

Off with the Old, On with the New, Part 1

Scripture: Ephesians 4:17-20

Code: 1928

INTRODUCTION

A. The Change of Nature

When you receive Jesus Christ, are born again, and enter into God's kingdom, you become a totally different individual. The change that occurs when you're saved is more dramatic than the change that will occur when you die. Why? Because you already have a new nature and you already are a citizen of God's kingdom. All death does is enable you to enter into God's presence.

1. 2 Corinthians 5:17--"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." We don't receive something new--we ourselves are new!

2. Galatians 2:20--Paul said, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

B. The Character of Newness

In his epistles Paul tells us that we have been given a new will, mind, heart, power, knowledge, wisdom, perception, understanding, life, inheritance, relationship, righteousness, love, desire, and citizenship. He called it the "newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). Some teach that when a person becomes a Christian, God gives him something new in addition to his old sin nature. But according to the Word of God we are new. Our new life isn't a matter of addition; it's a transformation!

C. The Cause of Sin

However, that raises this question: "If I'm such a new creation, how come I still sin?" Christians continue to sin because their new nature is encased in a smelly old coat known as the flesh. In Romans 7:17-18 Paul says, "It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me ... (that is, in my flesh)" (cf. v. 20). When I sin it is not my new nature that sins, but the "sin that dwelleth in me." Sin dwells in my humanness--the smelly coat that my new nature has to endure until it goes to be with the Lord. What we need to do is to get rid of that coat. In 1 Peter 2:1 the Greek word translated "laying aside" literally means "to strip off clothes." We are to take off the dirty clothes of our flesh and throw

them away.

D. The Concept of Transformation

When we become Christians we are not remodeled, nor are we added to--we are transformed. I don't believe a Christian has two different natures. He has one new nature, the new nature in Christ. The old self dies and the new self lives; they do not coexist. The new nature is righteous, holy, and sanctified because Christ lives in us (Col. 1:27). He is righteous, holy, and sanctified, and we have the divine principle in us--what Peter called the "incorruptible" seed (1 Pet. 1:23).

Ephesians 4:24 tells us to "put on the new man," a new behavior that's appropriate to our new nature. But to do so we have to eliminate the patterns and practices of our old life. In Colossians 3 the apostle Paul says, "If ye, then, be risen with Christ.... [Kill], therefore, your members which are upon the earth: fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil desire, and covetousness" (vv. 1, 5).

E. The Context of Paul's Instruction

The first three chapters of Ephesians discuss the new nature of the new man. From Ephesians 4:17 to the end of the epistle Paul instructs us on how to eliminate our old lifestyle to accommodate a new one. Romans 6:13 says, "Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin, but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God." If it's true that we are risen with Christ and have been transformed, we should act like it. We are to behave in accord with who we are.

Let's look at how the new nature functions in the new man as we examine Ephesians 4:17-24. Before we do that, however, we need to establish the context of chapter 4.

1. The principles

In verse 1 Paul says, "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation to which ye are called." How do we walk worthy? Verse 17 says, "This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk." The worthy walk is a different from that of the world.

a) Taken generally

"Therefore" in verse 17 refers to Paul's discussion in verses 1-16 about the unity, spiritual maturity, and growth of the church. There he talked in generalities about how the church is to function, but in verse 17 he gets specific about what God wants individual believers to do. We are to walk worthy because of the vocation we have been called to (v. 1); because God wants us to be humble, meek, and patient (v. 2); because we are one in Christ (vv. 3-6); because He has uniquely gifted us as

members of His Body (vv. 7-11); and because He has given the church principles for maturity, growth, edification, and love (vv. 12-16). It's as if Paul was saying, "Since God has created a marvelous new entity in the world called the church, with its unique character of humility, its unique empowerment with spiritual gifts, its unique unity as the Body of Christ, and its need to be built up in love, here is how every believer should live as a member of that church."

b) Taken specifically

After discussing what the church is designed to be, Paul moved to the specifics of how individual believers are to behave. The first principle is we are not to live like people in the world. Since we are members of the church of Jesus Christ, we are unique. The world is proud--we're humble. The world is fragmented--we're united. The world is impotent--we're gifted. The world is hateful-- we're full of love. The world doesn't know the truth--we do. If we don't walk any differently from the people in the world, we won't accomplish Christ's goals. If we live like people in the world, that's the same as imitating the dead (Eph. 2:1-5), and that doesn't make sense.

