

Ephesians Bible Study

Lesson 14 Notes / Ephesians 4:17-24

Building the Body of Christ by Embracing Spiritual Growth

Introduction:

As we come to our passage for today, it is helpful to be reminded once again of the overriding passion Paul had for the church: their spiritual growth. Looking back on what we have studied so far in Ephesians, it is easy to recall many admonitions that the apostle wrote related to this theme. For instance, in chapters 1 and 3 both of Paul's prayers focused on believers coming to truly know God more intimately and in such a way that they overflow with His love and fullness. Going further, it is hard to miss the repeated emphasis Paul places on the believer's union with Christ, and how that union propels them into an ongoing process of transformation. (Eph. 1:3-14,17, 2:21-22) Additionally, the teaching in chapters 2 and 3 focused on the oneness of all believers, was written to help break down relational barriers within church fellowship, and train Christians to grasp that they were not saved for a life of isolation: they were saved to live out their faith in the family of God. This truth, coupled with the notion that believers are to be passionate about preserving unity in the body through their attitudes and actions, reflects in a complimentary way what was stated initially: Paul desperately wanted the church to grow and mature as Christ had intended (Eph. 4:13-16), and he knew that this could only occur as each individual member was embracing what the Bible refers to as sanctification.

For many, the word sanctification stirs up all kind of thoughts and emotions. Some might wonder what the word even means. For others who know the definition, feelings of disdain for the process might result in negative comments being made about the term. This should not be so! Defined, the Bible uses the Greek word, *hagiasmos*, translated sanctification to refer to the process whereby saints are set apart for God and become holy like Jesus. The Scriptures teach of a positional sanctification that occurs at conversion (I Cor. 1:30), a progressive sanctification that occurs while the believer is still on earth (John 17:18-19, Phil. 3:12), and an ultimate or final sanctification that will happen in heaven when the believer is fully glorified (I John 3:2). In most contexts of the New Testament though, progressive sanctification is the idea that is being referred to when the term is mentioned. As Vine's puts it, *"This (progressive) sanctification is God will for the believer and His purpose in calling him by the Gospel; it must be learned from God as He teaches it by His Word, and it must be pursued by the believer earnestly and undeviatingly...it is not vicarious, it cannot be transferred or imputed, it is an individual possession built up little by little, as the result of obedience to the Word of God and following the example of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit."*

As Paul moves into verses 17-24, he clearly has progressive sanctification on his mind. While he had taught extensively that the believer's positional holiness and standing before God was assured, he continued to feel compelled to teach the church that true believers seek to live

their new life out, by putting off self and putting on Christ. (vs. 20-24) This lifelong process was seen by Paul as a prize to be won rather than an arduous duty to perform (Phil. 3:12-14). While he recognized there was pain involved, the joy of getting to know Christ intimately far outweighed all the sacrifices. (Phil. 3:7-8)

The Lifestyle of the Godless (Old Self)

Starting out in verse 17 Paul warns his readers by saying, ***“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.”*** It is important to remember that the readers of the letter were surrounded by people who were living in the darkness of rampant godlessness. As we have discussed, the culture at Ephesus was an especially dark place steeped in idolatry and the occult. Sexual immorality was widespread and largely went unchecked, leading many historians to rank Ephesus as the most lascivious city in Asia Minor. (Macarthur) Many of the believers Paul was writing to had been engaged in these wicked practices before they came to Christ, and the pull to return to their old ways was strong. Because of all of this, the need for a stern admonition was in order, and the language Paul uses in these verses reflect just that.

The phrase ***“testify in the Lord”*** shows us that what Paul is about to say is a solemn declaration backed by the authority of Jesus Christ Himself, not merely his personal taste or opinion. As Macarthur says, *“The matter of forsaking sin and following righteousness is not the whim of isolated, narrow minded preachers and teachers. It is God’s own standard and His only standard for those who belong to Him.”* The Greek word, *peripateo*, translated walk here refers to one’s daily conduct and lifestyle, *“the whole round of activities of the individual life,”* (Vines) and in this case the Gentiles he is referring to walk ***“in the futility of their minds.”*** In more specific terms their mindless and empty thinking had led them to a place of hopeless, reckless wandering, where life had no purpose other than self- gratification. In the end, all of life was vanity without God, just as Solomon had declared (Eccl. 1), and these Gentiles he is referring to were living, breathing examples of that.

