THE NEW SELF, CREATED TO BE LIKE GOD

Ephesians 4:17-32

Key Verses: 4:23-24

“…to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

The main theme of Ephesians is “…to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (1:10). Based on this theme, Paul gives practical applications in chapters 4-6. In 4:1-16 Paul emphasized keeping the unity of the Spirit, while recognizing the diversity of gifts in the body, and growing to maturity in Christ. True unity develops when members of the body grow in godliness. So, in 4:17-5:20, Paul admonishes them to grow in godliness in their being and way of life.

In today’s passage, Paul explains why we have to grow to maturity. When we heard about Christ and accepted him, God created a new self in us. In other words, when we accepted Christ as our Savior and Lord, we were born again through the work of the Holy Spirit. At that moment, the seed of God’s life was planted in us, and it began to grow. God’s purpose is that we may grow to maturity until we become like Jesus (Ro 8:29). But this growth is not automatic or painless. It involves change of one’s attitudes, thoughts and way of life. People may hate to be changed more than anything else. So many medical doctors have testified that in spite of their serious warnings, patients did not change their way of life in regards to eating, exercise, or using abusive substances. The reality is that people would rather die than give up their bad habits. This applies to Christians who do not want to change our sinful habits and way of life. In this passage Paul teaches us why we have to grow (17-24), and, how to live a new life (25-32).

I.  Why we have to grow (17-24)

In verses 17-19 Paul explains why we must no longer live as the Gentiles do. In verses 20-24 he teaches the doctrinal basis for our new lives.

First, “you must no longer live as the Gentiles do” (17-19). Paul begins in verse 17, “So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do.” At first glance, this may seem to be legalistic: “…you must no longer….” But we need to understand why Paul gave this strong warning. Paul had been a very strict Pharisee before knowing Jesus. But after encountering the Risen Christ, he was completely changed. He grasped the essence of the gospel. He knew that he had been saved purely by grace, based on what Jesus had done for him. So he could accept any kind of person in Christ. He embraced the Gentiles and became like one of them so as to win them (1 Cor 9:21). He had a genuine shepherd’s heart for them (Gal 4:19). Paul’s words came from his shepherd’s heart. For their own good, he urged them not to live as the Gentiles do.

What, then, was the Gentile way of life? Paul mentions specifically, “…in the futility of their thinking.” This means that without God their minds were empty, fruitless and vain. Even though people work hard to attain something, it perishes and vanishes with death. So people feel emptiness in their deep hearts. The philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) said, in his book, “The New Being,”1 that ungodly man’s way of thinking is characterized by three gray figures: emptiness, guilt, and death. When people try to live without God, they think they will be free. Yet they are always accompanied by these three gray figures, especially emptiness. They are darkened in their understanding (18); they have no discernment and no wisdom. We live in a flood of information. According to research done at U.C. Berkeley, the total production of new information in the year 2000 was 1.5 exabytes, or 37,000 times the total holdings of the Library of Congress. Just two years later, the annual rate had more than doubled.2 Yet, despite all this information, we rarely find books with real wisdom. Modern people have lots of knowledge without much wisdom or discernment. The Bible is the book of wisdom. It makes us wise for salvation through faith in Christ and equips us to do good works (2 Ti 3:15-17). When people abandon God and the Bible, they lose wisdom. They do not know why they live, or how to live, because they are darkened in their understanding. They are separated from the life of God (18). This means to be cut off from the source of life, like a cut flower in a vase; it seems to be alive, but has no root. Moreover, they live in spiritual ignorance. This ignorance is not due to lack of education, but to the hardening their hearts toward God. They deny God intentionally, like an ostrich that sticks its head in the ground to avoid danger. Romans 1:21 says, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” Eventually they lose all sensitivity to God’s presence and cannot recognize spiritual things. They become numb in their conscience and spirit. On the other hand, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed (19). They are greedy for money, pleasure, power, and food. This leads to destruction. This is why Paul told them to no longer live as Gentiles do. We, too, must no longer live like the Gentiles do.

