

SCRIPTURE FOCUS	Ephesians 4:17-32	DATE	10.27.19
	FROM: Mike Smith, Discipleship Minister	First Woodway Baptist Church	
LESSON SUMMARY	Believers are called to leave the life of the world behind in favor of new life in Christ. Among other things, this has to do with how we live in relationship with others.		

all scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted

ENCOUNTER THE TEXT

¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

Remember that Paul has been speaking to Gentiles who have been included in the family of God/body of Christ for the last few sections of Ephesians. Now, he tells them to “no longer live as the Gentiles do.” In speaking in this manner, Paul seems to intimate that Gentile Christians are no longer Gentiles. He could have said, “Don’t live as your countrymen do,” or, “Don’t live like the other Gentiles do.” Instead, Paul lumps Gentiles into one group that is “other” than the Gentile Christians in his audience. This is a bit like a pastor telling American Christians to “no longer live as the Americans do.”¹ The language itself drives a wedge between Gentile/American Christians and Gentiles/Americans in general.

Of course, people do not lose their ethnicities when they come to Christ. Indeed, ethnicity is still a deep part of all Christians’ identities, a fact that is in no small part due to Paul’s work, which laid the foundation for Gentiles to become Christians *with their ethnicities* rather than abandoning them (see 2:1-3:13; Acts 15). At the same time, Paul has been speaking of a new identity that goes deeper than ethnic ties. Remember that in 2:14-18, Jesus did away with the hostility between Jews and Gentiles and made the two groups into one new humanity in himself. Membership in Christ, and therefore in Christ’s people or new humanity, becomes the foundational, most basic piece of Christian identity. We can therefore celebrate our ethnic heritages even as we find deeper meaning in the new thing that God is doing among us in Christ.

So, we have a new, deeper identity in Jesus. But, how does this new identity work itself out in our lives? Vv 17-19 zero in on the concept of “walking” (this is a more literal translation of “live” in v 17; see ESV, NASB). As Arnold explains: “Paul uses the Greek word ‘walk’, which comes from Paul’s Jewish background, to characterize the features of their daily lifestyle.”² Inner, spiritual Christian identity becomes intensely practical for Gentile Christians in the way they “walk” in their daily lives, which is meant to stand in stark contrast to the non-believing Gentiles that surround them.

¹ Klyne Snodgrass also uses this phrase in his exposition of this passage.

² Arnold, C. E. (2010). [Ephesians](#) (p. 281). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Before speaking of how the Ephesians should live into their new identity, Paul first paints a bleak picture of the Gentile way of life. The flow of the passage is as follows. I'll use wording from the NASB, which is closer to the original Greek.

- The Gentiles walk in the futility of their mind
 - Being darkened in their understanding
 - Being alienated from the life of God
 - Because of the ignorance that is in them
 - Because of the hardness of their heart
- They have given themselves over to sensuality
 - (having become calloused)
 - For the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness

Of note here is that Paul does not move straight to speak of the sinful practices of the Gentile world. Instead, he begins with a description of what we might call the Gentile disposition. This disposition is marked by a futility of the mind, which refers to more than just confusion. As Snodgrass explains, “The word translated ‘futility’ expresses meaninglessness, uselessness, worthlessness, or emptiness.”³ To say that the Gentiles “walk in the futility of their mind,” then, means that the Gentile way of living flows from thought processes that are ultimately worthless and amount to nothing where God is concerned. This futile state of mind is marked by darkened understanding and alienation from God’s life that flows from ignorance and hardness of heart. We might say here that the Gentile disposition is ignorant of God and hardened toward him.

This disposition then leads to sinful actions, which Paul names as sensuality, which refers to “unrestrained indulgence in sensual pleasures.”⁴ Being callous, the Gentiles have “given themselves over” to a greedy indulgence in sensual urges. This is an interesting word construction, because a calloused, unfeeling heart leads to an exaltation of pleasure through the senses. Hardness toward God has led to the idolatry of pleasure. Pleasure, of course, is a good part of God’s creation. However, it is meant to be pursued within the scope of God’s intention for creation. Apart from God, pursuit of pleasure gives way to sin. Paul is adamant that the Ephesians avoid this way of life. His seriousness is found in v 17, where he “insists in the Lord.” This is strong language from a Christian pastor to a Christian congregation.

A question to ask as we consider this description of Gentile life is whether or not Paul is being fair to the Gentile world. Let’s take a moment to see what Paul actually says: (1) the Gentile way of thinking is futile and amounts to nothing, (2) the Gentiles are ignorant of and hardened toward God, and (3) this ignorance and hardness has led to an exaltation of sensual pleasure, which is pursued greedily. Admittedly, Paul doesn’t give any attention to positive aspects of Gentile society in any of this, but he’s not wrong in his depiction. In essence, he is describing societies that have been formed apart from knowledge of the true God and that are still being formed apart from that knowledge. In such settings, it’s not hard to find the unrestrained pursuit of sensual pleasure as a centerpiece. Just take the current state of the USA, for example! In the end, we don’t want to act as if everything outside the church is bad. Indeed, there is beauty and good to be found. At the same time, we don’t want to sugar coat the reality of a world that is by-and-large hardened toward and ignorant of God.

³ Snodgrass, 230.

⁴ Definition taken from dictionary.com

²⁰ That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹ when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Having spoken of Gentiles as “other” than his audience, Paul now acknowledges the Gentile Ephesians’ connection to their culture by speaking of their “former way of life.” Unsurprisingly in light of the description of Gentile life in the previous section, Paul calls the Ephesians to leave that life behind in favor of something new.

