With The New

- A. Our passage today deals with God's people walking in ways that are different than the cultures around them
 - 1. This idea is not new to Paul
 - 2. It has a long history out of the OT
 - 3. So before we dig into Ephesians, I want to show you a little of this in the OT
 - B. Start by turning to Leviticus 18:1-5, 24-30
 - 1. God makes it plain that Israel is not to follow the practices of the Egyptians where they had been living or the Canaanites where they will settle
 - a) If you stop to think about this for a minute, this is a large request
 - b) How long was Israel in Egypt? (400 years)
 - c) Do you think that in 400 years they did not pick up some of the habits of those around them?
 - (1) How long has America been around? (238 years)
 - (2) Has the Christian church picked up some bad habits from the culture it is in?
 - d) So this is a big command from God
 - 2. Second, turn to Psalm 1
 - a) Here the contrast is obvious
 - b) Blessing for those that follow God
 - c) The wicked struggle
 - d) We see the two ways: follow God's way or the world's way
 - 3. There are several others, but we don't have the time to look them all up - but this idea of being counter cultural is not a new thing with Paul
 - 4. God's people have ALWAYS been called to be counter cultural
- II. The Old life of futility - vv. 17-19
- A. Paul starts out strong by saying "I tell you, AND INSIST on this IN THE LORD"
 - 1. This is no small command Paul is about to give
 - 2. He even draws on the fact that this comes with divine authority
 - a) Remember that Paul is a "prisoner for the Lord"
 - b) So he is stating God's desire
 - B. You must no longer live as the Gentiles do
 - 1. They all, at one time, were not followers of Christ, and followed the ways of their culture
 - a) These folks had a complete re-education process
 - b) It really started as basic as "There is one God"
 - c) "You are not Him"
 - d) "Don't have sex with temple prostitutes"

Off With The Old, On With The New

2. What they need to do is begin to conform their behavior to reflect this new man that has come to be
 - a) God created them for good works (2:10)
 - b) They are to walk in those good works
- C. Here is the key - the reason the Gentiles acted that way was because their minds were darkened
 1. Some things to take note of here
 - a) This passage parallels the passage in Romans 1 well
 - (1) 1:21 “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”
 - (2) In both places their thinking became futile - the word was used to describe idol worship, and in the LXX it was used most often in Ecclesiastes - “meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless” (without God)
 - b) The second thing to note is that sins are not the issue in either passage
 - (1) In Romans 1 people latch on to the homosexuality argument - but that is not the core issue
 - (2) The core issue in each is the mind, and the choices made against God because of what they were thinking
 2. I stop to point this out because Christians are notorious for lamenting the sin of society
 - a) However, too often we forget that the sin comes from people with futile thinking that has been darkened
 - b) We should not sit in judgment over these folks, we should have compassion on them that they can’t see it
 - c) We should be praying that God opens their eyes to see the truth
- D. Verse 18 expands on what is happened with these folks
 1. Here Paul continues to help us understand that it is the mindset of these folks that has kept them estranged from God
 - a) They are blind to the truth
 - b) They are dead in their sins - just like the people Paul is writing to USED TO BE
 2. They do not know God - nor can they because of the blindness of their minds
 - a) And this is more than intellectual knowledge
 - b) What is in view is a personal relationship - and intimate knowledge
 3. Yet this blindness is no excuse
 - a) Paul says that the ignorance is in them

Off With The Old, On With The New

- b) That puts the final responsibility on their shoulders for this ignorance
- 4. The ignorance, the darkness arose out of the final phrase - the hardness of their hearts
 - a) The term rendered “hardening” consistently refers to stubbornness
 - b) The idea is, because they have been stubborn and refused God, darkness and ignorance has clouded their minds
- E. The thought of hardening their hearts continues in verse 19
 - 1. They have lost all sensitivity
 - 2. The term literally refers to skin that is so calloused that it has lost all sensitivity
 - 3. So in context it would refer to a complete lack of shame or embarrassment about moral behavior
 - 4. Then it says they gave themselves over to...
 - a) Curious because Romans 1 says God gave them over
 - b) Do we have a contradiction? Of course not!
 - (1) The people made a choice to seek self-pleasure and reject God
 - (2) God says, “If that is what you really want, I will not stand in your way.”
 - 5. The things they gave themselves to
 - a) Sensuality - means debauchery, or a vice that throws off all restraint, with no regard for self respect or the feelings of others
 - b) Impurity - usually it refers to sexual behavior, in which case it is speaking of complete unrestrained sexual behavior, but it can also refer to a broad range of impure things - that seems to be the case here
 - c) The final one is greed, but that is a poor rendering of what the Greek is getting at
 - (1) The Greek idea for the word is a continual lust for more
 - (2) So the things that they were doing in the first two vices, they had a strong desire for more and more
- III. Learning the new life of Christ - vv. 20-24
 - A. The opening phrase is unparalleled in Greek
 - 1. It literally reads, “you did not learn Christ that way.”
 - 2. The idea “to learn a person” appears nowhere in the Greek Bible or Greek literature (besides here)
 - 3. So the idea seems to be that when these folks accepted Christ as Lord, they welcomed Him into their lives but also received instruction regarding Him
 - a) Turn to Colossians 2:6-7 - this is the closest parallel we have

