

Pathway of Maturity: How we change – Part 1
Ephesians 4:17-24

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do...

Introduction: Certain stories are most definitely the stuff of urban legend, but make an impact nonetheless. There are two stories that I enjoy that make a clear point though are impossible to verify if they actually happened. The first is told of President John F. Kennedy visiting NASA space center for the first time in 1962 to give a speech after committing the United States to a space race to the moon. The story goes that he took a wrong turn and ran into a janitor who was mopping the floor. When President Kennedy asked the man what the man was doing, he replied, **“Well, Mr. President, I’m helping put a man on the moon.”** Or maybe you have heard the story of Christopher Wren, a seventeenth-century English architect who walked one day unrecognized among the men who were at work upon the building of St. Paul’s cathedral in London, which he had designed.

“What are you doing?” he inquired of one of the workmen. The man replied, “I am cutting a piece of stone.” As Wren went on, he put the same question to another man, and the man replied, “I am earning five shillings twopence a day.” To a third man he addressed the same inquiry, and the man answered, **“I am helping Sir Christopher Wren build a beautiful cathedral.”**

These stories, or versions of them, have been told for decades (and perhaps centuries) to illustrate an important point that pertains to our study in Ephesians 4. An audacious task like going to the moon or building a 17th century cathedral took the efforts of many, each playing a role, each serving a unique function, in order to accomplish together something greater than any one person could ever achieve. God has given the church an audacious mission, to make disciples of all nations, to wake the dead from their sin, to shine the message of the gospel in both word and lifestyle to people who don’t know they need it thus act like they don’t want it. We are to WALK IN A MANNER WORTHY of our calling, to walk in holiness, love, light, and truth, and stand firm against an enemy that is constantly trying to bring us down. So, we have been given the Holy Spirit to unify us (Eph. 4:3), the gifting of Christ to equip us, and the truth in love to build us up and join us together. When every believer is playing their role by growing up in Christ, the church is unstoppable, able to accomplish all that God desires.

In this second half of Ephesians 4, we will look at the process of Biblical change, how we practically move upward in maturity. We often ask the “how” question in our walk with Christ, and this section gives us daily principles to implement, and by them we will grow. In verses 17-19 we will see the condition of our former self, before Christ redeemed and saved us, and in 20-24 we will see the radical difference of a new life in Christ, along with new choices and desires.

The Plight of Life Without Christ (4:17-19)

*Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the **futility** of their minds.*

*They are **darkened** in their understanding, **alienated** from the life of God because of the **ignorance** that is in them, due to their **hardness** of heart. They have become **callous** and have **given themselves up** to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.*

A Contrast of Conditions

One of the most often repeated critiques of Christianity and Christians is the fact that it is a hypocritical system filled with hypocrites. In a world that believes sincerity, transparency, and authenticity are high values (though they themselves can't live up to that standard), one of the worst expressions of religion is someone who SAYS they believe one thing but LIVE in a categorically different way. It's the church goer who says they are a Christian and are the most angry, mean, and short-tempered person at work, the usher at church who never touches their Bible at home, or pastor caught up in scandal. The reality is, they are not wrong to point this out. **"If we say we have fellowship with Him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."** (1 John 1:6). God is not interested in a confession of words that comes out of a heart that is unredeemed, that has not fully come to grips with their sin and has humbly sought forgiveness in Jesus Christ, turning from sin to Christ is a fully hearted, yielded way. Why? Talk is cheap. It's not the one who merely SAYS "Lord, Lord" who will be saved, but those who know Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection (Matt. 7:21-23). So, our actions as a result of faith in Christ are paramount, knowing that a new heart WILL PRODUCE new results

Notice verse 17 ties back to verse 1 of chapter 4 in terms of how we **walk, live, or act in space and time**. The first 16 verses explained what a walk worthy of our calling meant, and now Paul comes back to his original point. He starts with the negative (no longer walk) and will move to the positive (this is how you walk). He uses a term here that has to be determined by the context (as most words must). Paul uses the word "**Gentiles**" here not to denote a nationality, in contrast with Judaism, but rather a general term for those who are far off from God (Eph. 2:13, 17). The contrast is clear: those who are in Christ must cease from acting like those who do not know Christ. But what does that look like? He delves into that reality in the next few verses.

