

Ephesians: *Be Renewed*
Ephesians 4:17-24
May 14, 2023

If you were with us last week, you will recall that we spent some time looking at verses Ephesians 4:17-21 in my message entitled *The Road Less Traveled*. We observed that those who remain unredeemed, those whom Paul refers to as Gentiles, are those who walk in darkness because they are alienated from God. We used the analogy of attempting to navigate the city of Chicago without a map or using the wrong map. The result is inevitable: no matter how good we are at driving, we're still lost. What is worse, the longer we drive around blindly, the more damage we do to ourselves and others. The wide road that Jesus speaks of in Matthew 7 is full of those people who follow their appetites and walk blindly through life...it is a road that leads to destruction, both now and for all eternity.

As Christians, the Apostle Paul reminds us that we are not to walk as the unbelievers do. As those who are in Christ, we have been given an accurate map that helps us to understand who we are, why we are, where we have been, and where we are going. That map is given to those who are redeemed...for those who are in Christ. That map leads us to take the road less traveled...and that road makes all the difference, amen?

We left a bit of meat on that bone, so this morning we will return to Ephesians 4:17-24. Let us stand and read together.

7 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. 18 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. 19 They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. 20 But that is not the way you learned Christ!— 21 assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, 22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Again, I encourage you to review last week's message, but this morning we're going to pick up where we left off last week as we now focus on vs. 22-24. My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Old Self; 2) The New Self; and 3) Be Renewed.

I. The Old Self

In Ephesians 4:22-24 Paul speaks of two selves. He reminds the church that they were taught "to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires" and then in vs. 24 he writes; "and put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

Let us first consider "the old self." According to Paul, the default, universal condition of every Christ-less life, whatever the superficial differences may be, is a life shaped according to and under the influence of "deceitful desires." Now, what does that mean?

Alexander Maclaren sums up the old self this way:

Apart from Christ, it is not the conscience that rules our lives. Apart from Christ, the real directing impulse to which the inward proclivities, if not the outward activities, do yield in the main and on the whole, is the things that we like, the passionate desires of nature, the sensuous and godless heart.¹

These passionate desires that Maclaren speaks of are desires that come naturally to all people such as wealth, good reputation, power, and influence in addition to the more basic desires such as food, drink, and other normal appetites. Rest assured, there is no sin in desiring any of these things. The desire for food leads us to eat...without the desire of hunger, we would starve to death and die. That is how desires are designed to work: they are impulses that prompt action. In a perfect world, desires should be subject to and accountable to our reason and ultimately our conscience. Our conscience is designed to be informed by and in constant submission to God. Thus, desires should be way down the line in terms of influence...desires should never have the driver's seat in a person's life. But this is exactly the problem that Paul is attributing to the "old self". The "old self," the life without Christ, is a life where the conscience is disconnected from God, and as such it is a life directed and dominated by desires. And those desires are not benign...they are inevitably desires of deceit. Maclaren says it this way:

These desires are, as it were, the tools and instruments by which deceit betrays and mocks men; the weapons used by illusions and lies to corrupt and mar the soul. They are strong, and their nature is to pursue after their objects without regard to any consequences beyond their own gratification; but strong as they are, they are like the blinded Samson, and will pull the house down on themselves if they be not watched. Their strength is excited on false pretenses. They are stirred to grasp what is after all a lie. They are 'desires of deceit.'²

The reason that the desires are deceitful is obvious. Desires lie to us. For example: if I see bowl of candy sitting on the table, my desire tells me that I will experience pleasure and fulfillment if I take a bite. So, allowing my desire to have its way, I eat some candy, only to discover that my desire lied to me. Sure, I experienced momentary pleasure at the first bite, but then my desire for more kicks in, and after eating the whole bowl of candy, I am feeling anything but content!

And this is always the case when it comes to our passionate desires: desire grows and the object of the desire does not. The fierce longing increases and the power of the thing that we pursue to satisfy it decreases in the same proportion. This is the very essence of addiction. We feed our desire and experience momentary satisfaction, but the desire does not then decrease...it actually increases. At the very same moment, the thing that brought us temporary satisfaction will no longer suffice. More will be needed to achieve the minimum satisfaction of our first taste, and so it goes. More accomplishes less until all that is left is a raging desire that can never be satisfied.

