

Ephesians 4:20-32
Off with the Old, On with the New
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The message found in today's passage is very simple. There is no deep theological principle here, no impenetrable divine mystery beyond our creaturely comprehension, no dark prophetic symbolism. All is plain and simple, very straight forward, very to the point. But here is the rub: the message of today's passage is very difficult to live out. In fact, it is impossible to apply successfully the message of today's passage to your life apart from the freeing and enabling grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are many things in life that are very simple in concept but very difficult in execution. I might read a book on how to play basketball and even watch some instructional videos or watch some professional basketball games. I may understand all the moves in my mind, but that doesn't mean that I can get my body to do them.

Some things are simple in concept and difficult in execution because doing them requires a certain degree of giftedness and a great deal of practice. Some things are simple in concept and difficult in practice for a very different reason. There are things which are simple in concept and difficult in execution because we are morally disinclined to do them, because we don't want to do them. Theologians call this moral inclination against doing what is right and toward doing what is wrong, original sin.

Original sin is the inclination toward sinning that is within us from which all actual sins proceed. This is the heart disposition from which all sinful transgressions originate. Thus we call it original sin. This heart inclination was a part of God's judgment upon our forefather Adam for his first transgression - eating that forbidden fruit. We inherited this heart inclination from him because we were born in his image. Jesus spoke about original sin when He said in Mark 7:21-23:

- 21 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders,
- 22 "thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness.
- 23 "All these evil things come from within and defile a man."

Because of the effects of original sin upon us, we even have trouble recognizing that we have a problem with sin. Original sin affects our mind, our understanding. We are blind to the fact of our sinfulness and to the misery which results from our sinfulness. In other words, we fail to recognize that the main problem we have in life is found in us. We are the real problem. We like to assume the problem is others or our circumstances.

We are like the older man who was concerned that his wife was becoming hard of hearing. Communicating with her was becoming more and more difficult. One day he decided to conduct a test of his wife's hearing. He went all the way across the room from her and said, "Honey, can you hear me?" He didn't hear any response. He got a little closer and again said, "Honey, can you hear me?" Again, he didn't hear any response.

He did this again and still nothing. Finally he got up right behind his wife and again said, "Honey, can you hear me?" This time he heard his wife say, "Yes, dear, for the fourth time, I can hear you." He thought that she had a problem with hearing, but he had finally learned that he was the one with a hearing problem. Because of original sin, we are inclined toward sinning and we are disinclined to recognize that we are sinners. Because of original sin, we are inclined toward sinning and disinclined to recognize that our sins are causing us misery.

Last week, we looked at the general principle that we as Christians are to put off the old and put on the new. The old is the way of life associated with original sin. The old is the way people live when original sin is the dominating influence in their lives, the influence which most characterizes what they are and how they live. The new is the way of life associated with the new birth, the way of life associated with regeneration, the way of life associated with the new creation which occurs in our hearts at the time of salvation. The new is the way people live when the heart effects of regeneration are the dominating influence in their lives, the influence which most characterizes what they are and how they live. The heart effects of regeneration are well defined in our Shorter Catechism's definition of effectual calling:

Q.31. What is effectual calling?

A. Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, He doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ freely offered to us in the gospel.

Putting on the new means living as those whom the Holy Spirit has convinced of their sin and misery, living as those whose minds the Holy Spirit has enlightened in the knowledge of Christ, living as those whose wills the Holy Spirit has renewed, living as those whom the Holy Spirit has persuaded and enabled to embrace Jesus in the arms of faith.

Last week, we looked at the general principle of putting off the old and putting on the new. This week, Paul gets very specific by giving us some very specific examples of what it means to put off the old and put on the new. We will this morning consider these specific examples.

1. Speaking the truth - verse 25

Jesus pointed out that the devil was a liar from the beginning. The devil misrepresented God's truth and even denied God's truth. He presented a fantasy world to Adam and Eve, a world where they could rebel against God, be their own moral authorities, and succeed. Satan told them a fairy tale in which they sinned and lived happily ever after. It was all a lie.

