

Prayer

Call us, O Lord, from Your glorious throne on high;
Speak to us, O Lord, through the world of natural beauty;
Address us, O Lord, in the joys and hardships of our earthly lives;
Talk with us, O Lord, in the midst of our deepest, heartfelt feelings;
Tell us, O Lord, how to understand the many things we hear.
Your voice, O Lord, is always true: Praise You!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Pray for all your current friends and neighbours, name them before the Lord, one by one

On-going prayers

- ***This week, pray for prisons.*** *Pray for prisoners who are repeat offenders and keep returning. Pray that they will be wisely counselled*
- *Thank God for peace, where it exist in the world*
- *Pray for scientists and the pioneering work they do*

Meditation

Be comforted, you who have felt the power of sin,
There is One who has the victory over Satan's evil sway.

Be strengthened, you who know cruel oppression,
There is One who has the courage to bring you freedom.

Be heartened, you who struggle with your burdens,
There is One who takes the weight you suffer on Himself.

Be encouraged, you who need to hear good news,
There is One who broke through death to bring you love.

Be enlightened, you who have the heart to understand,
There is One who taught the way of life, and lived it perfectly.

Be enthused, you who are willing to speak your faith,
There is One who works through you in authority and power!

Be blessed, you who have walked in hope and joy,
There is One you know who has a place for you in heaven!

Bible Study - Ephesians 4:17-24

¹⁷ So I declare this and testify in the Lord; you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, and strangers to the existence of God because of the ignorance within them and their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ Having become insensitive, they have given themselves over to sexual immorality and are greedy for every kind of impurity.

²⁰ However, this is not the way you learned Christ! ²¹ You have surely heard about Him, and you were taught in Him, since the truth is in Jesus, ²² to discard your former way of life, the old self that is seduced by deceitful desires. ²³ Be renewed in the spiritual disposition of your minds, ²⁴ and be clothed with the new self, as made by God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Thought for the day

Text

Ephesians 4:22,23

'discard your former way of life, the old self that is seduced by deceitful desires ... be renewed in the spiritual disposition of your minds'

Thought

Here, Paul's letter to the Ephesians sounds a typically forthright call to God's people to remember the truth of their salvation. As time goes by it is easy to forget that our baptism represents what God has done for us, and as a result our lives have changed forever.

It is worth reminding ourselves each day of the truth of our salvation. Some suggest saying a prayer like this when getting dressed each morning; 'today I put on Christ; I am a new person in Him', for example. There is no need to make a binding ritual of it, but a simple prayer like this can help us live according to the truth of our faith.

Review

In today's passage, Ephesians moves on from the subject of Christian unity to an appeal to God's people to live according to the new life they have received in Christ. The life of a Christian is always radically different from those who have rejected Christ and do not know God, and our text explains why this is so. We are told about the true nature of the world without Christ, and we are also told about the true nature of the life we find in Christ (4:20f.). Paul urges each Christian to 'discard' the life of worldly impurity and immorality (4:22) and 'be clothed' with a new life made by God (4:24). There are many well known texts within this passage, and they are all to be treasured by people of faith.

It is not surprising that each section of this passage is similar to other famous Biblical texts. The verses about the nature of Gentile disbelief (4:17-19) are similar to Romans 1:21-24, the discussion about learning Christ and the renewal of the mind (4:20-23) has similarities with Romans 12:1,2. The language of discarding the old and being clothed with the new (4:22-24) is found in Colossians 3:8-10, and the language of being made anew by God (4:24) reminds us of Jesus' famous words to Nicodemus about being 'born again' (John 3:7f.). Those who believe that Ephesians was not written by Paul suggest that the author used these themes to verify his own message. However, it seems to me that these words are themselves the message of Ephesians, for Paul did not preach a different Gospel to different people. In each of his letters, he rooted what he had to say in the Gospel of Christ, and he was always at pains to explain it.