A Condition of Captivity

As we go through this progressive list, there are two things to keep in mind. **1) This is a list that used to categorize every believer** – in other words, this is a glimpse of our past, not of our present and future. **2) This IS the PRESENT condition of our loved ones, neighbors, and friends who do not know Christ** – this not only should fill us with compassion, but with a huge helping of dependency, reminding us again that only God can open blind eyes, soften hard hearts and forgive those who are under wrath.

CONDITION

Before Christ transforms, our minds and hearts are both futile and darkened, meaning that in and of ourselves we cannot find the truth or figure out meaning and purpose. The word "**futility**" has a range of meaning from vanity, purposelessness, absurdity, and emptiness. The idea is that there is a general aimlessness, a life pursuing of an object that is not known or without an end at all. We see this play out in Romans 1:18-32, especially in verse 21, "*For*

although they knew God (God revealed in His creation, including His invisible attributes, especially His eternal power and divine nature, so that there is no excuse) *they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became **futile in their thinking**, that their foolish hearts were darkened.*” This means that our minds were intended to perceive and know God, but in rejecting this knowledge, we have become empty which leads to a darkened understanding of life and reality.

The second condition, then, is being **darkened in understanding**, which means being clouded in their reasoning process. When our eyes are darkened, we CANNOT see the light or the truth (“Let their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and bend their backs forever – Rom. 11:10, Psalm 69:22-23). This does not mean that an unbeliever cannot think at all, nor does it mean they cannot operate in any kind of wisdom (James 3:13-18). God’s common grace allows mankind to grow, learn, and accomplish amazing things even when we cut God out of the process. However, what it DOES mean is that in a condition of darkness and futility of the mind and understanding, one CANNOT comprehend God to the point that they worship Him, yield to Him, or make much of Him, but instead the mind is **turned inward** to oneself for light and understanding. This condition has consequences:

POSITION

Because of this condition, they are in a POSITION of **alienation from the life of God**. This means that unbelievers are separated from the life that comes from God, living a life that is built on self, seeking to control life on our own. Most people will acknowledge there is a God because they see the creation around them and yield to the fact that someone had to cause all of this. But acknowledging God and living in Him, for Him, and to Him is categorically different. God is forgiving to an unbeliever, not someone known intimately or even desired to know. But what is the cause of all of this?

CAUSE

There are two kinds of ignorance: true and forced, one that is innocent and the other is deliberate. The cause of our condition and position is the second type, a forced ignorance in terms of our knowledge of God. Some kinds of ignorance exist because we have NO knowledge, where others are formed with knowledge but claiming to be unaware (“no one told me I couldn’t use the bushes outside as a bathroom! There was no sign that said I couldn’t”). Again, this spiritual ignorance is the fact that we all have a knowledge of God given to us externally, but reject it in our thinking. We all have a knowledge of God’s law written in our conscience, but we violate them to get our own way (Rom. 2:15-16). Claiming to be wise, we have become fools (Rom. 1:22). We create a whole new morality to fit our desires, even if it is inconsistent and brutal toward others. We see this in the argumentation for abortion rights, placing the supposed rights of women above the life of a child. This is the height of deliberate ignorance, one that exchanges the truth of God for a lie.

Notice that our minds are darkened because our **hearts are hardened**. The same sun that melts the wax hardens the clay, and the light God gives us about Himself will harden the hearts of many. A hardened heart is a result of continual rejection of the truth, and it makes it impossible (without something else acting on it) for the truth to get in, instead just bouncing off like a pebble hitting a boulder. Hard hearts are **stubborn, never willing to admit sin**,

acknowledge a need for forgiveness, and putting our view of life and self above all other.

Hard hearts are not convicted by truth, cannot respond in obedience, and must double down on self. There is only one hope for the hard hearted, and that is a new heart, a miracle of turning a heart of stone into a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26; 2 Cor. 3:3). This is why salvation is miraculous heart surgery, requiring radical transformation.

