

December 6/7, 2014

Off with the Old, On with the New

The Truth About Our Life in Christ

Ephesians 4:25-32

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Last week I opened talking about generations that are defined by lots of things, including their fashion and their clothes. I talked about myself as a child of the '70s and the clothes that we wore that, in the moment, seemed so normal because everyone was wearing them but years later looking back, not so much. Well one of the comments I heard from lots of people is, "We wanted pictures!" (laughter) So here you go...Bryan in the '70s. (laughter) Notice the bowtie with the silk flowery shirt. The next one features the leisure suit and the turtleneck, and the last one is my John Travolta (laughter). It is worth pointing out that that last one was several years before *Saturday Night Fever* and John Travolta, so technically I'm the trendsetter, and he was copying me.

Well that's what we want to talk about this morning. We want to talk about clothes that at one time seemed normal because everybody was wearing them—meaning behaviors, attitudes in our life that seemed appropriate because we were spiritually dead—but now that we are alive in Christ, now that I'm a new creation in Christ, those clothes seem very inappropriate. I have to take off the grave clothes and put on the new clothing of this new life in Christ. So if you have a Bible, turn with us to Ephesians, Chapter 4. This is our last week in Ephesians. We'll take a break for the holidays and then in January we'll pick it up and finish it off.

We pick it up in verse 25, which starts with the word **therefore**. I'll try to remind us of this several times in the next several minutes, but it's really important to understand that **therefore** means "in light of what we've learned so far in Ephesians" —who we are *in Christ*. This amazing position and wealth we have in Christ then should result in new clothing, living a different way. If what we conclude at the end of our time together this morning, based on these issues we're going to look at, that, "I just need to try harder," then it's a total miss. The point is not, "I should try harder." The point is, "Now that I understand and believe that I am a new creation in Christ, that belief system, that new understanding, should result in changes in how I live." I've said over and over again in this study of Ephesians that we need to understand it and believe it to such a degree that we actually live like it, and so then the question is, "What does that mean?" Well starting now in verse 25 to the end of the book, it gets very specific. "This is what it means." He starts with four kind of basic issues to point out.

Therefore, laying aside (so that's the clothing metaphor that he started last week, *taking off the old clothes*) **falsehood**, (What do we put on?) **SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE of you WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another.** (*NASB, Ephesians 4:25)

The word **falsehood** is a pretty broad term. It goes beyond just like an outright lie. It would capture the idea of half-truths, the idea of kind of slanting the facts to my favor. It would even capture the idea of allowing something to be perpetuated on and on that isn't true, and even though I know it's not true, I allow it to continue because it somehow promotes my own agenda.

In first century Rome, truth was basically whatever it needed to be in order to get me what I want, so truth was highly devalued. There really wasn't a sense of truth in the sense of a moral commitment to what is true. It was much more a convenience. Truth is whatever I need it to be in

order to accomplish what I want, in order to promote my agenda in order to get what I want. I would say it's very similar in our culture today. We've lost our sense of the value of truth. Truth is whatever it needs to be in order for me to get my way, in order to promote my agenda, in order, ultimately, for me to win.

Now that makes sense, given our description last week that without God people are futile in their understanding. There's a sense of desperation. There's a sense of emptiness which produces kind of this desperate selfishness, this greediness out of an unsatisfied, dissatisfied soul. We talked about people being in darkness and people being callous and insensitive. If that's what defines me, then truth is going to be whatever I need it to be in order to get what I want, but all that is changed for us in Christ. That's not who we are now. We are a new creation *in Christ*, and Christ *is* truth. It isn't just that Jesus tells the truth. He actually *is* truth. We saw that last week in verse 21 that the truth is *in Jesus*, so if that's who's in us, if that's what now defines our life, there should be a commitment beyond just my own selfish agenda to what's right and what's true.

Think about it this way. The reason we lie, the reason we deceive, the reason we promote half-truths is basically selfish in nature, and that's because of our insecurities. That's because of our struggle with our own value and our own significance and trying to find our way and trying to find some meaning, but now all of that is settled *in Christ*. Now on the basis of God's grace, I have found my significance; I've found meaning and purpose; I've found my happiness, my joy, my hope, my acceptance. I have found that *in Christ*, and it's not based on my performance. It's based on God's grace. Therefore, it's safe now and forever.

Because that's true it creates a foundation; it creates a security in my life. No one can take that away. Nobody can diminish that; nobody can change that. Therefore, because that foundation is secure, in a lot of ways we need to understand then the pressure is off. I don't have to pretend. I don't have to hide. I don't have to deceive. I don't have to lie. This is now safe and secure, which actually frees me to be a person of truth.

