

## STUDY ON THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS

### PUT ON NEW AND CLEAN CLOTHES!

Read Ephesians 4:17-32

#### **Introduction**

We may think of the twenty-first century as secular and hard, proclaiming evil as good and deriding good as evil. And it is. Much of the good and righteousness that the revival movements had worked into our way of life has dissipated now. But Paul's day was even worse. His era wasn't "post-Christian" but "pre-Christian," and sin abounded in the great cities of the Greco-Roman world of the day. Paul calls the Christians of Ephesus to take seriously the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. What follows in Ephesians 4:17 through 6:9 is a call to righteousness in all areas of life.

Just previous to this passage and as we studied last week, Paul painted an exalted picture of the church as Christ's Body which is upbuilding itself in love and unity (Ephesians 4:1-16). Now he spells out some of the implications of being a part of this community of believers. Verse 17 begins with the word "so" or "therefore," indicating a transition.

#### **Darkness of the Gentiles Mind (vv17-19)**

The Gentile walk is characterized by the futility of their mind. In the end, their thinking is futile because their understanding is darkened – because they are alienated from the life of God. We define the words or phrases used in these verses to describe the Gentiles mind:

**Futile in their minds.** "Futility" refers to a "state of being without use or value, emptiness, futility, purposelessness, transitoriness." They have big thoughts and lots to say, but in the end, empty, vain, fruitless.

**Darkened in their understanding.** Unbelievers are darkened in their understanding because they selectively exclude the light about Jesus. They presuppose that Christianity is wrong. They won't hear of it. They reject it. And consequently, they are darkened inside.

**Separated from God's life.** This selective rejection has shut them off from God's life. "Separated" (NIV) or "alienated" (ESV, NRSV, KJV) translate a verb meaning to "estrangle, alienate." How very tragic! God's life is all around us, pulsing through the creation. But to miss out on the ultimate reality of the universe because of selective deafness is terribly sad.

**Ignorance.** The unbelievers just don't know about God. They suffer from "ignorance, unawareness, lack of discernment." But it's not as if they've never heard.

**Blindness or Hardness in their hearts.** The reason for their ignorance of God, says Paul, is because they have hardened their hearts. The verb refers to a "state or condition of complete lack of understanding, dullness, insensibility, obstinacy."

**Given to sexual immorality (lewdness and uncleanness).** The Greek word is variously translated "sensuality" (NIV, ESV, NASB), "licentiousness" (RSV), and "lasciviousness" (KJV). It refers to "lack of self-constraint which involves one in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable, self-abandonment." It is sexual depravity, utterly outrageous behaviour, "with a continual lust for more" (NIV). With the constant portrayal of sex outside of marriage in novels, television and films, this kind of sexual behaviour has become widely accepted and acceptable. Sexually loose behaviour has become part of our young people's courtship rituals.

Paul paints a dark picture of the unbeliever because he wants his readers to clearly see the contrast between darkness and light, between hell-bent behaviour and holiness.

### **Put on New & Clean Clothes (vv20-24)**

This kind of behaviour and empty living described in verses 17 to 19 has nothing to do with Christ, and what you've been taught about him, says Paul. You've been taught to put off the old, corrupt self, and to put on the new holy and righteous self. Paul uses the analogy of taking off dirty clothing and putting on clean clothing. We see this kind of language elsewhere in his writings (Rom 13:12-14; Col 3:10, 14).

For clarity purposes, we don't become Christians by reforming our ways. God works a basic change inside by his Holy Spirit. Jesus called it being "born again" (John 3:1-8). To illustrate Paul's point:

When I'm hot and sweaty and filthy, nothing feels better than a nice hot shower. After the steamy shower and I come out smelling clean, I would be stupid to put back on my dirty underwear. When I'm clean I want to put on clean clothes, it's only natural. This is Paul's point. You've been "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:25), so "put on the new self."

We find today, Christians that rushes back to what is familiar, what they are used to. It's so easy to look like and act like unbelievers all over again. Don't admire unbelievers in any way. That "old man" has been "corrupted by its deceitful lusts" (Ephesians 4:22). The answer to "deceitful desires" is the work that God is doing in us, making you "new in the attitude of your minds" (Ephesians 4:23). He gradually changes our desires, and with that change come new habits and living patterns. We are to cooperate with what God is doing -- "put on" (NIV, KJV) or "clothe yourselves" (NRSV) with the new self. We are to refuse to clothe ourselves with the old dirty clothes any longer, but instead, clothe ourselves with the new self.

### **Truth, Anger, and Theft (vv25-28)**

We've just seen the big picture, the ideal, of putting off the old self and putting on the new. Now Paul starts to spell out some of the nitty-gritty implications with another "therefore" in verse 25.

#### ***Speaking the Truth***

Since God is truth, then we must leave our clever white lies -- Paul calls it falsehood -- and, instead, speak truthfully. As we discussed in the previous lesson, we don't have to be cruel in our truth-telling. Instead, "speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him" (Ephesians 4:15). Since God is the ultimate truth, and we are "created to be like God" (Ephesians 4:24), then we too must speak like our Father, and put away forever the double-speak of our former father, the father of lies (John 8:44). The reason for speaking truth within the Christian community is plain: "for we are all members of one body" (Ephesians 4:25).

#### ***Controlling Anger***

Paul recognizes that anger itself is not sin. Anger can be a natural reaction to injustice, the emotion that God gives us so we will not passively allow injustice to have its way forever. But we must be very careful of anger, for it can have many deceitful roots. For example:

- **Selfishness.** Anger can spring from selfishness as well as injustice. We must observe our motives carefully, so that we don't justify "righteous anger," when it has much more to do with self than with righteousness.
- **Control.** Anger impels us to overflow our inhibitions and act. It is a powerful emotion designed to overcome our passivity. But without careful self-control, our anger can become abusive, violent, and sinful.