Christians are like a new race of people added to Jews and Gentiles. We have a new spiritual, incorruptible seed, and we must live a lifestyle that corresponds to it. We are new creations who have been suited for an eternal existence. Our new nature imputes Christ's righteousness and holiness to us. As a result we can discard our old lifestyle. Yet tragically the church does little to conform the world to the principles of Christ; instead we often allow the world to shove us into its mold.

2. The people

The Greek word translated "Gentiles" (ethne) is an ethnic term used in the New Testament to refer to non-Jewish races. However it also has a religious frame of reference, as in 1 Thessalonians 4:5, where Paul defines ethne as those "who know not God." So it can refer to an ethnic group of non-Jews or to people who don't know God. Paul's point is we are not to live like people who don't know God.

3. The problem

The believers in Paul's day found it difficult to live differently from the unbelievers surrounding them. They were constantly subject to the vile habits and deeds of the pagans. We have the same problem in our own age. Today the church in America has difficulty affecting people because our country is so affluent and constantly inundated by the media's propagation of evil. Our problem isn't getting people in the world to live like Christians, but getting Christians to stop living like the world.

The Evils of Ephesus

Let's examine the pagan culture of Ephesus in Paul's day so we can draw some parallels to our own day. Ephesus was one of the most dissolute and evil cities in Asia Minor. It served as a religious center, with multiplied temples and idols. The worship in Ephesus focused particularly on the goddess Diana (Gk., Artemis), often represented by an ugly multi-breasted beast.

The temple of Diana was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, and served as more than a religious center. It was an art museum with one of the world's largest collections of art treasures. A quarter mile-wide perimeter served as an asylum for criminals. It was the greatest bank in the world. A sacred temple was the perfect place for a bank in those days because the people feared reprisal from the gods. And it was also a place of business. Pilgrims came by the thousands to worship there. Where sex is the chief aspect to a religion, it will be extremely popular. Silversmiths made a fortune selling thousands of little idols there. The people would put those idols in their homes, hang them around their necks, wear them on their wrists or ankles, and some even fastened them to the front of their chariots. Acts 19:23-41 records the events surrounding a revolt of silversmiths who feared Paul's preaching would ruin their business.

Diana was worshiped as a sex goddess. Scores of eunuchs, priestesses, temple prostitutes, singers, and dancers led the people in their worship, which was nothing more than a great orgy. One writer said that the worship was a type of hysteria where the people, with shouts and music, worked themselves into frenzies of shameless sexual activity, including mutilation. Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, from Ephesus of the fifth century before Christ, often criticized the morals of his city and the temple (cf. Diogenes Laertius: Lives of Eminent Philosophers, 2 vols., R.D. Hicks, ed. [N.Y.: Putnam, 1925], 2:409-10).

The church in Ephesus was like an island in a cesspool. What a vile, sinful world those early Christians had to live in! That's why Paul urged them to be different. Living the new life may be tough, but it's necessary.

4. The parallels

a) 1 Peter 4:3--"The time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revelings [wild parties], carousings, and abominable idolatries." Some of us may have done those things in the past, but now that we're Christians we're to leave that lifestyle behind. Because of who we are in Christ and all that God desires of us, we are to be different from the world.

b) 1 John 2:15, 17--"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world.... The world passeth away, and the lust of it." The world is fading away so we are to have no attachment to it. Our society is hostile to godliness because it is dominated by carnal ambition, pride, selfishness, greed, lust, and a desire for evil. Its opinions are wrong, its aims are selfish, its pleasures are sinful, its influence is destructive, its politics are corrupt, its honors are empty, its smiles are phony, and its love is fickle.

Paul wasn't just giving his own opinion, for he said, "This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord" (Eph. 4:17). He was passing on information he received from the Lord. It was the divine lifestyle--God's standard--that Paul was promoting, not his own.

LESSON

Having introduced verse 17, let's examine the contrast in verses 17-24 between the old walk and the new walk--our old and new lifestyles. Paul described four characteristics of the old walk and then followed that with four contrasting characteristics of the new walk.

I. THE OLD WALK (vv 17b-19)

I believe the key issue in verses 17-24 is the mind--how people think. In verse 17 Paul says that unregenerate people live "in the vanity of their mind." He also speaks of understanding and ignorance (v. 18), learning and teaching (vv. 20-21), and the mind and truth (vv. 23-24). Proverbs 23:7 says, "As he thinketh in his heart, so is he." So when Christians think differently, they will act differently.

