

Union With Christ

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

Living the Changed Life

Ephesians 4:17 – 24

Introduction: How Am I Different?

Two weeks ago (early Feb 2006), I got a very important phone call from a friend. He was a good friend from high school. And though we have drifted somewhat over the 15 years that have passed since our high school graduation, he called to tell me that he had proposed to his girlfriend. We celebrated with each other over the phone. He told me how he had got down on one knee while they were traveling in Atlanta, Georgia at this beautiful restaurant. He told me how she was totally surprised and said, 'Yes!' Their wedding date is set for September 2nd of this year (2006), and it will be in a very cozy, family-owned vineyard and winery in Canada, 20 minutes north of Niagara Falls. The food will be French Canadian, and I'm sure it will be mouthwatering. As my friend and I talked, we got caught up on our friends in common – the people we hung out with in high school. He's done a better job than I have keeping in touch with most of them, so I found myself really looking forward to seeing all of them at his wedding.

And yet I feel a certain amount of concern and sadness, too; because all of my high school friends don't know Jesus. A couple of them, including my friend who called, have even turned away from him. For that reason, their lives have started to look very similar to each other, and my life looks very different. All of them drive fairly fancy cars; I don't, and I made it a point not to fix the dent in my car so I could give the insurance money to Jesus. Most of them have spent thousands of dollars traveling to gorgeous places in the world. I have given tens of thousands of dollars to Christian people serving in inner cities, slum communities, and suffering places in the world. All of them are primarily focused on their immediate Chinese-American families; I've stepped out into Latino, African-American, Caribbean, and Muslim communities in California and Boston. All of them live or aspire to live in very nice areas where they don't have to care about their surroundings; I live in a tough neighborhood, lower-income and higher crime, where our purpose is to care about people around us. Some of them are done having their 1 or 2 kids; my wife and I are asking when can we start adopting some kids? They care about their name being well known – some of them are doctors, for instance, in specialized fields; I've come to care more about Jesus' name being well known even if my name isn't; and I want to tell people about him.

I don't mean to villainize or heroicize any particular one of those things, or any one decision. But there is a larger pattern, where our lives look more and more different over time. There are still many things that connect me and my friends that we have in common. And I am very much looking forward to reunions and all that. I hope I can tell them about Jesus. But, in some very deep and fundamental ways, Jesus has changed me and is continuing to change me, and making me different. And that is how it should be.

Relevance

If you truly know Jesus, how are you different from those who do not? Right here in Dorchester, right now in February of 2006. How are Christians any different from non-Christians? Is it just the fact that you as Christians gather on Sundays and sing these little songs? Is that it? Or is there more? You see, I am sure that in the back of your minds, or maybe even the front, you have asked the question, 'How different are Christians supposed to be from the world around them?' What should that look like? How should you be different?

Context

We're looking at Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Paul has described the spiritual difference it is to be joined to Jesus through faith in him. In chapters 1 – 3, he says that God brought us into His new family in Christ, seated us in the place of Jesus as the new human being, because we are in Jesus. Starting in chapter 4, he begins to flesh out the big difference it is to be God's new humanity.

Not Ruled By Your Old Identity: v.17 – 19

In 4:17, Paul says, 'So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord.' Who is Paul speaking to? He is speaking to Christians. Apparently the Ephesians were turning back or tempted to turn back to live in the old ways that Jesus brought them out of.

What's really powerful is that Paul speaks 'with the Lord' Jesus. Jesus himself is saying this. If you've ever wanted to hear the voice of Jesus, here it is. Paul is simply hearing Jesus and says 'together with' him. In fact, Paul is literally 'testifying' to them. He is calling them into a holy courtroom and saying, 'There are dire implications about your actions.' In fact, in a few verses, he presses a definition of Jesus' kingdom in 5:5, 'For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.' Life in Jesus' kingdom involves transformation at the very core of who we are by allowing Jesus to reign there by his Spirit.

