

Ephesians 4:17-32: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 00] Ephesians chapter 4 verses 17 to 32 And to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.
- Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.
- Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. 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.
- And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.
- Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Having spoken of the oneness of the people of God in the body of Christ, in the second half of Ephesians chapter 4, Paul turns to address the change in life and behaviour that should occur in Christians.
- [1 : 51] Like several other parts of Ephesians, we should notice the parallels between this section and corresponding sections in the book of Colossians, such as in chapter 3, verse 8 to 13.
- But now you must put them all away, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.
- Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all. Put on, then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another, and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.
- Being in Christ should entail a radical and far-reaching transformation of life. Paul's teaching concerning the unity and character of the body of Christ, in which we are growing to maturity as we are formed by the triune God, will lead to a radically different form of life from that characteristic of the Gentiles.
- The Gentiles have a form of life that is shaped by the futility of their minds. Their minds are vain and lacking in substance. They are not acting in terms of the truth of reality in God's world.
- [3 : 13] They are out of touch with the weighty and substantial things of life. Having rejected God, no matter how smart they are, they are unable to gain mental purchase upon the things that really matter. Their understanding is shrouded in darkness.

They may be living in the real world, but they are living in it as if under the cover of thick blackness, clumsily bumping into things, stumbling over unseen obstacles, and wandering about they know not where.

They are alienated from God due to the ignorance and stubbornness of their hearts. Their ignorance arises from a fundamental aversion and resistance to God. This resistance has led them to become callous and to surrender themselves to growing forms of wickedness as they willingly enslaved themselves to their own desires.

This couldn't contrast more with that which should characterize the Christian. Paul describes the source of our new way of life as having learned Christ. This is a very strange way of speaking.

In what other case would you speak of having learned a person? You might well talk about having learned about a person perhaps, but that is not what Paul says here. Paul gives us a sense of what he means by this in the clause that follows.

[4 : 21] We learn Christ by hearing about him, but more particularly by being taught in him. As Marcus Barth powerfully expresses it, Jesus Christ is the headmaster, the teaching matter, the method, the curriculum, and the academy.

Learning Christ is unlike learning anything else, which is why Paul speaks in such an unusual manner here. The conclusion of verse 21 expresses something of this, as the truth is in Jesus, or since truth is in Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. If we are looking for truth, a proper way of behavior, and a new source of life, then we will find all of this in Jesus.

In him are truthful ways of life. From our knowledge of Christ as the truth, we learn to divest ourselves of the old ways of life that are contrary to him, ways of life that are no longer appropriate to us.

They belong to our old selves and are ill-fitting upon us now. They are corrupt and decaying on account of deceitful desires. The desires of this old self are themselves mired in lies and falsehood.

[5 : 24] They tangle us up in them in ways that we cannot easily understand or are not. They catch us up in the snares of death. The first step is to put off the old self. Then we must be renewed in the spirit of our minds and clothe ourselves with a new and very different self, a new self that bears the likeness of God in righteousness and true holiness.

Paul is intentionally alluding back to Genesis chapter 1 here. God is restoring and perfecting us in his image. In Christ, humanity attains to its divinely intended form and destiny.

Christ is the truth and the model of this humanity, and we must inhabit his life as the place where we learn how to live. One of the most immediate results of this necessary putting off and putting on will be our abandonment of the falsehood fundamentally characteristic of our old lives.

Such falsehood is not just an occasional feature. It's something that lies at the very heart of the character of the old way of life. In its place, we must have a commitment to the truth. Paul makes a very similar point in Colossians chapter 3 verses 9 to 10.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. This practice and speaking of truth is informed and inspired by a new recognition of others in Christ.

[6 : 43] We are not detached individuals, but we are people who belong to each other, members of each other. The golden rule has a deeper logic to it in the body of Christ. If we are members of each other, what we do to each other in the body of Christ is in some sense indirectly being done to ourselves.

Paul is likely quoting from Zechariah chapter 8 verses 16 to 17 here, which speaks of the appropriate behaviour for the restored people of God. These are the things that you shall do.

Speak the truth to one another. Render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace. Do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. And love no false oath. For all these things I hate, declares the Lord.

This of course is to be seen in the church, where God is restoring humanity after exile and renewing us in his image. Quoting Psalm 4 verse 4, Paul recognises the appropriateness and perhaps even unavoidability of some forms of anger.

However, we must carefully hold our anger within bounds, lest it get out of control. One of the ways to do this is to settle matters before we go to sleep. Unaddressed anger can fester.

[7 : 51] It can cause breaches that cannot easily be healed. Keeping short accounts with God and our neighbours is a way to lessen the dangers in this area. It also has the effect of closing off opportunities of which the devil will take advantage.

He loves to use such openings to destroy relationships and render people bitter. We must accordingly deal with anger swiftly and without delay. Paul's teaching concerning sin is not just basic instruction.

It contains a lot of wisdom. Not letting the sun go down on your anger is a very practical way to deal with our tendencies to anger. His teaching is designed to limit Satan's opportunities.

With people tempted to steal, he encourages them to commit themselves to honest labour instead and to learn what it means to give as an alternative. As in the wisdom literature, Paul is especially attentive to speech.

Speech can corrupt. It can serve as a channel of death and the tearing down of others. In its place, Paul wants Christians to learn to speak in ways that build people up, in ways that are suitable to the season, and in ways that function as a gift that lifts up and strengthens those who hear us so that they might be blessed by our words.

[9 : 02] Christ has given us his Holy Spirit, marking us out for final resurrection and giving us a reality-filled promise of what we are to expect. However, it is possible to live in a way that grieves the Spirit.

In Isaiah chapter 63 verses 9-10, to which Paul is likely alluding here, Isaiah speaks of the Holy Spirit being grieved and God turning to oppose his people as an enemy.

There are several occasions in the New Testament where the genuine possibility of the most devastating loss is hinted at or stated. We must not be presumptuous in our reception of God's grace.

Paul concludes the chapter by listing things to be put away and contrasting attitudes and behaviours to adopt. The old divisive patterns of life of the flesh must be abandoned. These are forms of behaviour that led us to bite and devour each other.

In their place, we must adopt new ways of life that we have learned in Christ, patterns of life that he himself has modelled for us. These divine traits, kindness, tender-heartedness and forgiveness, would not be the most prominent virtues for many of Paul's Greco-Roman contemporaries if they would have been considered virtues at all.

[10 : 09] However, in the Gospel they are seen in Christ and they are virtues that should be characteristic of those who have learned Christ. A question to consider.

The themes of truth and falsehood are prominent in this section. How does Paul's account of these things challenge typical ways of thinking about them?