
The Transforming Power of Living the Truth

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

What is the Christian life? How should Christians live and why? You would think that the answers to that would be fairly easy and have some general agreement. Nothing could be further from the truth. While there is a general agreement about how Christians live, there are vastly different theologies of the Christian life. Many of you who are new to the Chapel are realizing that what we teach about Christian living is very different from what you have learned elsewhere.

Over the next two Sunday mornings, we are going to look at one of the most critical texts for understanding the Christian life. It will help us understand the meaning and the means for Christian living. The principles and precepts are taught here by Paul. They also are applied to relationships. And, they are connected to what he has said before.

God has chosen and saved His people to become holy and to become mature. To that end, He has sent His son to die and to be raised as the means for all that God has purposed for His people. He has then applied the work of Christ to His people through conversion and through transformation. Then, He has given abilities to people, and able people to the gathered church so that they will grow in truth, maturity and ministry.

We have been called together in real spiritual union. So we must also live together in community. Now we who prize so highly our individuality must come to the Bible and learn deeply of these lessons. Our inner real oneness must not be fragmented and fractured by the pressures of sinful anger, sharp words and lies.

To this end Paul writes with strong words to shape our lives differently from the world around us.

***For the sermon:** What I have before me I cannot possibly complete this morning. So, we will stop at an appropriate time and place and pick up next week. The sermon next week will merge the balance of this text with the text for next week. So, I hope you will make an extra effort to be here to hear, "the rest of the story."*

What is to be Rejected

(v.17-19)

It is foundational to our living together as believers that we do not live as the world does in our relationships.

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. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

In its Command

(v.17a)

Paul signals that he is now moving from our character to our conduct. He is highlighting that what he is about to say is important. Furthermore, it is “in the Lord”. In other words, this is binding on all Christians. If you are “in the Lord” then what follows is the Apostolic commands for you.

We are commanded to live differently from the pagans around us. See the “must” there? This is a strong imperative. It is not intended to be heard as a suggestion or even as wise counsel. This is a from-heaven-through-the-Apostle command to us. We must no longer conduct our lives like the unbelieving pagans. I want to clearly affirm that we believe that the New Testament has a way of life that is both commanded and involves obedience to commands. Every time you see a phrase here in Ephesians beginning with “Let us” or “You must” you are hearing an imperative, a command. Now the Bible never separates who we are from what we are to do. But neither does the Bible ever, ever give us who we are without telling us what it means for living. And often what it means comes to us in the form of commands to be obeyed.

One other note, there is no such thing as passive obedience. Obedience does not just pop up in the Christian’s life. Obeying God’s command is an intentional effort on our part that is enabled by grace. No one is teaching, as we have been slandered to believe, that obedience simply happens without our working at it. Truly obeying God flows from our response to God’s enabling grace. We receive the ability to obey the commands of God when we hear the commands of God. (John Owen)

Now it is not a difference from the world just to be different. We are not looking as what the world is doing now do something different just so that we are not like the world. No, it is a difference that is grounded in truth. The way pagans live is both the who they are, the way they think and how they behave. There is a sort of ordinary way that unbelievers live. Over against that is the ordinary way that believers are to live.

In its Cause

(v.17b-18)

The reason we are different in our relations is because of what their lifestyle comes from. There is a deep darkness in their minds because of ignorance and depravity. Their way of processing life (understanding) arises from their being alienated from the life of God and therefore ignorant of the light that comes through the truth. Their thinking is futile, dark, ignorant, stubborn ending in hardness of heart.

So we are not to live like they live because we do not think as they do

In its Course

(v.19)

Here is the deadening, hardening effect of their course of life. Losing their sensitivity (sense of shame) they are given over to sensuality, hungering for more and more impurity. They are never satisfied and seek ever more ways of fulfilling their pleasures. The darkness of evil ways of thinking leads to ever deepening spirals of sensual and carnal conduct.

We must not live like the pagan because our course of life is to be different. Because of who we are as Christians, what God has done in saving us through the cross, we are to be growing in practical righteousness and holiness and wisdom. This is exactly the opposite course as the world.

Where does the pagan thinking and living come from? A hardened heart. What is the result of the unbelieving lifestyle? A hardened conscience.

What we have Learned

(v.20-24)

²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

We have present commands based on past facts. (Stott) We are to obey the commands God has given. But we do it in faith. We are to live differently in our thinking and in our conduct. What is in ignorance in them is to be truth in us.

