Walking Differently

Believers are to live a life that is different from those who reject Christ.

As a teenager, I longed to blend in as part of the crowd. I wanted to be liked by the popular kids. While I grew up in a devout Christian home environment, I had the same desire as any teen to be accepted among my peers at school and in the neighborhood. We all knew what the temptations were that often accompanied the desire for acceptance—temptations to drink alcoholic beverages or to flirt around with sexual temptation. As I think back on that time in my life, I am grateful that my parents provided great guidelines for my behavior. “Remember,” they would say, “Christians are supposed to behave differently than other people. It doesn’t work to say that all your friends act in a certain way. They could all be wrong!”

Sadly, the temptation to follow along with the crowd does not automatically stop at twenty years of age. Adult Christians as well can be swayed by the allure of popular culture so that they give in to self-destructive and sinful behavior. They see others seemingly get by without consequences or they try to justify such behavior with the old arguments that everyone is doing it or that one’s Christian confession somehow immunizes the believer from God's disciplinary judgment.

The situation was no different for the generation of Jesus’ followers who lived in Ephesus and to whom Paul addressed his epistle. Most of these Christians had been converted as adults, many coming from pagan or secular lifestyles. They knew that as believers they were now expected to behave differently than worldly people, but it was not always easy to go against the crowd. The apostle Paul was certainly aware that believers are not immune from the temptations of secular culture. Therefore, it is no surprise that he provided the Christians in Ephesus with strong encouragement about the urgency of living in ways that are different from those who reject Christ.
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 4:17-32
Paul laid a strong theological foundation in chapters 1–3 for understanding the blessings of salvation in Christ, the gospel, and the church as the body of Christ united to glorify God and carry on Christ’s mission in the world. Beginning in 4:1, the apostle marked a clear transition with the word therefore. This transition word expressed a new (yet related) emphasis on fleshing out the theological truths of chapters 1–3 in terms of practical living. Chapters 4–6 thus focus on the “what now” factor of salvation in Christ. Paul addressed the question: “I’m saved; how should I now live in light of that reality?”

Paul began the practical section with a call for believers to live in unity with one another and use their God-given spiritual gifts to build up the church (4:1-16). We delved into these verses in the previous two sessions. Now in 4:17, we find a second instance of Paul’s using the word therefore to signal yet another way that Christians can (and should) live out their salvation. In 4:17-32, Paul turned to the issue of Christlike behavior as demonstrated in the ways Christians relate to others. He reminded the Ephesian believers of the sinful types of behavior that characterized them before salvation. He described their turning to Christ with an analogy of taking off old, soiled clothes and putting on new, clean garments.

Salvation is a transformation from death to life, from the old to the new. Thus, Paul urged believers to shed their former ways of promiscuity, deceitfulness, bitterness, and vengefulness. In place of such sinful practices, Christians needed to be characterized by practices such as truthfulness, honest labor, encouraging speech, kindness, and a willingness to forgive.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE OLD (Eph. 4:17-19)
Paul reminded the recipients of his letter of their former lifestyle before believing in Christ. They searched for fulfillment through sinful activities, but those practices resulted only in futility and ever-worsening behavior.

VERSE 17
Therefore, I say this and testify in the Lord: You should no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their thoughts.
Paul reminded the recipients of his letter of the grounds on which he exhorted them: **I say this and testify in the Lord.** The apostle was not merely giving his opinion; he was speaking out of his calling and authority as an apostle of Christ. The phrase *in the Lord* had the effect of declaring, “God’s own character and purpose in Christ underscore what I am about to say.” The Greek word rendered *testify* signaled that a serious, substantive matter was about to be stated (see Acts 20:26; Gal. 5:3).

Paul’s message to the Ephesian believers was direct: **you should no longer live as the Gentiles live.** While there may have been a number of Jewish believers in the Ephesian church, the congregation by this time probably was comprised predominantly of converted Gentiles. In any case, the church was undoubtedly surrounded by a pagan Gentile culture often characterized by excess, idolatry, immorality, dishonesty, and humanistic philosophy. The apostle outlined the emptiness of this pagan culture—the believers’ former way of life—with a series of five devastating criticisms.

First, Paul condemned **the futility of their thoughts.** This phrase refers to a life of thinking—intellectual pursuit—without knowledge of the true God. In the end, such knowledge is frustrating and meaningless. In Romans 1:21, Paul spoke of those whose “thinking became worthless, and their senseless hearts were darkened.”

**VERSE 18**

They are darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them and because of the hardness of their hearts.

