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THE CHANGED LIFE

Ephesians 4:20-24

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Ephesians Lesson 31

The Changed Life Ephesians 4:20-24

When it comes to the subject of changing our lives, we all feel the same as we feel about going to heaven: We're all for it, but we'd rather not go through what you have to go through to get there! The idea of change sounds good, but when it gets right down to it, we think, "You mean I actually have to *live differently*? No way!"

But the Christian life is fundamentally a changed life. If you claim to believe in Christ, but are living just as you did before you believed in Him, you need to examine whether you *truly* believe in Him. Becoming a Christian requires turning from your sin to God (repentance). But repentance is not a one-time event. It defines the lifestyle of a believer. God changes us radically at the moment of salvation by imparting new life to us, but this is followed by a lifetime of changing into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

In Ephesians 4:17-19, Paul paints a grim portrait of how unbelievers live. While not all unbelievers are as bad as they possibly could be, they all live "in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart" (4:17b-18). That bleak picture describes each of us before we met Jesus Christ.

But now (4:20) Paul draws a sharp contrast: "But you did not learn Christ in this way." He gives us a brief sketch of the changed life that every believer should be experiencing. He's saying:

The changed life stems from the transformation that God works in us through the gospel as we put off the old life, are renewed in our minds, and put on the new life in Christ.

First, Paul shows the changes that God works in us through the gospel (4:20-21) and then he shows us how the process of changes works in our ongoing experience (4:22-24).

1. The changed life begins by coming to know Christ personally (4:20-21).

Paul describes the changed life in four ways:

A. The changed life begins when you learn Christ.

To “learn Christ” is an unusual phrase that occurs nowhere else. Paul does not say, “you did not learn *about* Christ,” but rather, “you did not *learn Christ* in this way.” *This way* refers to the way of unbelievers that he has just described.

What does he mean, to “learn Christ”? He is saying that to become a Christian is a matter of coming to know Christ personally. Yes, you must know something about who He is, as revealed in Scripture. The entire Bible testifies to the truth of who Jesus is, that He is the Christ (Messiah, God’s anointed One), the Son of God. He is the eternal God in human flesh. You must also know something about the significance of what He did when He died on the cross as the substitute for sinners. He satisfied God’s wrath toward our sin, so that we are free from condemnation when we trust in Christ to save us.

But it is possible to know all of these facts and more and yet not to know Jesus Christ personally. In John 17:3, Jesus prayed, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” The Christian life begins when you receive eternal life from God through faith in Jesus Christ. At that moment, you come to know Him personally. Yes, that initial encounter with Christ is only the beginning of an eternal relationship with Him. But, if you have not entered into that personal relationship with Christ, you are not a Christian in the true sense of the word. You may be a theologian or a Bible scholar. But you are only like a historian who knows much about the President, but who has never met him or spent any time with him personally. The changed life begins when you learn Christ.

B. The changed life begins when you hear Christ.

“If indeed” does not express any doubt, but rather affirmation. Paul is saying, “I know that you have heard Him.” Probably none of the Asian believers had heard Jesus in Palestine when He was on earth. None of them had had a personal encounter with the risen Christ, as Paul did on the Damascus Road. Rather, Paul means that when he and others had preached the gospel, these people had heard it as God speaking to them. God opened their

deaf ears so that they didn't just listen to words, but they heard Jesus Christ calling them to Himself. They heard so as to obey His call to faith and repentance.

In John 8:43, Jesus asks the Jews that were challenging Him, "Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word." He goes on to identify the root problem, that they were of their father, the devil. Satan had deafened their ears so that they could not hear Christ's words of eternal life in order to believe and be saved. The changed life begins when God opens your ears to hear Jesus Christ in the gospel and respond with obedient faith.