We need to live in the real world that is defined by truth which we learn from God. The devil tells us that God's truth is like the string on a bird's leg which is a chain of bondage. No, God's truth is like the string on a soaring kite or the rope which a mountain climber uses to descend a vertical cliff. God's truth doesn't bind us. It frees us from harmful fantasies and enables us to know and live in the real world.

We should ourselves be truthful with others. Sometimes we are tempted to tell people what we know they want to hear even though we know it isn't true. Paul calls this tickling their ears. Sometimes we are tempted to tell people what makes us look the best even though we know it isn't exactly the truth. No, we should speak the truth in love.

This doesn't mean that we have to tell others everything. There are things we should keep private, things we should tell only certain people. But we shouldn't lie to people and deliberately deceive people.

It is especially sinful to lie to our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is especially sinful to try to deceive the church. Think about Ananias and Saphira. They lied to the church. Peter said they lied to the Holy Spirit. They sold some land and gave some of the proceeds to the church, yet they said they gave all the proceeds to the church. It was not the truth, and they paid for their sin with their lives.

Lying is always dangerous. We end up deceiving ourselves. We end up confusing the fantasy world of our lies with the real world. Also, liars are eventually caught because they eventually slip in their efforts to live consistently with their fantasy world of deceit.

Paul Harvey once told about four boys who were late for class one day. They told their teacher that they were late because of a flat tire. They had missed a test because of their tardiness. The teacher said that she was willing to allow them to make up the

test if they would answer just one question. She gave them each a piece of paper and a pencil and sent them to the four corners of the room. Then she asked them each to write on the paper which of the four tires on the car had been flat. As it says in the book of Numbers, "Be sure your sin will find you out."

2. Being angry without sinning

Paul didn't say never to be angry. In fact, there are times when something is wrong with us morally if we are not angry. Those who love the truth will hate lies. Those who love what is right will hate what is wrong.

Jesus never sinned. Yet He was angry when He saw the temple at Jerusalem being misused and abused as a place of commerce. Jesus was angry because of His zeal for God and because of the religious leaders' sinful abuse of God's house. Jesus' angry response to this sinful abuse was the righteous response because Jesus' actions were always righteous. He was holy, harmless and undefiled. He never sinned in thought, word or deed.

In contrast to Jesus, there is always some sin clinging to our anger. Our anger is never a purely righteous indignation justified by the circumstances. To the degree that our anger is rooted in selfishness, pride and conceit, to that degree our anger is sinful. In our lost condition, such sinful motivations always dominated our anger. In our saved condition, such sinful motivations always at least touch and taint our anger. The sin inclination no longer dominates our heart but it still dwells there and has its contaminating effect on all that we think, say or do.

Paul also goes on to say, "Don't let the sun go down on your wrath." We have better things to do with our time and our energy than to focus on the wrongs done to us and to brood over them. Remember that God will ultimately right every wrong. God says, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay." We should leave such things to God. In the mean time, we should seek reconciliation with those who have wronged us. We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." We ask God to pardon all our sins based on the saving work of Jesus. We are encouraged in our request because our own inner desire and ability to forgive others from the heart is evidence of our faith relationship with Jesus. The Jesus who gives us a new heart is also the Jesus who forgives our sins.

We should seek reconciliation with those who have wronged us. When the guilty party who has sinned against us won't repent, we should turn the other cheek. We should turn our focus away from the situation, leave justice to God and go about our work of seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. We have too much to do in this life to become obsessed with settling personal scores.

Paul goes on to say, "Don't give place to the devil." To obey this command, we have to keep short accounts with others. If we continue brooding over perceived wrongs, we will give the devil a foothold in our lives. Once the devil has a foothold in our lives, he will continue pressing on until we are filled with bitterness. Paul tells us in verses 31 and 32:

31 Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.