Specifically the text talks about your **neighbor** and defines your neighbor basically in this text as a fellow believer because it's talking about being *members of the body*. It's a metaphor that he's used several times in Ephesians. It's understanding that, at the end of the day, if we're going to have unity like he talked about at the first part of chapter 4, if we have a mutual commitment to one another that we need one another to grow, the only way that's possible is if we're honest and truthful with one another. In other words, no marriage can thrive when there are lies and deceit. No family can really thrive when there are lies and deceit...no friendship...no community...no church. Lies and deceit just systematically break everything down.

I think most of us feel that in the world today. We really struggle to figure out who's telling the truth. Our politicians don't tell the truth. Our leaders don't tell the truth. The nightly news doesn't tell the truth. Our professors don't tell the truth and, frankly, a lot of people walk through the doors of a church wondering, "Who's telling the truth?" You feel that, but when you're rooted in the One who *is* truth, it changes everything. So now that we are safe and secure, then we are free to be truthful and honest and not hide and deceive one another. So the first one is this commitment to truth rather than falsehood. The second one, verse 26:

BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. (Vs. 26-27)

The second one is emphasized as being very important because if you don't get it right, you make yourself vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy. The text is not commanding us to **be angry**. The text does not say, "*Be angry* but do not sin." It's a permissive word grammatically, which basically means there is an assumption that living in an evil, hurtful world, things are going to make us angry. That's more the idea of it. The point of focus is to resolve that anger so that anger isn't what defines you as a Christian.

There is such a thing as *righteous anger*. Jesus modeled righteous anger, but I'm always hesitant to say that because my experience has been so many Christians justify their anger under the umbrella of a *righteous anger*. So let me just say, I still think that's extraordinarily rare that we are so focused that we are righteous in our anger. Most of the time it's selfish and it's hurtful.

In talking about a righteous anger, people use Jesus as an illustration. I understand that. That is correct, but it's also correct to say Jesus was God in the flesh. He was perfect in His righteousness and holiness walking in the midst of sin and evil, and yet even for Him, the moments of anger were few and far between. The defining characteristic of Jesus was love. As a matter of fact, in virtually every discussion on righteous anger they use the illustration of Jesus cleansing the temple. It's not that there are a hundred examples from Jesus to choose from. They're all picking the exact same one because it was so rare. It happened so few times, so understand there's not a person in the room that is more righteous, more holy than Jesus, where sin and evil offends us so much more than it did Jesus that we should be angry all the time. All that to say: the point of the text is that anger should not define the Christian. Jesus was very clear. The defining mark of a believer is to be love.

Now think about: what is it that makes us angry? It flows out of our insecurities. It flows out of our pursuit of significance, our pursuit of value, our pursuit of success, our pursuit to try to be somebody or to accomplish something or to be happy or to find pleasure. It's this selfish pursuit, and people get in our way. People block this pursuit and so that makes us angry. We respond to them, but once I've settled these key issues in Christ, once now I am settled *in Christ*, I have this significance; I have meaning, purpose; I have hope; I have joy; I have acceptance. Once all of that is rock-solid *in Christ* on the basis of His grace, it creates within me a security where life is no longer defined by my pursuit of that. Rather than being selfish, I actually can give myself away. That begins to change everything in terms of what defines me, in terms of my capacity to love rather than this constant anger, and always rationalizing and excusing some reason why it's okay for me to be angry.

The idea of the text is to quickly resolve it. **Don't let the sun go down on your anger**. Now that is a figure of speech; it's not literal. In other words if somebody makes me angry thirty minutes before sundown, it doesn't mean I have thirty minutes to get it done, but there is a sense in which this needs to be resolved quickly. If Ephesians 1, 2, and 3 are true, if I understand it and believe it, it gives me the foundation by which I can face that which makes me angry and get it resolved quickly. In other words: if I have an ongoing anger problem, that is proof positive I either don't understand or I don't believe the truths of Ephesians 1, 2, and 3.

Again, the issue is not that I should try harder. That hasn't worked so far; it's not going to tomorrow. The issue is there's something about the way I think. There's something about the way I'm viewing myself and who I am, and this sense of significance and purpose and meaning and acceptance—all of that—that is still messed up, and because it's messed up, then my life is defined by anger.

Truthfully, some of you here this morning, by and large your whole life has been defined by your anger. You've framed your whole personality around it. That's who you are, which reminds me of these words by Fred Buechner. He says, "Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick over your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor the last toothsome morsel—both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it's a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

For some of you, anger has become a way of life, but according to the text, that simply cannot define someone who understands and believes the wealth, the riches that are ours in Christ. You need to go back and figure out, "What is wrong in my thinking and belief system that causes this to continue to define me?" The third is in verse 28:

He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have *something* to share with one who has need.