Off With The Old, On With The New

- b) “So learning Christ means welcoming Him as a living person and being shaped by His teaching” - Peter T. O’Brien
- B. The second phrase helps explain the first better as well
 - 1. “when you heard about Him” - or when you came to Jesus
 - 2. “and were taught in Him” - the ongoing instruction in Christ
 - 3. And they were instructed in Him “in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus”
 - a) This is a bit of a curious phrase, but fits the context well
 - b) The contrast is back at the beginning of verse 20 - “that is not the way of life you learned”
 - (1) That way of life being what verses 17-19 were talking about, and being a standard or one type of model life
 - (2) The contrast being that the way of life they were taught was based on the truth in Jesus
 - (a) Remember what Jesus said, “I am the way, THE TRUTH, and the life”
- C. In verses 22-24 Paul expands on the teaching by using three things
 - 1. The first is “to put off”
 - a) Now, the picture of taking off a garment and putting one back on was widely used in the ancient world with reference to initiation
 - b) The old person here is the whole of a person when he is ruled by sin
 - (1) The idea is clear from Ephesians that the old self, the desires of the flesh were headed for destruction
 - (2) So a clean break had to be made from the former way of life to the new life in Christ
 - (a) The old self was being corrupted by deceitful desires
 - (b) It is dying and decaying, so it must be jettisoned
 - 2. The second is “to be made new in the attitude of your minds”
 - a) This is something we have said around here in a variety of ways
 - b) You cannot just rid yourself of sin - because it will come back, or something worse will take its place
 - (1) Remember Jesus story of the demon coming out of a man and then returning, finding the house in order, but it brings 7 others spirits worse with it?
 - (2) You cannot think that you can just clean yourself up from sin, and not do some serious work of renewal
 - c) Something to note about this inward renewal - its a process
 - (1) We know that is what Paul had in mind because of the tense of the sentence - present infinitive

Off With The Old, On With The New

- (2) Secondly, the verb is in the passive voice - which means the action is being done to us, not by us
 - (a) In other words, it is God that is renewing us
 - (b) We do not renew ourselves
- (3) Titus 3:5 “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,”
- d) So the flow of Paul’s argument would imply that unless the Spirit renews us, we are incapable of living a life that is pleasing to God and in keeping with Jesus
 - (1) John Stott put it this way, “If human degradation is due to the futility of their minds, then Christian righteousness depends on the constant renewing of our minds.”
- 3. The third and final thing, put on the new self
 - a) This new self was created to be like God in holiness and righteousness
 - b) The force of this phrase, “to put on” in Greek gives the idea that we are to put on the new man and continue to conduct our lives in light of this change that God has given
 - c) This new person has been created by God
 - (1) Again, the verb for created is passive which means that God has acted on our behalf, we didn’t create ourselves toward holiness
 - (2) God is also the pattern or mold of our new creation
 - (a) “to be like Him”
 - (b) He is the One we are patterned after
 - d) This putting on of the new self which was created for us by God gives the idea that we are already created holy and righteous, we need to live up to what God created us to be
- IV. Taking this passage into application for our lives is admittedly very easy - I can do it by changing one word in the passage
 - A. “So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord that you must no longer live as the Americans do, in the futility of their thinking.”
 - 1. Case closed - that is all the application needed
 - 2. But you know you are not getting out of here that easily, right?
 - B. The first thing to note is that the passage does not teach human worthlessness
 - 1. It is not rejecting human value, rather it rejects what we value
 - 2. The passage rejects not the Gentiles (because that is who Paul is talking to, btw) it rejects the Gentile way of life

