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Learning Christ

Ephesians 4:20-24

Intro: As we pointed out last time, v17 of ch4 begins of a new section of Paul's letter. The theme of the rest of Ephesians will focus on the need for Christians to walk in purity. Paul has already instructed us that Christians are God's holy people and as such, we are not only to strive for unity between us but also strive for purity within our own lives. Oddly enough, in introducing this new section, Paul doesn't immediately launch into some positive instructions on what the morally pure life should look like. He will get to that eventually but before he does, he takes the time to remind the Ephesians of the true nature of the world system that they have been delivered from and the sad reasons it has come to be this way.

In v17-19 Paul lays out the nature of this present world system by the fact that the lost walk, in the futility of their mind (thinking), having their understanding darkened, and being alienated from the life of God. This speaks to the current status of the present world's miserable condition. The unsaved person doesn't know God so they can't think properly. Their disordered sinful conduct reflects a disordered sinful mind. The reason for this is because of the willful blindness (hardening) of their hearts. The world has willfully closed their eyes to the revelation that God has given of Himself to the world. This hardness has lead to a loss of sensitivity which enables them to give themselves over to impure, evil indulgences. They abandon themselves to a destructive life of sin. The situation described in v17-19 is as tragic as it is real. But for all its tragedy, it's not completely hopeless as v20 introduces the glorious alternative. But, Jesus isn't just an alternative; He's the only alternative to the wretched condition of the present world system!

Have you ever considered how significant it is that in the Western world we don't reckon time from some fixed point in the far distant past to which we add on year by year but from a midpoint from which we figure both forward and back? The Jewish calendar begins from what it regards as the date of creation and moves on from that point. So does the Chinese calendar. But not the Christian calendar! We begin with an approximation of the year of the birth of Jesus Christ and then number in two directions—backward in a

receding series of years, which we call B.C. and forward in an increasing accumulation of years, which we call A.D. (anno Domini, “in the year of the Lord”). By this strange reckoning we testify that Jesus of Nazareth is the dividing line of history.

But Jesus is the great divide in more than just a historical sense. He’s also a personal dividing point for everyone who has been saved by Him. This is what Paul has in mind as he moves in his treatment of practical Christian conduct from the gentile world, as it was (and is) apart from Christ, to the new standards of Christianity. Having described the world in its darkness, alienation, and futility, Paul now exclaims, “But you have not so learned Christ.”

This is Paul’s introduction to what’s going to be an extensive description of the Christian life and it’s important to notice that it begins with a reference to Christ Himself and not to anything that might be supposed to come out of the depraved hearts or futile efforts of mere human beings. Some people think that a new life or a new beginning in life can emerge from self-discovery (human potential movement). Some think that change can be found through personal enlightenment. They search for it through Eastern mysticism. Still others retain belief in the nineteenth-century notion of inevitable progress.

Real change comes in none of these ways. The only truly transforming power that has ever come into the world is that of the person and teaching of Jesus Christ, and the only true and lasting changes that ever take place in an individual life take place through believing in and learning from Him. Jesus is the great divide – you either receive Him or reject Him; accept Him or refuse to acknowledge Him. Jesus is the great divide, not only historically but also in the lives of countless people. Where you stand in relation to Jesus Christ will determine your destiny in this life and in eternity to come.

20-21 – As Paul begins to explain all this he uses 3 particular verbs, each related to education, and he follows them with a reference to the truth as it exists in Jesus. Together they create an image of what we could call the school of Jesus Christ. The way these verbs are used is interesting. One theologian even calls them baffling and considers them examples of an extraordinary use of language. Even in its English rendering, the phrase is somewhat confusing and there’s actually a very good reason for that.

The 1st verb appears in v20 should be rendered literally “you learned Christ” (or came to know [NIV]). The reason this is “extraordinary” is that the idea of learning a person, rather than a mere fact or doctrine, is found nowhere else in the Greek Bible. Nor has it been found in any other pre-biblical document. What does it mean? Well, it certainly means more than just learning about the historical Jesus or becoming acquainted with His doctrines. Its more likely to be taken along the lines of Jesus’ words when He said in His great prayer to the Father, in [John 17](#), “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent” ([3](#)). But, if this phrase is as unique to Greek literature as they say, how can we be sure this was Paul’s intended thought?

First, consider the fact that the bleak Gentile situation of the previous verses has at its center being excluded or alienated from the life of God. Being cut off from God and the life He gives is directly contrasted with knowing Christ on a relational level, not just on an intellectual level. Secondly, Paul’s statement that the truth is in Jesus indicates that the location of truth is within Jesus Himself. This means that it’s not enough to simply learn about Jesus, in order to know the truth you must personally come to Jesus Himself, since the truth is located in His person. This means that Christians are Christians because they’ve had an encounter with the living Lord Jesus Christ and have entered into a personal relationship with Him. It is a learning of Him that changes them at the deepest possible level.