What is Paul speaking against, then? Against our old forms of life. 'That you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk.' He is critiquing some of the most advanced peoples of the world of his time: the Greek and Roman worlds. Imagine the Greek world, filled with philosophy, science, theater, and sculpture, and now imagine Paul saying in the midst of that, 'Your minds are dull.' Imagine the Roman world, filled with laws, roads, aqueducts, military power, and coliseums. Now imagine Paul saying in the midst of that, 'Your thinking is futile.' I wonder if he would look at us in the United States with all our technology, universities, entertainment and luxuries and say, 'You're a bunch of morons'?

Paul is concerned about the spiritual and moral life of the rest of the world. Look at how he does that. The human condition is corrupt from the inside out, from heart to mind to body:

- mind: ^{4:17} in the futility of their *mind*, ¹⁸ being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, (because of what?)
- heart: ^{4:18} because of the hardness of their *heart*; (this is the root cause – their hearts are hard)
- body: ^{4:19} and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.

This sounds so brutal, doesn't it? I have to admit that part of me wants to whisper, 'Paul, you can't talk about people that way! That's really awkward.' And yet the more I think about it, the more I have to agree that this world is crazy!

Let's look at Paul's diagnosis. Why does he say all this? What does it mean that we used to have a hard heart? The heart in biblical terms is the center of your will. To have a hardened will means to not be open to God, not open to His voice. It's how we all once were. The first person that was described this way in Scripture is Pharaoh in Egypt. When Moses confronted him with the words of God, Pharaoh hardened his heart. And just as hardened arteries cause death physically, a hardened heart causes death spiritually, and then it continues to have implications. Jesus said that out of the heart come evil things. So again, Paul is basically repeating what Jesus said, and is still saying. Jesus is not concerned with just changing our behavior, and if you want proof of that in Scripture, this is one of the clearest passages. Jesus is all about radically changing us from the core and then allowing that change to work out through the rest of our lives.

But a heart that is closed and rigid and hardened against the one true God and dead set against Him affects the way you think. That's why Paul says the Gentiles live 'in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding.' How does this happen in the world around us? People think in a self-centered way. For example, a lot of people just 'want to be happy.' And they think that they can get happy putting themselves first. But they don't realize that that's impossible. If the most important thing in life is you, then you'll always be disappointed; you'll always be upset with other people; you'll always be hurt. Because no one will ever be as committed to you as you are. In order to actually be happy, you have to give your life to something much greater than yourself; that's the only way you'll actually be happy. You should tell that to your friends. It's so logical.

People either think thoughts of fear and worry, or about domination and power, or something along those lines. It's like the little shrines that we see in Asian restaurants along with all the superstitions about dragons and devils. People lived in a world in which they were exposed to powers they recognized as being greater than themselves, but in which there was no consistency – and never any love. They could beg

for mercy, and try to influence them through burning incense or whatever. But there was no sense of belonging to God. People never thought of a god as loving them; pagans never thought of loving a god.

So when people don't have a rich inner spiritual life, they usually just want to have a good physical life. 'Well, if the soul isn't important, then I'll just enjoy my body.' We become ruled by our bodies. Part of growing up, I think, is learning how to temper your body. For instance, when I was growing up I was able to eat three Big Macs. I was able to eat a dozen donuts by myself. I loved the smell of gasoline. Those are extremes. I think that's a natural part of growing up, but in other ways, we start to want more and more sensations. When I was a teenager, I was a competitive swimmer, and I thought about taking performance enhancing drugs because I wanted the sensation of having lots of power. I pressured a girlfriend for sex because those were the sensations that I most wanted. I also wanted a lot of money; I really liked ties at that time, because I thought ties were powerful symbols for a man. Maybe your friends say they feel most alive when they're playing video games because it gets your adrenaline going, or high on something, or making a lot of money. That's when they feel most alive. They really start to like indulging themselves. And even though there was always a let down, and those things that promised so much delivered so little, still they jump right back in there. If they're apart from God, they just live for themselves, if all we live for is to gratify some desire of our bodies.