Their futile thinking was further demonstrated in the fact that they were ***“darkened in their understanding and excluded from the life of God.”*** Because they had no true knowledge of God, they had no light of His wisdom influencing them. They, like all people, had been exposed to the glory of God revealed in Creation, but because of their ongoing rejection, were in a place where they could not even discern the most basic essence of His light. This was due to the ***“hardness of their hearts,”*** and their ***“callousness.”*** The idea expressed in these two terms is similar in that what is described in graphic terminology is that their minds had become “stone cold” to the truth. *“The Greek word porosis used for hardness here carries the idea of being rock-hard. It was used by physicians to describe the calcification that forms around broken bones and becomes harder than the bone itself. It was also used of the hard formations that sometimes occur in joints and caused them to become immobile. It could therefore connote the idea of paralysis as well as hardness. Sin has a petrifying effect, and the heart of the person who*

continually chooses to sin becomes hardened and paralyzed to spiritual truth, utterly insensitive to the things of God.” (Macarthur)

Going further, this darkness they were in had led them to have such a seared conscience that they had **“given themselves over to promiscuity for the practice of every kind of impurity with a desire for more and more.”** When a person no longer feels the sting of a guilty conscience a lifestyle of wickedness always follows. These Gentiles had abandoned themselves to that type of lifestyle and were living a life of *aselgeia*, according to the Greek. *Aselgeia* translated here to promiscuity, is more specifically defined as total licentiousness or sensuality. Literally it means *“wanton violence or outrageous conduct of any kind, a life without care for personal standards or social sanctions.”* (Foulkes) While it is obvious sexual perversions are in view here it does include so much more. The Greek word translated impurity is *pleonexia*, which some translations render as uncleanness or greed, and conveys the idea that their desire for self-gratification had no limits. They coveted what was not theirs, were never content with what was given, and their desires that drove them were entirely fleshly. Whether it be in the area of sexuality, wealth, or some other type of vice, they simply had no regard for anyone other than themselves and were willing to abuse and exploit to get what they wanted.

For many of us reading these verses, it is easy to dismiss Paul’s warning because the conduct of these Gentiles seems so outrageous. Yet the reality is that what is being described is the natural man in each of us apart from Christ. While this is a specific group of people Paul is describing, the reality is that before we were saved, we too were living in complete darkness and entangled in the vicious, destructive cycle of sin- incapable of truly seeing Christ. As Ephesians 2:1-6 says we were **“dead in our trespasses in sins in which we previously lived according to the ways of the world, according to the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit now working in the disobedient. We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and we were by nature children under wrath as the others were also. But God who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace!”** Nothing is more critical to grasping the greatness of God, than seeing ourselves for who we truly are, and nothing is more hopeful that grasping that God reached out to us anyway, simply because He chose to set His love on us.

The True Way of Christ and the New Self

After describing the lifestyle of the godless, Paul writes, **“But that is not how you came to know Christ, assuming you heard about Him, and were taught by Him as the truth is in Jesus, to take off your former way of life that is corrupt through deceitful desires.”** Here the apostle affirms the true way of salvation: that genuine, saving faith’s fruit is repentance and that the one who has truly heard Christ’s call is one who is seeking to walk in obedience. All through the New Testament we see this idea of Lordship salvation being taught. Jesus Himself said in Luke 9:23, **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me.”** In I John 2:4 we read, **“The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’**

and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. James 4:4 reminds us that ***“Friendship with the world is hostility toward God.”*** Macarthur speaking of this says, *“From the human side, salvation begins with repentance, a change of mind and action regarding sin, self, and God. John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2), Jesus (Matt. 4:17), and the apostles (Acts 2:38, 3:19, 5:31, 20:21, 26:20), began their ministries with the preaching of repentance. The very purpose of receiving Christ is to “be saved from this perverse generation.” (Acts 2:40), and no one is saved who does not repent and forsake sin. Repentance does not save us, but God cannot save us from sin of which we are unwilling to let go.”* He goes on to make clear that, *“No Christian is totally free from the presence of sin in this life, but in Christ he is willingly freed from his orientation to sin. He slips and falls many times, but the determined direction of his life is away from sin.”*

To many in the church today these harder truths of the Gospel have become difficult to swallow, just as they were in Jesus’s day (John 6:60-69). Sadly, even many well-meaning Christians, perhaps desiring to protect the Gospel from being polluted by any form of works righteousness, have become willing to underplay the teachings of the Lordship of Christ. This has resulted in a more easy-believism type of Christianity that in the end compromises the true Gospel message, and sadly leaves many people deceived and with little hope for life change. Yet, as Paul articulates clearly here, the true way of Christ is one where believers are yoked to the Lord- they hear Him, they learn from Him, are empowered to follow Him, and *do* seek to follow Him (John 10:27, Matt. 11:29). Yes, there is a battle to be fought, but the point is that true believers fight the battle! (1 John 2:3-6)