The 2nd verb appears in the phrase you have heard Him. The NIV renders this, “you heard of him,” but “of” is not in the original text. The point is not that we have heard of Christ but rather that we have heard Him speak. How so? Were these Ephesian believers present in Israel some 30 years prior to hear Jesus speak? No, but through the apostolic witness of Paul and by the Holy Spirit, they have heard Christ. Have we heard Jesus? Yes! We’ve heard Him speak to us in the Scriptures, particularly as they have been expounded to us by preachers of the gospel. This is the way the Ephesians heard Christ and it’s exactly the same way all Christians hear Him – in His own words!

This is hard for the world to understand. The minds of this world’s people are clouded and their eyes blinded. Yet Christians know exactly what this means. You read the Bible or hear the Word of God preached and,

suddenly, sometimes quite unexpectedly, you are aware that Jesus is talking to you personally. This isn't subjectivity; or the power of persuasion; it's supernatural. Jesus does speak. He speaks to change the life and thinking of His people.

The 3rd verb is a heightened form of the common Greek word for instruction and appears in the phrase have been taught by Him. The key phrase is literally in Him but it can be understood in a locative sense (in Him) or to express the teaching agent (by Him). Being taught in Christ means that believers are taught the truth within the domain, or realm, of Christ. As people who belong to the domain of Christ, they have learned what is required under His rule, steering them away from the destructive sinful behaviors of the previous verses. Jesus is the atmosphere within which the teaching takes place. We can say Jesus is the school, as well as the teacher and the subject of instruction.

In the school Christ we have a case where the teacher and the subject and the environment are all the same thing. Christ is everything. John Stott comments on this passage, "When Jesus Christ is at once the subject, the object, and the environment of the moral instruction being given, we may have confidence that it is truly Christian. For truth is in Jesus. The change from His title Christ to His human name Jesus is odd for Paul but not unprecedented and it seems to be deliberate. Who Jesus was in His earthly ministry (and is now) – seen through His way of living, His way of relating to others, His attitudes, actions and manner of speech – is where truth is found. Jesus reveals God, His heavenly Father, through His character and person. In this way, the truth about God is seen in and through Jesus the man. The historical Jesus is the embodiment of truth, just as He claimed: "I am the way, the truth and the life..."

Notice in all of this that although Paul is speaking of the knowledge of Christ and His ways in the deepest, most personal, and most profound sense, he still speaks in educational terms of knowing or learning of Christ. Why? It's because in the previous verses Paul has described the condition of the secular world as due chiefly to ignorance. He has stated that the depravity of the Gentile world was due to its willful ignorance of God. The world has hardened its heart against God and so is alienated from Him intellectually and in every other way. So it follows that when Paul speaks of the difference Jesus makes, he does so in exactly parallel terms. The world is ignorant of

God, but Christians have come to know Him. The secular mind is hostile to Christ's teaching, but the believer joyfully enrolls in and continually makes progress in Christ's school.

22 – Here we see that the teaching of Christ in v21 was not a general statement of instruction but is aimed at something very specific: believers have been taught by Christ to put off their former way of living. Paul uses the metaphor of clothing to express this idea. The image is easy for us to understand. Despite our contemporary tendency to constant casual dress, we still recognize that some kinds of clothes are more suited than others to a particular occasion or activity. We normally wear light, bright clothes for a wedding and dark, somber clothes for a funeral. Also, some clothing is determined by a particular line of work. Doctors and nurses have special clothing. So do military personnel. Prisoners have clothing proscribed for them by the penal system. When they leave prison they exchange this unwelcome type of clothing for normal dress.

Clearly, before a new garment can be put on, the old garment must be taken off. Here, the old garment is the former way of life, described as the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts. This former way of life was not simply a lifestyle. It was actually an expression of the former self, the lost self. What you do flows out of who you are and this former self was corrupt. While Paul doesn't elaborate on the nature of this corruption he does reveal its cause: deceitful lusts (desires). How do these corrupt a person? These desires reach out of a person and draw them to their object, whatever it might be. Desires propel and shape a person's consciousness and life. If the object is unhealthy, unfulfilling or out-right evil, then it's not surprising that a person will be adversely affected. In this way, they've been betrayed by their own desires.

Of course, desires themselves possess no rational intent so how can Paul call them deceitful? The deceitfulness of lustful desires is seen in the contrast between what they promise and what they actually deliver. We desire things because we believe they will deliver some kind of good. But desires deceive and betray us when the desired object doesn't deliver the promised good but instead falls short. The overwhelming presence and use of mini-storage facilities is a testament to this. Those expensive units are chocked full of things people believed they needed and yet, have no room for and so there they sit, in storage for months and years at a time. But

seriously, the corrupt person is predisposed to continue pursuing these deceitful desires as they continue to search for the good they crave. In this way, their desires just further corrupt their inner being.

23– The 2nd thing believers are taught by Christ is to walk by being renewed in the spirit of their mind. This renewal refers to the proper realignment of the spiritual disposition of the inner person. This realignment overturns and corrects the previously darkened understanding with its futile thoughts that were willfully ignorant of God.

