

## **Walk (Not) This Way – Ephesians 4:17-24**

*Five Points Community Church (4/26/15) Brett Toney*

We continue this morning in our series on the worthy walk of Ephesians 4-6. And I've been reminded how helpful that imagery is of the Christian life being a walk as I have started running again a few times a week. When I get up early to go for a run, I've got to be wearing the right clothes, the proper shoes. I've got to know which route I'm taking, and I need my RunKeeper app so I know what kind of progress I'm making. If those things aren't in place, I absolutely can still go for a run, but it is probably going to be more challenging, and I probably won't stick with it. If I head out wearing a suit and dress shoes, I can still run, but it will be cumbersome and at some point I'd get some kind of injury from not wearing the right shoes. And I can just head out not knowing my route—and certainly without my app—but I'm probably not going to make as good of progress in running longer or faster.

This is what Paul is trying to do for us here. He is wanting us to be well equipped for the walk of the Christian life so that we stick with it and don't just give up. He's trying to give us the right gear and tools and attire to walk faithfully over the long-term. He wants us to know our route, the direction we are to be walking. And over the last two Sundays, JJ has helped us in seeing the vital role that unity and diversity play in the walk of the Christian life. There is unity and diversity because we aren't on this walk by ourselves. There is much direct application in these chapters for us as individuals, but Paul has begun by emphasizing the corporate, community dynamic of this walk. We pursue humility, gentleness, patience, and love being *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* (4:2-3). We pursue personal holiness in the context of a unified people. And this people, the Church, are diverse—the Spirit has given different gifts to each of us *for the benefit of all of us* (cf. 4:7, 11-16).

We are more like the marathon training group you see out on trails and sidewalks, all wearing the same t-shirt with their water bottle fanny packs, than we are the lone power walker with his shaking hips. We are in this together, all growing in holiness as individuals but doing so not alone, but in the context of community. And indeed, Paul has stated that individually we won't attain Christian maturity; that will only happen when *all* of us attain it. My right leg isn't going to be conditioned to run long distances without my left leg also being conditioned—one isn't going to improve without the other. And the same is true for the Body of Christ.

### **Don't Walk Like You Did (v.17-19)**

So we see in v.17 that Paul picks up his walking illustration again. But rather than telling us to “walk this way” as in v.1, he comes back to this imagery to say “walk *not* this way.” Verse 17, “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.” Whereas humility and gentleness and so on are what characterizes our walk in Christ, unrepentant Gentiles have their walk characterized by futility. Their minds are fruitless, and thus the way they live their lives is worthless.

In giving this exhortation to the Ephesian believers, it is interesting that Paul tells them to not walk like “the Gentiles” as though they *aren't* Gentiles. Do you see this? The traditional biblical dichotomy is Jew and Gentile. Well, the Ephesians are certainly not Jews—they're Greeks. But Paul talks about “the Gentiles” as a group distinct from the Ephesians. I think what Paul is doing is writing in light of the theological truth he explained in 2:15, that Christ has created in himself a “third race,” “one new man in place of the two [—Jew and Gentile.]” Paul considers the Ephesians—and all who are united with Christ by faith—in the way Jesus does. He doesn't consider them in their former identity, but only that they are united with himself as a new people in Christ.

So Paul rightly draws an us-them distinction in saying, “Don’t walk like them any longer! You are no longer part of that group—you are categorically different now in Christ! Don’t walk like them because their head, heart, and hands are all affected by their depravity and sin!” Their head—their thinking—is darkened, and they are ignorant. They don’t have even a glimpse of a right understanding of the Light that has come into the world. Their minds are closed to the revelation of the redemption that Christ has accomplished.

But their situation is worse than that; it is not that they just haven’t worked through the logical proof of the existence of God or something. Their problem is deeper seated. They don’t just go on walking in their futile ignorance because someone hasn’t shown them the light. They are culpable in their depraved walk because their hearts are hard and calloused. This serves as the ultimate ground of their damned situation. They stubbornly persist on the path to Hell. Nothing persuades them to even consider turning aside. Like a deeply rooted plantar wart in the thickest part of your foot—you can poke and cut and slice but nothing is felt in that corrupted tissue.

Nothing changes and nothing is felt because they have set their hands to the work of all uncleanness in greediness. In fact, they have given *themselves* over to deeds marked by an utter lack of self-restraint. It’s not only that *God* gave such depraved individuals over to their sin—like Paul says in Romans 1:24—but *they* gave *themselves* over to their “sensuality,” as the ESV translates it. I found the definition of this word from the best Greek dictionary to be helpful. This sensuality or impurity is a “lack of self-constraint which involves one in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable.”<sup>1</sup> They *gave themselves* to utterly forsaking any form of self-control or social norms. Or as the prophet Jeremiah would put it, “They did not know how to blush” (Jeremiah 6:15).

