

# Life in Christ

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We live in a very do-oriented world. The basic American recipe for increased personal happiness is a change in behavior. If you want to have a better marriage, start doing these 10 things. If you need to drop 15 pounds, try this new diet. I think we prefer these changes because they are outward, they are concrete, and they are comparatively easy to make. Living off of grapefruit and bacon for a month might not be fun, but at least you know what you're supposed to do. However, those outward changes rarely penetrate inwardly.

It is true that the Bible has a lot to say about what we are supposed to do, but that isn't really its primary focus. Instead, God is more concerned with who we are in our hearts, because if our hearts have changed, our lives will follow. This is hard. There is no grapefruit-and-bacon diet for the soul. However, it is change that will last, and the Bible tells us how to seek it. Let's look, then, at life in Christ.

## What Christ Has Done

Our study today will take us through the bulk of Ephesians 4, and within this portion of Scripture, Paul first describes what Christ has done. This begins when he recounts **CHRIST'S VICTORY**. Read with me from Ephesians 4:7-10. In this text, Jesus is compared to a victorious earthly king. Here's the comparison. Back in Bible times, once the weather turned nice, kings would go out every year and campaign against their enemies. If things went well, they would defeat them. Then, when the king came back to his capital city, he would bring with him thousands of his defeated enemies as slaves, and he would also have a collection of loot that he would distribute to his loyal followers who had remained behind.

Jesus is our King, of course, but He never led an army out to fight the Moabites or the Edomites. Instead, He went on campaign against His enemies, Satan and death. Obviously, if you want to attack your enemy, you have to fight them on their home ground, so Jesus went into Hades, the abode of the dead itself, to seek out His opponents. He emerged victorious from the tomb and ascended to His city, the Jerusalem above. In His triumph, He led a host of captives from the devil's realm—all of us, whom He rescued from the dominion of darkness. What is more, He bestowed and continues to bestow gifts on the faithful.

The rest of Paul's discussion in this section concerns **CHRIST'S GIFTS**. Let's look together at Ephesians 4:11-13. When we hear the word "gift" in the New Testament, normally we think of one of two things. We think either of salvation or of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit. In this case, however, Paul isn't talking about either one of those subjects, except indirectly. Instead, the gifts that Christ has given to His subjects in His triumph are other people. These people subdivide into four groups: first apostles, second prophets, third preachers, and fourth pastors and teachers.

Obviously, we don't have any apostles or prophets around today. At least, if they want me to recognize them as such, they'd better do something undeniably supernatural like apostles and prophets in the first century did! However, those long-dead men are still able to carry out their function in the church of today. Christ didn't give them as gifts to the church because they looked pretty. Instead, they were important because of their teaching, and in the word of Christ, we have that teaching preserved for us. The point for us is plain. If we want to get the most out of Christ's gift of apostles and prophets, we need to be opening our Bibles on our own. The more we read, the more we allow them to speak to us and change us.

Next, we come to men who are still alive today. First, we have pastors and teachers, whom we can readily identify as elders. We don't have any here, but we should still be doing what we can to develop them. Finally, we come to preachers. Normally, I would hesitate to describe myself as God's gift to the church, but in context, that's exactly what the text says about me. Here too, though, this isn't because I look pretty, or because of my innate special wonderfulness. It's because of what I have to say. YouTube is full of motivational speakers, but only a preacher of the gospel can tell us what we must do to inherit eternal life.

Indirectly, this passage also emphasizes the importance of frequent church attendance. If you are a member of the Joliet church, I'm part of God's plan for your life, and you can only hear me on Sunday mornings. If you choose not to be here, you're short-circuiting God's plan, and you will suffer spiritually for it. Hearing God's word isn't some kind of spiritual luxury. It's essential for every Christian.

According to Paul, all of these men work together to build up the saints and make them more useful in carrying out God's will. This process is to continue until four goals have been reached. The first is spiritual unity with God and one another. The second is understanding of Jesus and His love for us. The third is spiritual maturity, so that as a physical adult is able to make his way in the world and work usefully, we are able to work usefully in the church. The fourth is the measure of Christ Himself. In other words, we need God's human gifts at work in our lives until we have succeeded in becoming like Jesus.