Off With The Old, On With The New

3. It is true that Christianity and the Gospel ask us to recognize that we are vile sinners before God, but it also shows us the way to be holy and righteous “like God” - He gave us HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS
- C. The second thing is that the first few verses (17-19), if we are honest, invite reflection on life
1. Life without God is meaningless
 2. Life with God has meaning, it brings things into focus, we have a sense of purpose
 3. The problem is few people want to reflect on life like that
 - a) Our society is not interested in the meaning of life
 - b) In fact, many people do everything they can to avoid contemplating that question
 - (1) Whether it is alcohol, entertainment, or workaholism
 - (2) We have become experts at not reflecting on life - I’ll come back to this
- D. Third, we have to deal with the fact that this passage is written to Christians
1. It is not just describing the outside culture that is foreign to us
 2. Paul is exhorting them NOT to think like their culture
 3. And sad to say, WAY TOO MANY CHRISTIANS claim the title of Christian, but are as self-serving as any non-Christian.
 - a) These “Christians” are stillborn Christians - they are not born to new life
 - b) They allow the world around them to define life rather than the God that created them
 4. If we are truly converted, conversion is a renunciation of self-centeredness in favor of an identity defined by Christ
 - a) It is the willing surrender to God’s will and desires
 - b) This passage is about us having our minds reshaped and formed by Christ
- E. Fourth, if the problem is distorted reasoning, we need to restructure our minds
1. The book of Ephesians as a whole makes it clear that the Holy Spirit is the one to take charge of this process (1:17-18; 3:16-17)
 - a) So to think that a twisted and distorted mind will repair itself is foolish
 2. Think about what we face today - the primary people that help shape ethics in our culture are singers, actors, talk-show hosts
 - a) Christians have something far better to say to these things
 - b) ASSUMING: that Christians have thought through the implications of the Gospel

Off With The Old, On With The New

- (1) This is something I am both good and bad at - time to spend focusing on the interior life
 - (a) If we do not spend time focusing on what is really going on inside our hearts - our thoughts, motivations, patterns
 - (b) We will never restructure our lives properly
 - (2) We all need to spend more time focusing on our inner life
 - (a) Husbands and wives - you need to spend time helping each other focus on what is going on in each other's hearts, and pointing each other to Jesus
 - (b) Parents - you need to do this with your kids
 - (c) Small groups need to help each other spend time focused on how to put off the old self, renew our mind, and put on the new self
- F. Fifth, and something else to reflect on - society
1. If society's ways of thinking and doing are generally prohibited for us as believers, we should probably spend more time examining things
 - a) Do we really reflect on what influences we allow in the house through the TV or the internet
 - b) Do we think through what movies are trying to tell us, and avoid ones that are just garbage
 - c) And don't think this is the section for the teens and young kids
 - (1) "I'm an adult, I can handle it"
 - (2) You set the example in your house - keep that in mind - kids see, "do as I say, not as I do"
- G. Sixth, and finally, we need to go to school
1. This passage is the closest thing we have to displaying a formal system of learning for new believers in the first church
 2. Did you know that the Bible makes no differentiation between believers, followers, and disciples?
 - a) It's not like pastors are disciples because they do all that formal study stuff, and we are just regular Christians
 - b) Nope!
 - c) If you are a Christian you are a disciple - and if you are a disciple, by definition, you are a learner
 3. This is that "holy discontent" we have talked about in the past
 - a) That dissatisfaction about where we are with Christ
 - b) That drive, that passion to always know more, to hunger and thirst for more of Christ
 - (1) He is inexhaustible!
 - (2) I dare you to try to exhaust Him - to reach His limits

Off With The Old, On With The New

4. What things do you still need to grow in?
 - a) Don't just think head knowledge
 - b) Think about practical applications of character in life
 - (1) That really is the difference between Bible study and discipleship
 - (2) Bible study is just that, studying God's Word - awesome thing to do
 - (3) Discipleship is learning how to live life - to follow another's example - to invite them into your life to allow them to correct, rebuke and train you in the way you should go
 - c) What do you need to grow in?
 - d) Then, what is holding you back from doing it?
 - (1) Drive or desire? Pray for it
 - (2) Time? Figure out something that is not as important as deepening your life in Christ, and cut it free
 - (3) Lack of knowing where to start, or not having someone to disciple you? Ask
5. Whatever it takes - we need to be about the school of Christ