

SPECIAL MESSAGES

HOW TO LIVE A NEW LIFE

Ephesians 4:17-24

Please follow along as I read.

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. 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. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

The Apostle Paul has been teaching the Ephesians. As he begins his letter to this group of Christians he tells them, “Listen, I have been thanking God for you. I have actually been praying for you - not to get something that you don’t have - but I have been praying for you to know about something that you already have. I’ve been praying that you would know just how great God is within you, how great the power of God is that is at work in your life right now. And I am praying that you would really come to an awareness of your incredible inheritance in God, and that that inheritance cannot be taken from you.

I grew up in the Washington, D.C. area, and I grew up as a Washington Redskins fan. Please don’t hold that against me. I was a big fan. One day I had a chance to go to a game here. The Redskins were in town playing the Dolphins. The owner of the Redskins came out of his box and I just happened to be there on that level. It was just him and me: Jack Kent Cooke. He was well into his eighties. To his dismay and my dismay, the Dolphins had won that day. Mr. Jack Kent Cooke taught me some new words and a new order of words, because he was not very happy.

Well, he passed away; he died, and the whole world was shocked when he did not leave the Redskins to his one known son at the time. As it turns out, he had more than one son, and he didn’t leave the franchise to this known son. His will was published in The Washington Post. There were all these names listed in the paper. Jack Kent Cooke’s story is remarkable. He started out selling encyclopedias door to door. Then he started buying the Redskins in bit and pieces. He made all

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kinds of money. He was married for decades, had a family, then he left that wife, and the last few years of his life were very different from those decades of loyalty to that initial family.

Here is why I tell you that story. In the paper there were certain names from previous years where this word appeared beside their name: "Disinherited." Tragically -- this ex, this former, this past -- no longer inherits anything from me.

Paul writes the Ephesians to say, "Listen, I want the Spirit of God to make something so sure in your heart: You have an inheritance that is incomparable, unlike anything you can imagine, and you will never be disinherited. God is in you. You are seated with Christ in the heavenlies. In fact, he says this: If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, that miracle is the greatest demonstration of God's power. If you think about it for a second, you think, "Of all the things that God has done, that's the greatest?" What does he mean?

He says that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became a man, died and paid the penalty of our sin, and was raised from the grave. And that resurrection was this great demonstration of his power, because when he ascended, he ascended to this place of reign and rule, but now something is different. Do you know what it is? If you are a follower of Jesus Christ he has taken you with him. Now this is the power of God: You are seated with Christ in heavenly realms. It's amazing, right?

So, Paul was teaching this glorious truth. Ephesians is so rich in truth! Chapter 2 is a glorious, glorious chapter where he says, "Sin has separated you from God, and without God doing a miracle in your life, we are all dead in our sin, and our destiny is one of death. But God gives us the gift; he offers to you the free gift of salvation. It's grace." He tells those early Christians, "For by grace have you been saved through faith; not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, lest any person should boast."

To each and every person here: Trust in Jesus Christ if you have not done that. It's a gift. You don't earn your relationship with God. It's broken and it's only healed when we trust in Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2:1-10 may be one of the most glorious statements of the gift of salvation that's made possible because of what Jesus has done. Paul is just laboring. He is saying, "Listen, I am working in prayer so that this will come alive in your heart. This truth will take hold of you because it's already yours."

By the time he gets to our text today, he now wants to tell you how to live this life. He says, "You've been given a whole new life. It's for now and all of eternity! You have this glorious inheritance, but it's not automatic. For you to experience it, you have to appropriate it. You have to deploy these resources. You have to live it out in faith." And this passage is one of those passages that tells you

how to do it. It's a really simple model. It's three things you do. This is how you live a new life in Christ. Here it is:

- I. Put off the old self.
- II. Put on the new self.
- III. And be renewed on the inside. Be daily renewed in the inner person.

What's interesting about this little three-fold paradigm for us, this model, is that the first two are one-time events. I'm going to say they are like marriage. Boy, I really want to be careful about how I say this. I'm suddenly feeling the weight of this particular illustration. There are days you wake up and you feel so happy to be married. And then there are other days, but you are still married, right? Ooh – I got an Amen on the front row.