Paul then moves on to describe **THE EFFECTS** of this process. Consider Ephesians 4:14-16. In this section, he first describes the problems associated with spiritual immaturity. Christians who are spiritually immature don't know enough of the truth to take care of themselves. As a result, they are easily influenced by false teachers. For those who have recently obeyed the gospel, spiritual immaturity is not a shameful state, any more than it is shameful for Marky to be unable to earn a living for himself. What is, shameful, though, is when we remain spiritual toddlers past the point when we should know better.

Paul then outlines how we grow past immaturity. This begins with speaking truth in love. Remember: one of the things that Christ's gifts equip the saints for is the work of service, and this is one of the most important services that Christians can render one another. When we see a brother or sister working hard for the Lord, it's our job to praise that. When we see them practicing apathy or even sin, it's our responsibility to rebuke it. Only when we benefit from the honesty and love of others can we grow.

When we grow in this way, we draw closer to Jesus, we become more like Him, and we better carry out His plan in the church. There are no vestigial organs in the body of Christ. Every one of us has a gift. Every one of us has a job. As we allow Jesus to instruct us, we learn how to do that job, and as we do it, the entire church grows as the result of our work. We help our brethren, and they help us.

During the Lord's Supper, let's consider all of this. Let's remember Jesus, who carried His campaign against the devil into Hades itself, so that He could rescue us and bless us. Second, though, let's ask if we are taking advantage of His blessings. Do we spend time with the words of His apostles and prophets? Are we here regularly, so that we can hear His word proclaimed? Have these things made us useful to the other members of this church? Let's reflect on these things as we partake.

## Old and New Selves

In the second main text that we're going to look at this morning, Paul explores what ought to be the difference between our old and new selves. He begins by describing **THE GENTILE WALK**. This description appears in Ephesians 4:17-19. If you'll recall, our theme this morning is about who we are determining what we do, and it's evident that who the Gentiles were determined what they did. The words that Paul applies to their inner selves are not flattering ones: Futile. Darkened. Ignorant. Hardhearted.

We're not supposed to be like that, but we can easily become like that. Futility of mind isn't limited to Romans who lived 2000 years ago. Spiritual ignorance isn't only a problem for our ungodly neighbors. These things can describe us too, and it's not even very hard to reach that point. All we need to become futile of mind, dark of understanding, ignorant, and hard of heart is to stop doing all the things Paul told us to do in the first part of this study.

When we turn away from God's gifts, when we start ignoring apostles, prophets, and preachers, we open the door for all of these evil habits of mind. The devil is constantly looking for an opportunity to corrupt our hearts, and without constant edification, our defenses will crumble. Unless we are constantly reminded of the futility of materialism, we will become materialistic. Unless we train our consciences through study to discern good and evil, we will be every bit as dark in our understanding as the worldling. Unless we invite Jesus into our lives every day by learning from Him, sin will harden our hearts against Him. If we allow all of these things to happen, we will be cut off from the life of God as surely as our neighbors.

Once we think like the wicked, we will begin to behave like the wicked. If we're living dead-end lives, if we follow the world's moral code, if we don't give two hoots about Jesus anymore, why not sin in every way that catches our fancy? Corruption of heart produces a corruption of life too, and if we have some evil in our lives that we can't seem to get rid of, we can trace the problem back to evil in our hearts, and we can trace that problem back to not enough time spent with the Lord.

However, we can overcome all of these vicious habits of mind by **LEARNING CHRIST**. Look at Ephesians 4:20-21. The world around us grows increasingly wicked because it is becoming increasingly

standardless. As in the days of the judges, every man does what is right in his own eyes. However, Paul points out that a standard does exist. Truth is in Jesus, and that truth is supposed to transform us. First, we hear Him. Even today, Jesus speaks through His gospel, and the greatest story ever told tells us of His purity, His love, and His self-sacrifice. Then, we are taught in Him. The life of Jesus implies a way of life for us too. If He lived so nobly, we should too, and the servants of Christ tell us how.