In its Process

(v. 20-21)

I want to highlight the three verb phrases in these verses and think about them. I am deeply indebted to John Stott for what I have learned from these paragraphs.

You learned Christ	Christ is the substance of our teaching. He is our primary subject. Who He is, what He has done, and how we are related to Him are what we must learn and know.
You heard Him	Notice that I have taken out the word “about”. It is not in the original. In the teaching of the Word you are hearing Christ. He is speaking. The Word of God is living. The Word of God is speaking. Christ is speaking in the Word
You were taught in Jesus	The change here to Jesus indicates that the teaching points to Christ as the embodiment of the thinking and living that is being called for here. This is not merely referring to the gospels, the first 4 books of the Bible. This is referring to the whole Bible in how it explains Jesus as the embodiment of God, the fulfillment of God’s promises and the One who pleased God in all ways at all times.

So Christians must be taught and they must learn some Christ centered truths in order to not live like the pagans in our thinking and in our conduct.

In its Principles

(v. 22-24)

What then is the truth that Paul taught the Ephesian church and expected them to recall and is fundamental to practical Christian living? John Stott puts it this way, "To 'learn Christ' is to grasp the new creation which he has made possible, and the entirely new life which results from it. It is nothing less than putting off our old humanity like a rotten garment and putting on like clean clothing the new humanity recreated in God's image."ⁱ

The truth that is taught in Jesus is what has happened to us. Here, in these verses are not commands: to put off and to put on. This is what happened to us when we were converted. The verbs here are aorist infinitives, not imperatives – something decisive that has happened. Now, he is going to go on to call for the putting on and putting off of sinful attitudes and actions. But here, this is what God did for us at our conversion. The old self, the old person we were which was corrupted (depraved) and belonged to the old realm was put away. The new self, the new person we are was created in God's likeness, in true righteousness and holiness. This is the same teaching of Colossians 3, Romans 6-7 and Galatians 5. At our conversion, God stripped off the old clothes of depravity corrupted by the world. He birthed us again from above through the Spirit so that we are a new person clothed in His own righteousness and holiness. The underlying truth here is the same; the analogy is different. In other texts Paul talks about death and resurrection. In some He talks about a change in location, in realms.

So there is a radical change in who we are that then is sustained by an ongoing renewing of the mind. The new person we are, is growing into maturity as God changes the way we think. Initially, there is radical reorientation of our thinking that is then sustained and applied through the Christian life.

Now, is all this new and foreign to you? If so, then listen and listen and listen. Think, apply, write it down. This is the most fundamental truth you need to know. It is rarely taught in churches today. The result is that Christian living falters and fails because it is being attempted *through the means of flesh, namely law, self-effort, legalism, mysticism*. All of these belong to the old realm. You cannot live the Christian life by the old. You must live the Christian life by the new. Transforming maturity comes through believing and living the truth. *But you cannot believe and live truth you do not know*. This is why we teach this. This is why we spend so much showing you Christ, listening to Him in His Word and insisting that this is the truth as it is in Christ.

So, in an ongoing change of the way we think, we are to grow into the decisive completed actions or truths of the past. The old self has been put off and the new put on and this is fleshed out in a constantly being renewed mind.

How it Works

(v.25-32)

We are given some examples that work these principles out in daily living. Notice that the principles are applied through practical, intentional obedience to commands.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood [the lie, Gr], let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

See the “therefore”? Because of what God has done (put off the old person) and who we have become (the new man in God’s holy image) then, you must intentionally work at putting off unbelieving, old man stuff and putting on holy, new man stuff. Every one of these reflects this Biblical reality and personal responsibility. All of these are connected to relationships. Each one will have something to stop, put off and something to begin, put on. Each one will have a reason; a Biblical truth to be believed from this this obedience rises. I am going to state these as commands for that is how they are given in the text.

Don’t continue lies, instead speak the truth

(v. 25)

This is an interesting sentence with much more here than appears on the surface.

Having put off the old person, we have put off, literally, “the lie”. The ESV calls it “falsehood”. The old person we used to be was in essence, a lie, a myth.

Since the old lie has been put away, we are commanded to speak “the truth”. In other words, Paul does not have in mind lying per se. He is talking about stop continuing to speak or spread the myths, lies, falsehoods that you used to live by. Instead, now speak what is true. Say what is real.

One entailment is that we speak what is true so that we do not lie to one another. We ought to tell each other the truth. We should not deceive one another.