One more quote from Maclaren because these words are profoundly true:

Nothing is more certain than that no man will get the satisfaction that his ruling passions promise him by indulging them. It is very sure that the way never to get what you need and desire is always to do what you like.

¹ Alexander MacLaren: *Expositions of Holy Scripture—Ephesians*, 243.

² *Ibid.*, 244.

That is a voice of reason and long life! Any observer of human behavior would immediately agree with Maclaren. Happiness and contentment are never achieved through our direct pursuit of either. And yet, this is the default condition of the unbelieving world: a life dominated, directed, and ultimately frustrated by deceitful desires.

Friends, if you find your life dominated by desires...whatever those desires might be, you are a modern-day example of what Paul refers to here as “the old self that is corrupt through deceitful desires.” Again, this is the default state of all those who are alienated from God; but, in theory, those who are in Christ should not be those who are dominated by deceitful desires. So let me ask you Church: how does it look in your life?

Paul writes to the church here in Ephesians 4 as though that corrupted lifestyle is a thing of the past. He refers to the “old self” as that which “belongs to your former manner of life.” But here’s what we know: many people sitting in churches...and even many pastors preaching from pulpits...are still those who are often dominated by their desires. We see example after example of Christian leaders who have secret, indulgent lifestyles. We see those who claim to be Christians shamelessly feeding their appetites for fame, wealth, fancy cars, luxury vacations, and other indulgences. Even more concerning to me, however, are those “Christians” who aggressively feed their desires for influence, control, power, and revenge with no conscience whatsoever.

Church: at what point are we to assume that those who live according to their corrupted desires of deceit are actually not Christians at all?

Listen: I do not mean to be offensive, and I’m sure some people are going to be offended. But here’s my concern: if you call yourself a Christian, and yet you live under the tyranny of your deceitful desires, your soul is quite sick and yet you are convinced that you have already taken the cure.

I find that situation to be incredibly concerning...so much so that I am willing to offend you by asking you again: how does it look to you? Is your life largely driven by your passionate desires? Do your passionate desires typically inform what you do, where you go, how you spend your money, what words come out of your mouth, and how you spend the vast majority of your time?

If the answer is yes, here’s what I can tell you: you have no hope of simply “putting off” that nature, even if you wanted to. Even your best intention would be corrupted and rendered futile. In our flesh, in our natural state, we are incapable of bringing about that kind of change. As one poet writes, “The will is feeble for good, the conscience sits like a discrowned king issuing empty mandates, while all his realm is up in rebellion and treats his proclamations as so much waste paper.”³

³ Maclaren, 245.

The corrupted conscience is not powerful enough to change our nature because it is part of that nature. Our corrupted conscience is part of our “old self”.

What we need is a new self! This is what God wants for us all...to make us new...to give us a new identity.

C.S. Lewis says this so well in *Mere Christianity*: “Christ says, “Give me All. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good...Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked--the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.”

Friends, if your “old self” is the only self you have ever known, I invite you to call upon the name of Jesus in repentance and faith. Surrender your lives to Him as your Lord and King. Trust Jesus as the One who died for your sins to satisfy God’s justice on your behalf. Receive His unmerited grace and be thankful. And here’s what will happen: you will receive a new self...a new identity...you will be remade into a new creation.

That leads to my second subheading:

II. The New Self

The Good News of the Gospel is not that you have the power to become all you ever hoped to be if you try hard enough! God forbid! Such empty promises and trendy phrases have never helped anyone. The Good News of the Gospel is this: in Christ, we are forgiven, and when we repent and come to Jesus in faith, our old nature is crucified with Christ and we are remade! Galatians 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Jesus offers repentant believers a new life--a new self, a new identity. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17: Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

Our new self is a soul who is redeemed. We are those who have been justified by what Christ accomplished on our behalf. We are adopted into the family of God and we are members of the Body of Christ. We have a new life...a life empowered by, informed by, indwelled by, and directed by Jesus through the agent of His Holy Spirit. In Romans 6:4ff Paul writes, “We were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

These are the teachings that Paul is reminding the ancient church in Ephesus to remember. The old self, hopelessly shackled as a slave to sin, was put to death when they made their confession of faith in Jesus. Their baptism represents a new creation...the opportunity to walk in newness of life! Church, this truth is powerful and relevant for us today in the 21st century. As those who are a new creation, saved by grace, having been set free from sin, we are those who are to put away once and for all the old patterns of thinking and behavior from our former lives as slaves to sin.