C. The changed life begins when you are taught in Christ.

The proper translation is not, *taught by Him* (KJV), but rather, *taught in Him*. The phrase "in Christ" sums up Paul's view of what it means to be a Christian. As we saw in chapter 1, the saints are "faithful in Christ Jesus" (1:1). We have received every spiritual blessing "in Christ" (1:3). God chose us "in Him" before the foundation of the world (1:4). "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (1:7). He made known to us the mystery of His will, which He purposed "in Him" (1:9). "In Him" we have obtained an inheritance (1:10-11). "In Him" we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (1:13). God's surpassing power towards us was revealed "in Christ" when He raised Him from the dead (1:20). These are just the references to being "in Christ" in chapter 1! The blessings that are ours because we are "in Christ" keep piling up!

So, to be "taught in Him," means to be taught from the standpoint of this new relationship with Christ that entails this new position in Christ. Before, you stood outside, not understanding the things of God. But now, because of God's mercy and kindness toward you in Christ, you are "in Him" for time and eternity. To be taught in Him is a lifelong process that begins at the moment of salvation, but never ends. Since Christ is the center of all of Scripture, to be taught in Him is to grow to know the glory of Christ in His person, His offices, and His work on our behalf. Someday when we see Him as He is, we will be instantly changed to be like Him (1 John 3:2). Meanwhile, we must engage in the process of being taught in Him.

D. The changed life begins when you know the truth that is in Jesus.

The phrase, “just as truth is in Jesus,” qualifies the preceding comments about learning Christ, hearing Him, and being taught in Him. The reason that Christ is the focus of instruction is that He is the embodiment of truth (John 14:6). The truth of salvation is only in Jesus Christ. In Him, we learn the truth about who we are, the truth about sin and righteousness, and the truth about God’s purpose for why we are on this earth. We learn the truth about how to love God and how to love one another. We learn the truth about the coming judgment, and about heaven and hell. All of the truth that we need for life and godliness centers in the person of Jesus Christ.

Note that Paul here makes a deliberate shift in how he refers to Christ. In verse 20, he talks about learning *Christ*, but here he says that the truth is in *Jesus*. This is the only time in Ephesians that he uses the name Jesus by itself. Why did Paul not say, “just as the truth is in *Christ*”? The change seems to be more than stylistic.

The name “Jesus” focuses on the historical person who was born of the virgin Mary, who worked as a carpenter, and who walked around Israel teaching and healing the sick. He was crucified, raised bodily from the dead, seen by many of His disciples after the resurrection, and ascended bodily into heaven. All of these historic facts lie behind the name, “Jesus.”

But, why does Paul want us to think of the truth that is in *Jesus*? Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Darkness and Light* [Baker], p. 100) explains, “the Christian is not saved by a philosophy of redemption; he is saved by that historic Person, Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God!” Some of the false cults talk about “the cosmic Christ,” or the “Christ principle within us all.” But that is just metaphysical mumbo jumbo!

As Lloyd-Jones points out (*ibid.*), all of the world’s major religions are built around teachings and ideas. But, in sharp contrast, the truth of the gospel is rooted in history. The Christian message is the proclamation of certain facts that happened in history in the person of Jesus. If the gospel accounts are fictional stories, then there is no salvation in Jesus! If the historic person of Jesus did not

die on the cross and rise bodily from the dead, as testified by many reliable eyewitnesses, then you are still in your sins (1 Cor. 15:17). *Everything* in the Christian faith rests on the truth being in the historical person of Jesus, crucified and risen from the dead!

So Paul's point (in 4:20-21) is that the changed life stems from the transformation that God works in us through the gospel. When we meet Jesus Christ personally through faith, we are changed people! But, how does the process continue? Paul goes on (4:22-24) to explain these changes with three infinitives (in Greek): "lay aside"; "be renewed"; and, "put on."

There are different opinions about how these infinitives function. In my opinion, the best view is that the infinitives explain the changes that took place when we trusted in Christ, but they also have the force of ongoing commands. At the moment we trusted Christ, we did in fact lay aside the old life and put on the new life, much as a baptismal candidate took off his old clothes and put on a new, white robe for his baptism. We began the process of inner renewal. But, day by day we must continue to put off the dirty old life and put on the new life in Christ, as we are renewed in the spirit of our mind. In other words, we must live daily in light of the truth of what God says we now are. We are new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Live each day in light of that truth by decisively putting off the old life, being renewed in your mind, and putting on the new life. Let's look at each of these.