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<sup>1</sup> See entry for ἀσελγεία in BDAG

And this hard-hearted, shameless depravity was carried out in greediness; greediness in all forms, not just for material possessions. Their sin is insatiable. It is always wanting more, *more*, MORE. It's like an unweaned infant on his mother's lap. Nothing satisfies their sin. Gluttonous? Give me more and finer foods! Envious? Give me more status and position! Slothful? Give me more comfort and service! They sin in using rather than serving others.<sup>2</sup>

But before we get prideful or start thanking God that we are not sinners like them (cf. Luke 18:11), take note that Paul says in v.17 that we ought *no longer* walk as they do. The very people and the very depravity he describes in v.17-19 is what *we* once were! The Ephesian believers, you, me, and all who are in Christ—this is who we *were*! Remember that:

“You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ... Remember that you were at [one time] separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (2:1-3, 12).

*But for the grace of God in Jesus Christ.* That is who you *were* Christian, “but God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us [with which he loved *you*] ... made us alive together with Christ. ... But now in Christ Jesus you[, Christian,] who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (2:4-5, 13).

### **Walk How You Were Discipled (v.20-21)**

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<sup>2</sup> This observation and insight is from personal correspondence with JJ Sherwood.

“You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do ... greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!” (4:17,19-20). You did not learn Christ to go on living according to your former way of life. You were not taught to persist in the sins that characterized your life before Jesus. Walk not this way. “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (4:1).

It is kind of an odd phrase when you think about, “learned Christ.” It isn’t, “learned *about* Christ.” What you learned *was* Christ. You learned the person of Jesus. I think it is helpful to note Paul’s word choice here. The word for “learned” (μανθάνω) is not just an intellectual learning, not just a cognitive awareness. It entails learning by experience, by doing. The distinction is clearer when in the next verse, v.21, he uses the more classic word for “teach” (διδάσκω). I think the kind of learning Paul has in mind is the kind of teaching Jesus had in view as he commissioned his disciples. Jesus didn’t say, “Make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them all that I have commanded.” No, he said, “teach them *to observe* all that I have commanded” (Matthew 28:20). You haven’t made a disciple by just informing him; you make a disciple by helping her conform her life to Jesus’ teaching. As a disciple of Jesus, you are not merely taught all that Jesus commanded; you are taught *to observe* all that Jesus commanded. That’s what Paul is getting at, not just information transfer, but transformational information—teaching that aims at life change.

Now let me pause for a moment to offer a little glimpse into what JJ and I and hopefully anyone else who stands behind this pulpit are trying to do. We are trying to help you *learn Christ* and not just learn *about* Christ. We do not *mainly* want to carry out that information transfer. We don’t want to just convey biblical and theological truths. We want you to *learn Christ*, not merely *about* him. We want you to have an encounter with the Word Incarnate through the Word

Written. We want you to *hear Christ* and be taught *in him*. Far more important than remembering a sermon outline or alliterative points is having met Jesus in his Word so that you are changed to be more like him, *right now*. Our aim is that you leave saying, “Ah! I met Jesus this morning! My heart has been changed. His Spirit sanctified me a little more this morning.” That’s what we’re after. Ok, back to the sermon.

So continuing to walk as the Gentiles walk is contradictory to your discipleship. You did not learn to be like Christ this way. You weren’t disciplined like that. Furthermore, your discipleship didn’t orient on facts, doctrine, self-help tips, or “12-Steps to the Perfect Christian Life.” No, as Kent Hughes put it, “[The terms Paul uses in v.20-21] present *Jesus* as the subject of the teaching, the teacher of the teaching, and the atmosphere of the teaching.”<sup>3</sup> All that you know about the Christian life orients on the person of Jesus. *He* is what you learned—the subject of the teaching. *He* taught you through his inspired Word and the apostolic witness—the teacher of the teaching. *He* is the sphere in which you learned all this, as the truth is *in him*—the atmosphere of the teaching.

You were taught according to gospel truth—you were taught Christlikeness. You were not taught the falsehood that would condone the persistence of sin. You were *not* taught that one who is now in Christ could go on walking in sin. No! It must be killed because Christ already died for it. You have a *new* heart, not a hard, calloused one. Paul’s assumption in v.21 is that this identity is what is true of his recipients; that they are in fact united with Christ. But it’s right for us to pause and ask the question, “*Have you* died with Christ? *Have you* been raised with him? *Are you* united with him by faith?” May you not just assume this is true for you because you

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<sup>3</sup> Kent Hughes, “Living in Light” (February 26, 1989). Accessed April 22, 2015 via <http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/living-in-light>; emphasis added.

grew up here, or have “always been a Christian,” or your parents are solid, mature believers.

Does your life look more like v.19 or more like v.20? Are you calloused or a disciple of Jesus?

### **Put Off & Put On (v.22-24)**

So all of your teaching and discipleship orients on and stems from Jesus, but what does it look like to be taught *to observe* all that Jesus commanded? What does it look like to be “taught Christ”? What is Paul bringing to memory? In v.22-24 he reminds the Ephesians and us that as disciples of Jesus, we were taught: (1) to put off sin, (2) to renew our minds, and (3) to put on holiness.