Second, the phrase **darkened in their understanding** points to the result of an empty pursuit of intellectual knowledge without knowledge of God. The pagan culture of ancient Ephesus had forfeited the moral light of true wisdom. Many Gentiles craved wisdom (1 Cor. 1:18), but apart from a relationship with Christ they could not attain the wisdom that is eternally valuable. Jesus affirmed that God hid His true wisdom from the worldly wise and revealed it to believers who responded to Him in childlike faith (see Matt. 11:25).

The third criticism, **excluded from the life of God,** echoes what Paul wrote previously about the Gentiles’ hopeless condition before their salvation in Christ. The unbelieving Gentiles were “without hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).

Fourth, Paul spoke of the **ignorance that is in** those who were trapped in a pagan, Gentile culture. He was not suggesting that all Gentiles were incapable of learning. Some were, in fact, highly educated. Sadly, however, they were ignorant of life’s most vital knowledge—knowledge of the one true God.
Fifth, Paul condemned the hardness of their hearts. The Greek word translated hardness could be used to describe the hardening of a soft substance over time or the building up of calloused skin. It was used figuratively to describe becoming spiritually insensitive or stubborn. The heart was considered to be the center of a person’s moral decision-making. Living in willful ignorance of the one true God over time produces a calloused heart that rejects His wisdom and, worse, becomes insensitive to the Spirit’s convicting work. In such a condition, all kinds of immoral behavior seem acceptable.

VERSE 19

They became callous and gave themselves over to promiscuity for the practice of every kind of impurity with a desire for more and more.

If the hearts and minds of unbelieving Gentiles were so deeply malformed (or as Paul described it, they became callous), their futile thoughts and darkened understanding led directly to all types of immoral behavior. First, they gained a reputation for promiscuity (“lasciviousness,” KJV; “sensuality,” ESV; NIV). This term referred not only to base sexual sins but also to immoral conduct of any kind, including violence. The phrase rendered gave themselves over points to a willing participation in sinful actions.

Second, by saying that unbelieving Gentiles willingly chose to engage in every kind of impurity, Paul contended that such types of behavior had developed into a lifestyle. Unbelievers showed no sense of decency; they simply had a desire for more and more sensuous, self-gratifying activities.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Hardness of Heart” on page 705 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. What evidence shows that a person’s heart is hard toward the things of God? How did the Lord soften your heart concerning Christ and the gospel?

THE CHANGE (Eph. 4:20-24)

Paul reminded the Ephesian believers that believing in Christ results in transformation. He used an analogy of changing from dirty to clean clothes.

VERSE 20

But that is not how you came to know Christ,
Paul contrasted (but is emphatic) the way Gentiles had formerly lived to the transformation Christ brought to them in salvation. First, the recipients of the letter had come to know Christ. Unbelieving Gentiles had grown dark in their understanding and basically were ignorant (unknowing) of God. That state of ignorance changed radically for those Gentiles who heard the gospel and responded with faith in Christ. They did not just know the facts about God’s Son; they came to know Him as their Savior and Lord!

_VERSE 21_

assuming you heard about him and were taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus,

In this verse, Paul expanded briefly on the transformation that happens when someone comes to truly know Christ. Salvation isn’t just listening to a sermon or Bible study about Jesus. Genuine conversion moves beyond hearing about him to being taught by Christ and receiving Him by faith. Unbelievers can find the truth about sin, repentance, forgiveness, and new life only through a faith-relationship because the truth is in Jesus.

On one hand, Paul probably did not intend to call into question the salvation of the Ephesian believers. On the other hand, he never wanted to presume that the recipients of his epistles—many of whom he had neither met nor discipled—fully understood the gospel and its implications for Christian living. To the Christians in Corinth Paul wrote, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith” (2 Cor. 13:5). The proof of genuine salvation in Christ is a transformed heart and mind that leads to a Christlike lifestyle. The believers in Ephesus would do well to examine their values and behaviors to make sure they were different from their former way of life.

_VERSE 22_

to take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires,

Paul used a compelling analogy to express the transformation that happens in the believer’s heart and life. The old life—the life of unbelief—can be compared with wearing old, dirty, tattered clothes. Through faith in Christ, however, believers are empowered (and commanded) to take off their former way of life. To make sure the letter’s recipients did not misapply the analogy, Paul clarified that conversion was not just making an external change. Salvation is not a matter of cleaning up one’s actions or turning over a new leaf. Rather, believers have been made new inside and out; they are empowered to take off the old self (“the old man,” KJV) that is corrupted by deceitful desires.
The self-centered demands of our old way of living as unbelievers deceived us; they led us astray into a darker and darker lifestyle, as Paul explained in 4:17-19. As a result, our old self was corrupted through and through. In the same way that a filthy, torn, decayed garment cannot reform or restore itself, even so we cannot as unbelievers reform ourselves into a right relationship with God. The Spirit must do that miraculous work as we trust in Christ for forgiveness and then open our hearts and lives to His transforming power.

