

BEING DIFFERENT

Ephesians 4:17-32

There is a dynamic tension at work within each one of us. On one side we would like to have the best, we would like to be the smartest, the richest, the wisest, and whatever else we can think of. On the other side, we want to fit in and be part of the group so that we will be accepted. If we are not able to achieve a good balance in this struggle, then we will find ourselves being envied and disliked and having no true friends or we will settle for mediocrity in order to fit in with the peer group. This ambition-peer pressure struggle is not limited to teenagers who are trying balance achievement with acceptance. We see more evidence of it among this group since they have not learned to conceal their inner struggles. Adults also have to deal with these issues and we find ways to compensate in an effort to have it both ways.

How can you be different and still “fit in” with the group? One way this is done is by forming smaller groups of people who are different in the same way we are different. We see this in our culture with the “jet set” at one end of the spectrum and the “gangs in the hood” at the end. Within each group we still have the micro-level struggle for dominance versus acceptance going on. On top of this, we have interposed a macro-level struggle among the groups for dominance versus acceptance with acceptance being on a much lower priority. The small group identity becomes more important than any consideration of having an identity with the overall or global group. We see this going on in what is commonly referred to as “class warfare” and the ultimate refinement of this societal dynamic is found in the Caste system in India.

What does all this have to do with the church? The Greek word that is most translated as “church” is *ekklesia* which literally means a group that has been called out of one situation and into another situation. We typically “group” things or people together because of certain things or characteristics that would distinguish them from the general population. In the latter part of the fourth chapter of Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus, he instructed them with regard to the distinguishing characteristic they should have as a result of their calling.

The Walk to Avoid - 4:17-19

¹⁷ So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, ¹⁸ 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; ¹⁹ and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. Ephesians 4:17-19 (NASB95)

A collection of sermons by Watchman Nee on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is titled “Sit, Walk, Stand.” Nee had noted that these were the major themes Paul addressed. “Sit” is a reference to our position as Christians. “Walk” refers to how we conduct our lives. “Stand” relates to what we represent and advocate in our lives. Since we are “in Christ” as a result of being born again, then we have been called out from the world and called into a new realm. Because of this, we are different and the old ways of living are not appropriate and really do not fit the new person we have become in Christ.

The admonition (advice) Paul sent to the church was not just something he came up with, but was given to him by the Lord. Before a person is saved, he has certain behaviors that result from what he has learned and his understanding of what life is about. Most people see little or no purpose in life other than survival and creation of the next generation. For those who have risen above the survival existence, life’s purpose is to avoid pain and maximize pleasure. Such thinking is described as vanity or futile. To the Jewish mind such a condition was associated

with idolatry and the philosophies of pagan religious thought that was devoid of truth.

The root of the problem is the condition of the heart which is described as being like stone or hardened. This condition is not related to emotional response but rather to moral response. It is not so much rooted in the soul but in the spirit. This is not surprising since the spirit of fallen man is dead in trespasses and sin and needs new life. Since the revelation of the truth could not happen because of the deadness, hardness, or blindness, then people were in the dark as to truth. As a result, people made up their own version of what life was about and its purpose. This usually leads to pursuit of sensual experiences that became more and more perverse. In other cases, the result is accumulation of things and the attempt to have control over others since these actions produce the “feel good” experience that drives their behavior.

Such behavior is a result of ignorance of what is acceptable to God. This whole situation changes when a person comes to know Christ and is born again of the Spirit of God. The hardened, dead or blind condition has been replaced with new life that is capable of responding to God through the leading of the Holy Spirit. Now that we are no longer ignorant, then we are to have behavior (walk) that is different from those who are still in their ignorance.

The Walk Adopted - 4:20-24

²⁰ But you did not learn Christ in this way, ²¹ if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, ²² that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, ²³ and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, ²⁴ and put on the new self, which in *the likeness of God* has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. Ephesians 4:20-24 (NASB95)

An alternate translation of verse 20 would read: “But this does not apply to you, you have learned Christ.” What did they learn when they were taught about what would happen to them when they believed and trusted in Christ for their salvation? The most significant thing was that the old self was put away and they were given a new self. This is the work of the cross. In his book *The Naked Gospel*, Andrew Farley noted the following:

People who place their faith in Christ undergo a miraculous exchange at the center of their being. Who they were in Adam is no longer there. They become a new person, a child of God who is *in* Christ. The key event causing this exchange is a death, burial, and resurrection with Christ. This miraculous exchange is not figurative or symbolic but *literal* and *actual*. The spiritual part of every Christian has *literally* and *actually* been crucified, buried, and raised with Christ. The fact that this occurs spiritually (and not physically) doesn't make it any less real.

Since it is real, we should not be reading verses 22 through 24 as an admonition of something we are to do but need to see this as something that has already been done because we are in Christ. The manifestation or the outcome of what has been done is a work in progress. The transformation that Paul wrote about in Romans 12 (be transformed by the renewing of your minds) is in reference to our way of thinking and our actions that are able to happen because we have a new spirit which was created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

This is the same message that Paul had communicated in many of his other letters to the churches. We see it in Philippians 2:12-13

¹² So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.

If we will read the word “work” as “walk” (as in walk out your salvation) which means to “do something,” then we see agreement with the caution in verse 4:17 of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. A different Greek word is used for “work” in verse 13. The usage here means to energize. The bottom line is that our behavior should always be in agreement with who we are in Christ. We do not need to behave as the world behaves. They can’t help it. They are acting

out of who they are in their lost condition and we need to have behavior that is consistent with who we are.