There was a day when you said, "I do." There was a commitment that you made. That vow bound you together. The best illustration I can think of about what Paul is talking about here is that you put off the old. The old person is no more. The old Brian living for himself is no more. Now, I am a new person in Jesus Christ. It's a decisive putting off/putting on in my past, but I have to live in the reality of that every day. It's past events with daily ramifications. But then, the being renewed on the inside is an ongoing process. He uses a very unique phrase -- that we are to be renewed in the spirit of our minds.

What becomes clear in the passage is that our thinking has to catch up with our new identity. We have a new identity, and our thinking has to be renewed constantly so that the patterns of our thinking, the motivations of our heart reflect who we really are in Jesus, who he has made us to be.

I was 26 when Beth and I were married, so I had a season where I experienced single life. This might be some encouragement to moms who have older sons who are adults, but they are not married yet. They may at times appear to be sloppy to you. But I want you to understand there is actually a very intentional methodology that's going on. You see, when you're single and you do your own laundry, there are these moments where everything is dirty, but some things are less dirty than other things. You have to find the less dirty of those things to wear in that moment. If you've gone through that a few times, you become reluctant to commit things to the dirty clothes pile, because then they really get dirty. So you spread them out, just in case they are needed before they get cleansed. Are you following the analogy here? Don't do that with your spiritual life. Do not hang on to the past. Do not leave corrupt, rotten, defiled old you laying around just in case, "I'm going to need to put that on briefly."

Paul says, “No, no, no. There is this break and a new me.” I don’t fully understand the reality of it. I think it was John Piper who used this analogy. He said, “When you come to follow Jesus it’s like joining the military. When you join the military, you know that your drill sergeant is going to tell you what you can and can’t do. He’s going to tell you what to do, and you have to do it. You just don’t know what it’s really like until you get into it, then you’re like, “Ah, this is a little different than I expected.” It is more, and in some ways more difficult than you expected.

Well, when we follow Christ, there is a place where immediately when Christ takes our heart we say, “He’s Lord. He’s Lord of my life. I’m going to follow him.” That’s just a part of the new reality that takes place in our lives. But, we don’t completely understand, and we are constantly experiencing a newer and better understanding of that. Probably where that analogy breaks down is that following Jesus is not entirely like being in the military. It’s this wonderful experience of consistent renewal. Let’s just look at the verses under each heading briefly.

I. Put off the old self.

I think the concentration of that is found in verses 17-19. I draw your attention to this in the beginning, verse 17, where Paul states very explicitly: “Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do.” This is not a pro-Jewish, anti-Gentile paradigm that Paul is using here. In scripture, this model represents the unbeliever – the person who doesn’t believe in God -- the old word “pagan.” He doesn’t mean to insult them, but he is talking mostly to Gentile Christians. He is saying, “Before you believed in God, before Jesus made you new, you lived a certain way.”

This is so helpful because the bible is so clear. The word of God just comes in like thunder and removes all confusion. This may be new to you if you’ve not been clearly taught according to Scripture. But when you become a Christian, your life is different as a Christian than before Christ. It just is. That’s the expectation of Scripture. You’re not perfect. You’re not sinless. You don’t have it all figured out. You’re going to stumble. You’re going to fall. We walk in humility, but we clearly now are seeking to live a new life.

I emphasize that because there are times where teachers teach a message: “Just come to Christ. You don’t really need to change. Just be who you are.” Let’s be clear. Come as the person you are. Jesus loves you and he offers you salvation, but he wants to make you a better you. That’s his call on your life. Isn’t that great? That’s good! That’s actually good news, it’s not bad news.

So, notice as we move quickly through the verses, how many references there are to our minds, our thinking, our learning, the truth, ignorance – these words just pop out because Paul is wanting you

to grab ahold of this key when it comes to living the Christian life. In one sense, something has happened in my will. There has been this decisive choosing, that I'm no longer going to live in a way that dishonors God. My life belongs to God, and everything I do, I'm going to honor him with my life. That's settled.

Then secondly, my thinking has to be constantly renewed. I'm on a journey of learning to think according to my new identity. If you can take those two things away from this message:

1) How do I live a new life? Well, you have to settle that you belong to God. When you know this is God's will, don't barter with God. Don't argue with God. Say, "Okay, God, I'm yours. Yes." Then:

2) Understand that there is a renewal of the mind that needs to take place continually, and really never stops until God calls us home.