- **Bitterness.** Anger can turn into a deep-seated bitterness if we don't deal with it. "Do not let the sun go down on your wrath" advises the Apostle (4:26b). If we practiced this advice diligently, we would cut the workload of a lot of psychologists and psychiatrists -- and pastors, for that matter. A lot of our psychological stresses and abnormalities have resulted from buried anger, rather than anger which is openly dealt with and resolved quickly.
- **Foothold for Satan.** Anger and the bitterness that it can lead to can "give the devil a foothold" or "place" in our hearts (Ephesians 4:27). We know how that works. When we're angry, our inhibitions are less, and many times we speak our mind without the normal barriers which keep a civil tongue in our mouth. Once we've said some of those angry, nasty, bitter, hurtful things, we can't recall them. Or we justify our bitterness to the point that Satan, the father of hate, can do his work in us.

God is known throughout the Bible as "slow to anger" (Exodus 34:6). We need to stop making excuses for our temper tantrums and become like our Father.

### **Theft (v28)**

For the Christian, stealing, too, must go. Many people today are used to taking things so long as they think they can get away with it. Shoplifting is rampant. People steal pencils and supplies from their offices, copies from the company copy machine, and time from their workday -- and think nothing of it. When the boss is watching we are scrupulous, but when he is elsewhere, we steal with impunity. Our culture is beginning to smirk at dishonesty as something smart. Getting away with it is mark of our cleverness.

But God's Holy Spirit doesn't let us get away with this for long. First, Jesus reminds us to treat others as we, ourselves, would like to be treated. Stealing isn't only wrong just because it defrauds someone else, it is wrong because it avoids "work, doing something useful with his own hands" (Ephesians 4:28b). Work is not a necessary evil, it is good. God worked for six days and rested on the seventh. Jesus supported his family as a carpenter until being about his Father's work captured his full-time attention.

Another reason for not stealing is that stealing is the opposite of giving. A person who is a "taker" is seldom a "giver," and our God is the ultimate Giver. The former thief is admonished to do honest work "that he may have something to share with those in need" (Ephesians 4:28c).

### **Blithering, Blathering, Bitterness, and Brawling**

*"Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers... Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you."* (v29, 31-32)

It is interesting to note how much of the "new self" has to do with our altered speech patterns. James talks a good deal about the evil done by the tongue (James 3:1-12).

*If anyone thinks himself to be religious [scrupulously observant of the rituals of his faith] and does not control his tongue but deludes his own heart, this person's religion is worthless (futile, barren).* (Js 1:26 AMP)

Ephesians 4:29 contains a lot of truth in a few words. "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers."

The adjective translated "corrupt" has the basic meaning of "spoiled, rotten," used literally of spoiled fish, decayed trees, rotten fruits, and stones that are unsound or crumbling.

Figuratively, it means "bad, evil, unwholesome to the extent of being harmful."

Just what is coming out of our mouths? In the latter part of verse 29, Paul gives three guidelines for judging our words:

1. **Is it helpful for building others up?** Does it edify? Does it enlighten? Does it encourage?
2. **Is it according to the hearer's needs?** Or only *our* need to vent our frustrations? Does he really *need* this? Does she really *need* this? Do they have a need to know? Some things need to be said, however hard. But many of the things we say could just as well be left unsaid.
3. **Is it beneficial to the hearer?** If love is our mainstay, then benefiting others is our way of life.

Our speech can destroy or heal, it can rip apart or it can build up. And our words lie at the very heart of our Christian religion, according to James.

### **Grieving the Holy Spirit of God (v30)**

Our words can "grieve the Holy Spirit of God." The verb means "to cause severe mental or emotional distress, vex, irritate, offend, insult." We are indwelt by the Spirit, but our words can insult the Spirit; we can offend Him by our words. When we seek to blend in and please unbelievers, we may be offending and grieving our very best Friend. Our words can cause deep pain to others -- and to the One who loves us deeply.

We Christians can't afford to hang onto smoldering anger, our bubbling bitterness, for it will destroy us, our testimony, and those around us. What can we do? Confess our anger and bitterness to God and plead with him to take it from us. Repent of our "righteous anger" and call it what it is: sin. While there is such a thing as righteous anger, most of the time, "man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (James 1:20).

Can God temper our anger? Certainly. He may not do so overnight since we didn't develop unrestrained anger overnight. Part of it is a habit and a learned behavior. The Spirit will help us unlearn it if we will become humble before God and be willing to be humbled.

### **Kind, Compassionate, Forgiving (v32)**

Instead of a self-centered attitude that the world revolves around us, Paul commands kindness and compassion towards each other. We don't return evil for evil, but instead good. And these actions aren't just for someone else's benefit. The real cure for our own bitterness and pent-up anger is forgiveness.

Sometimes we withhold forgiveness because we don't think that the person deserves it. While we are probably correct in our assessment, it shows that we don't understand forgiveness. Forgiveness, like grace, is neither earned nor deserved. It is granted freely, unilaterally, by the giver, with no thought to the worth of the one receiving it.

### **Conclusion**

The key to putting on the new man is following Jesus, emulating him, making him our new Role Model. Clever unbelievers were once our role models, but no more. "Put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ," Paul reminds us, "and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof" (Romans 13:14, KJV).

We are part of Christ's body, part of the church, a new creation, a new man. We've taken an invigorating shower. Let's make sure we put on clean clothes.