That's why Paul says we become 'calloused.' A callous appears on your finger because you use a pencil and it rubs there. And what happens to a callous? It becomes tough. You can't feel things there. But our soul and our thinking and our feelings can become calloused, too, because of the way we use our bodies. If you take drugs, you start to lose feeling and your body becomes toughened. Then you need more and more drugs to get the same feeling. If you get hooked on pornography, you start to lose feeling. Then you need more and more pornography to get the same feeling. If you want to just shop, you start to lose feeling, and you need more and more things to get the same feeling. That's why Paul throughout 4:24 – 5:7 talks about people wanting sex and greed. Those are the things that affect us most. Here in v.19, he says they 'have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.' When people don't have a rich inner spiritual life, they just want to have a good physical life. But nothing ever satisfies. They just keep going back for hit after hit and it becomes very frustrating for them.

(There's a joke about Americans being fat.

There are more serious consequences, though. American psychiatrists increasingly treat all human problems as if they're just physical. If you're depressed or struggling emotionally, just take prozac! Counseling is becoming less important because counseling is the care of the soul. It deals with memories, emotions, and spirituality. But the more secular America becomes, the more materialistic we become, and the more we reduce the human person down to physical molecules and chemicals.)

But as much as we might agree with Paul on that, he is not addressing the world per se. We are not to take this passage and say, 'Wow – you're right! And thank God I'm not like those other people at my school, or my workplace, or my neighborhood.' This passage is addressed to Christians, and it's challenging to Christians for being hypocritical. We often say we're different, but in these critical ways, we're the same.

Many of you, for instance, probably don't struggle with alcohol or drugs, you may not even struggle with pornography, but you do want to be rich. You want to pamper your body. For that reason, you really don't love other people that well.

Illus: For example, my wife Ming is on the board of an organization called TXV, an outreach to at-risk Vietnamese youth. She was asked to lead a Bible study for the staff. One of the five staff is not a Christian. So when Ming covered a passage about how Christians are supposed to share their wealth with others, this young man said, 'That's why I'm not a Christian. I don't see anyone doing that.' Christians can be just as greedy and selfish as everyone else. We need to leave those old ways behind. We cannot be like everyone else.

If you're a Christian, your body is still important. All the basic things of life like food and sleep and sex are important, but they have a place set by God. There's a flow to how our lives go. Our spirit rules our body, not the other way around.

The Great Voice of Christ: v.20 – 21

Why is that? Because you responded to Jesus. Look at v.20 – 21. ²⁰ But you did not learn Christ in this way, ²¹ if indeed you have heard Him.’ Wow! This is an incredible statement. If you learned about Christ and gave your life to him truly, then it was not just human words you heard. You heard *him*. He spoke to you, and you responded. And this is one of the hopes that we hold out to the world. People need Jesus. He is the one who calls us into relationship with himself. He is the one who comes into our lives and begins to transform us from the inside out.

C.S. Lewis tells a beautiful story about this kind of transformation in one of the Narnia stories, *The Voyage of the ‘Dawn Treader’*. Here’s the episode in the third book when a boy named Eustace tells his story of being transformed by someone who is like Jesus.

‘Well, anyway, I looked up and saw the very last thing I expected: a huge lion coming slowly towards me. And one queer thing was that there was no moon last night, but there was moonlight where the lion was. So it came nearer and nearer. I was terribly afraid of it. You may think that, being a dragon, I could have knocked any lion out easily enough. But it wasn’t that kind of fear. I wasn’t afraid of it eating me, I was just afraid of it--if you can understand. Well, it came closer up to me and looked straight into my eyes. And I shut my eyes tight. But that wasn’t any good because it told me to follow it.’

‘You mean it spoke?’