2. The changed life requires putting off the old man (4:22).

Paul's phrase is literally, "the old man." He identifies this as being "in reference to your former manner of life." So the old man refers to all that we were before we were saved, when we were ruled by the evil desires and practices (see 4:19; 2:3). Paul uses the same phrase in Romans 6:6, where he says, "our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin." Romans 6 is really a longer exposition of what Paul says more succinctly here.

In Romans 6 (and in Col. 3:9), Paul refers to the putting off of the old man as an accomplished fact. When Christ died on the cross, we died with Him positionally. When He was raised from the dead, we were raised up with Him. We are to reckon these facts to

be true in our daily practice, so that we will not yield to sin (Rom. 6:11). Because in those passages Paul clearly states this putting off of the old life as a done deal, some argue that it is not something that we have to go on doing now. They contend that it was a once and for all matter that happened at the cross.

But, although we died with Christ, in other places Paul commands us to put to death our members that are on the earth (Rom. 8:13; Col. 3:5, literal translation). Why do we need to put to death our members if we already died?

My understanding is that we must daily apply experientially the facts that are true of us positionally. So, yes, at the moment we got saved, we put off the dirty clothes of the old life. But, every day we must reckon that this is so by putting off everything associated with the old life and putting on the new life in Christ.

Lloyd-Jones (*ibid.* p. 123) uses a helpful illustration. When Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves, they were officially free from their many years of servitude, but some of them went on living as if they were still slaves. The President's proclamation gave them legal standing as free citizens. It was a done deal—they were no longer slaves. But, out of habit and way of thinking, many of these poor people still lived like slaves. So, they needed to live in accordance with the new facts. When they were tempted to think like a slave, they needed to say, "No, the truth is I am now a free man!" They needed to appropriate that truth into their daily experience.

Even so, our old life involved a process of being corrupted by the lusts of deceit. Sin deceives us into thinking that it will give us freedom and fulfillment, but it's a lie. Sin only defiles, enslaves, and ultimately destroys the person who is deceived by it. When Christ saved us, He liberated us from bondage to sin. We died to sin by virtue of His death on the cross. We were raised to new life in Him. Now, we must daily put off the dirty clothes of sin and put on the new clothes of righteousness and holiness in Him, because He freed us. There is still in us a strong tug toward the old life, but we do not have to yield to it. The changed life involves putting off the old man.

3. The changed life requires being renewed in the spirit of your mind (4:23).

“Be renewed” is a present passive infinitive, which means that it is an ongoing process that God performs in us as we cooperate with Him (see Phil. 2:12-13). The renewing takes place “in the spirit of your mind.” God does the renewing as we obey Him by saturating our minds with His transforming Word of truth. So God’s Spirit performs the work of renewal in us, but we are responsible to use the means of renewal, namely, His Word, which renews our hearts and thoughts as we submit to it.

Why does Paul here refer to *the spirit of your mind*? Why not just, be renewed *in your mind* (as in Rom. 12:2)? Some interpret “spirit” as the Holy Spirit, but the phrase, “of your mind” doesn’t fit with this. The Spirit isn’t a part of our minds. Others take it as the human spirit, but Paul does not use “spirit” in that way anywhere else in Ephesians. Some think that “spirit” is in apposition to “mind,” so that it means, “the spirit, which is your mind.” But, why would he say it that way? Others take it to mean, “the attitude or disposition of your mind.” Some say that it simply refers to your inner being.

Perhaps the best view is that it refers to the principle that regulates or controls the mind. In this sense, “the spirit of the world” (1 Cor. 2:12) is the principle that controls the world, or makes it what it is (Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans], p. 264). Thus, the spirit of the mind is not just mental ability, “but the power that controls and directs the abilities” (Lloyd-Jones, p. 156). Paul means that our entire way of thinking and what controls our thinking needs renewal. We need to think in line with God’s thoughts, as revealed in His Word.

