

Rooted & Grounded In Love ~ Ephesians

Week 6 ~ 4:17-5:14

4:17-24

In verses 17-19 Paul offers a description of life without God. “Gentiles”, as a category, should be understood not only as a racial or cultural classification, but also as those lacking the knowledge of, and revelation from, God. Notice the rather bleak description Paul uses...

- futility in their thinking
- darkened in their understanding
- ignorance
- hardening of their hearts
- lost all sensitivity
- given themselves over to sensuality (a good way of understanding this is a lack of restraint)
- indulging in every kind of impurity...with a continual lust for more (because it is not able to fulfill what is hoped for, combined with the law of diminished returns).

In verses 20-24 Paul contrasts their former way of life with what life “in Christ” is like. The former way of life was ruled by “deceitful desires”. “Deceitful” because they are full of false promises. Humans were not made to live with unrestrained desires. Nor would having all our desires met actually be good for us. But therein lies the Lie that our world propagates and perpetuates—that life is about getting everything we want (or at least to the highest degree we can).

But Jesus has taught us that life is about something different. Paul reminds his readers that they “...were taught in Him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.” (4:21) We can understand that as a summary statement of everything Paul covered in chapters 1-3, as well as a reference to previous teaching he had given them somewhere along the line. Or, stated another way, they previously did not have revelation from God, but now, through the preaching of the Gospel about Jesus and His Kingdom, they do have revelation from God. This results in being “*made new in the attitude of their minds...and a new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness*”. (4:23-24)

The exciting thing to see in all this is that CHANGE is possible...not only is it possible, it is expected. (We could even say that if no change results, there might be reason to believe that Jesus hasn't been grasped properly.)

This raises the question, “*How do we change?*” Prior to answering that question, we need to understand how we are formed in the first place. There are three primary factors/influences that form every human:

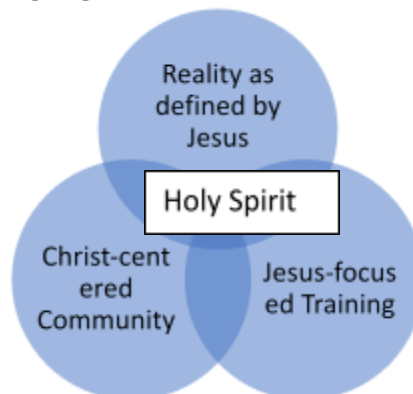
- Who we associate with (or who we are connected to...i.e. our community)
- Our understanding of reality (or what we think and believe...which is usually picked up along the way from those we associate with and the various stories/narratives that permeate our culture/society)
- The activities, practices, habits we do regularly (often learned from those we associate with) that either shape our understanding of reality or are a reaction to our understanding of reality.

Because these three factors/influences are fluid, we can accurately say that as humans we are in a constant state of “becoming”...which raises the question, “*Who/what are we becoming?*” In order to change/transform or be more proactive in the becoming process, we simply need to change these three factors/influences. (I say “simply” only conceptually...like many things, it’s easier said than done.)



So, when Paul says something like “*put off your old self*” (4:22) and “*put on the new self*” (4:24) he is inviting his readers to consider those three factors/influences “*in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.*” (4:21)

Jesus did not come to start a religion but to tell us about reality and how to live in harmony with that reality. He called that reality the Kingdom of God. Everything Jesus did and taught was to demonstrate/prove the reality of the Kingdom and how to live properly in it. So as we analyze the three factors/influences, we see that change/transformation happens as we engage in Christ-centered community, embrace reality as defined by Jesus, and participate in Jesus-focused activities. What kind of change? We become more like Jesus...which is the goal. As Paul stated, we are “*created to be like God*” (4:24). Though we are not left to make all this change happen by ourselves (in fact, under our own power we really can’t affect that much change). But, like all of life, it is meant to be done in partnership with God...so He empowers us with His Spirit (the ultimate change agent).



As we look at the letter to the Ephesians as a whole, we can see how Paul addresses each of these three factors/influences. In chapters 1-3 Paul goes to great length to describe reality as defined by Jesus, and he speaks to some degree about the Christ-centered community that results. In the first part of chapter 4, Paul really dives into the importance of Christ-centered community. In the rest of the letter, Paul will lay out for us what areas (activities, practices, habits) we need to pay attention to and give energy toward so that we can grow/mature.