In Colossians 3 Paul writes: “Put to death what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness...in these you once walked when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices...”

As believers, we must not walk as the Gentiles do. We are to put off the old self and the practices associated with the old self because we can...we have a new identity, and we have been set free from the power of sin. We are now those who have been created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. That is who we are. That is our new self.

The problem for most of us is this: we often forget who we are. When we forget who we are, we tend to revert to our old patterns of thinking and behaving, right?

That is why Paul inserts this powerful phrase, right there between the old self and the new self, “to be renewed in the spirit of your minds...”

Let's close by taking a closer look at...

III. Being Renewed

Paul is reminding the early church of their conversion...how they were taught Christ. The truth is IN JESUS. And it was when they came to see Christ as the One who died in their place...when they came to hear Christ as He spoke to them in their spirits...when they came to trust Christ as their living God and entered into union with Him...it was then that they were remade and were liberated from their slavery to sin.

So, if they, as believers, find that they are starting to fall into old patterns of behavior...as many of us often do, Paul reminds them that they were taught “to be renewed in the spirit of their minds”.

Now, what does that mean? Well, look closely at what Paul said.

First of all, we have something to do here. Paul reminds the believers that we are to put off the old self and put on the new self, even as we are to be renewed...

In all three instances, the verbs suggest that these are things that have happened and still need to happen regularly. In other words, we have been liberated from the status of “the old self” in Christ, but we need to continue to put away all vestiges of our old self. We have been given a new identity in Christ, but every day we need to put on that new identity and practice the virtues that are part and parcel of following Jesus.

This is that mysterious “already” but “not yet” of the Christian life that we regularly find in the NT. We were saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved, right? We were made new, we are being made new, we will be made new.

In the same sense, there is something that we must do when it comes to being renewed in the spirit of our minds.

Our part is probably best summed up in Romans 12:1-2 where Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Our role in the renewal of our minds is to worship God, and to do so by presenting ourselves...our bodies...our hearts...our lives...as a living sacrifice to God. That is to say, we come to God with open arms and say, “Here am I...your adopted child...as one purchased by your Son at great cost...do with me as you wish.” As we worship with our whole hearts, refusing to conform to the ways of the world, our minds will be transformed and renewed. And, over time, through the trials of life, we will come to discern the will of God...all that is good, acceptable, and perfect. Which is to say, we will come to discern who we have been created to be in terms of true righteousness and holiness...the true nature of our new selves.

Notice, however, that we are not the active agents of our renewal. The verb is an imperative passive, “be renewed.” It is the Holy Spirit that renews and transforms our minds. Remember Paul prayed for the church in Ephesians 1:17 “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened...”

So, the renewing of our minds is a work of the Holy Spirit that involves wisdom, revelation, and knowledge that opens the eyes of our heart...which is a powerful way of saying “being transformed,” right? We are being transformed from the “old self” way of thinking, living, responding, and behaving to “the new self” way of thinking, living, responding, and behaving.

I think it is implied here in Ephesians 4 that the believers were taught to practice a lifestyle of worship so that they would regularly undergo a renewal of their minds. And isn't that what often happens when we gather for worship? Isn't that what regularly happens when seek union with Christ in prayer, scripture reading, and waiting?

So, there is something that we must do...and there is something that only the Holy Spirit can do.

As we prepare to enter back into the world, let us commit to those things we can and must do. We must no longer walk as the Gentiles do. We must consciously put off the old self and put on the new self...that is to say, we are to put our energies toward becoming who we are! And let us remember who we are. We are the redeemed! We are the Body of Christ! We are the children of God! We are a new creation! We are the New Community! That is who we are, but it will take a disciplined life immersed in worship if we are to more and more become who Jesus saved us to be, amen?

And for those who might yet be bound in the old nature...subject to deceitful desires...alienated from God and darkened in your understanding...I beseech you: repent of your sin and call upon the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sin. Call upon His name in faith, and He will come to you. He will take your sin and give you Himself, that you might be remade into a new creation...free from the tyranny of sin, and given a new identity as an adopted child of God. Call upon His name and be saved.

Will you pray with me?