Salvation is first of all a change of mind. In verse 20 Paul says to believers, "Ye have not so learned Christ." Christianity is cognitive before being experiential. We need to consider the gospel, believe its historic facts and spiritual truths, and then receive Christ as Savior and Lord. The first step in repentance is to think differently about our sin, about God, about Christ, and about our life than we used to think. The Greek word translated "repentance" means "to change one's mind." And as it is used in the New Testament, it always refers to a change of purpose, and specifically a turning from sin.

Since an unbeliever thinks differently from a believer, let's look at four elements that characterize the thinking of an unbeliever.

A. Self-Centeredness (v. 17b)

"That ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind."

What's important to unbelievers is their mind, their thinking, their desires, and their whims. Whatever they think and whatever they want governs their behavior. Ephesians 2:3 says that when we were unbelievers "we all had our manner of life in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind."

Paul characterized the self-centeredness of unbelievers as "vanity" (Gk., *mataios*, "that which is empty, futile, useless, or vain"). I believe useless is the best way to define it. Pagan thinking is useless because it accomplishes nothing.

Solomon was the wisest and richest man in the world. He had more women and prestige than any others. Yet he summed up life this way, "Vanity of vanities ... all is vanity This is also vanity and vexation of spirit" (Eccles. 1:2; 2:26).

It's tragic how people will exhaust their money, their bodies, and their minds trying to find meaning in life, only they never find it. Why? Because their thinking is empty and useless, accomplishing nothing. Jesus said, "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5).

B. Ignorance (v. 18)

"Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart."

It's difficult to face people who don't know Christ and tell them that they're ignorant. In an educated society such as ours, people will take that as an insult. No society in history has ever been more educated than ours, but as the apostle Paul said, people are "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 3:7). Because of the Fall, we are born with a natural inability to understand the things of God. Romans 1:21-22 elaborates: "When they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools."

1. Darkened understanding

The Greek word translated "darkened" means "to make blind." In verse 18 this verb is in its perfect participle form, which implies it is something that happened in the past with continuing results in the present. Being darkened in their understanding is a continuing problem for unbelievers.

2. Alienation from God

When did man have his understanding darkened? Verse 18 says, "Being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness [hardness] of their heart." A man's understanding is judicially darkened by a sovereign God when he willfully alienates himself

from God, is willfully ignorant, and willfully hardens his heart. God affirms the choice that all men and women initially make.

a) God's confirmation

In reading about the Exodus of Israel we find that Pharaoh hardened his own heart several times. We also read that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. If a person chooses a certain lifestyle and is confirmed in that lifestyle, God will judicially and sovereignly act to make that lifestyle permanent.

Since Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), someone alienated from God can't know the truth. In the same way that a corpse can't hear conversations in a mortuary, a spiritually dead individual can't hear God. People alienated from the life of God have no spiritual life in them.

As we noted in Romans 1, people refuse to honor God and therefore suffer the consequences (vv. 24, 26, 28). They choose the way to go and God confirms them in their choice by giving them over to their evil desires.

b) Man's rejection

The Greek word translated "blindness" (porosis) comes from the root poros, which refers to a stone harder than marble. It was a medical term that referred to the callus that forms around a broken bone and the calcium that can form in a joint and paralyze movement.

An unbeliever's life is like that--hard and without feeling toward God. Every time he takes another step of willful rejection, he pours more concrete on his heart. The process is obvious--a man sins and feels guilt and remorse, sometimes very deeply, but tries to deny it. The more a person tries to eliminate his guilt by rationalization, self-justification, transferring the blame, or by denying sin and eliminating morality, the further away he pushes his guilt until he can't sense it anymore. That's when his conscience becomes seared, his heart becomes petrified and insensitive, and his understanding is permanently darkened.

John 12:37 says, "Though he [Jesus] had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him." The people had sufficient information to believe in Jesus, but they willfully chose to be alienated from the life of God, to be ignorant, and to petrify their hearts with constant rejection. Verse 38 continues, "That the saying of Isaiah, the prophet, might be fulfilled, which he spoke, Lord, who hath believed our report? And to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore, they could not believe because that Isaiah said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them" (vv. 38-40).

c) Satan's deception

Satan knows that Christianity and God's truth is an issue of the mind. Second Corinthians 4:4 says, "The god of this world hath blinded the minds of them who believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them." Satan blinds the mind. As man continues to willfully acquiesce to the activity of Satan, God will eventually blind his mind. Then that becomes his permanent state.

C. Shamelessness (v. 19a)

"Who, being past feeling."

