

Ephesians 4:17-24
(Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Matthew 22:34-40)
“Living As God’s Children”

Introduction

Salvation is not merely an event or series of events in the past. “Are you saved?” is not a question asked in the Scriptures. Salvation is the life of God in the soul of a person, and if our lives are not being made new, then we have reason to question whether or not we have yet been born of God’s Spirit. Thus, the apostle Paul was never satisfied simply to write theological truth or simply to describe God’s way of saving us in and through Christ. After he explained the gospel, he would always reach a point where he wrote the word, “therefore.” He would then begin to describe the kind of changes that we should expect if we have been born of the Spirit and united to Christ through faith.

Nor does Paul simply describe such changes and tell us to hope for them to begin appearing in our lives. He calls us to seek the reality of these things and to grow into these truths. A newborn child does not grow up to strength and health by being taught principles of nutrition and exercise. The child must eat and grow. To be a businessperson, doctor, lawyer, builder, teacher, one must finally leave the classroom and begin to do what, until then, is simply theory. The carpenter or painter or musician must learn by doing – most of life is on-the-job training.

Why is it that so many Christians think that the gospel is simply about learning and believing (at some level) certain basic truths and going to church occasionally? No, salvation is a life lived in union with Christ and in an ever-growing conformity to his mind and heart and will. To understand our need of such life-transformation, Paul always draws contrasts between the life we live by nature, a life described in our text as “alienated from the life of God” (4:18), and life offered us by God’s grace – life in Christ.

In our text, Paul puts this in the form of an imperative and even invokes the name of the Lord, “Now I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their minds” (4:17). He does not say, “If you want to grow up spiritually, if you want to go to the next level, if you want to be really happy,” or any of the other ways we try to cajole people into doing what is best for them. He says, “You must!”

Jesus spoke this way: If you want to be my disciple, then this is what it costs; this is what you must do. Of course, it is the only way to true and lasting joy, it does lead to the *shalom* we all desire and look for in all the wrong places. But the great masters of the spiritual life, and especially our Lord, never begged or cajoled or pleaded. They simply said, “This is the way. Walk in it. It leads to life. All others lead to death. Choose this day whom you will serve. Decide now whether it will be life or death.”

In our text, Paul describes what we must do as “putting off the old self “and “putting on the new.” What does he mean by this?

Body

1. Put off the old self (4:17-19).

The problem of the mind: “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” (4:18).

The Greek word translated as “futility” is the same word used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) to translate the Hebrew word *hevel*, which means “vanity.” “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Solomon used it to describe the emptiness of a life that may have everything the world considers as the good life – health, wealth, success – and yet be utterly empty of meaning because it lacks any eternal dimension.

Paul likely expected his readers to remember Solomon’s words when he chose that same word to describe life apart from the knowledge of God. The wise and fool, the rich and poor, the respected and despised, all die and their bodies molder in the grave. How meaningless and futile! Such futility is marked by a lack of understanding and ignorance of God. No matter how smart and well educated: if we do not know where we are from, where we are going, or what it all means, we have no base of wisdom from which to live our lives, to direct our choices or behaviors.

The problem of the heart: “due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous” (4:18-19)

The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. Apart from God’s gracious and loving influence, the heart quickly grows hard. The word Paul uses for the hardening of the heart is the Greek word *porosis*, from which we get such words as osteoporosis. It is a hardness and stubbornness that can lead to brittle emotions and broken relations.

Such hearts, Paul writes, are calloused, insensitive to others, insensitive to the voice of God, insensitive to the greatest issues of life, insensitive to the voice of conscience. One can hear the truth, sing the songs, say the right words, but walk away unmoved, unchanged. Once, perhaps, there was a tenderness to things of the spirit, but repeated refusal to heed the Spirit, to obey the truth, to do the right, has left the heart hard and unresponsive.

The problem of the will: “and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity” (4:19).

And so, of course, the will simply follows the heart and mind. It’s not that our wills are bound, as Luther thought. It is that the will serves the heart and mind and does their bidding. As C.H. Spurgeon used to say, “What’s the good of a ‘whosoever will,’ when nobody wants to?” We do not stubbornly do what we don’t want to do, but what we want to do, even when we know that it is wrong and may lead to pain and suffering. Paul puts it like this: “They have ... given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity” (4:19).

All of this, Paul says, we must put off like a filthy shirt: throw it away! Be done with it! But how are we to do that. It is our natural self – how can we simply throw it away? Here is how: “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God” (4:24). That’s the key. Although Paul describes it as an external action – “put on” – it rests upon what God alone can do: namely, recreate us in his image and likeness as we were originally intended to be. This work of God’s grace in and through Christ is always the basis of Paul’s insistence that we put on the new life given us in Christ Jesus.

2. Put on the new self (4:20-24).

The mind of Christ: “That is not the way you learned Christ! – assuming that you heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus ... to be renewed in the spirit of your minds” (4:20-23).

Paul’s words here echo his words in Romans 12: “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” (Romans 12:2). The Lord wants to change our minds from the inside out. That is, in fact, the real meaning of *metanoia*, a Greek word that Jerome – the great early Church translator of the Latin Vulgate, which was the western church’s Bible for a thousand years – mistranslated as “do penance.” In the renaissance period, it was correctly translated as “repentance.”

Unfortunately, it took on a moralistic, behavioral tone, so that repenting means to most Christians a change of behavior. Now repentance should result in changed behavior, but it is literally a change of mind. And, although Paul does not use the word *metanoia* here, it is what Paul describes: We are to have the mind of Christ. But what does that mean? It is a mind marked by humble submission toward God and self-sacrificial love toward others. As Paul wrote elsewhere,

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a

servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross (Philippians 2:5-8).

The heart of Christ: “in true righteousness” (4:24).

Yes, we have Christ’s righteousness credited to us, but as his Spirit is now in us, our heart affections should no longer be marked by callousness and hardness, but by tender love of God and others, and by a growing desire for Christ’s righteousness that is, essentially, “rightness” in our thoughts and feelings toward others. The law of God is a description of what it looks like to love God and to love others, and a renewed heart should learn to love what the Lord loves because it is the surest way to love him and to love others.

Far from a call to dead legalism, this is a call to see as Christ sees, to love as he loves, so that we may begin to do as he did in his days among us, and as he would continue to do through us, his body in the world.

The will of Christ: “and holiness” (4:24).

And so, of course, the mind of Christ and the heart of Christ should be increasingly expressed by a will that now desires to do what the mind and heart approve. Just as a mind and heart in rebellion against God express themselves in rebellious behavior, so too the mind and heart of Christ express themselves in Christ-like loving service, which is true holiness.

In the rest of this chapter and the first half of the next, Paul will draw a series of contrasts between the life of the old self and the life of the new. We shall, Lord willing, look at those contrasts next Sunday.

Conclusion

What shall we make of this? What is this text calling us to do? Clearly, there is an imperative call by the apostle: You must no longer live as you once lived. Put off the old life and put on the new. So, where does one begin?

I suggest the following: This next week, find time every day to get alone in a quiet place for twenty minutes and simply pray, “Lord, open my eyes to see, my mind to understand, my heart to desire, my will to obey, your Word.” Then open this letter and read, beginning with the next verse (4:25), one of Paul’s “therefore”s, and read down through verse twenty-one of chapter five (5:21). That’s less than thirty verses. Just steep in these verses this week and ask the Lord to work these pictures into you and to use them to give you the mind and heart and will of Jesus.