How is this accomplished? We must understand that conversion is a crisis that leads to a process. Through Christ, once and for all, we have been given a new position in His new creation, but day by day, we must appropriate by faith what He has given us. The Word of God renews the mind as we surrender our all to Him. Sanctify them by Your truth, Your word is truth (**Jn 17:17**). As the mind understands the truth of God's Word, it is gradually transformed by the Holy Spirit and this renewal leads to a changed life. Physically, you are what you eat. Spiritually, you are what you think. To be renewed in the spirit of our minds we need to be spending time daily in the Word, praying and fellowshiping with Christ.

24– The 3rd thing we are taught by Christ to do is to put on the new self. This is clothing language that corresponds with the taking off in v**22**. The old garment of the former way of life is to be taken off and replaced with the garment of the new self. This is metaphorically referring to the taking on of new characteristics, virtues, intentions and such.

Notice the contrast between these 2 selves. The old self was corrupted by deceitful lusts while the new self has been created according to God (His likeness), in true righteousness and holiness. The old self has been corrupted, which implies the ruin and warping of a pre-existing entity. The new self is a newly created entity. The old self is corrupted by desires that promise what they can't deliver. The new self is shaped according to God who always delivers on His promises. Instead of being excluded from the life of God through ignorance and a darkened understanding, the new self exists in conformity with God. Instead of being hard-hearted, promiscuous and impure (**18-19**) the new self is characterized by righteousness and purity. Instead of being ignorant of the truth (**18**) the new self is shaped by the truth that comes from God.

Now, if all of this sounds too morally high and out of reach for modern Christians to ever hope to attain to, let me encourage you by stating that what Paul describes here is not an imperative. Paul is not literally saying this is what you now must do as if we've just been saddled with a new list of impossible do's and don'ts that we're supposed to live by. No, Paul's not pointing to something that needs to happen in the believer's life, he's talking about something that's already happened! Believers are to follow certain Christian standards precisely because God has already made them new creatures in Christ by putting away the old nature and putting on the new. Paul's not urging a new and higher standard of morality on us. That's utterly futile. We can't ever hope to be genuinely better just by moral persuasion alone. That's never happened in the history of the world. Paul's demanding is a high form of behavior precisely because something decisive has already taken place. We've already been made new in Christ. That is why we should and must act like it.

The best illustration of this is given in John 11, at the resurrection of Lazarus. Lazarus had already been in the grave for 4 days when Jesus and His disciples arrived at Bethany, and even Martha admitted that, by now, the decaying body would stink. But Jesus spoke the word and Lazarus came forth alive. Notice the Lord's next words, "Loose him and let him go." Take off the grave clothes! Lazarus no longer belonged to the old dominion of death, for he was now alive. There was no need for him to go around wearing graveclothes. Take off the old and put on the new.

Or think of a prisoner who is released from prison but still wears his prison issued clothes and still acts like a prisoner and not as a free man. The first thing that guy needs to do is put on some new clothes. Fundamentally, Paul is telling us that as believers, there must be a genuine and complete break with the past. Jesus isn't merely added to our old life; the old life dies and He becomes our new life. Again, this isn't something we must gin up within ourselves. We are already new creation in Christ, created in us at the moment of our conversion. It's this new creation, this new self that is created according to God and is being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ and, as such, is instinctively righteous and holy. We already have both the capacity and the power to walk in purity; now we just need the resolve.

We began our study by recognizing the divisive nature of Jesus Christ. Yes, He came to bring peace but that peace only applies to those who accept Him. But, because not everyone is willing to accept Him, he brings division. What specifically does the coming of Christ and His revelation mean to the world?

1. God and atheism. Jesus shows us that God exists and that this God, the true God, is the God of the Bible. Anyone who rejects any aspect of the revealed Christ, by default, rejects the true God.

2. Plan or accident. Is life part of an important, divine plan, or is it just an accident? Either the world exists as the result of intelligent design or it exists merely by chance. Of course, tracing everything that exists back to chance is absurd but the world refuses to see it. If there's no plan and everything is the product of mere chance then nothing at all has meaning. The world itself is meaningless. History is meaningless. You have no meaning, and neither do I. If everything is just an accident then everything is irrelevant. It's only in Jesus Christ that we know this.

3. Truth or ignorance. Francis Schaeffer: "God is there, and He is not silent." This not only means that God exists but that we can know He exists and that we can know many other things besides. We can know because of God's authoritative revelation. Our world, which has heard the Word but has rejected God, has moved in the direction of uncertainty. In the final analysis there is no truth. A philosophy like this is the opposite of revelation, and the ignorance that results is so deep that it does not even know it is ignorance.

4. Life or oblivion. What is in store after death: eternal life or personal oblivion? Of all the fears people have in the face of death the least to be feared is oblivion—to die and be no more. The reality of facing God is far worse. To face God apart from Christ is to face judgment. Only in Christ can we pass over the dividing line between the kingdom of wrath and condemnation to that of life and light.

5. Blessing or cursing in this life. Jesus makes all the difference in this life too. Only Christ can bring blessing.

What was our life B.C. (before Christ)? Wrath and disaster. What is it A.D.? It is the way of mercy and blessing. What a Savior! 😊