VERSE 23
to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,

In this verse, Paul highlighted the contrast between unbelievers’ futile thinking (4:17) and believers’ being renewed in the spirit of their minds. The apostle was referring to the daily process of choosing to live according to the truth found in Jesus. The Greek verb rendered renewed is in a tense that expresses ongoing activity. In other words, believers are to keep on being renewed in their minds each day by depending on and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The phrase spirit of your minds probably refers in this context to the human spirit. Further, New Testament writers thought of the mind as the center of one’s thought life. Nevertheless, renewed thinking comes to the believer only through the Holy Spirit’s indwelling presence and power. Paul emphasized this truth in 1 Corinthians 2:12-13 when he wrote, “Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God, so that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God. We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people.”

VERSE 24
and to put on the new self, the one created according to God’s likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth.

Paul returned to the analogy of taking off old clothing and putting on new garments. To put on the new self emphasizes the radical new look on the outside (one’s lifestyle) that results from transformation on the inside (salvation). This new self is thus not of the believer’s own making but is created by the Spirit’s powerful working in the believer’s heart and mind.

The apostle noted three characteristics of the believer’s new self. First, the new life of the believer is according to God’s likeness. That is, salvation restores the image of God in believers that had been corrupted by sin. The new self empowers believers to live Christlike lives, to stand courageously against the world’s sinful culture.
Second, the new self is characterized by righteousness. The new life we as believers receive at conversion—and which we are to display daily just as we might wear a new set of clothes each day—displays the attitudes and actions of moral uprightness: honesty, humility, love, godliness, compassion, and so forth.

Third, the new self is characterized by purity of the truth (“true holiness,” KJV). The Greek term rendered purity can also be translated “holiness.” It points to believers’ being set apart in their relationship with God. They belong to Him and count it their life’s purpose to glorify Him and make Him known to a lost, sinful world.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read Romans 6:6-7, 2 Corinthians 5:17, and Colossians 3:9-10. How do these passages contribute to a better understanding of Paul’s “old self-new self” teaching in Ephesians 4:22-24? How would you explain to a new believer the importance of showing “the new self” every day?

THE NEW (Eph. 4:25-32)

Over the course of these eight verses, Paul identified five specific behaviors that are to adorn the believer’s lifestyle. For each behavior he began with a negative command, gave the positive counterpart, and then identified the underlying spiritual principle for his teaching.

VERSE 25

Therefore, putting away lying, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, because we are members of one another.

The word therefore signals that Paul was continuing to expound on the matter of putting the truths of the gospel (theology) into action (application). Having been transformed by Christ and given new life, Christians are now empowered to live differently. They are to shed their former pagan lifestyles and put on the new ways of living that testify of Christ and the gospel.

First, believers are empowered to put away lying (“falsehood,” ESV; NIV). This was not a new expectation for God’s people; the ninth commandment states “Do not give false testimony against your neighbor” (Ex. 20:16). In Christ, who fulfilled the law (Matt. 5:17), believers now understand the positive statement of that command. That is, we are to speak the truth, each one to his neighbor. In Christ, God revealed the truth to His creation.
We as believers therefore exhibit Christlike character when we speak the truth to one another—not forgetting that we are to do so “in love” (Eph. 4:15).

Whereas lying destroys trust and damages relationships, truth-telling builds unity. Thus, Paul reminded the Ephesian believers of the Christian principle of unity: we are members of one another (see 4:4-6). We as believers are to display the truth daily in our words and actions.

VERSES 26-27

Be angry and do not sin. Don’t let the sun go down on your anger, and don’t give the devil an opportunity.

Second, believers in their new life are empowered by the Spirit to keep their emotions—particularly anger—under control. The words be angry and do not sin appear to be a quotation of Psalm 4:4, a psalm of David that has the earmarks of a good nighttime prayer. That said, we need to carefully examine the way Paul used the quotation in the context of the believer’s new lifestyle in Christ. The apostle was not exhorting believers to get angry. No one has to be commanded to feel anger. Anger is an emotional response to a given situation that can spur us into action. And it is for that reason that anger must be kept under control and properly directed. We as believers must not allow even “righteous” anger to spur us to commit sinful actions.

