

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Ephesians 4:17-32

"Made New"

God's plan, in the fullness of time, is to *"unite all things in heaven and earth under one head, Jesus Christ."* Currently, says Paul to the 1st century Christians in Ephesus - formerly Gentile and pagan - that plan has begun in the work of Jesus Christ in reconciling people to God through faith, and bringing Jew and Gentile together in the new *"body of Christ"* - the Church. So as parts of that body, Christians know they should work together to protect the unity of the Church and *"live lives worthy of their calling,"* because they are now on display to the pagan world as examples - *"first-fruits"* - of God's reconciling work.

So now as Paul goes into details about *"living a life worthy of the name Christian"* and about *"building up the body of Christ,"* he is not so much giving the Ephesians new instruction as reminding them, in strong rhetorical style, of what they already know. When they became Christians, they were taught Christian virtues and values. Of course their Christian communities are still embedded in pagan Greco-Roman culture; but (in the apt words of that old Puritan preacher Matthew Henry) they *"may have to live among them, but they don't have to live like them!"*

1) *Put Off, Put On*

So Paul reminds them, using one of his favorite metaphors, that they should *"put off"* the old pagan ways as they would an old,

dirty, tattered garment; and *"put on"* the new clothes that befit the *"new man,"* the *"Christian."* He reminds them that this starts in their minds, in their hearts - that is, internal transformation is needed, which in time of course produces new behavior.

Paul would agree that *"ideas have consequences."* He is of the firm opinion that bad theology leads to bad ethics; that culpable ignorance about God leads to vice, and that the truth about God revealed in Christ leads to virtue. Now that sort of view is very controversial today - many argue that people with no religious belief or faith can be virtuous. Others maintain that American culture is decaying because people are turning away from God.

Paul is clear in his mind that willful ignorance of God and his ways leads to a hard heart and separation from God, and that this produces insensitivity to moral and religious precepts that over time leave people with sensuality as a major motive for living, and various kinds of debauchery soon follow. In this Paul is not alone: many modern writers, and by no means only *"believers,"* have traveled that road in their minds and come to the same conclusion. Famously, both Dostoevsky and Nietzsche said that *"if God does not exist"-* nobody believes he exists or cares what he says - then *"everything is permitted."*

But Paul reminds his readers that *"you know better."* God has called you, Jesus has redeemed you, and the Holy Spirit lives in you and among you so *"everything is not permitted!"* You learned this already in Christianity 101; it's time to put it into serious practice. You *were "made new"* when you came to put your trust in Christ. Now live as *"new people."*

Maybe this is the moment to remind ourselves that when the New Testament uses the word *"you,"* the word is almost always *plural.* In the days of the King James Bible, we had the nice distinction between *"thou"* and *"ye,"* and we could tell how many people were being addressed; modern English only uses *"you."* So when Paul says *"you must no longer live as the Gentiles do"* he means *"you all."* When Jesus says to Nicodemus *"you must be born again,"* he says *"y'all."* There is always this collective sense, a deep communal sense, about Christianity. Christian teaching is not so much addressed to individuals as to a *community* of believing people.

So when Paul reminds Ephesian Christians to *"live worthily of Christ,"* and to *"build up the body of Christ,"* he is really saying the same thing!

2) Don't Grieve God

So he comes to a long list of vices and virtues for Christians to avoid or pursue, and he tells them why these things matter.

Only occasionally does he say *"so you will stay on good terms with God,"* though he does say that. In this passage, the expression is *"do not grieve the Holy Spirit."* That's an intriguing command. It emphasizes the *personality* of the Spirit – the Spirit is a *he,* not an *it.* It also tells us that we can hurt God's feelings! Now that is in line with him telling us we are his children, part of his family; as

parents we all know that our children can hurt us and grieve us. They never stop being our children, we love them still, we never stop seeking ways to help and guide them. But they can grieve us. I don't need to give you examples! We struggle with how to respond – lashing out is no answer, sometimes correction or discipline are needed, sometimes forbearance and forgiveness are best.

God of course knows better than we do how to mix correction and forgiveness and guidance; and we can be sure that when we grieve him by our thoughts or actions, he sends us what is best for us. Sometimes it's a painful correction; sometimes it's slow realization and then repentance on our part, followed by his forgiveness. But here's one big principle, says Paul – don't make God sad!

3) Build The Body

But Paul is also deeply concerned with how Christian ethics and values affect the Christian community. So some specifics. *Truth not lies,* says Paul. Lying is of course endemic in human society, but its worst aspect is that it erodes trust, and without trust there can be no community. So *"speak truthfully... for we are all members of one body."*

There are many kinds of lies, of course. Buying into the *"big lie"* of our culture that we can *"have it all"* and that will make us fulfilled. Outright deceit – everyone lies about sex. Failing to tell the whole truth, concealing what does not put us or our product in the best light. *"Truth is the first casualty of war"* (that goes back to Roman times!). We are all so used to administrations of every stripe at every level lying to us, that trust in government is seriously eroded. Auto and drug manufacturers hide from us truths that they know, and further undermine our trust. No trust, no

community. Of course there is a time for lying – when the Nazis bang on your door and demand “are there any Jews here?” or when your wife says “do these pants make me look fat?” Truth that wounds is not “speaking the truth in love,” which is the Christian virtue.

Conciliation not anger, says Paul. If we keep the row going, and everyone goes to bed angry, we “open the door to the devil.” Keep short accounts, apologize readily, look for reconciliation. Remember “an apology” is not the same as really being sorry and showing it. Anger can be legitimate, but can also be sinful if it is too intense or persists too long or is wrongly directed.

Generosity, not theft. Don’t steal from your neighbor, your employer, the government. Do work; not only because it will do you good but it will also enable you to share with other people in need. Our labor is part of what builds our community. If we can’t find paid work for a while, we ought to volunteer to do something that builds our community. It doesn’t mean we can’t draw unemployment benefits – we have paid insurance premiums for that for years. But remember, everyone has to contribute to the good of the community if it is to flourish, and individuals or families will never flourish if their community is collapsing.

Edifying speech and not vulgarity. It should hardly need saying, but it does. It’s connected closely to *grace and not verbal abuse*. How we speak has a huge impact on our relationships and therefore our communities. If we are harsh, vindictive, abusive, angry, slanderous, malicious, we do great harm, and that’s especially true in the little community of the family, where it’s most common. People who have to “behave” all day at work often react to that when they get home. Bad language is all too common “in private.” Verbal abuse is the most common

form of “domestic violence” and ruins more marriages than infidelity. If we deal with our own inner pain by belittling other people; if we constantly put our spouses or children down verbally, we destroy trust and relationships and the community of the family.

And when verbal malice plays out in wider communities, or in a nation, it is incredibly corrosive. People who make a living or a reputation by verbal abuse of others destroy more than they know – whether they are managers, newspaper editors, politicians, talk-show hosts, or any public figure. Stirring up people’s worst emotions used to be called demagoguery, and that kind of public agitation was despised. Today it’s common currency in this and many other effectively “post-Christian” countries. Christians ought to have nothing to do with it. “Watch your tongue,” says Paul, and other Christian writers. You can destroy your community with it.

Grace, compassion, kindness, forgiveness are Christian virtues. Community, cooperation, reconciliation, unity are Christian values. Paul says to Ephesus, and to all of us, “you know better than to behave as the pagans do.” You already know God, and you know that “everything is *not* permitted.” So live worthy of your calling, build the body of Christ, and do not grieve the Spirit of God.

Let us pray...