When unbelievers continue in sin and turn themselves off from the life of God, they will become shameless--past any feeling. They become insensitive and apathetic, unconcerned about the consequences of their behavior. According to an old story, a Spartan youth stole a fox but ran into the man who owned the fox. Not wanting to betray the fact that he'd stolen the fox and that it was hidden under his tunic, the youth remained motionless while the fox tore at his midsection. Our society stands just as motionless while sin tears it apart. People have become so good at wearing a mask that they don't feel anything. That gives rise to shameless behavior because all standards of morality are ignored.

D. Perversion (v. 19b)

"[They] have given themselves over to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness."

The Greek word translated "lasciviousness" (*aselgeia*) speaks of shameless wantonness and unblushing obscenity. It primarily refers to sexual obscenity. Basil, the fourth-century church father, defined it as a disposition of the soul incapable of bearing the pain of discipline (cited by Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983 reprint], p. 56). Some bad men will try to hide their badness, but a man given over to *aselgeia* doesn't care who he shocks or how indecent he is, just as long as he gratifies his own sick mind.

A person with a reprobate mind can't reason, be logical, or receive the truth. He continually gives himself to lasciviousness and does so without fear of shocking anyone. He may indulge in homosexuality, promiscuity, lying, cheating, and stealing.

"To work [Gk., *ergasia*, "business"] all uncleanness with greediness" implies those people make a business out of evil and lust. That's certainly true of our society. There was a day when dirty business was hidden; now it's wholesale. Pornography, prostitution, X-rated films, suggestive TV programs, and other types of uncleanness form a large industry in our country. It's been stated that the books

published in America rival the drippings from a broken sewer.

Paul said such people pursue their evil with "greediness." The Greek word translated "greediness" means "a lawful desire for things that belong to others." Reprobates are after your purity, sanity, morality, and character. They want it all!

CONCLUSION

Paul looked at the evil pagan world and concluded that its self-centered useless thinking leads to darkened understanding and a hard heart. That in turn leads to an insensitivity to sin and shameless behavior, which then leads to unblushing obscenity. They make a business out of it to drag down others to their level.

But in Ephesians 4:20 Paul says, "Ye have not so learned [in] Christ." We're not to have any part of that old lifestyle. Instead we're to put off "the former manner of life" (v. 22) and "put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (v. 24).

Believers shouldn't be dabbling in any of the evils characteristic of unbelievers. We are to be a light on a hill, separate from the evil around us. We are to be different. A city that's set on a hill can't be hidden. We must stand as salt and light. But if we're corrupted by the system, we become useless. Our blessed Lord Jesus Christ purchased us at the cost of His own life. He gave us a new nature that is holy, undefiled, and sanctified forever. He simply asks us to live up to what He has given us by discarding our old lifestyle and taking on our new one.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What change takes place when a person is saved?
2. Since Christians are new creations, why do we continue to sin?
3. Does a Christian have two natures? Explain.
4. What did Paul say about the church in Ephesians 4:1-16?
5. In what ways are Christians different from unbelievers?
6. What is a major problem facing the church?

7. Describe the culture the Ephesian believers had to live in.
8. What is the key issue of Ephesians 4:17-21?
9. What is important to unbelievers?
10. How did Paul characterize the self-centeredness of unbelievers (Eph. 4:17)?
11. What is a continual problem for unbelievers?
12. In what way is an unbeliever's life like the callus that forms around a broken bone?
13. How does Satan help unbelievers to stay unbelievers (2 Cor. 4:4)?
14. Define lasciviousness. How does it characterize unbelievers?

Pondering the Principles

1. Review Ephesians 4:1-16. Since the instruction Paul gives in verses 4:17-24 is a result of his previous discussion, answer the following questions about verses 1-16: According to verses 1-3, what is the worthy walk? How does Paul characterize the unity of the church in verses 4-6? Who are the gifted men that Christ gave to the church (v. 11)? What is their duty (v. 12)? According to verses 13-15, what results when we follow God's pattern for the church? Where does the power to do all that come from (v. 16)? Based on this brief study, what ought your commitment be to the church?
2. As believers we shouldn't participate in any of the evils in the world around us. While we know that, and probably don't exhibit a life characterized by a reprobate mind, shamelessness, and an ignorance of the truth, notice that the first characteristic is self-centeredness. Are there any aspects of your life that you are unwilling to give over to God? A Christian ought to be fulfilling God's desires, not his own. Confess to God any areas of your life that you long to fulfill regardless of His will. Seek to replace those things with desires that will glorify God. As you do you will find that God will give you a greater fulfillment than you've ever known before.

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