This process of fighting the battle, referred to earlier as sanctification, requires the believer to ***“be renewed in the spirit of their minds and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”*** It is interesting that Paul once again mentions the role of the mind. For both the believer and the unbeliever, he is making clear that what we think and believe ultimately determines not only our choices but our destiny. For the unbeliever their darkened understanding and futile way of thinking leads to all kinds of wickedness and in the end eternal separation from God and hell. For the believer, who has been illuminated by the Spirit of God and empowered to believe the Gospel, there is not only the imparted righteousness of Christ which results in eternal life, but a compelling capability to walk in practical righteousness and holiness in their daily life. This is because, as Nancy Pearcey wisely notes, *“Redemption is as comprehensive as Creation and Fall. God does not save our souls while leaving our minds to function on their own. He redeems the whole person.”*

Of course, as the passage makes clear, this requires us to still, ***“put off our old self”*** which sadly is an ever- present reality that constantly seeks to negatively influence our choices and put on the new self through the avenue of a renewed mind. The phrase Paul uses here ***“be renewed in the spirit of their minds”*** references the idea that what is required for us to walk in our new life is that we be continuously renewed in our human spirit, not *merely* the sphere of us where our thinking and reasoning occur, but actually what is more in view is the moral part

of our inner being. This process began at salvation when the Holy Spirit gave us a completely new spiritual and moral bent and will continue as the Holy Spirit empowers us to tap into the divine resources, primarily the Word of God and prayer. (Macarthur) As we commit ourselves to cooperating with the Spirit of God through these means, we will find that we are granted the mind of Christ, which in turn enables us to ***“put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”*** And as Pastor Ken referenced in a recent sermon, the light of Christ that increasingly shines through the believer is like ***“the light of dawn which shines brighter and brighter until full day (Prov.4:18),*** and ultimately will find its full culmination when we enter eternity and see our Lord face to face, resulting in our full glorification (1 John 3:2).

Lastly, the description of the new self, referenced above, makes clear that the new life we have been given by God was created to restore what was lost in the fall- namely our capacity to rightly reflect God’s image. As Foulkes says, *“Humanity was made in God’s image in the beginning (Gen.1:27) and when that image had been marred by sin and the life of fellowship with God lost, there was in Christ a new creation, a restoration of the divine life and all that means.”* He goes on to say, *“Above all the image of God is shown in character, in true righteousness and holiness. If these qualities are not seen, at least in some measure (in professing believers) there is no evidence that there has been God’s work of recreation at all.”* It is noteworthy to mention that the two qualities that are mentioned each convey a different aspect of our divine life. Righteousness relates to our moral duty to other people, and holiness relates more to fulfilling our duty to God. How beautiful it is that the new life we possess was created to fulfill the most basic summation of all that God commands of us: love for others and love for God (Matt. 22:37-40).

Conclusion

Finally, as we consider the truths contained in the passage for this week it is important to remember once again the primary passion Paul had for the believers he was writing: their spiritual growth. Paul wisely knew that if the true Gospel was going to shine brightly to the world in and through the church, each individual believer needed to fully embrace the sanctification process. He also knew that in doing so, believers would find that truly making their lives about Jesus would result in a fuller, more rewarding life than they ever dreamed possible. As Steve Lawson says, *“To follow Jesus is the greatest adventure in all of life. It involves the pursuit of life’s greatest purpose- the glory that belongs to Jesus alone. It meets life’s greatest need- the forgiveness of sin that only Jesus can give. It gives life’s greatest pleasure- the joy that comes exclusively from knowing Christ. It involves the greatest partnership in life- the fellowship of walking closely with Jesus. It imparts the greatest teaching in life- the wisdom that Christ alone possesses. It infuses the greatest power in life- the grace of Jesus Christ to live triumphantly. It leads to the greatest destination after life- the immediate presence of Jesus Himself in heaven. There is no journey that can compare with this one. It will take you from you are to where you need to be. It will take you through all of life’s many experiences including*

your greatest moments and darkest nights. This journey with Christ will enable you to live as God intends you to live. As you follow in His footsteps, you will find the real purpose for which you were made. Moreover, it will ultimately lead you home to heaven, to the very throne of God. No pursuit in life even begins to compare to this journey of following Jesus.”

References

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