The third one is this idea of being a giver rather than a taker...**stealing**. We could talk about a lot of things related to stealing, but specifically here it's talking about stealing versus somebody who works, somebody who earns for it—not to accumulate more but to become a generous person—in other words to be part of contributing to that which is good rather than being a taker and draining the system. In the first century Roman world, stealing was a huge problem. A huge portion of the Roman Empire was made up of slaves. Slaves, as a way of life, were inclined to steal under the rationalization of, "We have it coming," and so it was a huge problem.

There are places in the world today that are very similar to that. One of those would be India. I think we as a nation fail to realize—as we become more secular and less moral—it's going to dramatically change our lifestyles. An example of that would be: a couple of years ago we had a couple from India who were here for a few days, and they stayed in our home. Each day I would drive them back and forth from where we live, and the thing that so struck them as we made the drive out and back was all the stuff that we have as a community just lying around—landscape things, tractors, lawnmowers, stuff in your yard, stuff that decorates—because in India, overnight all of that would be gone, and they just made the comment, "You virtually couldn't have any of that." You end up living in this prison and guarding what little you have because as we lose our sense of right and wrong and morality, then we begin more and more to live in this prison. Ultimately, if we're not guided by an internal moral system, all that's left is the rule of law and, trust me, that will be a lifestyle very different from what we've known. That's the way it was in first century Rome.

The specifics of this is he's talking about those people who are takers when the gospel of Christ—the wealth we have in it—should make us givers. Now let me say this: I've got to say this very delicately. There are those in our community, and I'm sure there are those here this morning, through the circumstances life—they may be your fault; they may not be your fault—you find yourself in a season of life where you desperately need help just to live. It is the job of the church and the community to make sure you get the help you need to live. That's part of our commitment to one another. We're in this together. You don't need to feel ashamed or embarrassed by that, but it is equally true there are people who have figured out how to work the system, who are perfectly healthy and able to contribute and make a difference but choose not to. They are takers. They found loopholes in the law, and they drain the system. It's very important to understand: just because something is legal doesn't mean it's morally right.

The ultimate law is God's law, and God has a very high work ethic. When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he said, "If they aren't willing to work, then don't let them eat." It was this idea that if you're able, you are expected to make a contribution to the greater good. We are all in this together. A lot of that is driven by the fact that the Bible believes that work is good. It's right; it's noble. It's a part of finding significance and meaning and purpose in life. We work because God works. It's a reflection of being made in the image of God. Frankly, we will work for eternity. It's just a part of who we are as people made in the image of God, so the idea is: if we are able, we should do our part, not to accumulate more but to be generous—to be givers, to be part of contributing together.

So let me just say: I would suggest that it is virtually impossible to truly understand and believe who we are *in Christ*. The very nature of God is to give. It's impossible to understand and believe that and come out a taker. It just is impossible. If the pattern of your life is to be a taker rather than a giver, it would be right to conclude you do not understand and believe the riches that are ours in Christ. That's the idea there. The last of the four that he talks about starts in verse 29:

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of *the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

The last one is this idea of *what comes out of my mouth*. If I truly understand and believe the truth, if I understand that my significance and my security and my acceptance and all of that is safely rooted in God on the basis of God's grace, if I understand I am a new creation in Christ, then that's what comes out of my mouth. If I still don't understand it and believe it, then something else comes out of my mouth.

The word **unwholesome** is a very graphic term. It basically means something that is putrid, something that stinks. It was a word used to describe like rotting meat or rotting fish, something like that. It's the idea that if I am spiritually dead, when I open my mouth the smell of death comes out my mouth, and that makes sense. I'm futile in my thinking; I'm insensitive; I'm callous. I'm wandering in darkness. I'm desperate. But if I'm a new creation in Christ, if now what is inside of me is life, it makes no sense that what would come out of my mouth smells like death. That's the logic of the text there.

I think it's very helpful to understand what comes out of my mouth never just slips out. It's a reflection of what is in my heart. Jesus was really clear about what comes out of your mouth is a reflection of what's actually in your heart. Again, the solution is not to try harder. That hasn't worked before; it's not going to work tomorrow. The solution is to figure out, "What do I still not understand and believe that is causing this in my heart that keeps coming out my mouth?" If the pattern of your speech is tearing people down rather than building people up, there is something desperately wrong with what you believe. We as children used to say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." We as adults understand that is very untrue. As a matter of fact, I'd rather get hit by sticks and stones because words are the most hurtful, and they're the most difficult to process and heal from.