RESULT

The process, then, becomes clear and the next steps are obvious. What does forced ignorance out of a hard heart produce? **Callousness**. What is the nature of a calloused part of the body? It becomes insensible to pain, ceasing to feel, and insensitive overall. It's what we develop on our heels as our body protects our feet. It's what happened to my arm growing up as my brother would hit me repeatedly in the same spot (affectionately known as a "dead arm"). It's what our bodies do spiritually to protect us from the thing all people struggle with: **guilt and shame**. Since we know what is right and wrong, when we do wrong, we feel bad, and no one wants to feel bad. So how do we do what we want and NOT feel bad? We first cut out God, convincing ourselves that He does not exist or remake Him in our image. And second, we just sin and sin and sin and sin, surrounding ourselves with people who live and think the same way, until we do not feel anything, especially guilt and shame. It's why we see people having to flaunt their depravity in public. It's why they must rid themselves of anyone who would shine the truth on them, because the truth brings to light what is written in their heart, causing the unsettling of desire.

Notice that a **consequence or result of this callousness** is "*a giving themselves up*" to more sin. Sin never stays put or in the boxes we try to put it. Sin grows, since we need more of it to feel the same way we did before. A consequence of rebellion and rejection of God is that **God gives us over to our sin** (Romans 1:24, 26, 28), creating more sin and more callousness. But we also continue down the rabbit hole by giving ourselves over to that same rebellion, much like Pharaoh did as he refused to listen to God and let Israel go (Exodus 8:15, 32). Sin breeds more sin, and its no wonder we see rampant **sexuality or sexual deviancy** today, or that everyone is out for themselves and what they can get, rather than serving God and others.

So just to summarize this power packed section: This is the OPPOSITE of our condition, position, cause, and result of being in Christ. Christ has not only forgiven us, but given us new hearts, His mind, and new desires to be able to live differently, obediently. But this also reminds us that those we love deeply that are still in this condition need radical transformation, not simply repeating a confession. God is the One who can offer and provide a new mind, light, relationship, wisdom, soft-heartedness, and quick responsiveness of a new life, helping us see that holiness is true happiness, Christ being our greatness purpose and joy.

The Principles of New Life in Christ (4:20-24)**Contrast of Past Condition**

Paul liked writing and teaching in terms of comparison and contrast. If you'll remember in chapter 2, he did this multiple times. "You were dead...but God, being rich in mercy..." (v. 1, 4). "You were separated from Christ...but now...have been brought near (v. 12, 13). Here, Paul

gives the contrast “BUT, that is not the way you learned Christ!”, the point being that there should be a vast contrast between our life in Christ and those who do not know Him. He gives **3 words that are possible when Christ saves us**. We become **LEARNERS** of Christ, which overcomes the futility and darkness of our mind, replacing it with the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). In fact, the definition of a “DISCIPLE” is that of a learner, one whom comes to a new understanding of God in Christ. We have **HEARD** about Christ and the truth, which not only means that someone presented the gospel to us (*“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him who whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”* – Rom. 10:14), but also God had to quicken our ears to hear. And we are finally **TAUGHT** the truth in Jesus Christ. This means that we are not done when we come to a saving knowledge of God, but set up for a lifetime of learning, growing, and becoming more like Christ (called sanctification). No true believer can say they’ve been a believer for decades and be at the same point of knowledge and growth as they were at the beginning. The basic definition of a disciple betrays that thought. But what does this new condition look like?

Freedom of a New Condition

There is a three-part process that Paul gives here that defines and explains how we change, each day, to become more like Jesus. We try to stay away from “how to” lists in preaching, since the goal is to transform the mind, shape the thinking, and present principle so that every person will be able to walk by faith, the leading of the Spirit, and make decisions each day consistent with obedience and glorifying God. But this is a brilliant mixture of “how to” and principled process, giving us a framework while leaving room for discernment and wisdom in implementation. If you have ever done any counseling, or have disciplined anyone, or sat with your kids to help them think through life, vv. 22-24 is a template for every situation. In fact, I’d venture to say that if every believer sought to implement these verses daily, our joyful obedience and maturity would grow visibly and palpably in this church. How’s that for a setup of what’s to come!!! Here is the quick process: put off, renew your mind, put on. That’s it. That’s revolutionary.

