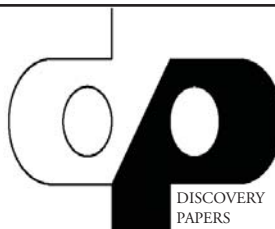


# WALKING IN RENEWAL

*SERIES: LEARNING TO WALK*



Catalog No. 4987  
Ephesians 4:17-32  
2nd Message  
Steve Zeisler  
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It has been observed that relatively few people begin a relationship with God late in life. Some will argue that this is because the sophistication of adulthood answers life's questions better than simple faith does. But I think the truth is the opposite of that for most people. It's not because people have better answers as they grow older, but because they have less hope. Anyone who has lived very long has been inspired and disappointed—probably more than once—by impressive ideas and charismatic personalities. The Christian gospel sounds, to many, like another grand claim that is too good to be true.

The belief, “I will never change—I am stuck with who I am,” is a terrible lie. The pages of the book of Ephesians shout against this lie. Ephesians tells a story that begins before creation and ends with the renewal of all things. But it is also about transformation of believers in this life. The word “walk” dominates the last three chapters of Ephesians. The argument is introduced in 4:1: “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called . . .” We are supposed to live right now making active choices, in the power of the Spirit, changed from the inside out.

In the last message (Discovery Paper #4986) we noted that all of us share the same life from God, and each of us makes an important contribution to a noble mission. In this message we are going to observe ourselves walking as those who have new personal character, new conviction, new hope, and new courage. At the heart of the passage we'll study, Ephesians 4:17-32, is this command: “Lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted . . . and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness . . .”

Ephesians 4:17:

**<sup>17</sup>So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk . . .**

I want to stop here for a moment, because there is a problem that has occurred historically in Israel and in the church as well. Paul uses the term “Gentiles” to make the point that there is a way of life that is unbelieving, and we are not to walk down that path. But when we

see the term “Gentiles,” we may start labeling people we know. “Oh, you mean the reprobates, the blasphemers, the idolaters—not people like me.” But that is clearly not what Paul intends. Verse 17 should direct us to examine ourselves, not judge others.

## The symptoms of unbelief

Ephesians 4:17-19:

**<sup>17</sup>So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, <sup>18</sup>being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; <sup>19</sup>and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.**

This is what an unbelieving life turns out to be like. Notice three outcomes that characterize those who live in unbelief: their thinking is degraded, their conscience is seared, and their appetites are out of control.

The first outcome: their mind is futile, and their understanding is darkened. They become ignorant. Perhaps you have found yourself on an extended spiritual detour and realized that your mind was less available to God than it had been before, that you had once thought more clearly, that you had once seen more beauty in the pages of Scripture and in the purposes of God. You had once been more aware of truth, more interested in the Scriptures, more responsive to what you heard. The arresting conclusion is that fleshly living diminishes our ability to perceive the Lord.

That's the warning that Paul is sounding here. There is a downward progression; an unbelieving mind gets darker, more futile, and more ignorant.

And at the same time that our thinking gets darkened, our hearts grow hard. An active and vital conscience that

feels shame and recoils from sin is critical to spiritual health. A soft heart will sound a warning: “Don’t go there,” or, “That’s wrong,” or, “That’s lustful,” and so on. But eventually, if we ignore the warnings then our conscience stops sending such messages.

There’s a fine line between humor and cruelty, have you noticed? I was making a fool of myself at our staff meeting last week, for no good reason. I was the butt of a joke, and it was wonderful! My friends were pointing out my shortcomings in a way that indicated they loved me. But I’ve been in other settings where the joke stops being funny and starts being cruel. The knives get longer, and pain is being inflicted, and somebody’s crying inside, whether they can admit it or not. Your conscience should bother you if you’re the one with the knife. There’s something in you that should say, “Stop. You’ve gone too far. It’s no longer funny.” A hardened heart neither perceives nor cares.

Finally, Paul talks about appetites that are out of control: sensuality, impurity with greediness. The NIV translates greediness as “continual lust for more.” All of us have appetites that ought to be sated with a good amount—enough pleasure, enough fun, enough chocolate, enough thrills. Paul is warning that for an unbelieving mind, “enough” ceases to exist. You need more and more and more. Appetites are out of control—food, sex, drugs, thrills, pleasures of all kind command more attention.

The warning: “Don’t go that way. You have an alternative. God is committed to making us new.”

## Putting off the old, putting on the new

Ephesians 4:20-21:

**<sup>20</sup>But you did not learn Christ in this way,  
<sup>21</sup>if indeed you have heard Him and have been  
taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus . . .**

The darkened mind can be taught by the truth of Christ. There is a new way to think and a new direction to go.

Ephesians 4:22-24:

**[You have been taught in Him] <sup>22</sup>that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, <sup>23</sup>and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, <sup>24</sup>and put on the new self, which in the likeness**

## of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

Verse 24 describes God’s creative work. Human beings were first made in God’s likeness. When he re-creates us, it is the same creative hand of God that makes us again in his likeness. Only God can create something new that didn’t exist before. Only he can bring life out of death. He has done so, and we can make choices to live based on our identity as the new creation of God.

There are two steps to this. It’s a simple, perhaps obvious thing. We lay aside or put off how we used to think, or what we used to be, and we put on something better, as if we were changing clothes.

But most Christians I know have a problem: we want to add Christian virtue without saying no to anything. We want to add a prayer life, or kindness, or compassion for the poor. But we also want to have all the status that comes by competing according to the world’s terms.

