



Ephesians 4:17-24 **How To Change**

What we call the 'book' of Ephesians is actually a letter – a letter written by a man named Paul to a church he knew well. And when they received it, they would have read the whole thing – several times. We need to remember that. This isn't just a starting point for a bunch of random sermons. There is a flow to what Paul is saying and we need to remember that, we need to remember the context of what we're about to read.

So let's back up for a moment and review what we've been learning just in Ephesians Chapter four where the chapter begins with Paul begging the Christians in Ephesus to live well. He tells them:

Eph 4:1 I ... beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called,

God is reminding us: He has a blueprint for our life. He has invited us into something bigger than ourselves. He prepared "good works" for us beforehand that we should walk in them.

And though that calling of God on your life, and the "good works" He has for you are personal, they're not private. No, we've been learning that God deals with us individually *so that* we can fit together corporately. And as we read the chapter we find the Scripture calling us to unity, to reconciliation in our relationships with one another and with God. Last week we saw the church compared to a human body with individual Christians serving as joints, bones, muscles, or limbs that all work together under the headship of Christ.

We're each called to grow spiritually as individuals because as we strengthen, mature, and develop we provide greater assistance to other believers - and they do the same for us as they grow so the body of Christ grows in size and strength.

And that's the desired goal – this is the direction we're headed in life – unity with God, unity with other people in our lives, and all of our relationships bonded together by love.

But now we're going to see some of the things that need to change in order for it to happen. For the next several weeks we'll be looking at obstacles to unity and spiritual growth. Don't be surprised if you sense God saying, "This needs to change." "We need to talk about that." Or, "You need to really hear this."

Friends, as we make our way through Ephesians Four, Five and Six, God is going to bring conviction and encouragement to those who are willing to receive it. God is going to speak to you directly about personal issues in your life and He's going to insist on change.

It might be a big change, it might be little changes, but it will be change none-the-less because none of us are perfect, we all have room to grow. And as we grow, we'll become

more united with Him, with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we'll be strengthened under the headship of Christ, and we will fulfill His will for our lives individually and corporately. We'll begin to discover, or further clarify, the good works He has prepared for us.

And here's how we'll get there:

Eph 4:17 This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk,

Remember that a Gentile is anyone who is not ethnically Jewish. So if you're Ukrainian, or Nigerian, or Thai, or Han Chinese - anything other than a Jew, you would be a Gentile. But not all Gentiles are the same. Right off the bat we're pressed to notice that there is a difference between the life of the Christian Gentile and the non-Christian Gentile. So, can you find it?

When you look at your life and the life of your non-Christian friends, family, co-workers, classmates, teammates, whatever – and I do hope you have some of those people in your life – but when you look at your life compared to theirs, do you notice a difference? Can you find it?

Is there a difference in how you spend your time? Is there a difference in any of your priorities? Is there a difference in how you talk about your spouse or how you talk to your spouse? Is there a difference in the way you respond to that missed scoring opportunity or losing that game? Is there a difference in how you spend your money?

4:17 This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk

That's a command given in God's name - how's it working out for you? Do you walk, do you live, does your life, your speech, your calendar, your closet, your schedule, your ambition, look just like everyone else in Northern Virginia or is there a change, things you no longer do like the rest?

If you're allowing God to shape your life, there will be a difference. You should expect it. And the difference is good, because the people around you who don't know God personally are headed in a different direction with their lives. They are characterized by:

17 (cont.) in the futility of their mind, **18** having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God,

Do you believe that? I'm not making it up. It's here in the Scripture: *there are people who are alienated from God*. Now that doesn't mean they're all raging, dogmatic, atheists. It doesn't mean they're bad people, they could be a good friend, a good neighbor, a good boss. It doesn't mean that they're not spiritual people. But they are alienated from the one, true, living God. Why?

because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart;

This is God's diagnosis of the world without Him – they are spiritually blind and ignorant.

And Christian, this could be life altering if you could really understand what it says: that there are people walking through this life, living this life, in a way we're not supposed to mimic, because they are being led by a blind heart.

But think about this – what is the usual advice and message you hear all day long? *“Follow your heart.”* People ask, “What do *you* want to be?” “What does *your heart* say?” This is the climax of so many decision points in movies and advertising and songs: let your heart be your compass, let your heart be the judge, follow your heart.

Ok, but what if your heart is blind? What if you're following someone else whose heart is blind? What if ignorance is in them?

Have you ever wanted something, and wanted it really bad, and later learned that it wasn't such a great thing and now you're thankful you didn't get it? Of course, we all get lured into the wrong thing at times because the desires of the heart can be so strong and we can be so sure, *but what if our hearts are blinded?* Just because I experience a desire in me for some thing doesn't mean it's the right thing, or a good thing, the thing that would lead me toward God instead of alienating me from Him.

Friends, the only heart that can be trusted is the one that is cleansed, made new by Christ, and constantly recalibrated and polished by His word, by prayer, by the counsel and conversation of other godly men and women.