To elaborate a bit on “*Jesus-focused training*” (or activities, practices, habits that are aimed at becoming more like Jesus), a good way of thinking about it might be:

- Be with Jesus
- Become like Jesus
- Do what Jesus does

The classic/traditional “spiritual disciplines” are time-tested and good places to start. But really, whatever helps us to become aware of His Presence, His love for us, and His will for us are good things to do. And ideally/hopefully these aren’t compartmentalized activities but part of the natural ebb and flow of our lives. And, if a particular practice gets stale or is more of a burden than a blessing, experiment with something else. Be with Jesus with a heart of being real with Him and with a willing attitude to obey/follow Him...He’ll do the rest. But remember, change takes time, so be patient. Also, try to let go of any preconceived ideas/expectations of what spending time with Jesus is supposed to “feel” like. If your experience isn’t the same as somebody else’s, that’s OK...you’re not them.

- *Think about your “old self” (prior to knowing Jesus) and your “new self” (since knowing Jesus). What are some specific differences you can identify?*
- *What are you doing to be with Jesus so that you can become more like Jesus?*
- *How are you different today (how have you grown, how are you more like Jesus) compared to a year ago? Two years ago? Five years ago? Ten years ago?*
- *As you step back and try to analyze our culture/society, who or what attempts to define reality? How so?*
- *When you spend time with Jesus, what is usually entailed, or what does that usually look like? Describe how you learned that.*
- *Share how spending time with Jesus has evolved for you over the years.*
- *Describe the impact that Christ-centered community has had on you.*
- *As you consider who you are, describe how the three factors/influences have shaped/formed you into who you are.*
- *What do you think/feel Jesus is presently inviting you into/toward?*

4:25-32

*“...I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.
Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.
Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:1-3)*

I offer the above passage simply as a reminder that everything following that passage is an elaboration of that exhortation. From this point forward, Paul is essentially laying out what it looks like to live consistently with our God-given identity (which he described in Chapters 1-3). So, we want to keep this well in mind as we look at this next section (4:25-32)

Additionally, we want to keep the immediately preceding instructions clearly in mind also:

“...put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires...put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Eph. 4:22, 24)

Paul will now describe at least some of what this looks like:

- Put off falsehood...speak truthfully to your neighbor
- In your anger do not sin
- Do not steal...instead work, doing something useful with your hands
- Do not let unwholesome talk come out of your mouth...speak only what is helpful and edifying
- Do not grieve the Holy Spirit
- Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, malice
- Be kind and compassionate, forgiving one another

Some things to keep in mind: This is a sample list (not an exhaustive list) of what it means to become like Jesus. Becoming like Jesus is the goal. The goal is attainable.

Some more things to keep in mind: We don't do these things (or not do these things) in order to get God to love us more or in order to earn any favor, merit, or appeasement. Rather, we do them (or do not do them) in order to live consistently into who we are...who God says we are (again, see Chapters 1-3). Look over the list again. Notice how the list describes what we would expect Jesus to be like...and we are called to be like Jesus.

Paul offers some detailed explanation of HOW these exhortations/instructions are in-line with our identity and calling:

- For we are all members of one body
- So as not to give the devil a foothold
- So that we have something to share with those in need
- That it may benefit those who listen
- Just as in Christ God forgave us

We are intimately connected with God and each other. That being the case, there are certain principles and practices that rule the day. Notice how all this fleshes out, and is in harmony with, verses 2-3. We can think of verses 25-32 as the rubber meeting the road of verses 2-3.

To not obey Paul's instructions in verses 25-32 is to not keep the unity of the Spirit (verse 3), which naturally grieves the Holy Spirit.

Practically speaking, why do people lie, hold onto anger, or steal? Typically, it's because they're looking out for themselves, not trusting anyone but themselves, being fearful or greedy. None of that is in line with who God says we are, or with what God has done for us, or with what He promises us. Rather, it's the old humanity doing what it naturally does...following its corrupted and deceitful desires. But in Christ, that is all changed. So, again, Paul is simply outlining what it looks like to live consistently with who we are in Christ.

From a simple moral/ethical viewpoint, Paul's instructions don't seem much different from other religions or philosophies or ideals of virtue. But the underlying motivation, the foundation which undergirds it, is completely different. It's loving God and others due to the love that was first shown to us. (It's not in order to earn or gain anything, but rather a response to what has

already been given.) This is uniquely and distinctly Christian. It is relational, not pragmatic. It demonstrates intimacy and interconnectedness, not independence and autonomy. It also speaks to a divine empowerment.

Under our own steam, utilizing only the resources we can muster within ourselves and living in the world we do, the idea of getting rid of bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, malice (verse 31) is pretty unrealistic. If you don't believe me, just check out the news. Likewise, to be consistently kind and compassionate and forgiving is pretty idealistic if we're left to our own devices. But thankfully we're not left to our own devices. We have the Holy Spirit to empower us; and we have the experience of being forgiven to fuel and motivate us to forgive others.

What does it look like when a person is indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit to live "in Christ", to put on this "new self"? It looks a lot like what Paul describes here in verses 25-32.