‘I don’t know. Now that you mention it, I don’t think it did. But it told me all the same. And I knew I’d have to do what it told me, so I got up and followed it. And it led me a long way into the mountains. And there was always this moonlight over and round the lion wherever we went. So at last we came to the top of a mountain I’d never seen before and on top of this mountain there was a garden--trees and fruit and everything. In the middle of it there was a well.

‘I knew it was a well because you could see the water bubbling up from the bottom of it: but it was a lot bigger than most wells--like a very big, round bath with marble steps going down into it. The water was as clear as anything and I thought if I could get in there and bathe it would ease the pain in my leg. But the lion told me I must undress first. Mind you, I don’t know if he said any words out loud or not.

‘I was just going to say that I couldn’t undress because I hadn’t had any clothes on when I suddenly thought that dragons are snaky sort of things and snakes can cast their skins. Oh, of course, thought I, that’s what the lion means. So I started scratching myself and my scales began coming off all over the place. And then I scratched a little deeper and, instead of just scales coming off here and there, my whole skin started peeling off beautifully, like it does after an illness, or as if I was a banana. In a minute or two I just stepped out of it. I could see it lying there beside me, looking rather nasty. It was a most lovely feeling. So I started to go down into the well for my bath.

‘But just as I was going to put my foot into the water I looked down and saw that it was all hard and rough and wrinkled and scaly just as it had been before. Oh, that’s all right, said I, it only means I had another smaller suit on underneath the first one, and I’ll have to get out of it too. So I scratched and tore again and this under skin peeled off beautifully and out I stepped and left it lying beside the other one and went down to the well for my bath.

‘Well, exactly the same thing happened again. And I thought to myself, oh dear, how ever many skins have I got to take off? For I was longing to bathe my leg. So I scratched away for the third time and got off a third skin, just like the two others, and stepped out of it. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water I knew it had been no good.

‘Then the lion said--but I don’t know if it spoke--You will have to let me undress you. I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

‘The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know--if you’ve ever picked the scab of a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh but it is such fun to see it coming away.’

‘I know exactly what you mean,’ said Edmund.

‘Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off--just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times, only they hadn’t hurt--and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch

and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me--I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on--and threw me into the water. I smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again. You'd think me simply phoney if I told you how I felt about my own arms. I know they've no muscle and are pretty mouldy compared with Caspian's but I was so glad to see them.

'After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me--'

'Dressed you. With his paws?'

'Well, I don't exactly remember that bit. But he did somehow or other: in new clothes--the same I've got on now, as a matter of fact. And then suddenly I was back here. Which is what makes me think it must have been a dream.'

'No. It wasn't a dream,' said Edmund.

'Why not?'

'Well, there are the clothes, for one thing. And you have been--well, un-dragoned, for another.'

'What do you think it was, then?' asked Eustace.

'I think you've seen Aslan,' said Edmund.

'Aslan!' said Eustace. 'I've heard that name mentioned several times since we joined the Dawn Treader. And I felt--I don't know what--I hated it. But I was hating everything then. And by the way, I'd like to apologize. I'm afraid I've been pretty beastly.'

It turns out that Aslan the lion is Jesus in another form. He transforms Eustace from this spoiled brat to a boy who cares for others and can put others before himself.

The process for us as Christians is that we 'have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus.' Jesus is the absolute benchmark for truth, he is the person of truth and the place of truth. When we come to him, we come into him, and so we start to soak ourselves in truth. That's what really drives our transformation.

Your New Self in Christ: v.22 – 24

So Paul reminds us in v.22 – 24 of our core transformation. Jesus taught us, ²² that, in reference to your former manner of life,

- you lay aside the *old self*, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit,
- ²³ and that you be renewed in the *spirit of your mind*,
- ²⁴ and put on the *new self*, which in God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.'