Sure, it sounds so powerful, so romantic, so liberating to ‘follow your heart,’ but how do you know your heart isn't blind or the heart of the person whose example you're following isn't blind? Do you ever stop to consider that? Or are you on autopilot, automatically, uncritically, accepting whatever is put before you, wherever the fashions and trends go, following the crowd, doing whatever everyone else is, living on impulse and desire?

Oh Christian friend,

4:17 This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk

You might have done it in the past, they might still be doing it, but please, please, for the love of God and for the sake of the rest of the church that is waiting for you to grow and bring strength to us and that wants to give strength, guidance, and encouragement to you, please - **no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk.**

Because some of them are going to walk right off the cliff:

19 who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

There is an addictive, compulsive, insatiable side to sin that can trap you, corrupt you, and betray you before you even realize it has happened. And yes, I mean you. Those of you who are mature spiritually know this to be true. You know that your sin can lead you to a place where it eventually scares you.

Friends, Scripture warns us that our heart, our innermost desires, can lead us into enslavement, self-harm, and harm to others. There is a desire in us for things that might offer a moment of pleasure but which will eventually consume us, take over, and use us for their own purposes. You go from being the driver to becoming the passenger in your life and you only realize what is happening as the car begins careening out of control or just after you've smashed into something.

As a pastor and chaplain, I get to talk to people like this, people who feel like they're not in control anymore and it's finally got their attention. Have you been there?

Do you have regrets? Is there anything you've done or said that you wish you could go back and undo? Is there something you want to change? Do you want make sure you never go back to that place again?

Well friends, here's how you do that:

Eph 4:20 But you have not so learned Christ, 21 if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

There's a distinction made for us here between the person who has learned Christ and the person who has not. There is a distinction between the person who is walking, living, doing life day in and day out with Christ and the person who is not.

Those two lives are driven by different knowledge and actions. Could we say they're driven by different doctrine and then different deeds, different theology and then different to-dos? Is that familiar language?

It should be, that's the pattern we find in Ephesians and all the rest of Paul's letters – first he tells us about God, who He is, what He has done for us, what He wants to do in us and through us, all the things that are going for us, and then, he begins to give us guidance on how that should affect our lives. You remember: Ephesians 1-3 were full of information about God, now Ephesians 4-6 is full of all the ways we live as a result.

So we should expect our lives to look different if we're thinking about God. And if we want our lives to change, our habits to improve, our addictions and patterns and ruts to finally be

broken, the answer is, we need to know more about God and then let that shape us as we put off the old way of life and put on – notice, that’s an intentional action – we PUT ON the identity God has created for us in true righteousness and holiness. Christian, you CAN be holy. You MUST be holy. You need it, God wants it, and we’re all counting on you because you’re part of the same body we’re all tied into.

But we need to be on guard, alert to the fact that there are two ways to live – one focused on God and the other focused on self, and those two ways to live will lead to different places.

All paths do not lead to the same destination. There is a path that is broad, that many take, and it leads to destruction, and there is a path that is narrow, and there are few that take it, that leads to salvation and holiness.

You need to know that and you need to consider: which way am I walking? And, which way are the people I am following and allowing to influence my family and me, which way are they headed?

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So, how do I avoid that? How do I change? How do I become the man or the woman, the teen that God wants me to be? You learn Christ.

The way that is phrased in verse 20 is important – to “**learn Christ,**” not to learn *about* Him, but to *learn Him*. To meet Him, to know Him. We are called into a relationship with a living God, we’re not here to learn information so we can pass a test or cheer for an athlete whose stats we’ve memorized. We are given the chance to know God – to **learn Him**. That’s normal for Christians, that’s expected.

But, can you affirm that? Do you know God? Personally? Not conceptually.

Jesus said:

John 10:27 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. 28 And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.

That’s a statement of fact, not opinion. If we belong to Christ, we hear His voice, He knows us, and we follow Him.

Can you agree? Are those things true in your life? Look, I’ve got to keep pressing us on this. I cannot relent. We can’t just shake our head and nod at these pretty Bible verses. This needs to penetrate us. Pierce us. It’s not just a rhetorical question. I’m asking you, for the sake of your soul, for the sake of your spiritual health and growth, and for the sake of the

impact you will have on all the rest of us as we're knit together in the body of Christ - point blank: do you hear His voice? Have you learned Christ? Have you been taught by Him?

How does that happen you ask? Well, it happens in several ways. Number one the Holy Spirit convicts you. You have this sense that God is hunting you down. He's pinning you in. He's bringing you to checkmate in the game of life. If you are a Christian you know what this means. You have a clear sense that God is guiding you toward, or away from, something. He is shepherding you like a sheep.

John 10:27 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.

That can be toward things or away from things, but you have a definite sense that God is directing you. And then, you must choose whether or not to follow and obey.

You can also hear God's voice in His Word – that's why it is so valuable for us to be reading and re-reading our Bibles.