- *As we consider the "old self" vs the "new self", describe some changes you have noticed in yourself. How have you changed when it comes to lying vs honesty? What changes have you noticed in regards to anger? How is your speech/conversations different now compared to before? What other differences can you identify/recognize?*
- *I'm sure we can all nod in agreement that Paul's instructions of what to do (or not do)—this list of morals/ethics, if you prefer—are good and right. But for you personally, what is your motivation for doing (or not doing) them?*
- *When are you tempted to lie or stretch the truth? How does everything we have and are in Christ speak to that temptation?*
- *Are you holding on to any anger (or bitterness or resentment) that you need to let go of? How does everything we have and are in Christ speak to that?*
- *Have you ever stolen anything? Care to share? (Just for fun, the Greek word "steal" is "klepto")*
- *Have you ever had anything stolen? How did it make you feel? What kind of thoughts and emotions did you feel?*
- *Describe a time when someone showed you kindness, compassion, forgiveness.*
- *Describe a time when you wounded someone with your words. Describe a time when you were wounded by someone's words.*
- *Describe a time when you were built up by someone's words.*

5:1-14

It is safe to say that all of us have done something or said something that we regret, that we're embarrassed about, perhaps even ashamed of. What do we do with that? Let's explore some options. We could deny it, hide it, cover it up, make excuses, or blame someone else. We could admit it and make any necessary reparations. Hopefully we learn and grow from regrettable, embarrassing, and shameful experiences and don't keep repeating them.

Our regrets, embarrassments, and what we are ashamed of are often things we bring upon ourselves. Sometimes, however, other people do things to us that are painful, and we are legitimately a victim through no fault of our own. Regardless, what might Scripture teach us about how to handle such things? Let's keep these thoughts/questions at the forefront of our minds as we dive into this passage.

The first two verses nicely encapsulate the Christian life, *"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* (5:1-2) This would be a good passage to commit to memory. It covers all the basics...

- We are dearly loved children of God. If we don't start here, we are not likely to progress much further, at least not in a healthy way. This also harkens back to chapter 1 which outlines the spiritual blessings we have in Christ.
- As such, we ought to do what children naturally do...imitate their parents. As cliché as it may be, I distinctly recall "shaving" with my dad (not with a real blade) while he shaved. Likewise, as someone who has taught a teenager how to drive, it was amazing how I defaulted to how my dad taught me to drive. Children are naturally inclined to imitate their parents. Now it might be tempting to think something like, *"How are we supposed to 'imitate' someone we cannot see?"* This leads to the beauty, power, and ingenuity of the incarnation.
- We can just as easily and accurately translate "be imitators of God" as "be imitators of Jesus". We see in Scripture someone we can, in fact, imitate. This is exactly what Paul had in mind as he elaborates that Jesus loved us and gave Himself up for us. The Scriptures testify to this. Following the model/example of Jesus is how we best live into what it means to be human...living a life of love.

Of course, we know that this is easier said than done. We could view verses 3-7 as the CliffsNotes of human history—sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity, etc.—from which God is calling/saving us (namely from ourselves). The vast majority of human history demonstrates what happens to humanity when we drift from God and don't live into the purpose and design God has for us.

In the final section of this passage (verses 8-14) Paul highlights the inconsistency of all the sins and shameful behavior mentioned in verses 3-7 by bringing it back to our true identity as "children of light" (5:8b). But notice that Paul did not appeal to rules or laws but rather to relationship. For the second time in this passage he describes our relationship to God as "children". And notice verse 10, *"And find out what pleases the Lord."* To get technical for a moment, the word translated "find" here is a present active participle that can also be translated as "testing" or "proving". I bring this up to say that the Christian life is one of active exploration and discovery, not a static appeal to a set of laws/rules, as we learn to live in real-time connection with the Holy Spirit (more on that in an upcoming passage).

A common metaphor throughout Scripture is darkness and light (it's a particularly pervasive metaphor in the Gospel of John, for example). The powerful choice that we have is the option, the free will choice, to live in light or live in darkness; to live in step with the Spirit or out of harmony with the Spirit; to live obediently or disobediently. The former leads to life, the latter to wrath, shame, and death.

Unfortunately, the choice isn't always so clear. Experientially, we often don't see things as clearly "black and white" but rather more like "shades of gray". We even come to see this as "normal", maybe even preferred. But, make no mistake, that's acquiescing to the darkness (or becoming "lukewarm"—to change the metaphor—as Jesus said in Revelation.)

We are not the source of light but merely reflectors of it. As such, we don't evaluate matters of right and wrong by our own light and judgment, but rather we must subject such questions/matters to the light and judgment of God...and then respond accordingly.