He lays out a process here in these verses. Let me describe it to you in really simple steps. Without God, Paul says "Ephesian Gentile Christians, this is what you live life like. You have rebelled against God, then your thinking started to reflect your rebellion. You rejected God. God said, 'Do it this way,' and you said, 'No, I don't want to do it this way. I'll have more fun, I'll have more fulfillment, I'll have more pleasure, I'll have real purpose, I'm rejecting God's way.'" So Paul describes what happens. Then our thinking begins to match that rejection. Then God's way doesn't even make sense to us. That's part of God's judgment on our lives – that our sin actually begins to make more sense to us than God's way.

Just speaking to the Christians here: If you say no to God long enough, you come to a place where your way makes more sense to you than God's way, and that's really dangerous. So we reject God. Our thinking begins to look like the choice we have made. Then he says we get reckless in our living. We get greedy for impurity. There is a recklessness to our sin as we advance in our rejection of God. Then he describes a last stage where we become hardened in our hearts and calloused. In other words, we just don't care anymore. Paul says, "Put off that old self. Put it off."

II. Then he tells us to put on the new self.

I think the best verse to capture that for us is the last verse, verse 24: "...and put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." Mankind is of tremendous value – precious to the Lord. In fact, in our worship time we made space to confess our sin to the Lord, and there were references to our unworthiness. I want to clarify that. If you're new to church life, you may hear that and say, "Wow, that sounds harsh."

There is a tension. There are two doctrines that we hold in tension.

- 1) Man is made in the image of God, and mankind is tremendously loved and valued by God. Every human life is worthy of dignity, worthy of respect. So we treat people with respect and dignity, whether they agree with us or not – every person.
- 2) But then sin has affected creation and mankind and brought God’s judgment. It is the biblical explanation for why things are wrong and not as they should be in the world.

Those things are held in a biblical tension and we need both of them. If you just accept one, you’ll be off. If you say, “Well, you know, people are good,” you will be disillusioned by the things that happen to you and around you. Because it’s not a sufficient explanation for the reality that we live in. But neither do you want to come to this place where people are not worth the trouble, because that is not a biblical message. I give you that explanation because (this is the exciting description that Paul gives) that image of God is restored in Jesus Christ. The new self you put on is Jesus. It’s the character of Jesus.

I don’t get that excited about new clothes. I’m grateful that I’m married because that’s how I get new clothes. For the most part, it’s a tremendous blessing and I’m better off for it. All the husbands say, “Amen,” if that is your experience at all. Alright? But I get excited about a new me. I get excited about a new personality in the sense of dressing myself in Christ. That’s the new life that Paul is wanting to invite us to, saying, “The image of God in man is restored in Jesus Christ.”

III. Be renewed internally, verses 20-23.

I think this seeps throughout the whole passage. This is what Paul says. “But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus...” Notice the emphasis. The battle takes place in the mind. We learn Christ. We hear the truth. The truth is in Jesus. “...to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt” (really, that word there is “rotten”) “through deceitful desires.” The desires that we have without Christ – they deceive us. They promise something that they will not ultimately deliver. Put that off “...and be renewed in the spirit of your minds...” As I’ve said, this phrase is one that is in the language of a continual process – that our minds are renewed.

They are really renewed by the Spirit of God and by the word of God. As we welcome the presence of the Holy Spirit and receive the Word of God in humility, God brings a transformation about in our lives. We grow and we change as a result. Don’t be discouraged if you say, “Wow, Brian, that’s great, but I’m coming to church on Sunday morning and I’m hearing you teach, and it’s great, but I’m not changing!”

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That's a little bit like going out to the nursery, Home Depot, whatever you want to call it, getting a little orange tree, taking it out and putting it in the back yard and planting it, coming out the next day and saying, "That thing doesn't work! There are no oranges!" Fruit takes seasons. It's just the nature of it. It's character. Character is fruit.

Gifts come automatically. You may be able to sing wonderfully without trying. I can try season after season after season and my margin for improvement is very small. I'm never going to be a great singer. But Christlikeness grows in us over seasons. So don't be discouraged if it doesn't happen instantly. If you will just get ahold of that simple truth, it will save you so much grief.

Can I tell you that your husband will not be different significantly tomorrow from what he is today? You're like, "Oh, I'm so sorry I came today." And neither will you. You have life issues that God is working on. I don't understand it. The growth looks like this. It's up, it's down. If you look at the trajectory over time, you are progressing. Sometimes God just does a miracle. You have an addiction. You come to Christ. He gives you new life. You never desire that addiction again. Then the person next to you fights it for decades. That is God's way. You say, "Why?" Well, because he masterfully designs your life so that you will depend on him and his grace and you will learn to live by faith. Character comes over seasons.