However, simply because we have heard Him and been taught in Him doesn't mean that He has changed us. For that to happen, we have to learn from Him too, and learning is the student's responsibility, not the teacher's. As our teachers can testify, it's entirely possible for a teacher to pour her heart out teaching for an hour, yet have no actual learning taking place because the class doesn't care.

We can be indifferent too. We can be here in the auditorium on Sunday morning and spend the whole service texting or daydreaming or sleeping or watching the ceiling fans go round and round, and it will do us no good. Physical proximity to the gospel is no more helpful to us than physical proximity to food. In both cases, if we don't take it into ourselves, we're going to starve to death. Friends, it makes about as much sense to die spiritually when we have access to a Bible and a preacher as it does to die physically when we're sitting next to a five-course meal. All we need for teaching is a teacher, but learning demands commitment from the student.

If we have this commitment, though, our lives will reflect our **TRANSFORMATION**. Paul describes it in Ephesians 4:22-23. In many ways, this is a summary of what we've already studied. Paul has already explained how the Gentiles live corrupt lives because of their corrupt minds. He's already shown that we are supposed to be renewed in our minds by learning Christ. Because of this renewal, then, we are supposed to be able to put off our old selves and put on a new self. When we see this language in Scripture, we're often inclined to think baptism and salvation. However, this text isn't about salvation at all. When we are baptized, we are regenerated by Christ. This, though, is about our willingness to renew ourselves.

If we possess that willingness, if we seek Christ through the gifts that we has given, we can become new and different people. In fact, it's fair to say that when we put on the new self, we live up to the expectations that God has for us when He saves us. Earlier in this book, in Ephesians 2, Paul observes that even though we are saved by grace through faith, we are created in Christ Jesus for good works. God has always had a plan for our lives. We reject that plan when we sin. Salvation, then, is a do-over. It's a second chance to get our service to God right. Of course, if we approach that second chance as the same people we were when we booted it the first time, we're only going to fail again. A new opportunity demands a new us, and the way that we create that new self is by putting off sin and putting on righteousness and holiness.

## **Christian Living**

Finally, Paul spends the rest of the chapter explaining what Christian living ought to look like. The first of his subpoints concerns **CONFLICT**. Let's read together from Ephesians 4:25-27. It's not obvious at first glance why this would be so, but these three verses give me more interpretive trouble than any other portion of Ephesians 4. On the surface, they seem very straightforward. However, upon inspection, that straightforward interpretation breaks down. If Paul means only what he says in v. 26 about being angry and not sinning, why does he tell us to put away anger in v. 31? For that matter, even if that isn't a contradiction, why does he address the topic of anger twice in half a dozen verses? It seems redundant.

As far as I can tell, if we want to understand what Paul is saying here, we first have to understand what he's quoting. The command to speak truth with our neighbor comes from Zechariah 8, and is part of the larger context of Zechariah 8:16-17. In this context, it is immediately obvious that Zechariah is not talking generally about our obligation to be truthful people. Instead, this text is filled with judicial language. We see the word "judge" in v. 16, city gates were used as courtrooms during Bible times, and v. 17 mentions perjury, which can only be committed under oath. Today, we might not know much about the Old Testament, but the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles of the first-century church did. They would have recognized Paul's quotation and understood it in the context of Zechariah.

Likewise with "Be angry, and do not sin." It's a quotation from Psalm 4, and it appears in the context of Psalm 4:2-5. Here too there are judicial overtones. The psalmist has been falsely accused by dishonest men, but rather than allowing his anger to lead him into sin, he is supposed to wait for God to deliver him. In time, the truth will come to light.

The New Testament doesn't have much to say about proper judicial procedure, but it spends a lot of time on relationships between brethren. What Paul is saying here, then, is this: If we see sin in our brother, we have a responsibility to be direct and up-front about it. However, we also have a responsibility to make sure that he's doing what we think he's doing, and certainly not to falsely accuse him.