Put off your old self

When we come to know Christ, have asked for and received forgiveness, we are made new, given a new heart, mind, and given new desires. However, we still live in this fleshly body which is corrupt because of the Fall, and thus we still have a propensity to sin. This is why we anticipate our full redemption when Christ returns, when we will be glorified with new bodies, built for eternity and that have not been affected by sin. The words “put off” refer to the process of taking off clothes, which is apt words for this process. As believers, we are continually seeking to take off the old self, which means identifying habits of **sinful thought, behavior, and desire**. We put these off by turning from them, refusing to give in to their influence, and ceasing the practice we once engaged in.

When I was in high school, we had P.E classes that required us to wear a separate uniform since there were no showers to clean off our stank. The directive was given to bring this home every weekend and wash it for the next week, which I rarely did. At the end of the semester the shorts and shirt stood up on their own (and maybe even moved a little bit). They were nasty.

The only good thing to do was take them off, burn them, and bury them in the back field. It made no sense to continually put on these old clothes, since it was not part of my life moving forward and only kept me dirty.

This is what we do aggressively each day. We take off the old self with its practices and bury them. This is NOT moralism, since it does not make us acceptable to God in doing this, but we can do it BECAUSE we've been made acceptable. To continue living in our habits of sin makes as much sense as me digging up the old P.E uniform and wearing it each day.

Renew the spirit of your mind

How do we identify what needs to change? How do we cut through our own deceived minds? How are we motivated to change habits? The answer is a renewed mind! There is only one pathway for renewal, and that is the Spirit of God working through the Word of God to change the mind and heart of man. The word renew is in the present tense, meaning it is something ongoing and it is a passive verb which means we are recipients of renewal. Change of action without a change of mind is a fool's errand. Scripture does not simply inform us but transforms our minds (Rom. 12:1-2), which then allows us to NOT be conformed to this present age, both in thinking and activities. This is why a desire to become like Jesus without a true knowledge of God's Word is impossible, since God wants to change our actions, thoughts, and desires altogether.

Put on the new self

Full change brought about by repentance will always have a replacement value. Here, the idea is to put on the new self, to put on the new clothes of a new life. Our new self was created, or re-created, in the likeness of God which breeds true and thorough righteousness and holiness. In other words, this is WHO we are and what we are saved for! But notice that there is an ongoing action, daily recognizing our drift from this toward the old self. So, each day we seek to put off our old self, put on the new, through the renewing of our minds by Scripture. In doing this, we will change, grow, and mature.

Why is this so hard? Because we still live in these fleshly bodies, which means there is a war raging in us for control, a war we must engage in actively or we'll lose. Paul said it this way in Romans 7:22-24:

*"For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the laws of sin that dwells in my members. **Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?**"*

Paul describes this battle of sin as a body of death, referring to a Roman practice of dealing with a murderer whose punishment was to be tied together with the one he murdered:

We gain some insight into this heinous practice from the poet Virgil, who described it in his *The Aeneid*, Book 8, starting on line 485:

The living and the dead at his command
Were coupled, face to face, and hand to hand,

Till, chok'd with stench, in loath'd embraces tied,
The ling'ring wretches pin'd away and died.

The murderer would be tied face to face, hand to hand, foot to foot with the body of death, and that dead body would slowly decay, infesting the living and slowly killing it. This is a vivid picture of our old self and how it affects us. When we fail to PUT OFF the old self, the old self will continually infest our life, thinking, and desires.

So here is the quick and clear conclusion: Are you in the battle of maturity and change, or not? Have you thought of yourself as a Christian but never experienced this kind of battle against sin and movement toward righteousness? Today is a day to deal in reality, not assumption. To all believers here today, let's enter this process of change gladly, proactively, and joyfully. To all who do not know Christ this morning, I implore you to be reconciled to God in Christ, to humble yourself before the God you know is there, and confess your sin, turning to Him and turning from your own control. This would be the happiest of Mother's Days for you.