A new mind. You've learned Christ. You've heard about him. You were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus. There is a new way of thinking. It's not futile. It's not empty. It's not vain. It's not deceptive. It's not darkened. You are not living in ignorance. Your heart is now soft and pliable and responsive to God. Your life is brand new. It's different. If you will humble yourself and just day in and day out say, "I'm going to get into God's word. I'm really going to come with the attitude that says, "God, I need to change. I want to change the people around me, I know, but I need to change. Change me! Teach me!" You humble yourself, you receive God's word, you invite the Spirit of God over and over, day after day. You come to be with God's people. You connect relationally. And you say, "Lord, just bring that truth."

What will happen is, there will be those moments that come where your mind really sees something about yourself and about God's way that is so enlightening!. You'll say, "I just never saw it like that! I never really understood how this had such a grip on me! I never realized how much I was motivated by this and how it was controlling so many areas of my life. And the freedom that is mine in Christ is amazing! It's like a massive river that breaks out of the banks and forms these canals, and everywhere it goes it brings life."

If you will invite God to work in your life that way and you experience it enough, you say, “You know what? This is great! This is better than me going through life telling everyone around me they’re wrong.” I’ve tried that. With little success. And many of us, if we don’t speak it, we think it.

I just encourage you with this simple truth, just a testimony. This happened to me this morning as I was praying during the worship service. My wife and I are alone again, naturally. Anyone remember that? Our nest is empty. The kids are gone, and I am the sole object of my wife’s attention. Hallelujah! So, there are little moments where we share our hearts with one another. Are you following me? You know, “You said this.” “You said this.” “Why can’t you be more patient?” We are not arguing. We genuinely disagree. And we are respectful. Even in the moment, we say, “I’m sorry. I love you. Off you go.”

I’m sitting in worship today, and this is what the Spirit of God speaks to my heart: “You are so arrogant. You really think (I’m sorry, Babe, that I’m going to say this) you really think you’re right and she’s wrong.” The problem with that whole thinking is that it’s just not renewed. You know why it’s not renewed? Because it’s not her and me. We are one! Right? It’s unrenewed thinking: “I’m right. Just the nerve that she can be so sure she’s right. I’m right!” Do you hear the hypocrisy in that? Did you have to say, “yes,” so loud? “He’s a hypocrite! Look at him.”

I tell you that, and maybe you say, “I’m visiting here. I’m going to a church where the pastor is a little further along in his own spiritual journey.” That can be your response, or you can just see it for what it is: an illustration that your mind must be renewed every day. And humility is not, “Oh, I’m just so humble.” It’s: “I need Jesus!”

Now, couple that with “I have Jesus, and he expects me to grow and change and is helping me,” so it doesn’t give me an excuse to go around all the time saying, “Oh, I’m just no good. I’m not worth anything.” No, that’s not where we are going with this.

There is something that happens in this passage that’s so valuable, and we’ll end with this. He now begins to tell you how to live, but he does it through this paradigm: Put off, put on, and be renewed in your thinking. I’m going to give you four concrete examples.

1. The first one is in verse 25. “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.” This is what I want you to see. In these verses, in the rest of chapter 4 and into chapter 5, he starts telling them how to live and he follows the model. Here he says, “Put off falsehood.” That’s the old man. In fact, if you look at the language, he stays true to the fact that this has happened in your past. You’ve already done this, right? “...having put off falsehood, let each one of you

“speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.” So, put off falsehood and put on “speak the truth with your neighbor.” I just don’t quit lying or deceiving; now I’m actually articulating the truth. But here’s the renewed thinking: I don’t use you. I don’t manipulate you. I don’t own you. I don’t control you. I don’t have to fear you. You are my neighbor. We are members of one another. If I deceive you, I’m hurting myself. Jesus said that I am to love you with the same sacrifice and energy that I love myself. He is connecting the behavior with a whole new way of thinking. It’s just not enough to say falsehood is bad, truth is good. It’s the way that we view people.

2. Example #2, verse 26: Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” So, put off sinful expressions of anger. Put on the quick resolution of your anger. Don’t let the sun go down on your anger. The thinking here is to admit your anger, deal with it, but don’t give sinful expression to it. Don’t allow it to take you to a place of sin.

