

God's New Society

Message 8

The Secret to the Christian Life

Ephesians 4:17-32

Introduction

All of you here tonight – everyone who has tried to follow Jesus sincerely – has known some measure of struggle, frustration, and disappointment. Who has heard that Jesus prayed every day and resolved to do the same, only to find a year later that days still go by prayerless? Have you decided to honor your parents, but somehow still get frustrated with them and speak disrespectfully? I know, here's one. How many of you began this semester determined to honor God by keeping up with your class work? Dare I ask how many of you are still caught up? All sorts of people try to change or improve themselves, but Christians expect better results. We claim to have God's Spirit in us. We claim that God answers prayer. We assert that God intends us to grow in holiness. So why do we struggle so? Does God not hear our prayers? Do we need a booster shot of the Holy Spirit? Or have we been colossally deceived? Is holy living impossible after all?

Ben Philip should be paying close attention now, for there's money to be made here. The difficulty and confusion of living for Jesus is so distressing for Christians that they are willing to pay a lot of money for the secret to spiritual success. Check out the myriad books, tapes, conferences, and programs on Christian living. Many of these materials are beneficial. But what is so sad is the sense of desperation that accompanies many people who use them. And that sadness is compounded because the secret is right here, in the book of Ephesians. And you do not have to pay a cent for it. But if you want to donate to my ministry this evening, I will accept!

Walk Worthy of Our Calling

Last week we noticed that chapter four begins the application section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. His central command is "to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called". This takes us all the way back to chapter 1 verse 4, where Paul says that God "chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame". Each of us who follows Christ was called by God, and God had a specific purpose in calling us to Himself. From the beginning God's intention in calling us was that we should be holy – like Him. So now Paul reminds us of God's purpose in calling us, and urges us to cooperate with God.

A life worthy of God's call is first a life of unity with other believers. God has made us one in Christ. We all partake of one Spirit, pursue one hope, obey one Lord, claim one faith, exhibit one baptism, and serve one God who is Father of us all and who has made us all into one body. There is no longer a Jew-Gentile distinction, or any other racial distinction, but we are all equally members of Christ. If these things are all true, we must live as though they are. Divisiveness in the church is a disgrace, and we must repudiate it.

A life worthy of God's call is second a life equipped for service. God has given leaders to the church, not to do all the ministry, but to equip all of us to minister. This leads to the goal of life – maturity. We live in a childish age, in which grown men and women act like babies and praise others who do so. Sadly, Christians have bought into this attitude. To our shame we admire irresponsible behavior and praise those who live that way. But immaturity is not worthy of God's call. Paul urges us to grow up to be mature like Christ.

Think Like Christ

Now Paul moves to the question of how we become mature. It's a fine thing to say we should live like Christ, but what should we do to accomplish that goal? It may come as not surprise to you who have

been in RUF for a while that your mind is the key. Paul says we “should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind”. We must be different from unbelievers. Paul will detail later some of the particular behaviors that must distinguish us, but first he identifies the root of those behaviors. The Gentiles live sinfully because they think wrongly. Their thinking is futile. The Greeks made a great effort to find truth, but they failed in every attempt because they did not know Jesus, who is truth. The thinking of even their greatest philosophers, while admirable, was useless in finding the truth.

Paul describes the degrees of futility unbelievers experience as they progress from one stage of unbelief to another. If we unravel Paul’s complicated grammar we see that the first stage of unbelief is hardness of heart. Although they see God revealed in creation, and perhaps hear Him in the gospel, they refuse to recognize Him. They resist God’s word and brace themselves against His revelation. Hardness of heart leads to ignorance. They may become more educated and more knowledgeable, but their ignorance of God grows deeper. Ignorance leads to the third stage, separation from the life of God. Instead they embrace a pseudo life of sin which in reality is death. Finally, they devote themselves to the wholesale pursuit of wickedness. We can summarize this sordid sequence with these four words: obstinacy, darkness, death, and recklessness. Those of you studying Romans this semester will notice the striking parallels to Romans chapter 1.

By contrast, in verse 21 Paul that we believers are different. We have learned Christ, heard Christ, and have been taught in Him. Our minds have been reoriented from the world to Jesus. Christ has re-educated us. He is the content, the teacher, and the environment of our re-education. The goal of this education is to think like Christ. In 1 Corinthians 2:16 Paul quoted Isaiah 40:13, ““who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him,”” then added, “but we have the mind of Christ.” Did you get that? We have the mind of Christ! This one aspect of the spiritual blessings Paul mentioned in Ephesians 1:3. We are capable of thinking entirely differently than the rest of the world. We are capable of thinking like Christ. The mind of Christ includes not only content, but also process. We possess the thoughts of Christ, and reason as Christ does. Well, at least that is the goal. At conversion we receive the mind of Christ as infants. Now the challenge is to exercise our minds so that we do indeed think like Christ.

