

### Ephesians 4 (31-32) – The Core of Christian Living

Paul has been giving us his description of living the Christian life, proving practical instruction with regard to lying (vs.25), anger (vs.26-27), stealing (vs.28), and communication (vs.29). We are to put away our old sinful ways (vs.20-24), and to stay in our old ways grieves the Holy Spirit (vs.30). Now Paul continues with the matter of our attitude and actions toward others. The same pattern Paul used in vs.25, vs.26-27, vs.28, and vs.29 he uses again in vs.31-32.

Don't do this – *Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice*

Instead do this – *Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another*

This is why – *as God in Christ forgave you*

Paul didn't just tell us as Christians that we are to put away sin in general; he doesn't want us to deal with sin in some vague manner. There are specific things we need to deal with, and specific ways that we need to deal with them. Just because we don't feel wrong doesn't mean that we aren't wrong (cf. Psalm 19:12-14, 139:23-24), and so the Word of God tells us about specific things. This is meant to bring us to conviction, confession, repentance and new action.

Yes, this has to keep happening all the way through our life. The process of sanctification is never complete in this life, but we can make real progress, and we are to do so because it pleases God. To avoid it is to grieve the Holy Spirit (vs.30 / 1 Thessalonians 4:7-8 – *For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you*).

We need to deal with sin directly, and specifically, and this whole section of Ephesians 4:25-32 is as practical as it can be. The “*let all*” here in vs.31 means both “every single instance” and “every single form”, and vs.31 presents us with various emotions, expressions, and forms of sinful anger. It's a lot, but our new nature gives us the power to take control over our emotions.

“*Bitterness*” is resentment, a dark outlook, it is to nurse a hurt, to bear a grudge, to meditate and feed on real or imagined wrongs and/or slights. It can be about events, but in this context it especially refers to relations between people. It is a hardheartedness towards others that will not let go of the past. It is an unwillingness to be reconciled, an unwillingness to forgive. It is sullen, sour, and cynical, and it thinks the worst of people and things. Bitter people are miserable and they attempt to spread misery on others.

You hear people say, “My walk with God has never really been the same since *this...*”, and yet they don't realize why their walk with God hasn't been the same. It is because they are still holding on to that, and they keep nursing that hurt, and so they are grieving the Holy Spirit. God wants you to be free, let it go. Every day you say “I'll never get over that” you are working contrary to the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. Something or someone else might have “made” you miserable, but resisting God is what *keeps* you miserable.

“*Wrath*” (same as “fits of anger” from Galatians 5:20) is an explosive outburst, it is rage; not only is the person angry, everyone knows it. “*Anger*” is a settled, seething hostility. Others may

not see it, but it is there below the surface, and God sees it. Some people may not have ever had a problem with a bad temper, but everyone has had a problem with that settled, seething anger, because it was a part of our old man's nature. Bitterness results in "wrath" and "anger" because bitterness is the result of unresolved anger. A bitter person is always angry about something, and they are angry more often than they are happy. This is not the work of the Holy Spirit.

"*Clamor*" speaks of shouting; the picture is of someone angrily yelling at someone else. The bitter person has fits of rage and is seething in hostility and they will yell at you if they feel that you have crossed them. You might have heard "clamor" in your neighborhood, when the quiet of the night is broken by the sound of people yelling at each other. That's clamor; it's angry noise. It can happen when people become intoxicated; there is a lack of restraint, a brawling attitude. Clamor is most certainly not the peaceful fruit of the Spirit. If a Christian is to act like a Christian, the shouting matches are over.

"*Slander*" is literally, "blasphemy", but it refers to other people here, not God. It is speaking of verbal abuse, of vilifying others. Still, there is a sense that we are blaspheming God when we verbally abuse people, because they are made in His image (cf. James 3:8-10). And how grievous must it be to the Holy Spirit when the people you are verbally abusing are also Christians! Slander is the attempt to damage, to injure people. It is badmouthing, speaking evil of someone (cf. James 4:11). The slanderer is spewing out words to wound, which might include outrageous, provoking, shocking, or violent language. The person seems out of their right mind; they say things that they wouldn't have said otherwise, things they wish they hadn't said later. Yes we have all done this. But we are to put this away.

*along with all malice* – "malice" is often the attitude that underlies all the other forms of anger listed here. It refers to the intentional desire to do harm, to cause distress. The actions of malice can be devious, but the attitude is like someone coming at you with an axe; there is no doubt as to their intention. Malice has no interest in mercy, and it has no place in the Christian life.

In all of this, notice he doesn't say pray it away, he says put it away. Yes we are to pray about these things, and yes we need the Lord to help us with these things. But as Christians we have the Holy Spirit, and so we can do these things. We are free, we are not bound by our old nature, we can put our past hurts away, and we can live according to our new nature. We have a choice; we don't have to give in to sin. Just because and even if everyone else gets it wrong doesn't mean that you can't get it right. And to put away the negatives of vs.31 means we must put on the positives of vs.32. Once again, Paul is giving us "obedience training". He isn't just telling us what to do; he is teaching us how to do it. We crucify the vices by cultivating the virtues.

It isn't just a matter of avoiding the bad actions; to obey as God intends us to, we must engage in the good actions. Paul does not just tell us to stop some things he tells us to start other things. You can't just sterilize, sanitize, and isolate yourself into the type of obedience these verses are commanding. You have to be actively, purposefully eliminating the bad by engaging the good, and you have to grow, and it takes time, and it hurts, but it is right, and it pleases God.