A quick teaching on anger is that it will own you and control you if you let it. So if you express it and vent it in an uncontrolled fashion, it will burn like a fire and rage. So, if your expression in this moment registers at this level, then something else irritates you, the next expression will be greater and wider. So two things happen, according to the book of Proverbs.

- 1) You become defenseless because of your anger. You absolutely lose self-control.
- 2) Then secondly, you inflict great harm and danger.

Part of the new thinking is that, he says, “Be angry and sin not.” So don’t deny that you have the anger. Be honest that it’s there. Admit it, but resolve it. Either absorb the offense and forgive – that’s a Christian response -- or go the party and seek restitution, reconciliation, and deal with it. But at the very least, release it before God.

Sometimes we think of this little model when it comes to offense: Release, reconcile, restore. You cannot always be completely restored to a person. When we deal with someone who has been abused, we don’t seek for that person to get into the same room with the abuser. We don’t seek that level of restoration. It’s not right for the victim of that abuse to be put in that situation. Restoration is generally impossible on that level unless God does an all-out miracle.

But release is not. If you don't release this to God and say, "God, you are a righteous judge. You will deal with this, and I'm going to give it to you. I'm not going to hold that debt. I'm going to let it go," then spiritually you will not suffer pain for it.

Then the next level is reconciliation, where you go and you deal with it. Maybe you're not going to be best friends, depending on the level of offense. A lot of times I think God does want us to seek restoration. So, release, reconciliation, restoration. Deal with it. Don't let the sun go down, because if you hold onto it, you are inviting the enemy -- you are giving a deed to Satan to come in and work in your life.

This is great for marriages. Do not hold onto unresolved offense and let it linger and fester. If you need time to process it and work through it, work through it, but deal with it, because eventually the enemy will show up and it won't be good.

3. Third example: "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." Put off stealing. Put on hard work, labor, doing honest work, giving, and sharing. The renewed thinking is: Rethink how you view work. Work is good. Work hard. Do it not just so you measure how much you'll get and accumulate, but you want to be able to share with others. You want to have that which is there for you to give to others.

On occasion, it's not infrequent that I will have an opportunity to meet with someone who will say, "You know, I have an opportunity to take a job. I've been unemployed for a long period of time, but I'm on disability, or I'm receiving some kind of assistance, and I'll lose my assistance if I go to work. I really am financially better off if I just keep the assistance." People genuinely find themselves in that situation. It just happens. It happens evidently frequently, because I am told about it.

I often will say, "If you've really looked for work and this is the work you can find, live on less and go to work." Because it's bad for your soul to be locked into this dependence. It just is. And, the scriptural principle is that work is good for you and if you do it, you will grow and God will bless the work of your hands. It's very hard to say, "God, bless this disability check and multiply it while I'm completely healthy enough to go out and take this job. It just doesn't pay as well as disability."

I know that's a hard saying, to borrow a biblical phrase. But it's truth. You just find that. You know, I find this even in ministry, in the work of the pastorate. Just go do what you know you're supposed to do. Spend time with people. Study. Pray. Do it. And you find, "Wow,

God blesses it!” I’m a little uncomfortable with the comparison between pastors and those who steal, but I’m going to make the association of work.

4. Alright, last example before we close: “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.” Put off rotting talk, corrupting talk. Put on words that build up others. Be renewed. Speak words which share God’s grace that are especially fitting for that exact moment.

Just a word on this. Scripture has a lot to say about our words -- avoiding foul language, coarse jesting, and more than just having pure speech -- to speak words that build up other people. I praise God for some friends that are in my life now who challenge me. I hope I challenge them. I grew up in circles of athletics and certain circles where you are always kidding one another. A lot of it is innocent, but you are tearing other people down all the time. You are making fun all the time. I really grew up always trying to be funny. And it’s okay to enjoy humor and to be funny, but there are times where we just aren’t doing anybody any good. We are not saying anything constructive.

And scripture challenges us. No, think about what is needed in this moment. How can I bring God’s grace to build others up? It’s a whole new kind of thinking. The reality is that what I’m describing is: Our speaking or not speaking is tied to so many emotions and motivations, fears, dreams, apprehensions – all these patterns of thinking – that as God renews us, we’ll find out we start doing this completely differently! And it’s great!

So let’s respond to God’s word. Let’s start with this. Would you bow your heads please?