32 And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.

3. Stealing, v. 28

Don't take what belongs to other. Respect the property rights of others and know the satisfaction of honest labor. If you are able, engage in honest and gainful employment so you will be able to meet your own needs and to provide for those who depend upon you, such as your family. Beyond that, through honest and gainful employment, you will have the wealth which enables you to be generous with those in genuine need. You will experience the genuine joy of giving to others, even as Christ has so generously given to us.

4. Speaking

Avoid saying anything which hurts another person unjustly. Instead seek to say what will truly edify others, what will build them up and encourage them in godly living. Think of your words as a form of food that you are feeding to others. Are you feeding others poison that harms them? Are you feeding others junk food which tastes good but which doesn't have any real nourishment in it? Are you feeding others wholesome food that is tasteless or not seasoned well? Of are you feeding others wholesome food that is well seasoned and thus both nourishing and delectable?

Conclusion

Finally I want to consider Paul's general exhortation for leading a new life in Christ: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." Paul says that as a

part of the application of redemption, the Holy Spirit has sealed you. Some wrongly interpret that as a motivation for sinning. They think,

"There is coming a day of full redemption after which I won't sin any more. Until then my salvation is securely sealed, and I can't lose it. So I don't really need to be that concerned about my sins in this life. I'm going to heaven regardless."

That is not a balanced understanding of the doctrine of sealing. A seal imparts an image to a soft material such as wax or clay. Then that image is a mark not only of security but also of authenticity and ownership. When the Holy Spirit seals us at the moment of salvation, He conforms our hearts to the image of Christ. He restores that moral aspect of the image of God which the human race lost when Adam fell into sin. Now Christ and not sin dominates our hearts and is the Lord of our lives. We are no longer our own. We were bought with a price. We belong to Christ. Christ gives us secure protection not only from hell in the life to come but also from the enslaving lordship of sin in this life. And our new life in Christ gives authenticating evidence that our faith relationship with Jesus is real and genuine. Thus the Holy Spirit gives us more and more evidence of our salvation through His enabling us to die to sin and live to righteousness. In this sense of given us assurance of our salvation, the Holy Spirit continues to seal us more and more. Thus the Holy Spirit seals our hearts with the image of Christ as a sign of secure protection, authentic faith and new ownership. You see, the seal of the Spirit means much more than security.

The seal of the Spirit means divine ownership, and some don't want to acknowledge that God bought them with a price and now owns them. The seal of the Spirit means authenticity, and some have no evidence of having an authentically new heart with a restored image. Those who emphasize the seal of the Spirit as security from eternal punishment while neglecting the seal of the Spirit as a sign of God's ownership and authentic faith should ask themselves if they really have been sealed by the Spirit. We should be grateful for the sealing of the Spirit as a part of the application of our redemption. We should also remember that our sins grieve the Holy Spirit. Our gratitude for the work of the Holy Spirit in sealing us should motivate us not to sin in order to avoid grieving the Spirit. Our desire should be to live in a way which will instead make the Spirit rejoice.

Let me close with a thought about our needed to look to Jesus for the power to put off the old and to put on the new. Think about being on a trip far from home when one of the tires on your car goes completely flat. This is not a slow leak but a serious puncture which has ruined the tire. You get out of the car and prepare to take off the old tire and put on the new tire which you keep in your car's trunk. Then you discover that the lug nuts on your old tire are frozen tight. With your limited little lug wrench, you can't get them to budge. Then you notice that your new spare tire has no air in it anyway, and you don't have a tire pump. You then realize that you are helpless. You are not going to be able to take off the old and put on the new in your own strength. That is simply beyond you, and you need help.

We are in the same situation when it comes to taking off the old and putting on the new spiritually. We need help, and the only one who can help us is Jesus Christ. We must receive and rest in Him alone for salvation. We must come to Him and embrace Him with the arms of faith. As that faith grows, Christ will progressively enable us to put off the old and put on the new.