On the other side of the coin, if we are falsely accused by a brother, it's our responsibility not to sin against him in return. His sin doesn't justify ours. This is hard, brethren! I've been in this situation before, and it's very tempting to strike back with whatever weapons lie closest to hand. The true child of God, though, doesn't stoop to the level of his enemies. That gives the devil all kinds of opportunity to wreak havoc in a church, or even split a congregation altogether. Instead, the righteous trust God to deliver them.

Second, Christians must be **HONEST** in their dealings with money. Look at Ephesians 4:28. This text is much more straightforward, but there are two points that I want to draw from it. First, Christians can't be thieves. As far as I know, there isn't anybody here this morning who puts "Thief" on his 1040 at tax time, but all of us have opportunities to be dishonest. We can defraud the guy across the table in a business negotiation. When our parents die, we can scheme and cheat to get a larger share of the money. On a really penny-ante scale, we can download pirated songs, games, and movies and cheat the copyright holders. All of these things are wrong, brethren. Money should never be so important to us that it takes us away from God.

Also, note that Paul says that our purpose for earning should be so that we have something to share with those in need. Whatever extra money we have after paying the mortgage isn't for us to have fun with. It's for us to be generous with. Too many Christians, though, aren't interested in being generous toward the poor. With much the same attitude as the lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?", they ask, "Who is a deserving poor person?" They'll help the poor just as soon as they find someone who deserves it.

As I've said before, let me repeat: if we show mercy only to the deserving, our mercy is actually justice. Mercy by definition is extended to those who don't deserve it. If we refuse to be generous to the needy whom we identify as undeserving, we are refusing to be merciful. Brethren, we owe our very souls to the mercy of Jesus Christ, and when we are so indebted to Him, we do not dare be unmerciful to others.

Third, if we have been transformed from within, we will govern our **SPEECH** appropriately. Consider Ephesians 4:29. This verse presents two contrasting kinds of speech. The second is speech that builds up and blesses the hearer. This helps us understand the first, because the first kind of speech is the opposite of the second. This speech is unwholesome, rotten. It eats away at the hearer from the inside like rot eats away at the inside of a dead tree trunk that still happens to be standing.

Every time we open our mouths, then, this verse should be at the forefront of our minds. We should automatically ask ourselves the question, "Will these words build up, or will they tear down?" This doesn't mean that everything we say has to be pleasant. Sometimes the people in our lives need to hear harsh truths and will benefit from being told the truth. However, whether our words are pleasant or harsh, our motivation in speaking needs to be the good of our hearer. If our motive is self-expression, if we talk for the sake of being heard, we're like a madman who lights sticks of dynamite and lobs them into a crowd. We're taking a very powerful tool that needs to be used carefully and using it instead with an utter lack of thought.

Finally, we need to be careful with **ANGER**. Let's examine Ephesians 4:30-32. As I was reading this, I said to myself, "I know I've seen the idea of grieving the Holy Spirit before", and indeed, it appears in Isaiah 63:9-10. In context, it looks like God's people grieved the Holy Spirit by taking His gift of salvation and treating it contemptuously. We see similar thoughts in vs. 31 and 32 in our main context, so I thought v. 30 belonged with them too. In context, here's the point: God has blessed us with an immeasurable blessing by forgiving us in Christ. He had every reason to be angry with us and destroy us, but He chose to be kind.

This, then, is our position. We are saved, but precariously so. We exist on sufferance because God is a merciful God. All too often, though, we behave as though we were not utterly dependent on mercy, as though we were judges rather than the pardoned rebels. We get mad at our brethren, we pick fights with them, we tell lies about them, and we look for ways to work evil against them. We are quick to offend, but we are equally quick to take offense. Woe betide the brother who treats us the way we treat others! This is the kind of behavior that makes God's Spirit grieve that He ever rescued us in the first place.

Instead, we have a responsibility to be kind and forgiving to others as God is kind and forgiving to us. When we are tempted to be angry about someone else's little offenses, we must remember the greatness of our offenses against God. Only as we forgive can we expect to be forgiven.