Christian, if you are truly a believer in Christ, one who is learning Him, hearing Him, being taught by Him, why have you not read your Bible? Have you at least read all four gospels? Have you read all the Psalms? Have you read Proverbs? Have you read all of the New Testament? Have you read all of the Old Testament? How many times? Do you want to hear God? Do you want to learn Christ?

Christian, I've got to make you squirm on this – how badly do you want to hear? How much time do you spend listening to His voice in prayer and in the Word?

No, really – how much? You prove what is important to you with your calendar and your wallet. Where does your time go and where does your money go? Those are the two trails that we can follow to find your heart. I know you feel busy, I know you feel tired – but what if you're actually wasting your life on things that have no eternal value while God is trying to speak to you and you're not sure whether Hezekiah, Haggai, and Hosea are all really books of the Bible.

If you can't answer that question with certainty, what IS teaching you how to walk in this world? What models and patterns are you following? Who are you looking to for guidance about being cool? We're being warned here – some things will lead us into sin. That could be scary sin or it could be just spiritual apathy that leads us to become flabby, injured, a hindrance to the body of Christ instead of growing fit, trim, and contributing to the overall health of the body as we all gather under the headship of Christ.

Remember: your spiritual fitness actually has an affect on me and my kids and my wife and my friends and everyone else in this church and the greater body of Christ. We're all in His body together and we need each other. God wants to use you, to make you noble, to make you worthy of looking up to, to give you something to be proud of when it comes to the use of your time, talents, and treasure – He wants to use you to be a blessing to others in the church.

But you can't do that if you're weak, injured by self-indulgence, or untrained. He's trying to speak to you, but are you listening? Do you sense any obligation to grow *for the sake of other people*? Do you have any desire to be used in greater measure by God? Those are good desires, those are healthy desires, those are normal desires that you should expect to find if you're really in Christ.

But the truth is, you're going to have to fight for them, they will require regular attention. Paul encourages the Ephesians:

22 that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

You can't avoid the contrast here - you either look like a person without Christ who is growing corrupt according to deceitful lusts or you look like someone who is being renewed by God in true righteousness and holiness. And your appearance is driven by what you put on.

We know that right? No one expects to show up at the White House and see people walking around in flip-flops and cargo shorts, even in August. No expects to see their surgeon show up for your procedure wearing her favorite little black dress. No, we put on clothing that reflects our position and environment.

So, what do you look like spiritually? Do you look like a teenage boy who just rolled out of bed with hair going every which way and crazy pajamas? Do you look like someone who has been working in a sewer all day clearing out obstructions? Or do you look crisp and clean, athletic and prime in a spiritual mirror?

When God looks at you, what does He see? When someone else in the church looks at you, what do they see? Do they see a dead man walking - or do they see you wearing the image of Christ? Do they see a contributing member - someone they are glad is here, someone who does them good and brings us all benefit? Are people excited to see you show up? When a kid shows up for your Sunday School class are they excited that it's *you* because though they might not express it this way, you love them like Christ? They see Him in you.

What do you look like in the eyes of others? Are you being corrupted and corrupting others or are you being renewed and sharing that renewal with others, provoking us all toward true righteousness and holiness? Are you a benefit to the body that you've been woven into?

These are hard questions, uncomfortable questions if we really face them, but we must face them my friends. The world is growing darker by the day. Our country is falling apart along racial and class lines. We're made to question who is really influencing whom in our

political process? Are the economies of the United States and China going to collapse? Is North Korea or Iran really ready to fire a nuke?

And on top of these big picture items, we've got trees falling on houses during recent storms, marriages falling apart, and parents being diagnosed with cancer. We've got kids who are getting into things they shouldn't and struggling to fit into places where they should. Life is hard and the world is a mess.

We need a place to stand firm. A place where we can feel safe. People we can trust. That's what the church should be. We are at war spiritually and we need people around us who recognize that and are willing to fight for us and with us, not against us, and certainly not to just sit around watching all the activity and getting in the way.

The call today is as it has always been:

Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war,
with the Cross of Jesus going on before.¹

He is calling us out of darkness, into light. He is calling us out of lust and into righteousness. He is calling us out of aimless busyness and into eternal productivity.

The church needs you, Christ wants you, but you have to determine: what are you going to put on today? What voices will you listen to today? And are you going to slide along spiritually or contribute to the spiritual health of others and receive the same from them? The pastors are here to equip you for the work of the ministry that God has called you to, will you walk in it? The church needs to know your answer – we're all woven together into this one body, we need you to help us, encourage us, strengthen us. You are not alone.

It's a line in the sand kind of morning my friends. Which side are you on? What are you putting on, and what are you putting off? I trust that the Holy Spirit is convicting you and encouraging you. Respond to Him. Trust Him. Surrender to what ever direction He is leading and walk with Him, instead of walking according to the pattern of the rest of this world.

Let's pray.

¹ http://www.hymnary.org/text/onward_christian_soldiers_marching_as