So let me just kind of shoot straight here. If you have a problem with things coming out your mouth that are hurtful to those around you, that do not rightly reflect this new life in Christ, I have the solution. Shut your mouth! (laughter) Shut your mouth and keep it shut and go to work. Go to work and figure out, "What is still so wrong in my heart and my mind that it's producing this stuff coming

out my mouth that is so hurtful to the people around me?" So that's my remedy. Shut your mouth; stop doing that to the people around you and go to work. Figure it out because if you understand and believe the theology of Ephesians 1, 2, and 3, that would not be coming out your mouth.

It is interesting when you look at the four different areas that Paul has discussed, they all have one thing in common. They all deal with relationships. They all have to do with how we relate to one another. If I truly understand and believe the theology of Ephesians, it dramatically affects my ability to have a relationship with someone else. I can claim all day long that I understand and believe Ephesians 1, 2, and 3. I can say, "I get it," and then I say something like, "You believe it to such a degree that you live like it." And you can convince yourself, "I get it; I believe it; I live like it. Let's go on." As long as you live in isolation outside of true community, you can pretend to be Super Christian all day long, but when you live in authentic community, the real you is exposed, and that's when you find out what you truly believe.

I would suggest to you that's one of the reasons that we as a culture hide behind social media. As we become more and more dysfunctional in our ability to have meaningful relationships, we hide behind social media because we can sanitize it; we can clean it up. We can hide behind that and pretend to be something we're not. Many people avoid genuine, authentic community because community exposes you're still messed up. Verse 30 is a very interesting verse.

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

You know, sometimes we wrestle with, "Does God know; does God hear; does God care?" I totally get that. I've wrestled with those things myself, but it is a sobering reality to know that God not only knows, God not only cares, but God can actually be grieved by my choices. I mean, stop and think about how staggering that is. I can actually make the God of the universe sad because of the choices I make.

Now the idea of God being grieved—*the Holy Spirit grieved*—isn't the sense of God is grieving that you are Loser Christian, and why did He ever choose you to be His child? Some of you that have a tendency to beat yourself up might go there. That's not what he's talking about. It's more the idea that God sees you in your new position in Christ. You are a new creation in Christ. He sees you seated in the heavenlies. Of all that He has made in creation, you are His favorite. You're His masterpiece. He sees you through this remarkable lens of who you are *in Christ* and so when you fail to live that way, when you fail to believe He tells the truth, He grieves because what He wants for you is so much more. You settle for so much less than what could define your story if you would just believe He tells the truth. That's the idea of grieving the Spirit of God. Verse 30:

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. (in other words, old clothing put off) Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. (Vs. 30-32)

So he ends with kind of this summary. This is the old clothing, the grave clothes that should be taken off. Here's the new clothing that should be put on. Now I don't think Paul intends for the list to be exhaustive at all. He's just simply getting real practical and saying, "Here's an example of things in the most practical areas of life that should change as a result of your understanding and believing what is true of you now in Christ."

So here's the key as we close. I have said it again and again and again—that we understand and believe it to such a degree it actually changes the way we live! Specifically, what do you mean? Paul gets into it then. Here are very specific areas that should change. In other words, your behavior is a way to read whether you really understand it and believe it. The key is not to think, "I have some areas to work on; I need to try harder." That didn't work yesterday; it's not going to work tomorrow. The key is to realize if there are some problems with your behavior, it's an evidence you don't really yet understand and believe what is true of you *in Christ*. You have to go back and figure out, "What am I still not understanding or believing?"

When I started this series the very first week back in September, I encouraged you to think about three things in this series to help you with this series. One is to read the book of Ephesians all the way through one time a week. Second was to memorize Ephesians 1:1 through 2:10. That's kind of the core of this new theology, and the third was to find somebody to interact with, to discuss, to kind of process what we're talking about. It's very important to understand: if you think by simply sitting here and listening to a thirty-minute sermon once a week that you're going to understand and believe, and everything's going to change, you are sadly mistaken. I can explain this to you, but every single day you are bombarded by the voices of the culture that tell you something else. It is a lot of work to renew your mind, to think differently, to really understand and embrace who I am *in Christ* to such a degree it actually changes the way I live. So my encouragement to you would be to go back again and process, to renew your mind with the truth and ask yourself, "Do I understand it? Do I believe it?" and if so, it should be reflected in the most ordinary, everyday behaviors of life.

Our Father, we are thankful for Your goodness and Your grace. When we were lost in our sin, You sent Jesus to be the Savior of the world. God, we are reminded this Christmas season that You did that not just to provide a ticket to heaven. You did that that we might be a new creation in Christ, that even in this world we would live differently, Lord, that we would reflect the change that has been brought about by the power of Jesus in our lives. Lord, my prayer would be that You would give us the understanding, You would give us the faith to believe to such a degree that it would be evident in our lives in the most ordinary, everyday things. Lord, this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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