Second, the godly way of life (20-24). Look at verses 20-21. “That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.” When the Ephesians heard about Christ and accepted him, they were liberated from bondage to sin and could begin a new life. They were taught in Christ in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. We can find the truth that saves only in Jesus. Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). Jesus also promised that when we know the truth, the truth sets us free (Jn 8:32). The words “learned,” “heard,” and “taught,” give us the impression that we are in school. As soon as we hear the gospel truth, we are enrolled in the school of Jesus. The main subject is Jesus Christ; it is not just getting information about Christ, but to know him, that is, to have a relationship with him. Our semester is not 12 weeks or 16 weeks, but our entire lifetime. The life of faith is to learn Christ—especially his character: humility, kindness, gentleness, love, patience, compassion, righteousness, and so on. It is also to learn the meaning of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. As an old missionary, Paul said, “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection of the dead” (Php 3:10-11). Dawson Trotman, founder of the Navigators, defined his life goal as follows: “To know Christ, to let Christ be known.” At the age of eight, Count Zinzendorf exclaimed about Christ, “I have but one passion—‘tis He only He.”

The content of the teaching to the Ephesians is specified in verses 22-24. Verse 22 says, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires….” Here, “…put off your old self…” means to repent. When we lived in the old self, the inclination of our thoughts was only evil all the time (Gen 6:5). The old self is being corrupted by deceitful desires day by day, and is on its way to ruin and destruction. That is why we were taught to put off the old self. This is what we must do by God’s grace. As the old ways of life are put off, renewal is called for, and it is inward renewal. Verses 23-24 tell us what God does to renew us. They say, “…to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” Colossians 3:10 says substantially the same thing: “…and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” When we accepted Christ, God created in us a new self—a new person—a new creation, according to the image of God in true righteousness and holiness. When we heard the gospel, the Holy Spirit worked in us and we are born again. The Apostle John says that when we are born of God, God’s seed remains in us (1 Jn 3:9). A seed has life in it, and it grows. God’s life that was planted in us grows to the fullness of Christ. Our job is to let the seed grow. In Jesus’ parable of the sower, he warns that the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things may come in and grow together with the seed, choke it, and make it unfruitful (Mk 4:19). In order to let God’s seed grow in us, we must uproot bad habits and sinful desires which hinder spiritual growth.

Exodus gives us a model of how God helped his people to grow in holiness. The people of Israel were helplessly bound in Egypt as slaves. They could do nothing to escape. But God liberated them by the blood of the lamb. They had done nothing; God had done everything to redeem them. They were free to live a new life as children of God. Even though they were free, they still had a slave mentality. They retained many bad habits and unholy attitudes in their minds. They were unthankful, quick to complain, greedy, lazy, unfaithful and impatient. They needed discipline. God led them to the desert, gave them his Law and trained them to be faithful in following him, eating daily bread, keeping the Sabbath, and so on. We, too, need God’s discipline to put off our old way of life (Heb 12:10).

In verse 23, the words, “…to be made new in the attitude of your minds…” describe the ongoing work of renewal in the inner life of believers. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, progressively transforming believers into the image of Christ. 2 Corinthians 4:16b says, “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” Romans 12:2 says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Since the Holy Spirit is working in us to renew us, Paul urges us to put off the old self and cooperate with the Holy Spirit so that we may grow to maturity.

II.  How to live a new life (25-32)

In this part Paul instructs us specifically how to put off the old way of life, and put on the new way of life. The instructions all regard relationships, especially those among believers. They give practical guidance to build up unity in the body of Christ. Each instruction contains both a negative prohibition and a positive command. As we give up old ways of life, they need to be replaced by the new. It is like taking off old, sweaty clothes with stains and holes, and replacing them with a fresh new suit of finest fabric.