In verse 23 says that we should “be renewed in the spirit of your mind”. God has given us the mind of Christ, but we have not yet emptied it of all the garbage the world has put in there. Our minds must be renewed by the Spirit. This verse is parallel to Paul’s exhortation in Romans 12:2, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” As the Spirit transforms our minds, we will do God’s will. If our minds are not transformed, we will not succeed in doing God’s will. If you are struggling to obey God, it is fairly safe to say that there is a problem in your mind. There is something wrong with what you believe, or in how you are reasoning. Get that straightened out and your behavior will fall into line.

So how can we retrain our minds? Paul says the Spirit does it, and He does trains our minds by the same means He does everything else in this world – through God’s word, prayer, and the sacraments. Now some people hear this and they think we are saying there is some magical quality in the Bible, prayer, baptism, or the Lord’s Supper. Nonsense! There is no magic. But there *is* a supernatural work of God’s Spirit on our minds through these things. As you read or hear the Bible, as you pray, as you receive the Lord’s supper, God changes the way you think. Notice I said, “as you...” God matures us over time. There is no magic. Maturity takes time. And if you let time go by while neglecting these means of growth, you will remain immature. So for those of you looking for practical application here is the first. If you wish to become a mature Christian and have never been baptized, that is your first step. Next, read your Bible every day. It does not need to be for several hours – but how much will three minutes change your thinking? How much do you want to grow? And set aside time to pray. Finally, eat the Lord’s supper frequently. I have said before and I repeat – if you neglect Bible study, prayer, or the Lord’s supper, you will not become a mature

Christian. Do not condemn yourself to childhood. Seek maturity!

Off With the Old, On With the New

The first secret to success in the Christian life is to renew your mind. Now that might sound as if we are saying theologians are the most mature Christians. Not at all. Christian growth must begin in the mind, but it can never stop there. A truly renewed mind will result in changed behavior. If you see someone who knows a lot about the Bible or theology, but is rude, insensitive, and uncaring – that person’s mind has not been renewed. His unbelieving mind has been filled with Christian fragments, but his mind itself is still full of wickedness. You must move on from thinking differently to acting differently.

Now here we encounter another grave misunderstanding – one so damaging that it derails the best intentions of sincere Christians. Briefly, many people think that they are justified by grace, but sanctified by law. In other words, they correctly grasp that we are dead in our sins and can do nothing to save ourselves. They turn to Jesus for salvation and trust in His death to pay for their sins. They rejoice in the free gift of salvation – salvation by grace. Then they set about to live for Jesus. They read up on how it is to be done and set off to follow the directions. They are surprised to discover that they do not do what they intended. They planned to follow Jesus, but they failed. So they try again. Perhaps they will have some success, but eventually they fail again. They press on with greater vigor, but at some point they begin to lose hope. Eventually they give up and settle for an immature Christian life. Except for the ones who are satisfied with their success. They become legalists.

The problem is that salvation is by grace all the way through. We are justified by grace, and also sanctified by grace. You cannot live for Christ by your own efforts. Obedience to Christ is a gift that comes from God. Let that sink in. Obedience to Christ is a gift that comes from God. Do you see what I am saying? You are called to obey. Your obedience is something you do. Your obedience is also a gift from God. If you do not grasp this, you will become a legalist.

Paul used a familiar image in an odd way to make this point. He said our behavior is like clothing. The key – this is the second key – you are getting two for your money tonight – the key to the Christian life is to take off your old behavior and put on your new behavior. It is like clothing. When we were breaking up the concrete in Mexico over spring break, I got sweaty and dirty. I did not want to eat lunch like that, so I changed clothes before lunch. Now I did not go to my room and manufacture some new clothes. I did not grow the cotton, weave the cloth, dye it, and sew the clothes. No, I simply went to the dresser and took out some clean clothes. Changing clothes was a job that I did. No one else did it for me. But the clothes were already made.

Remember what Paul said in chapter 2, verse 10? “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” God has made us to obey. When we believed in Jesus, we were born from above, and we have a new nature. Before, it was natural for us to sin. Now it is natural for us to do good. Before, we were creatures of the earth. Now we inhabit the heavenlies. Before, we were dead in sin. Now we are alive and ruling with Christ. These are not wistful dreams – these are concrete realities. The reason obedience is so hard is that we forget these things.

