



LIFE

BIBLE STUDY

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EPHESIANS 4:17-32

To understand the difference between the “old self” and the “new self” in Christ.

Read the Text:

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. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. 19 They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. 20 But that is not the way you learned Christ!— 21 assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, 22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. 25 Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. 26 Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and give no opportunity to the devil. 28 Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. 29 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.
(Ephesians 4:17-32)

Study the Text:

Change Your Clothes!

In Ephesians 4:17-32, the apostle pleads with the Ephesian Christians to take off the old self (Eph. 4:22) and to put on the new self in Christ (Eph. 4:24), almost as if the *old* and *new* self were different *outfits*. Below is a breakdown of the old and the new, with special attention given to key concepts and words in this passage.

THE OLD CLOTHES

Paul warns the Ephesians to “no longer walk as the Gentiles do,” a reference to the pagans in Ephesus among whom these Ephesian Christians lived. Paul lists five key terms describing how Gentiles walk, which Christians are to avoid.

- A. **Purposelessness:** First, Paul notes the lack of purpose in the old life. He says, “You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the *futility* of their minds.” The term “futility” is the Greek word *ματαιότης* (*mataiotēs*), which means “vanity, folly, or purposelessness.” It’s a term in the New Testament often used to convey the idea of “being unable to reach the goal.” For example, creation is subjected to “futility” in that it was intended to produce fruit and sustain life, but cannot attain its goal due to the curse of sin (Rom. 8:20). Here, it is the “mind” that cannot reach its goal, and this makes sense. The human mind, which carries out the basic functions of thinking, reasoning, and understanding, cannot attain its goal due to the curse. Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 2:14: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit

of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” Simply stated, non-Christians do not, and actually cannot, live in reality by the very fact that they reject God who Himself is reality and defines it. The old life is marked by a purposeless mind that seeks to reason with the world around it and yet is incapable of reaching its goal.

- B. **Blindness:** Because of the deficiency of mind, Paul says secondly: “they are darkened in their understanding” (Eph. 4:18a). The term “darkened” is the Greek term σκοτώ (skotoō), and it means “to shroud in darkness or to blind.” While the former description concerned the basic faculties of reasoning, this concerns morality (Rom. 1:21). If a non-believer cannot think well, they will reason themselves into immoral behavior.
- C. **Ignorance:** Third, they are “alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them” (Eph. 4:18b). They do not walk in the ways of the Lord because they are ignorant of the ways of the Lord. Interestingly, this term sometimes refers to sins committed unknowingly or unwittingly, but Paul makes it clear in Acts 17:30 that while God “overlooked” times of ignorance in the past, “now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” The revelation of Jesus Christ removes the excuse of ignorance.
- D. **Stubbornness:** The alienation from God’s life is not merely the result of ignorance, but also an unwillingness to listen to the truth. Paul says that their ignorance was “due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18c). Hoehner notes: “the heart is the center of a person, the seat of thought and understanding, will or volition, and, as here, of religious and moral conduct.”¹ As such, when it is hardened, it will lead the person into immoral thought, understanding, will, and volition.
- E. **Spiritual Apathy:** The news gets worse: along with a hardened heart that is unwilling to listen to truth and therefore leads to ignorance and alienation, the non-believers become spiritually apathetic to their sin. Paul says, “They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”

Notice that the critique of the non-believer and the warning to no longer live like them is not squarely focused on bad behavior, but the underlying broken spiritual condition that gives way to such behavior in a habitual manner. It isn’t that the distinguishing characteristics between Christians and non-Christians are simply behavior, but rather the spiritual (or unspiritual) operating system that drives them. Paul warns the Ephesian Christians to “put off the old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desire,” and instead to put on the new clothes of Christ.

THE NEW CLOTHES

What do the “new clothes” in Christ consist of? Paul mentions several characteristics that counter the old life.

- A. **Renewed Mind:** Unlike the non-believer who has a mind unable to attain its goal, the born-again believer in Christ has a renewed mind that can reach its goal as it submits to the Spirit of God and the Word of God. Paul, similarly says in Romans 8:5 that “those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit,” which prompts him to eventually encourage us to “be transformed by the renewal” of our minds (Rom. 12:2). This cannot be overemphasized: to be a Christian is to have your mind transformed.
- B. **Renewed Image:** The new self also revels in the renewed image of God in us. Paul says, “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God” (Eph. 4:24). Hoehner notes: “What Adam lost in the fall has been regained by Christ, a new creation in the likeness of God’s image.² In other words, the new self should be humanity as God originally intended.