We do so because we are neighbors and members of one body, Christ. We are related to one another. We must love one another enough to stop repeating the world’s lies to each other and start speaking God’s truth. This is how the body builds up itself in love.

My dear friends, Christians have to stop repeating the world’s myths, illusions and lies. We have put them off. Now, speak reality to one another – the truth in every area of life as God knows it and has revealed it to be.

Don’t lose your temper, instead be angry righteously

(v. 26-27)

²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil.

The command is to be angry and not sin. Stop now for a moment and think about that. I have thought a lot about this over this week. It strikes me that we tend, in counseling, to misuse this verse. The point of this sentence is simply that there are times to be angry. But in those times, you must not sin. How do you know you are not sinning? You can turn it

off. The sun is going downⁱⁱ; time to stop being angry. In other words, you stop experiencing the emotion because you stop thinking the thoughts the emotion comes from. You stop thinking about what your wife, your children, your friend did that you were angry about. Otherwise you will become an angry, bitter person.

Why must our anger be righteous? Because, if it is sinful, it will give Satan a foothold in the church. It allows him a place to start tearing down relationships. This is corporate. Your sinful anger is a trapdoor for you and it is a gateway for the devil. But it is the church, the people of God, who are in danger. Satan “loves to lurk round angry people, hoping to be able to exploit the situation to his own advantage by provoking them into hatred or violence or a breach of fellowship.” (Stott, p. 187).

Don't steal, instead work in order to give (v. 28)

²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

There are all kinds of ways to steal: from each other, from employer, from government, from God. What is commanded is to replace stealing with hard, honest labor. Go to work honestly. Rather than living off the labor of others, live off the labor of your own handsⁱⁱⁱ.

But notice that the heart is addressed. The reason to go to work is changed. People usually steal to fulfill their own covetousness. Robin Hood's are myths and rare. To go to work just to satisfy our coveting may not be as evil as stealing, but the heart is still coveting. Having put off the old man who covets, we now express the new man who loves to give and share. As one commentator said, “None but Christ can transform a burglar into a benefactor!” (Stott, p.188)

Reflect and Respond

It is noteworthy how God-centered Paul's ethic is. It is natural for him, in issuing his moral instructions, to mention the three Persons of the Trinity. He tells us to 'copy God', to 'learn Christ' and not to 'grieve the Holy Spirit'. (Stott, p. 191)

We will continue to teach you the truth so that you hear Christ and learn of Christ and walk in those truths. This will look like loving relationships with each other and faithful obedience to God.

Let's not lose the second focus of this text. This is how Christians walk in love and live the truth. It is not abstract theology or Christian theory. It is hard, grinding, tough, loving obedience to God in the midst of a pagan world (and sometimes pagan church) that laughs, mocks, slanders and hates it.

May God grant us grace:

To hear what we are being taught;

To live what we are being taught;

To understand who we are as God's people;

To understand how the death and resurrection of Jesus apply to us;

To love one another sacrificially;

To think, speak and behave in obedience to God;

May the love and kindness of Jesus so fill our hearts that we will be a kind, loving and forgiving people even when others sin against us.

May we grow up in Christ to the maturity He desires and calls us to. May we live the truth.

Notes

- ⁱ Stott, John R. W. *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979. p. 180.
- ⁱⁱ "the apostle's intention is to warn us against nursing anger. It is seldom safe to allow the embers to smoulder. Certainly if we become aware of some sinful or selfish element in it (and if our *orgē*, anger, degenerates into *parorgismos*, resentment, the word used at the end of verse 26), then it is time for us to cease from it, and either apologize or be reconciled to the person concerned. In the Old Testament a moneylender who took a poor person's cloak as a pledge was required to restore it 'when the sun goes down', so that he might sleep in it, and an employer who had any servants who were poor and needy was required to pay them their wages daily 'before the sun goes down'. There are many similar situations in which it is wise to live a day at a time." Stott, p.186-187
- ⁱⁱⁱ Christians really need to think through this in an age when 1 of 7 people in the United States are on food stamps. At what point is living on the dole sin? When is it simply taking the honest labor of others by the force of government? The liberal/progressive view on these things is usually criticized because of its outcomes - a pragmatic argument. What if the whole thing is simply immoral and sinful? Yes, people ought to care for and take care of the poor as they can. But it is never the government who is paying for it. The government is using its power of force, law and police, to force those who labor to support those who do not. The sword of justice the government has been given by God should not be used to rob from honest, hard working people.