We think we want to sin. After all, we have spent much of our lives wanting to sin. So we try so hard to overcome sin. Like a batter focused on the ball coming in over the plate, we keep sin on our sight so we can avoid it, and then we fall right into it. Elsewhere Paul explains that sin is indeed a constant threat. As long as we are in this world sin will tempt us, and we must be aware of that temptation. But the point is that Jesus is more powerful than sin, and if we focus on Him, we will fall into obedience instead of sin. Since we have been born from above we have a heavenly nature. It is natural for us to do good. We desire to do good, and increasingly do good unconsciously. But the old nature is present as well. So sometimes we

do want to sin, and even follow through. But you cannot overcome sin by focusing on it. You can only overcome sin by focusing on Jesus and living by His word.

If you are a believer, God has given you a new life. Part of that new life is new behaviors. These are a gift from God. Your task is not to agonize over what to do, or how to live, or how to avoid sin. Your task is to believe that God is at work in you and begin obeying Him. Sometimes you will fall into sin, but then you confess your failure, return your focus to God, and press on. You do not strain to *make* righteous behavior, you just *put on* righteous behavior that God made for you. You trust God to change you, as you learn from Christ to think differently and begin following His commands. Keeping your focus on Him, you will see that you do begin to live differently as God's power transforms you to be more and more like Christ.

Treat Others Kindly

Now having explained how to grow to maturity, Paul spends the next chapters giving specific examples of how this obedience looks in practice. The main idea in the rest of this chapter is to treat others kindly. One aspect of the new behavior we put on is truth telling. Telling the truth is a very basic component to the Christian life because it is so fundamental to God's own character. Can you imagine where we would be if we could not trust God to tell the truth? What if we arrived in heaven to discover that God was not really serious about accepting those who believe in Christ! And when God came into this world as a man, He called Himself the Truth. Paul provides another reason for truth telling – “we are member of one another”. It is a denial of yourself to lie to one who is part of you.

Next, wrath is absent from our new clothes. Jesus said that His followers would be peacemakers, imitating Him who is the Prince of Peace. James said, “So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” (James 1:19) Isn't it true that the opposite tends to be true of us? We are quick to anger, quick to speak, and slow to hear. Our old nature is easily provoked, easily offended, and hard to appease. But this is not the new, true you. God has remade you with a new nature. You are able to listen patiently to immature people, reply thoughtfully, and absorb their nonsense without anger. You really *are* able to do this. The power of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit in your life guarantees it. Why don't you try it next time you are besieged by some annoying person. Practice patience and see how it works. Of course, do not forget to pray for God's help in the moment. 1 Corinthians 13:7 says, Love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Cultivate a habit of thinking the best of people. Instead of assuming they had bad intent, assume they had good intent – even if they have sinned in the past. They could have changed! Give them the benefit of the doubt. Then do what James said – listen carefully to what they say, and reply carefully.

Our old behavioral clothing included theft, but not our new clothes. Neither are we to be lazy, but industrious. I doubt many of you here have robbed a bank, or even been tempted to. A notorious problem among young people is software theft. It is so easy and so tempting. Think, a Windows upgrade costs, what – \$100? If you buy it without the upgrade it is much more. I know you can get a lot of useful software free through Lehigh, but games are more tempting. You can get this stuff for little or nothing from software pirates or friends. And music! How many of you have stolen music off the internet? You can devise all manner of fancy rationalizations, but the bottom line is such actions are theft. Perhaps even more insidious and prevalent is theft of time. I doubt that anyone here is paying your own way through Lehigh. All of us these days get through school by our parents paying the bill, or grants and loans. Loans you will repay, but the grants are gifts from someone else. How faithful are you with the investment in your future? Do you steal from your parents or the university by sleeping through your classes and doing the minimum to get by?

It comes as a surprise to some people that the same commandment which sets aside the Sabbath for rest also specifies the other six days for work. “Six day you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh

day is the Sabbath.” Now this does not mean we can never do anything but work from Monday morning until Saturday night, but it does cast life in a different light than we are accustomed. John Wesley said, “Earn as much as you can, give as much as you can, save as much as you can.” The point is not to be a workaholic, but to be industrious and generous.

Paul moves on to say our new behavior does not include any corrupt speech. Instead, our speech is supposed to edify others. Edify means to build up, as is to encourage, instruct, and assist. Proverbs 16:24 says, “Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, Sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.” By contrast listen to what James says in his letter.

Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. James 3:5-6

speech of Hitler vs. Jesus

no malice, but kindness, tenderness, forgiveness

Conclusion

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