The human tendency is, out of pride, to display/promote all that we think is good and right about ourselves for all to see (or, to use the metaphor, to bring the positive about us into the light); and, out of fear and shame, to hide and cover up all that we think is bad or wrong about ourselves. This is not how God wants us to live—in pride, fear, or shame. In fact, this is exactly what He has saved/delivered us from. He wants us to live in the safe, secure protection and acceptance of His forgiveness and grace. He wants us to come out of the darkness of our disgrace and experience the light of His love.

Practically speaking, how do we do this? No doubt it takes trust (which is another word for faith or belief). Doesn't everything about the Christian life come back to faith/trust? One chief way we bring ourselves into the Light is through confession. Confession is a lost practice for many Christians. This includes confessing/admitting wrong to God...and also to another human being. Theologically, one of the powerful and beautiful aspects of the Church (the Body of Christ) is to experience forgiveness and acceptance from fellow believers as representative of forgiveness and acceptance from Christ Himself. (It is also why it can be so painful and damaging should forgiveness and acceptance be withheld.) We represent Christ to one another. That is a high calling and responsibility.

Confession need not be in front of a whole congregation or even a whole Table Group (unless directed by the Holy Spirit or perhaps if the sin involves leadership that has gone astray or if the damaging repercussions are so widespread). Often a trusted friend or two will suffice. Sometimes a trained counselor might be in order. But, the point is, confession should be a normal part of the culture of a community of Christ-followers. As we regularly expose things to the light, the darkness (which is often within us) will scatter.

As mentioned at the outset, sometimes the deeds of darkness are done to us (as opposed to by us) and we become victims of someone else's shameful acts. Sadly, this too is part of the human condition. What we need to understand is that, while we can be victimized, we do not have to be defined by it. Very bad things can happen to us, can impact us, can hurt and scar us...but they need not define us. Only God has the right to define us, and He identifies us as dearly loved children. And only He can bring the needed healing and restoration to our brokenness. So we take our brokenness to Him...which is another form of exposing the darkness to light. His love and healing touch are so powerful, we can even be brought to the point of being able to forgive those who hurt us. But this can only happen as we bask in the light of His love, immerse ourselves in it, in Him.

- *What has been your experience with confession?*
- *If we hope for the church to be a place that has a culture of confession, then that first must mean we are a safe place/people in which to confess. In your experience, would you consider the church a safe place/people? If not, what steps do you believe can be taken to make it so?*

- *When you think about your identity, your self-concept? How would you describe yourself? (Where do the “dearly loved child of God” and “follower of Jesus” fit in your self-understanding?)*
- *As dearly loved children of God, we are called to “live a life of love”, following the example of Jesus. Such a life of love, then, looks like humble, sacrificial service. What does that look like in your life? (Or what would you like that to look like in your life?)*
- *What do you find most difficult/challenging about the Christian life, and what do you find relatively easy, pretty much second-nature about the Christian life?*
- *Paul offers a relatively short list (by Paul’s standards) of things that are “improper for God’s holy people” (5:3) As a group brainstorm two lists (as specific/detailed as possible):*
 - *the first is a fuller list of things—characteristics or behaviors—that are improper/inconsistent for Christians*
 - *the second list is of things that are proper/consistent for Christians*

(This could cause interesting conversation as not everyone may agree...so have fun, but be careful...be sure to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace ☺)

- *Verse 11 says, “have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.” Other versions say to have no fellowship or partnership with the fruitless deeds of darkness. That can get kind of tricky. For example, if we spend money on something that supports a business/organization that harms/oppresses other people, are we complicit? Are we having fellowship/partnership with the deeds of darkness? (Christians throughout the centuries have wrestled with such ideas. I suspect it’s better to wrestle—even if we don’t end up agreeing—than to never even consider how we might be partnering with evil.) How do we determine if we’re partnering with evil? How do we follow this exhortation with being complete separatists?*
- *Verse 4 mentions obscenity, foolish talk, and coarse joking. How do we determine when we’re crossing the line to inappropriateness? And the counter question, how do we avoid legalism and keep from creating “rules” for such matters?*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Imitating God

In this week's passage we read that we are "...*created to be like God...*" (4:24) and we're exhorted to "*Be imitators of God...*" (5:1)

What is a quality or characteristic of God that you desire to emulate? What can you do to cultivate that quality/characteristic? What practice(s) or habit(s) might help you toward that end?

This week's passage is chuck-full of "do's and don'ts" ...all of which are designed to help us become more like God. Which one(s) do you sense God wants to work with you on...to "*put off your old self, and put on the new self*"? Share this with a friend and make it a matter of prayer. (Remember, God wants this more than you do and will help you.)