An explosive, uncontrolled temper wreaks horrible damage in relationships. Thus, Paul taught that believers must not bottle up their anger and allow it to boil beneath the surface without defusing it. He counseled in practical terms that believers must not let the sun go down on their anger. In other words, anger that gets bottled up and secretly held on to soon turns to rage. And like the boiling magma of a volcano, rage can explode into a burning, sinful force that destroys everything in its path.

The principle of Christian holiness undergirding Paul’s teaching about anger is simple: don’t give the devil an opportunity. Since the garden of Eden, Satan has demonstrated that he knows our most temptation-prone areas are our emotions and our God-given desires. Emotions such as fear and anger prove the point time and time again. When we as Christians feel anger welling up within us, we should utter a quick prayer for spiritual protection, because the devil is surely prowling nearby “like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

VERSE 28

Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need.
Third, believers demonstrate new life in Christ by acting with integrity, especially in regard to their daily work. As with truthfulness, the expectation that God’s people will be honest harks back to the Ten Commandments. The eighth commandment forbids stealing (Ex. 20:15). The way that Paul expressed this command, let the thief no longer steal, suggests that some of the Ephesian believers may have been guilty of this sin in the past. Whatever the case, they were believers now. Believers were empowered by the Spirit to follow a different path—the path of doing honest work.

The Greek term rendered work usually referred to manual labor, that is, working with one’s own hands. Manual laborers in Paul’s day often received meager wages for their work. James 5:4-6 levels a devastating warning against wealthy business owners who refused to pay honest wages to their workers. Nevertheless, no believer should fall for the temptation to gain by stealing what he or she has not earned with honest work. Certainly this command applies as well to Christian office workers, professionals, or any other occupation.

Yet, another Christian principle is involved here as well—the principle of being willing (and able) to share with anyone in need. As the body of Christ, Christians are to value and care about all the members of the body. God’s people must remember that when God blesses them with material things, they honor Him by being a channel of His blessings to others.

VERSES 29-30

No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear. And don’t grieve God’s Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption.

Fourth, the new life Christians receive from Christ empowers them to build up others rather than tear them down. In a command that is surely as relevant today as in Paul’s day, the apostle directed that believers should let no foul language escape from their mouths. The Greek term rendered foul can also mean “corrupt,” “unwholesome,” or “rotten.” It was used, for example, to refer to rotten, stinking fruit. Spoiled fruit easily contaminates other fruit that it touches. So it is as well with rotten talk, whether it is vulgarity or swearing or cruelty. It hurts those who are targeted by it.

As believers, we are to use wholesome, uplifting speech—words that are good for building up someone in need. Paul may have had in mind Proverbs 12:18: “There is one who speaks rashly, like a piercing sword; but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” As recipients of God’s grace, Christians have the power to give grace to those who hear by speaking words of encouragement.
The Christian principle underlying the command to speak words that build up others concerns our relationship with the Holy Spirit. When we let foul, hurtful language spew from our mouths about others, we **grieve God’s Holy Spirit.** To be sure, all sins grieve the Spirit within us. However, Paul was emphasizing that hurting others with foul, demeaning words is completely opposed to the new life the Spirit seeks to develop in the believer. Paul reminded believers that they **were sealed by** the Spirit **for the day of redemption.** When we remember that fact, we are motivated to please Him rather than grieve Him in the way that we talk to (and about) others.

**VERSES 31-32**

Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.

Fifth, the new life Christians receive in their salvation equips them to relate to one another with the same grace they received from Christ. This means allowing the Spirit of God to remove negative attitudes and actions such as **bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander,** as well as **all malice.** **Bitterness** is sourness or resentment. **Anger** and **wrath** refer to seething emotions that easily explode into sinful, hurtful actions. **Shouting** and **slander** point to loud quarreling and abusive speech. **Malice** refers to ill will, wishing bad things to happen to another person.

With believers’ willing spiritual cooperation, the Spirit removes those attitudes and empowers them to **be kind and compassionate** and to be **forgiving** of those who offend them in some way. The Greek word rendered **kind** is similar in sound to the word for Christ. Thus, Paul may have been using a play on words to emphasize that believers are to be Christlike. To be **compassionate** literally means “to feel with, to suffer alongside.” The word implies a deep sense of unity with others. Forgiveness is the divine remedy for letting go of the negative attitudes and actions mentioned in 4:31. The motive and model of Christian forgiveness can be no less than the reality that **God forgave us in Christ.**

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Which of the negative behaviors in Ephesians 4:25-32 do you most need to be intentional about removing? Which positive behaviors are the most demanding for you to allow the Spirit to develop more in you? Why?