Paul paints a stark contrast between Christians and Gentiles; though by saying 'Gentiles', he meant those outside the Kingdom of God, that is, pagans. The picture is bleak. Without a knowledge of God, the human spirit searches aimlessly and in futility (4:17f.), and with no defined moral compass, it finds solace in gratifying its own desires, the foremost of which being sex (4:19). Some people find this analysis of the world depressing and lacking in reality. Surely, they say, life is good for most people who live without God. We must remember, though, that this passage does not describe whether people are happy in their godlessness, it merely points to the eternal truth of their condition; and this can only be known by those who have accepted the truth about God, the Maker of the world, and about Jesus Christ its redeemer.

The purpose of this text, however, is to appeal to the Ephesian Christians to make sure that they know the difference between the godlessness of their former state and the new life they have in Christ. Paul was clearly worried that even then, some found it hard to separate themselves from the immoral temptations of the world. He says boldly; *'this is not the way you learned Christ!'* (4:20), and with this arresting call reveals the truth that people will easily slip away from the life of Christ if they have not been taught the truth about God. Evidently, he does not just mean the truth about salvation, but the truth about the moral world God has made. The new life is different from the old because immorality must be rejected, and this is hard if you do not know what this is! So Paul says with clarity, *'you are to be renewed in the spiritual disposition of your minds'* (4:23).

I have heard many sermons based upon the importance of discarding the old life and being clothed with the new, but I have not heard a sermon yet that tells people about the difference between a casual acceptance of the new life and an enduring life of faith. This is what Paul is concerned to reveal in this text, and he says plainly that the difference is found in the teaching given about God and Christ and whether it has been learned.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Why does Paul need to make this appeal to the Ephesians?
- How is Paul's picture of the Gentile world relevant to us today?
- What does this passage tell us about teaching and learning about Christ?

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V14 'sexual immorality'

Greek 'aselgeia'. This word means 'sensuality, indecency, or vice', with strong sexual overtones. It also implies the abandonment of restraint.

V18 'the existence of God'

Greek 'zoes ten theos'. Most Bible versions have 'the life of God', but the Greek word 'zoe' means the life-force of an object, so it seems right to speak here of the existence of God, which makes much more sense in this sentence.

Significant phrases

V23 'and be renewed in the spiritual disposition of your minds'

Other translations:

'to be made new in the attitude of your minds' (NIV)

'and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds' (NRSV)

The difference between the translations occurs because of the strange use of the word 'spirit' in this verse. The Greek says 'renewed in the spirit of your minds'. However, it cannot possibly be said that our minds have a 'spirit' that must be renewed, separate from the spirit, for example, of our emotions! The Greek word 'pneuma' meaning 'spirit' was commonly used in ancient times to refer to a person's inner disposition, so it seems best to translate the passage with this in mind, as I have done.

V24 'and be clothed with the new self, as made by God, in true righteousness and holiness.'

Other translations

'and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.' (NIV)

'and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.' (NRSV)

The beginning and the end of the sentence is clear, but it is not clear what Paul means in the middle by his reference to God. The Greek phrase says literally 'made according to God', but this implies that someone else does the making, and this can hardly be what Paul means. Paul believed God to be the source and Maker of all things, and this is the testimony of all Scripture. So for this reason, I have translated the phrase 'made by God', and rejected the more elaborate style of translation used by the NRSV, which tries to explain the phrase with yet more words.

Problems with the ancient Greek/Hebrew text

V17 'you must no longer live as the Gentiles do'

Other translations:

'that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do' (NIV)

'that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk' (New King James)

The New King James version follows a tradition found in the Latin text of the Bible, which includes the phrase 'the rest of the Gentiles'. In nearly all the more ancient Greek texts, the words 'the rest of' are absent. Most modern translations follow the more ancient Greek texts.

Going Deeper

I strongly suggest that if you have not read the translation notes, then you do so before you read 'going deeper'. Some of the well known phrases within this passage have nuances that are not well understood unless you read about the meaning of the words used by Paul, for example.

Why does Paul need to make this appeal to the Ephesians?