Verse 22, we have been taught “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.” Literally, we are to put off “the old man.” This is what Paul meant in calling us to not walk like the Gentiles. That kind of walking belongs to your *former* manner of life. That is not who you are any longer. Indeed, that old self has been put off already. The verb form Paul uses indicates this is a completed action. Your old self has been put off. You are no longer bound to sin. Before Jesus, you could do nothing but sin. In your old identity, you were being corrupted by the deceit of your desires. Sin spewed lies that made you think you could find satisfaction apart from Christ. And like a maggot, sin ate away at you, seeking to utterly consume you. And you would go looking for more maggots. In your hard-heartedness, you believed the lie. You so wanted your sin to satisfy, and so did I.

But Christian, you can’t keep doing these things. They must be put off. Your old self has been dealt a deathblow; he’s been mortally wounded. Your old self has been put off. O that God would give you eyes to see your sin with ever-increasing disdain, to see it for the maggot that it is. Go on putting it off.

And one way in which you will do that is by being renewed in the spirit of your mind. No longer let your thoughts be darkened, futile, or ignorant, but rather may they be illuminated, productive, and knowledgeable. *The* primary way God would have you pursue this is in his Word, studying and memorizing and sharing it. Understand sin for what it is. Know what God calls you to and how to fight the fight of faith. Or as David Powlison has put it, who is God in your particular struggle? What promises in his Word speak into *your* struggle against sin? You won't know who God is or what he has promised if you don't know his Word.

Last, we have been discipled to put on the new self, the new man. This new man, this new identity, he's been created in God's image in true righteousness and holiness. No longer is our identity tainted by the Fall. In Christ, we are *redeemed* image bearers. We bear the likeness of Christ as his disciples. And just as it is a completed action that our old self has been put off, so also it is a completed action that our *new* self has been put *on*. This is your new identity. You were made new. You were born again. You died and were raised with Christ. You were redeemed. You have positionally changed in your status before God. As one of the women at our Thursday morning Bible study observed, we were orphans—or in Paul's terms, we were aliens and strangers. But now through Christ and his indwelling Spirit we have been adopted by the King; we are princes and princesses, co-heirs with Christ. We have a new identity, a new status.

But you must still go on putting on this new self. You keep slipping back into your old identity; those ruts are well worn. This is because of what theologians describe as the “already-not yet.” It's the worldview of the New Testament authors that we presently enjoy all the benefits Christ has accomplished for us, the benefits of the age to come. And yet we still wrestle with life in a fallen world, a world that is not yet entirely made new. So you must be intentional and vigilant to go on living in your new identity.



Forgot who you are in Christ? Go back and read Ephesians 1-3. Everything Paul describes about who we are and our identity in Christ in those chapters is presently available for us to bask in. This new identity is presently yours to enjoy, like stepping out into the sunshine on the first 70-degree day of Spring. Paul is calling us here to live in light of who we already are. You *are* no longer a Gentile, walking in futile darkness. You *are* a new creation, a Christian formed in the image of Christ.

But O how we need one another in this walk. We need one another to put off our old self and put on our new self. Not one of us will reach full maturity in Christ on our own, nor will we get to the finish line first. We will attain the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ *together*. This is how God has designed it. We pursue holiness as individuals, but no one “arrives” on their own. This putting off, putting on is done in *unity* and in *community*.

It’s like one of those team-building exercises you do on a retreat. You do the “trust fall.” At first you just lean back into someone else who catches you. But you work up to where someone is standing on a platform five feet off the ground. The team holds their arms out like the teeth of a zipper but not grasping each other. No way does any one person catch the “faller.” But everyone standing there together accomplishes the goal. This is kind of like how God has designed the growth of his people. He gave us a new identity in Christ and united us together by his Spirit so that we all mature and grow together. And this is why the diversity of gifts are needed, because each of us are going to struggle differently and with different sins. And God has designed it so that within the Body there are those who are well suited to serve the advance of holiness in different ways.

So we need gospel-centered Shepherd Groups where sin is taken seriously and serious grace is mediated. You need to be known by other Christians and they need to be known *by you*.

We need men and women who are eager and ready to share not only the gospel but their very own lives with others (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:8), teaching those not as far along in the faith to observe all that Jesus commanded. We need to be a people who lovingly, patiently, and winsomely come alongside those still walking in the futility of their minds, to commend Christ and point to the way of true and everlasting joy and satisfaction. We need high schoolers and retirees alike who have been captivated by the person of Jesus and want to show him to the next generation.

We must no longer walk as we once did in our calloused depravity. But having learned Christ—having the grace of God overcome our rebellion and the Spirit of God create in us a new heart—we must put off our old self, we must renew the spirit of our minds, and we must put on our new self. And until Christ returns, we will together in our unified diversity grow in the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.