Look at verse 25. “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.” In 1 Timothy 3:15 Paul described God’s household as the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. Truth is essential in the church. If we lie to each other, the church cannot stand. Lying is the character of the devil (Jn 8:44). It is deceiving God, others and oneself. We must put off falsehood and speak truthfully. Then we can trust one another and form a healthy community. We are members of one body. If the eye sees a “Don’t Walk” signal, yet lies to the foot and says, “go ahead,” what happens? The whole body is smashed and the eye dies along with the rest of the body. As body parts work together truthfully for the good of the body, so we should speak truthfully to one another and build up God’s church in the truth.

Look at verses 26-27. “’In your anger do not sin’; Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” Paul does not say that we should not get angry. But he does tell us to manage our anger. When we are angry, we should not blow up and hurt others. We should solve each day’s anger problem before the sun sets that day. Some people hold anger for a week, a month, or even for a year. This damages themselves most of all. It gives the devil a foothold to work in our lives and in the church. To solve our anger, we may need to punch a punching bag. But most of all, we should pray until God’s peace comes upon us. If we add the letter “d” at the beginning of “anger,” it becomes “danger.” Anger is the warning sign of danger. We should remember this and learn to control our anger before it causes great harm. John Hunter (1728–1793) was a world famous scientist. He claimed that heart disease can come from feelings of anger, jealousy, and self-righteousness, which put pressure on blood vessels and cause heart attacks. After he shared this theory in a seminar, a scholar attacked it severely. Hunter was so angry. But when he got up to counter attack, he fell down and later died. The cause of death was a heart attack due to extreme pressure on the blood vessels induced by anger. He proved his theory by his own death. James 1:19-20 say, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.”

The teaching not to steal in verse 28 is not just a legalistic rule. It challenges our inner attitude of wanting to get something. It teaches us to be sacrificial instead of selfish—to share instead of getting. In order to have something to share with others we must work hard, doing something useful with our own hands. In verse 29 Paul tells us not to let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths. This suggests that nasty words are right there, ready to come out, but we must not let them out. Unwholesome speech can be like a sharp knife that pierces one’s heart, bringing great harm to them. So we must control our speech and say only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs. We must learn to speak for the benefit of others, not to gratify ourselves. There is the story of a woman who invented rumors about others to enjoy gossiping. One day she noticed that no one would speak to her any longer. She found that her careless words about others had caused everyone to lose trust in her. So she visited her rabbi and asked help. The rabbi told her to cut a pillow in half and scatter the feathers to the wind. She did so. Then he told her to gather the feathers and bring them back to him. She tried all evening but could collect only a fraction of what was lost. Then he told her that in the same way, bad words about others could never be taken back.3 Jesus said in Matthew 12:36: “But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.” Proverbs 12:18 says, “The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

In verse 30 Paul urges, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” Anything that damages the purity or unity of the church grieves the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has been given to us by the immeasurable grace of God and at the cost of our Savior’s blood, to dwell in and among us and to sanctify us—as individuals and as a church. The Holy Spirit’s work is most essential. We must always remember that the Holy Spirit dwells in the church. And we must honor the Holy Spirit in our words and deeds.

In verse 31 Paul admonishes us to get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. These things not only damage our personalities, but they hurt others and bring division to the body of Christ. For the health of our own personalities, as well as the church, we must get rid of all these things right away, just as we throw out the trash before it becomes a health hazard.

Verse 32 says, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” God is kind to both the evil and the good, and causes his sun to shine on both (Mt 5:45). God is also compassionate to the weak and helpless. As children of God we too should be kind and compassionate to one another. God is the one who is most mistreated, insulted and offended by mankind every day. But God forgives our sins through Jesus Christ. When we remember how Christ forgave us by shedding his blood for our sins, we can forgive others unconditionally. As we practice forgiveness, the grace of God overflows.

Let’s remember that God created a new life in us according to his own image and that he made us to grow into the fullness of Christ. Let’s get rid of all the elements of our old lives and live a new life so that we ourselves and our church can be healthy and strong.