Paul taught these things in order to warn the Ephesians not to return to their pagan state, but grow in Christ to the perfection of unity in Christ. Earlier in Ephesians, we read these words:

'we should no longer be infants, all at sea and tossed about by every wind of teaching, by the trickery of people and their cunning and deceitful schemes' (Eph 4:14)

In this way, Paul expressed his concern about the influence of various teachings upon the life of the church. We know from other letters and document fragments from the first century that the early church first began to split because of various Greek teachings that were brought from society into the life of the church, and Paul warned against this trend, and he saw this happening before the problem took root. In the same way, he perceived that the second problem for the church was the tendency of Christians to 'backslide' into former beliefs and former lifestyles after they had become Christians.

This passage describes the comparative moral darkness of being without God, a state that tends to harden people against God because people become self sufficient, simply in order to survive. They seek happiness and fulfilment and have no other means to explain it except the success of their own efforts, and this is just what the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, means when it speaks of 'hardness of heart' (4:18).

Paul warns the Ephesians against these things as signs of ungodliness. Having read this passage, the right response of a Christian would not be to condemn the world, for that would mitigate against a proper attitude of love and service towards those Christ came to save. The right attitude would be to watch out for the signs of backsliding in the church; mental confusion, ignorance of God, hardness of heart, insensitivity, and sexual misdemeanour. Such advice is as valuable now as it was then.

How is Paul's picture of the Gentile world relevant to us today?

Paul was not ignorant of the fact that people lived quite happily as pagans, and he would have seen people around him who were content in life, just as we do today. The reason why he painted a black picture of life without Christ was not to damn such people, his success as an evangelist proves to us that he must have been able to empathise with non-Christians and speak to them with understanding (as he does in his defence before Felix in Acts 24, for example). His words in this text are spoken to Christians, to help them understand the difference between living in Christ and returning to former ways. Once the light of Christ has shone within the human heart, the moral darkness of the rest of the world is exposed.

Paul illustrates the darkness of moral sin by speaking of sexual sin, just as he does in Romans 1:21-24, and some think that Paul has a fixation on sex because he always mentions this in his lists of sins, as here. Yet he is probably right to mention it, because as most newspapers today are well aware, sex and its misuse lie just beneath the surface of a vast range of social ills, from political intrigue to horrendous crimes. Paul was not the first or last author to spot the basic connection between the misuse of sex and the evil perpetrated in the world by men and women.

From a Biblical viewpoint, the union of a man and a woman expresses the very 'image of God' (Gen 1:27 and 2:24), and the loving activity of sex is beautifully designed by God for the greatest pleasure of both man and woman and also the procreation of children. It is hard to think of a more important aspect of human society, nor one that so begs for the guidance of God rather than the misuse of humanity. We have no space to discuss this further, but there is good reason why the church has consistently taught that God has given us some basic guidelines for sex, for marriage, for the procreation of children and happiness in married life. These may be found in His Law, and they protect us from the dire consequences of the misuse of sex.

What does this passage tell us about teaching and learning Christ?

The most memorable part of this text is the second half, and the first thing that catches our eyes is the contrast drawn by Paul between the 'old life' and the 'new' (4:22-24). In order to understand this it is helpful to compare what Paul says here with Colossians 3:8f.:

But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. (Colossians 3:8-11)

Just as in our passage, Paul begins with a description of the 'old life', and then exhorts his readers to demonstrate that they have rid themselves of the evils of the old life and taken on the new, characterised by '*being renewed in knowledge, in the image of the Creator*' (Col 3:10). I emphasise this, because the subject of knowledge and learning crops up here in Colossians, but it plays an even bigger part in our text.

Paul's exclamation '*this is not the way you learned Christ!*' (4:20) is pointed, and confirms that when writing verse 17 to 19 he was concerned not so much to analyse pagans but to warn Christians. We must remember that when Gentiles became Christians, they did not have the background of a Jew, someone who would have known the laws of God, even with a wrongful religious attachment to them. Gentile Christians were taught the great themes of the Old Testament; Law of God, the stories of the forefathers, God's work through the centuries and the importance of the prophets. Early Christians had no difficulty (as Christians do today) in connecting all this with the work of Jesus, the Messiah, and one of the benefits of such education was that Gentile Christians came to know the Ten Commandments, as well as the instructions for moral

living found in Leviticus (e.g. Leviticus 19) and the promises of God in the prophets. All the evidence we have from the life of the early church tells us this was done carefully, so if Christians began to backslide, Paul was entitled to believe that they had forgotten or abandoned what they had been taught.