If you read vv 20-24 in the NASB or ESV, you’ll find those translations to be a bit different from the NIV. This is because the NIV is trying to keep the text readable, while the NASB and ESV stay closer to the original Greek, which is a bit hard to understand. Here is how the NASB (the most literal of these translations) renders this part of the passage:

²⁰ But you did not learn Christ in this way, ²¹ if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, 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 *the likeness of God* has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

Some interesting points to note from this more literal translation: (1) Paul says the Ephesians have learned Christ (as opposed to learning about Christ). They have learned a person. (2) the Ephesians have heard Christ (as opposed to hearing about Christ). I assume this hearing has to do with Christ’s voice being present in the preaching of the gospel. (3) The Ephesians have been taught in Christ, which is an echo of the “in Christ” language we have seen over and over again in Ephesians. Once the Ephesians were incorporated into Christ they were also taught a new way of life in that new space. (4) Whereas the Gentiles were living in ignorance, the Ephesian Gentiles had found the truth in Jesus.

All of this said, I do think the NIV captures the spirit of the passage even if it does not bring out all of the nuances just discussed. The point Paul is making is that the Ephesian Gentiles have received a new identity and way of living in Christ. Thus, they must leave their former ways of life behind. That last point is actually the content of what they were taught in Christ: to put off the old self, to be renewed in the spirit or attitude of their mind, and to put on the new self, which is made in *true* holiness and righteousness (as opposed to the definitions of holiness and righteousness in surrounding society) and is therefore like God. I view this last piece as a kind of Mr. Rogers spirituality because it reminds me of how he would always change his cardigan and shoes at the beginning of each show. The idea is the same here. We are to put off our old lives like we would take off dirty clothes and then put on our new lives, which is like putting on resplendent, new clothing. The key to this entire process is the renewing of our minds. Remember that Paul has just said that the futile thinking of the Gentiles has led to a poor way of life. Conversely, the renewed, right thinking of Christians is meant to form a new, better way of life. Quite a bit of the Christian life, then, flows from having our dispositions softened toward God and learning his ways.

²⁵Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ²⁶“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷and do not give the devil a foothold. ²⁸Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

²⁹Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³²Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Up to this point in the passage, Paul has made a general call to a new way of life. Now he gets to specifics concerning what this new way of life entails, which are both positive and negative. Negatively, the Ephesians must put off falsehood, sinful anger, theft, unwholesome talk, bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice. Positively, the Ephesians must put on truthful speech, controlled anger, work that leads to generosity, edifying words, kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. Importantly, all of this has to do with communal life, even when it comes to work and speech. Work is to be done so that a person can be generous, and speech is meant to build others up. When we talk about the new life in Christ, we are talking about a life that is fitted for healthy community.

v 30's “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit” is a general command among specifics. Overall, it reminds us that the negative behaviors listed are more than just bad habits. Instead, they are points of grief for the Spirit, whose work it is to transform us into the image of Christ. They are sin, to put it bluntly, and they grieve the very presence of God within us.

TEACH THE TEXT

In teaching this text, I would focus on Gentile living, Mr. Rogers spirituality, and the qualities of the new self.

GENTILE LIVING

As noted above, Paul has little kind to say about the Gentile way of life. A fruitful strand of conversation could be whether Paul is being fair as he describes the world outside the church. We Christians need to be able to both affirm and challenge the world based on our knowledge of God and his work within us. Paul demonstrates challenge here.

A second point on Gentile living is to make it personal. Rather than speaking of the Gentiles (a term that isn't in normal usage), talk about America. What would it mean for Paul to sit among us and say, “Don't live like the Americans.”? What parts of our culture would he call out. What would he tell us to leave behind?

MR. ROGERS SPIRITUALITY

The Christian life can be summed up as living into the new identity we have been given in Christ. To do this, we must leave some things behind even as we accept new, better things into our lives. Mr. Rogers (at least for those who are young enough to know about him!) can be a potent picture of taking off the old self and putting on the new. Challenge your class to talk about how this process of change plays out in real life.

QUALITIES OF THE NEW SELF

The new self has more to do with relationships than we sometimes realize. To be fit for the kingdom is to be fit for living harmoniously with others! This means that bitterness, uncontrolled anger, slander, malice, and the like are anti-kingdom qualities. Unfortunately, we sometimes overlook these relational sins because they aren't "big sins". In Paul's thought, which sees all Christians bound together in Christ's peace, relational sins *are* big sins because they destroy the peace that Christ paid so dearly to create. A question then becomes how we should live in light of all this.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Vv 17-19

1. Do you think that Paul is being fair to the Gentile world in this description?
2. How is Paul able to tell Gentiles not to live like Gentiles?
3. For Paul, what is the root of the problem in Gentile society?
4. For Paul, what takes God's place in Gentile society?

Vv 20-24

1. How are Gentile Christians to live in light of their pasts?
2. What does this entail?
3. What does it mean in practicality to put off the old self, be renewed in the spirit of the mind, and put on the new self?
4. What does the new self look like?

Vv 25-32

1. Make a list of the negative qualities that Christians are to put off.
2. Make a list of the positive qualities that Christians are to put on.
3. Why do you think this list has so much to do with other people?
4. Why are the negative qualities not okay for Christians?
5. What does it mean to grieve the Holy Spirit?

Sources Consulted:

Arnold, C. E. (2010). *Ephesians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
Best, Ernest. (1998). *Ephesians*. New York: T&T Clark International.
Slater, T. B. (2012). *Ephesians*. (R. A. Culpepper, Ed.). Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc.
Snodgrass, Klyne. (1996). *Ephesians: The NIV Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.