¹ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 588.

² Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 591.

- C. **Righteous:** Part of the renewed image of God means a renewed sense of justice. The new person in Christ sees the world as it should be seen. Sin is rightly recognized as sin, and justice is rightly applied to those who wrong others. It's easy for Christians to loosen their determination to see justice done in light of the political hijacking of the term (i.e., social justice). While the Christian view of justice is altogether different from the secular vision, it is still important. Christians must not lose sight of this.
- D. **Holy:** Beyond that, the renewed image of God is holy, or "set apart." While we live in a fallen world amidst fallen people, we should appear different in that we have a renewed mind and renewed image and therefore think and act differently than non-Christians.

What About Now?

The applications of this text follow in the text itself, in verses 25 through 32. If you have put off the old self and put on the new self in Christ, it should necessarily follow that you "speak the truth with your neighbor" (Eph. 4:25), handle your anger in a righteous manner (Eph. 4:26), give no foothold to the enemy (Eph. 4:27), work honestly and contribute to the community (Eph. 4:28), have sanctified speech (Eph. 4:29), avoid grieving the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30), and put away bitterness and malice and instead live with kindness and compassion (Eph. 4:31-32). However, the ordering is important. Often, Christians want to focus on verses 25 through 32 without ever putting off the old self and putting on Christ. You will fail miserably in your pursuit of seemingly righteous works if you have not first been transformed by the new birth in Christ. Sanctified living only follows a sanctified life. Anything else is an outward attempt at fixing what's inwardly broken.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Ephesians 4:17-18. Who are we not to walk like? Why? How do the unbelieving Gentiles live?

2. Read Ephesians 4:19-20. What does "callous" mean? Why does Paul say we should not live according to the old self?

Day Two

1. Read Ephesians 4:21-24. In your own words, summarize verses 21 through 24.

2. Read Ephesians 4:25. What are we to "put away?" What are we to do with our neighbors? Why?

Day Three

1. Read Ephesians 4:26-27. What is the command in this text? What does verse 27 imply about the way we manage our anger?
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2. Read Ephesians 4:28-30. How do v.28 (honest living) and v.29 (whole speech) inform v.30 (grieving the Holy Spirit)? In other words, how does your life and speech impact the witness of the Spirit in you?
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Day Four

1. Read Ephesians 4:31. What are we to “put away” in the new life in Christ?
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2. Read Ephesians 4:32. How are we to live instead? What inspires the way we forgive others?
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Discuss the Text!

Weekly Discussion: Reasoning with Non-Christians

After reading the first part of this passage, it becomes clear why we need the Holy Spirit's intervention as we share the Gospel with lost people. Apart from the work of Christ, a person is incapable of living in reality, nor do they want to. They reject that which is good, and even if they received it, they wouldn't understand it. Talk as a group about how this passage informs the way you need to speak to non-Christians in the future.

1. Icebreaker: What is something you were certain was “right” when you were a non-Christian that you are now certain is “wrong” in Christ?
2. Of the five attributes of a non-Christian listed above (purposelessness, blindness, ignorance, stubbornness, spiritual apathy), which of these do you see most often in non-Christian friends?
3. Which of the five attributes of a non-Christian listed above do you see the least in non-Christian friends?
4. Which of the “new clothes” have you put on the best?
5. Which of the “new clothes” have you most neglected?
6. Kid Talk (For Home): Have your child play outside, and preferably get really dirty. Have them come in, wash up, and put on clean clothes. Then talk about how the dirty clothes are like the “old life” in Christ, and the clean clothes are like the “new life” in Christ. Even if they “behaved well,” they'd still have dirty clothes on and would get everything dirty around them. So it is true for the Christian faith. Good behavior, apart from a new life, doesn't accomplish much.

Takeaways:

1. Christians are to put off the old self that is incapable of living rightly in reality.
2. Christians are to put on the new self with a new mind, leading to new behavior.