All this lies behind Paul's words from verse 21 onwards. Surely, he says, a Christian has '*learned Christ*' (4:21), and was '*taught in Him*' (4:22), and in order to live the new life of Christ, one thing is therefore essential; '*be renewed in the spiritual disposition of your minds.*' (4:23). People have attempted various ways to interpret the traditional translation of this '*be renewed in the spirit of your minds*', but lack of clarity about whether this refers to the Holy Spirit or the human spirit has dogged all who preach on this without consulting a commentary. My interpretation (justified in the notes above) concludes firmly that Paul urged God's people to have a change of heart, and take learning about God seriously. Those who failed to learn needed a change in the spiritual inclination of their hearts, and the same is true today.

It is not often said by a preacher today that to be '*clothed with the new self ... in true righteousness and holiness*' (4:24) means having a change of heart and being willing to learn more about God! Of course, the Biblical picture of the 'new self' is used widely in Scripture to describe the life of faith in general, but here, Paul uses it to call for attention to this specific need within the church. Souls are lost if they are not taught the things of God.

Application

The study has ended upon an important theme that affects us directly today. It is patently true that many Christians today dismiss learning and do not read the Bible very often; their lack of spiritual depth is obvious and the consequent loss in 'church membership' is predictable. I have heard many people attempt to explain the decline of the Western churches over the last two centuries, but whatever other factors are doubtless involved, I would suggest that the general lack of interest amongst many in the Bible and their dismissive attitudes towards learning are a major contributory factor. Neither is it the fault merely of congregations. Some of the so-called 'Christian teaching' I have heard and read today is nothing of the sort. It is well meaning personal and anecdotal entertainment about faith, but it does not teach people the truths of God's Word.

If you have read this far in the study, you may be interested to know that this is the reason why I mostly refrain from making personal comment when writing about Scripture. To do so would divert the attention of the reader to being entertained by how I understand the text, when my intent is to focus exclusively on the text of Scripture itself. I run the risk of this work being described as boring, but I would rather this than have people diverted from learning from the Word of God alone and reaching their own conclusions.

This passage also reminds us today that the life of faith is indeed radically different from the 'life of the world'. In many western countries, the difference may not appear to be very great, but if we think it does not exist, then at the very least, we demonstrate our lack of faith and lack of knowledge about God. Christianity has fed into the world order today an abundance of moral values that are partially accepted in some countries, but there is no country that is exclusively 'Christian'. To make such a claim would be to deny the true identity of the Kingdom of God. The only true examples of the 'new life in Christ' are God's people who know they are saved; they have clothed themselves with the guidance and strength of the Spirit and live by demonstrating the love of God in Christ. The call of faith is no less, and never has been.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. To what extent does this Scripture describe our society today, and what must the Christian do to live in it and witness to it?
2. Discuss what this Scripture says to you about the 'new life' you have in Jesus Christ your Saviour.
3. How can God's people learn more about the things of God today, and what will motivate them to read their Bibles more?

Discipleship

Discipleship issue found in this text

- *The moral state of the world*
- *The consequences of backsliding*
- *The importance of teaching and learning in the church*
- *The true nature of the new life in Christ*

Personal comments from the author:

Before I read this passage and began to study it for today, I was not aware of the importance of the subject of education and learning to the new life in Christ. I kept trying to write about this passage as if this was a secondary issue within the text, but I failed to complete what I was writing. It only came together when I gave full weight to the subject! The Bible can surprise us all when we read it carefully!

Ideas for exploring discipleship issues

- *How long ago is it since you embarked on any systematic learning about the things of God; by reading the Bible, or by attending a course at church or at a local Christian centre? Pray about your obligation to learn about God, and do not assume that it can be satisfied by sermons!*
- *Pray about the life of God's church today, and ask the Lord to give His people a desire to learn.*

Final Prayer

Your love, O Lord, draws me onwards, through all the fears and doubts, the trials and temptations I experience. Your love has drawn me to the Cross where, inexplicably, all the things of this world fall away and I am empty before You! Fill me up O Lord, and make me worthy of my call! AMEN