*Be* – Christians are a new creation, yes, but growth is a process. We are planted in new soil, and we have new life, but some of those old dead leaves don't fall off until the new leaves burst

forth. It takes time, but it needs to be focused upon, it isn't automatic. "Be kind" is a present middle imperative; in other words, it means "keep on becoming kind".

*to one another* – These virtues are things that take place in the context of human relationships. We put away the vices of vs.31 and we practice the virtues of vs.32 with *one another*. We express our growth in terms of other people. We must see our relationship to the Holy Spirit as it intersects with our relationship to people. If the question is, "how are you treating the Holy Spirit in your life?" the answer is "how are you treating other people?"

You can't escape this with a simple, "I'm nice to other people". If you're not interested in the corporate worship of God, with the local people of God, then you haven't been born of God. People say, "I love God, I worship God, I want to serve God, but I don't want to be around the people at church, I don't think God cares about that". That is not the work of the Holy Spirit. This verse teaches that this is impossible; you can't actively love the Lord without actively loving His people. If you are avoiding the people of God, you are avoiding the Spirit of God.

Look at the verse; the process cannot be lived out unless it is lived out before other people. Our "vertical relationship" (with God) is not what we think it is if it does not affect our "horizontal relationships" (with people). There will always be differences in growth and spiritual maturity among people. We are all called to the "messy" of others having to deal with us, and the "mercy" of having to deal with others. The growth that God is calling us to cannot happen without it. Some will object by saying, "I got hurt by people at church". While that may be the case, and what people might have done wasn't right, that doesn't make it right to stay away from church. It isn't wise or godly to hold on to that hurt, it grieves the Holy Spirit.

*"kind"* – this is a gentle, generous, easily entreated, helpful spirit. This isn't simply about having a sweet attitude; it is about doing good things for others (1 Corinthians 13:4). It is a reflection of God's kindness to us (Titus 3:4 / 1 Peter 2:3). Kindness means we are available for people, and we aren't dismissive of people. It is *not* harmful and it *is* helpful. This puts the positive action to the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12). We are called to look upward and then look outward. The Christian life is not a self-centered, self-focused life. That's what a bitter life is.

*"tenderhearted"* – this is a compassionate disposition (cf. 1 Peter 3:8), a person full of empathy, with caring actions. This is the opposite of being hardhearted (*calloused* – vs.19). This is speaking of the sort of virtue that is the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian. There is an earthly sort of compassion which isn't what Paul is talking about here. A tenderhearted person cares about what sin is doing to people, and they want to bring God's grace and the Gospel, the real solutions to sin, to the lives of people. A soft heart wants to see souls set free.

*forgiving one another* – this is a reciprocal action. At some point and at certain times we all need forgiveness from others and we all need to extend forgiveness to others. This is part of our church's *Mission Statement*. The subject is a main topic in our church handbook (*The Fellowship Files*). Forgiven people become forgiving people. It's the heart of a gospel-transformed life.

*as God in Christ forgave you* – here is the motive (Colossians 3:13). This full, complete forgiveness has already happened, it is a past historical fact (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:19 / 1 John

2:12). The Christian has been forgiven of all their sins, and so we should forgive all of the sins that others do to us, because God has forgiven them. God's forgiveness of us required the death of His sinless Son. Our forgiveness of others requires only our willingness to do it. How can we hold a grudge against someone when God doesn't hold a grudge against them? How can we hold a grudge against someone when God doesn't hold a grudge against us?

The only way that we can receive the forgiveness of our sins from God is to receive Jesus Christ as the payment for those sins. And this "receiving" means that we accept the payment for sin that God offers, and it means that we have been bought. And what Paul is teaching here in vs.31-32 is the essence of what God commands of His blood-bought, blood-washed, born again children.

The "why" of vs.31-32 (*as God in Christ forgave you*) illustrates an important principle and gives us a vital implication. The principle is that our attitudes and actions toward others are to be based on our actions and attitudes toward Christ. The implication here is that the way we see and treat other people is a reflection of how we think God sees and treats us.

Jesus said that the essence of what God commands is to love God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40 / cf. Leviticus 19:18). Jesus said that the first command, "love God with all you are", and the second command, "love your neighbor as yourself" are alike; they are linked together. The NT echoes this truth (Romans 13:9 – *For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* / Galatians 5:14 – *For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* / James 2:8 – *the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"*). It is really just one command, the second flows out from the first. We are not doing the first if we are not doing the second, and we cannot do the second unless we do the first.

And so, if our attitudes and actions toward others are to be *based* on our relationship with Christ, our attitudes and actions toward others are a *reflection* of our relationship with Christ, as far as our current level of intimacy and degree of grieving or pleasing the Holy Spirit is concerned. We mess this up because we just aren't thinking rightly. We need to be continually renewed in our mind and reminded of what we believe, why we believe it, and how that is supposed to guide us.

If we aren't treating people right, then we aren't treating God right, and it is because we have forgotten how God treats us. Or we might see and treat people right for the most part, but at certain times, or with certain people, we have problems. It still boils down to an issue of us and God. Perhaps we see God in a way that isn't really true; we are focusing only on a part of the picture. And so our attitudes and actions toward others are warped, or how we think Christians ought to act is warped. Maybe we don't believe that God treats us like we think we ought to be treated at the moment, and so we aren't concerned as much for how we are treating others at the moment. Of course, some just don't care about people because they just don't care about God.

This is a powerful motivation and a piercing measure. Its application can be multiplied throughout all of life. How we see and how we treat others, in any situation, it is a reflection of how we think God sees and is treating us. We all have room to grow, of course, but this puts our path to growth in clear focus. If you want simplicity and clarity in the Christian life, here it is.