But the first step to walking in a manner worthy of our calling is to put off the old self. If we don’t, we resemble the Michelin man after awhile—an awkward, unstable figure. That’s why the Scriptures warn against double-mindedness, against trying to be two things at once (James 1:5-8). We can’t do it. We can’t serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). Our efforts to hold on to the old and hold on to the new at the same time are inevitably going to fail.

Observe four points of obedience, in which we are putting off the old and putting on the new. (We’ll pick up some more categories in the next message.) The four are honesty, anger, money, and gossip. These are real-life issues. They are not particularly religious. We all struggle at some point in our lives with temptation and failure regarding honesty, anger, money, and gossip. As we look at the next verses, we will observe a pattern: Say no, in order to say yes to something else.

## Honesty, anger, money, and gossip

Ephesians 4:25:

**<sup>25</sup>Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE *of you* WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another.**

Choose to lay aside falsehood and deception. There’s

a reason for this. Most of us deceive, prevaricate, and pretend because we're worried about our reputation. We're either fearful of losing something, or we want to gain good status with someone. But Paul's argument here is that we're already members of one another. We already have what we hope to gain by lying. Relationships are already established for reasons that are beyond us, the agape love that comes from God. So we lay aside falsehood.

The second point of obedience is anger.

Ephesians 4:26-27:

**BE ANGRY, AND *yet* DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, <sup>27</sup>and do not give the devil an opportunity.**

When we get angry, the likely outcome is that we will act on our anger in a sinful way. Anger always comes with the inclination to do something wrong. Yet we have another option—do not sin.

There's also some helpful wisdom in Paul's argument here. He does not say, "Never be angry." Angry feelings can rush up without our being able to control them. But we don't need to act based on this or any strongly felt emotion.

The other thing suggested here is that anger is sometimes instructive. Why are we angry? Sometimes the answer is that we're angry for good reasons. We're angry for the cause of justice, because the poor, the needy, or the helpless have been trampled on. Perhaps we're angry, as Jesus was angry, at those who had made his father's house a den of thieves (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46). Anger can have a good outcome. Sometimes anger teaches us about resentments or guilt that would otherwise be hidden to us.

The practical calling is to not sin. That's the choice we have. We will not hurt the person who made us angry. We will not deal vengefully with them. We will hold our response in check by the power of God.

The other thing Paul says is, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger . . ." That is, we'll put a limit on it. By nightfall we'll turn loose of it, and we won't wake up tomorrow with the same problem. We have the choice to put off the old and put on the new.

I suggest you take a break from reading this and spend a couple of moments praying and thinking, with this in mind: uncontrolled anger can be very destructive. Thank God for occasions when he has enabled you to acknowledge anger without becoming vengeful or bitter,

when he gave you a healthy way to deal with your anger. You're not who you used to be, and there's evidence of this in your life because the Lord has acted at times, done something good in place of your old sinful response. Thank him for it.

The next point of obedience to consider is money.

Ephesians 4:28:

**<sup>28</sup>He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.**

Most of us don't commit armed robbery or hold up banks. But it's likely that most of us want deals to tip in our direction. We like to have inside information on how to take advantage of opportunities. We like financial circumstances to be rigged to our benefit instead of somebody else's (too bad for them—"let the buyer beware"). Money means too much to us to prefer that everybody be treated the same.

What Paul is saying about money and theft is this: we have an alternative to letting money control us, and the alternative is to earn every paycheck we receive. Having done so, we will be generous with what we have. And at the end of the day, our conscience won't accuse us. People who live like this will not have their lives ruined by the love of money.

The final category is gossip.

Ephesians 4:29:

**<sup>29</sup>Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.**

By "unwholesome" Paul means damaging to other people's reputations, the kind of talk about folks that hurts them—slander, gossip. We should talk to one another, not about one another. And we should talk to one another in ways that are upbuilding, edifying, life-giving. This goes beyond superficial friendliness. It's knowing somebody well enough to be able to speak into their lives a word that will be genuinely meaningful to them, a grace-filled word that comes from God. Rather than gossip, let's use our tongues in such a way that we can speak to people's needs. We will have God's words for them at the very moment they need it, so that their lives are built up.

Again, I suggest you take a moment to think and pray. Reflect on how gossip and kindness work for you. Recall an occasion when someone encouraged your heart with a grace-filled word at just the right moment. Is there someone you could strengthen with a word today?

Now let's finish the last three verses,

Ephesians 4:30-32:

**<sup>30</sup>Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup>Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. <sup>32</sup>Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.**

We are forgiven people. However badly we've done, however hard we've been, however much we've failed, we are forgiven. We are claimed by Christ, and we can enter again into the life of walking worthy of our calling, walking in blessing to other people. No failure can deny us the opportunity to live for the Lord. And as God in Christ has forgiven us, that motivates us to forgive.

The apostle says, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." You can grieve only someone who loves you, who is paying attention, who cares about you. It's an extraordinary notion that God cares enough about us that our choices can bring him joy or grief.

Leslie and I recently spent an evening in an Emergency Room. She broke her arm, and she was in a lot of pain. During the long evening, we were in the company of many parents with sick children. Observing them, I would feel some compassion, and I prayed for some, but I didn't grieve over any of them. They weren't my children. The one you feel grief over is the one you love.

God loves us enough that everything about our lives matters to him. And he intends to fix what's broken in us and to give meaning to what we feel hopeless about.

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