This is what happened to you. It's like if you take your junky old car and take out the engine and replace it with the engine of a Porsche. Then you shut the hood. The car looks the same, but it drives totally differently. Do you drive it the same as you always did? No, because now your car has a high performance engine, and it actually needs to drive at a higher speed in order for the engine to get a good workout. The same thing happened to you. Jesus took out your old engine, and he replaced it with himself. You look the same on the outside, but on the inside, you're totally different, and you need to live at a higher level.

You may not have felt all of that happen. But if you truly came to Jesus, that's what happened. What did Jesus teach? He taught that if we come to him, we must take up our cross and lose our lives in order to find it in him, fresh and new. That is the same thing as laying aside the old self, being renewed by the Spirit of Jesus as he affects our minds, and putting on the new self. That is the deep spiritual reality that baptism gives us a physical picture for. In baptism, you go down into the water, and that symbolically means that the old self has died. But you don't stay there. You come up! And that symbolically means that the new self has risen. You're new, because all who truly come to believe in Jesus die with him on the cross and rise with him at his resurrection. Somehow by his Spirit, Jesus is able to share that experience with us even if we didn't know what was going on in that moment. From that point on, whenever it is for each of us, we became a new person.

First, you now have a new perspective. Your mind is now informed by the Spirit of Jesus living in you. And that Spirit tells you that the other powerful, alluring voices that are trying to get your attention are simply 'lusts of deceit.' That's all they are. They are deceitful; they're lying to you. And you need to get that straight that in your mind.

Second, your new self is 'in God.' Most Bible translations say 'in the likeness of God' but the phrase 'the likeness of' is an inference. Literally, Paul says, 'the new self, which in God.' It's the opposite of being 'separated from the life of God' in v.18. What does it mean to be 'in God'? We were separated from Him for so long. But now the core of who we are is swimming in God. We live out of a vital, living connection with the one God of all the universe.

Third, it has been 'created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.' We don't create righteousness or holiness. It has been created by God and we simply put it on. In fact, Jesus put it on us when we came to him and we are transformed by it.

What does that look like? Well, v.17 – 19 talked about what sin looked like. By contrast, Christians are supposed to let our bodies be servants to the Spirit of Jesus living in us. And here's a concrete historical example that is very pertinent to you as a Vietnamese community. In the 1600's, the Christian community grew in the Buddhist north, primarily among the poor. They offered people many concrete services there, like basic health, literacy, and assistance to the poor. In 1906, Phan Boi Chau, the leader of the National Revolution in Vietnam, wrote in his book of Vietnam's national history an evaluation of the impact of belief in Jesus on the people. As a non-Christian perspective on the impact of the faith, this is valuable. He said:

* Catholicism pays attention to mutual friendships between two persons, two groups, two communities. It is an indescribable bond without being expressed but mutually understood.

* Catholicism focuses more on people's souls and spirits than on their physical necessities. Therefore, when fulfilling their duty, they disregard hardships that might hamper them physically.

* Catholicism teaches people to care for public interests before individual ones. When serving public interests, people trust one another. This makes it easy for the work to be done collectively.

* Catholicism worships only one God rather than any other deities. Compared to other religions, this reduces the cost of the worship services, which are sometimes useless.

That is what it means to live in righteousness and holiness. Righteousness means 'faithfulness to the covenant,' in this case, Jesus is the one being faithful through us. Holiness means 'put to special use,' in this case, Jesus is the one making us special because he lives in us and has a special purpose for us. And it has everything to do with love, with being able to deal with physical hardship because we have a rich life of the soul, with putting other people before ourselves, and with worshiping the one true God. In fact, that's what Paul talks about in the rest of Ephesians. He begins v.25 with the word, 'Therefore.' And then he goes on.

Again, this is a reminder to you to be who you are. That's important. When you're trying to hear Jesus and allow him to live out his life through you, you're not faking it. You're not trying to be someone you're not. You're actually trying to be someone you already are. The rest of your life is going to be spent trying to be consistent with who you already are. You're joined to Jesus, and he has come into you to pour out his life through you.