Walk with Proper Actions - 4:25-29

²⁵ Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE *of you* WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ BE ANGRY, AND *yet* DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not give the devil an opportunity. ²⁸ He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have *something* to share with one who has need. ²⁹ Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear. Ephesians 4:25-29 (NASB95)

Do we need examples of behaviors that are appropriate with who we are in Christ? If you are brand new in your Christian walk and had lived in a different culture for most of your life, then you would need some reminders and examples. Paul used some quotations from the Old Testament that would have been familiar to the Jewish Christian but were likely not known by the Gentile who lived in Ephesus.

The first example Paul cited was a quote from Zechariah 8:16 regarding telling the truth to your neighbor. I'm not sure that Paul meant "fellow Christians" when he told them this since he made the argument that we are members of one another or if he was thinking that we are all members of the human race. Telling the truth is also in perfect agreement with the Ten Commandments. Why would someone tell a lie? To gain an advantage over someone else or to help his image. If a Christian lies, then it shows evidence of a lack of trust in God.

The next example Paul used was also a quote from the Old Testament. In Psalms 4:4 we see "*In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.*" The literal translation of the first part of verse four is "tremble and sin not." The Psalmist is not referring to trembling in **awe** but to trembling in **anger** or rage. How do we avoid sinning when we are so angry that we are having real difficulty in controlling ourselves? The first step is to seek some solitude - go to some place where you can be alone. Then whatever you need to say, say it first to yourself. Think about the situation and what is causing such a response in you. Meditate on it. Is the cause something that is related to you or is it related to the cause of righteousness? Is it righteous indignation or is it that your pride has been injured or you are going to experience a personal loss? The most important step in avoiding sin when we are really angry is to "be silent." It is much better to not speak in anger but to be in control and to give consideration to what we say.

When we (who have been set apart by God and for God) consider the awesomeness of God and His total power, then we should be diligent to spend quiet time in meditation to ensure that our thought processes, actions and attitudes are in alignment with what pleases God.

Not letting the sun go down on your anger simply means that we need to deal with such issues in a timely manner. If we let things simmer and seethe, then we give good evidence that we are trying to deal with the problem ourselves instead of turning the matter over to God and trusting Him for a solution. Failure to do this will give the devil an opportunity to gain a foothold in your life and you will be convinced that you should take the matter into your own hands which is a bad idea in most cases.

There are parts of our present day culture where people literally make a living by stealing from others. In some cases there is outright thievery and in many other cases people are just "working the system" by lying to get government benefits, by faking injury and suing people, by running up debt and filing for bankruptcy, insurance fraud, and a host of other schemes. Identity theft and credit card scams are in the news. This is a way of life in most of the non-Christian

world. This is what results from trying to “live by your wits” and making up your own rules for the way you live your life. The people in Asia Minor lived in a culture that had little moral restraint against such practices and Christianity and the expectation of what is expected of a child of God stood in stark contrast to such practices.

Not only are we to not steal, we are to work. Not only are we to work, we are work on “what is good.” This admonition would limit a Christian from working in businesses that produce harmful products or provide services that have the potential to harm people. For example, should a Christian own a liquor store or should a Christian work for a gambling casino?

A reasonable expectation for a person who works is that he or she be compensated. While that is not explicitly stated, Paul takes us a step further in the expectation of what a Christian should do with the compensation that is earned; namely, that we are share with those who have needs.

The final example that Paul used was with regard to our conversation. There are things to avoid such as “unwholesome words.” Vulgarity seems to be the norm in the conversation of a lot of people. We hear it on television, in the movies, it is in print and it is rampant in the board rooms of our corporations and in the highest places in government. We are becoming a secular society that has cast off all restraint. About the only place where do not expect to hear such language is when we are in church or in the home of a Christian. Paul’s encouragement to avoid such speech did not stop with what to avoid, but he went on to advocate that whatever we say should be helpful in building up a person and be appropriate for the situation.

Walk with Proper Attitude - 4:30-32

³⁰ 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, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Ephesians 4:30-32 (NASB95)

God sent His Spirit to dwell in us. If we participate in things that are less than holy and righteous, if we behave ourselves in a manner that is not in keeping with the character of Christ, then we create an environment that is non-welcoming to the Holy Spirit. When we became the children of God, then we entered into a special relationship with God. Just as you would be disappointed and grieve over your own children when they do improper things, in the same way our Heavenly Father is disappointed when we behave or think improperly. Paul listed the kinds of things that many Christians condone in their lives that really should not be there. Just as our spiritual growth is progressive, so is sin. Bitterness (a feeling of resentment) can grow into indignation from which a person can become “worked up.” If this is unchecked, it will result in an outcry (uncontrolled comment) and will eventually lead to slander of an other person. Christians who would never bow down to an idol or murder, or steal, or commit adultery are likely to find themselves being bitter toward others or even toward God. Paul tells us that such is displeasing to God and grieves the Holy Spirit. He also tells us what pleases God: being kind and having a heart of compassion, being willing to forgive those that have hurt us in the same way that God forgave us.

Clearly, we are called by God to come out of the world system and that calling means that we are to be different. Being different is OK as long as we are better in our differences.