This means that true biblical change must not bypass the mind. Sometimes, evangelists use emotional stories or music or a dramatic setting and then appeal to people to make a decision for Jesus. But they have bypassed the mind. Such decisions, made on the basis of emotions, will not last. God reasons with us through the truths of His Word. The doctrines of Scripture make sense, because they are God’s truth. When the Spirit of God opens a person’s mind to the truths revealed in the Word, the truth will result in changed emotions and changed wills. Any change that bypasses the spirit of the mind will not last.

So, the changed life begins by coming to know Christ personally. It requires putting off the old life of corruption and deceit, and being renewed in the spirit of our minds. Finally,

4. The changed life requires putting on the new man (4:24).

Again, I believe that the sense is that we did put on this new man once and for all at the point of conversion, but we must continue putting on this new man every day by making true in our experience what is actually true of us positionally. In other words, we must live by applying the truth of the new man in every situation that we face. Paul will make this very specific in 4:25-6:9. When you face the temptation to lie (the old man's way of acting), instead you speak the truth (4:25), because you are a new person in Christ. Instead of stealing, you work and give (4:28). Etc.

Note several things about this new man. *First, while Paul is applying it individually here, it also has a corporate aspect.* He used the phrase, "new man," in 2:15 to describe the church as the new creation of Jew and Gentile in Christ. Whereas the old man lived for self, the new man considers others ahead of self. Whereas the old man was full of racial prejudice and pride, the new man erases those distinctions and views others in the body equally as brothers in Christ. This corporate aspect of the new man implies that if you are not involved with a local church, where you are being built together with other believers, then you do not understand a major part of the new way in which you are supposed to live.

Second, God is the creator of this new man. As we saw in Ephesians 2:10, "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." This shows that the changed life of the believer is not something that we must conjure up by our own will power. God created us anew in Him. But, at the same time, we must walk in the good works that He has prepared for us.

Third, God is the pattern of this new man. It has been created (literally) "according to God," or, as the NASB interprets it (in line with Col. 3:10), "in the likeness of God." Specifically, Paul mentions "*righteousness and holiness of the truth.*" (Righteousness and holiness are aspects of God's character in Psalm 144:17 and Deuteronomy 32:4. See, also, Luke 1:75; 1 Thess. 2:10; Titus 1:8.) These qualities are

essentially synonymous, but righteousness refers to living according to God's standards, whereas holiness has the nuance of essential purity. Both qualities are the result of the truth, namely, the truth as it is in Jesus. In other words, the truth of sound doctrine results in holy living.

Conclusion

We don't all have dramatic conversion, as the apostle Paul did. Many of us that were raised in Christian homes may not know exactly when we came to faith in Christ. But no matter what our experience of conversion, we ought to know that God has changed our hearts. Formerly, we did not know Christ, but now we do, however imperfectly. Formerly, even if we maintained an outward veneer of virtue, we lived for self. Now, we live for Christ, to know Him and serve Him. Formerly, we were being corrupted by the evil desires of sin that deceived us into thinking that they would bring fulfillment. Now, we are new creatures in Christ, living for righteousness and holiness, which come from the truth that is in Jesus.

While it is a lifelong process of renewal, you should be able to see the distinct difference between the old person that you were and the new person that you now are in Christ. You should be able to relate to the old Black preacher who said, "I ain't what I want to be and I ain't what I'm gonna be, but praise God, I ain't what I used to be!"

Application Questions

1. If a person did not have a dramatic conversion, how can he know that he was truly born again? Cite biblical support.
2. If the "old man" is dead and removed at salvation, why do we still have such an intense struggle against sin?
3. What are some practical ways to be renewed in the spirit of your mind? Be specific.
4. How do lusts deceive us? How can we avoid this deception?

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