

## ***Disciples Are Different: Our New Life in Christ***

In our New Testament reading, the Apostle Paul sets forth the ways our lives as God's people are to be different from the lives of those outside his kingdom. I read **Ephesians 4:17-32**:

*<sup>17</sup> Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. <sup>18</sup> They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. <sup>19</sup> They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. <sup>20</sup> That is not the way you learned Christ! <sup>21</sup> For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. <sup>22</sup> You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, <sup>23</sup> and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, <sup>24</sup> and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*

*<sup>25</sup> So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. <sup>26</sup> Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, <sup>27</sup> and do not make room for the devil. <sup>28</sup> Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. <sup>29</sup> Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, <sup>32</sup> and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.*

The more I read and study this passage of Scripture the more the word "different" stands out in my mind. Obviously, Paul is driving home the point that the Christian life is different from the life of an unbeliever. Yet how we as disciples of Jesus are different from those belonging to the world is crucial to understand. We are not to be different for difference' sake but to be different in the ways Christ makes us different. I think we can all agree that in God's kingdom some are different in odd and even superficial ways. We are called to be different, but some are clearly more *different* than others, and different in the wrong kind of ways.

During my youth, like most teenagers I wanted to be well liked by everyone, and did manage to make myself popular in school, church and social life, primarily through achievements in sports, music and other activities and opportunities to achieve leadership and make many friends. I earnestly sought to maintain my Christian witness while at the same time achieving a high degree of social acceptance and even popularity. I tried to relate to others while also maintaining a degree of difference in moral and ethical values and behavior. I'm sure, that in my immaturity, I did not always live out my convictions as I should have done, yet my friends respected my standards

as a Christian. And I was embarrassed by certain individuals in my home church who seemed to want to be different just for difference' sake.

One young man, who was a fellow church member as well as a classmate at school, truly succeeded in being different, yet it was for him a matter of being different for difference' sake. For him, holiness was associated with a certain way of looking, dressing and speaking, and the more he could alienate himself from others and the more people he could offend seemed to add to his assurance that he was being "persecuted for righteousness' sake." I was convinced, however, that he was simply being justly punished for obnoxiousness' sake.

Kirk seemed to think that his "holiness" was enhanced by his sloppy appearance and poor grooming habits. He carried with him a large black Bible and often stood in the hallways of the school delivering orations of judgment against fellow students. Because he was a fellow Christian and church member, I felt obligated to at least tolerate his behavior, but was always embarrassed by my association with him. Kirk indeed was different, but he was different for difference' sake and in a way that nullified the kind of difference I think Paul is writing about in our text.

We are called, not to seek to be social misfits who alienate others by our superficial differences, but are called rather to be genuinely different in the ways that truly matter. Recent research indicates that those who claim to be born-again Christians show no difference in their moral lifestyle and ethical practices from non-Christians (Barna). Our Scripture passage clearly sets forth the vitally important and essential ways followers of Jesus are to be different from the world around us.

Most of the Ephesian believers were Gentiles and before God's grace rescued them, they were also under the influence of the former way of living and looking. They had a godless worldview, which was necessarily futile, hopeless and unenlightened by God's truth.

Paul had noted earlier in Ephesians, that before we came to faith in Jesus, we were dead in our transgressions and sins, were objects of God's wrath and were without hope and without God in the world (2:1,3,12). Again, this is a pathetic picture, which puts the unbelieving world in a different light than they naturally can see themselves. Spiritual blindness is self-deceptive and grace alone can enable the blind to see. Jesus said that the only hope for the spiritually blind is for them to admit their blindness and come to him for the sight he alone can give (John 9:35-41).

Paul says "You, *however*," have become different people, with a different way of looking, because of the transforming power of Christ. We have come to know Christ through a personal, living faith, which has given us a totally different outlook. We have come to know Christ in a personal, life-changing experience. Even an unbeliever, with a heart hardened against God, can know *about* Christ and can be good at quoting Scripture and be regarded as a good churchman or woman. But only by the invading, creative power of the

Holy Spirit we can come to know God through the risen Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

As we take off the old way of life, like an old, worn-out garment, we simultaneously put on the new self, “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (22-24). I recall in her healthy years how Nancy regularly coaxed me to “put away” a favorite shirt, jacket or other item of clothing, which to me seems quite natural and adequate, but to her better taste would be better donated to charity or used for cleaning rags! God is always recycling and remaking us, and we’re to “put on” conduct consistent with our being-remade character.

Wouldn't it be much easier to be a disciple of Jesus if all we had to do was agree in our minds with these magnificent, irrefutable truths of the gospel and of our new life in Christ? What makes the life of a disciple so challenging are these invasive, pesky, practical teachings that demand changes in our behavior! Paul doesn't give us an exhaustive list of our new and different behaviors in Christ, but one that's well representative of our life together in the body of Christ and also the life that others outside of Christ can see.

Paul says that the disciple of Jesus is different from the world in his or her integrity of speech. The people of God are people of integrity, with our speech and conduct being integrated and consistent with our profession of faith as the children of God. We depend on true speech, needing to teach and instruct one another in the faith, so that we all grow in spiritual maturity.

Here Paul may well be thinking of “the old lifestyle of deception,” which is always harmful to relationships. The lack of trust created by deceptive speech and conduct is a threat to the marriage relationship but also to the church body and fellowship. Nothing can destroy trusting relationships as much as hypocrisy in the church. Hypocrisy is not the failure to achieve perfection, but is rather the intentional deception of trying to make people think you're someone or something you're not. Hypocrisy is basically living and presenting a lie.

As your pastor, for example, I'll never achieve sinless perfection in this life, and will admit readily what you already abundantly know as a fact! But I'm called to seek after holiness and to grow in grace and godliness and to live before you with transparency and honesty, confessing my weakness and asking for your patience and understanding. And this transparency we must offer to one another, and be honest in our admission of failure and need for forgiveness and prayer.

The world is filled with angry people, who lash out against one another, often not knowing the reasons for anger, expressed against even those they love the most, and often in road rage against those they don't even know. Paul says we are to be different because our anger will be controlled and momentary and not a part of our emotional life.

There are times when we'll be angry. These verses don't prohibit anger, but rather seem to recognize that at times we will be angry and even ought to be angry for the right reasons. Scripture speaks of God's anger and wrath, which is always justified and under control, and there were times when Jesus was angry, particularly when he saw the destructive work of ungodliness that kept people away from God's mercy, love and grace. Jesus was angry with the works of the devil, such as the legalistic attitude that placed rules and taboos above the needs of human beings. When Jesus healed a man with a deformed hand his critics condemned him for healing on the Sabbath. And the Scripture tells us that, as he prepared to heal the man in defiance of their criticism, "He looked around at them angrily and was deeply saddened by their hard hearts" (Mark 3:5, NLT).

There are times when we'll be angry with people for their self-destructive actions or their words and actions that have hurt others. When our anger is self-centered, uncontrolled, long-lasting, and budding into resentment and bitterness, the devil certainly has a foothold in our lives. He can do some real damage in our own spirit and also in our relationships with our fellow believers.

This next verse may seem irrelevant to most of us, but it has an application to all of us. Certainly in the first century in Palestine, those who were unemployed were basically reduced to either begging or stealing in order to survive or to provide food for their families. There was no social support system for the needy. And for many of these jobless people who became Christians, this injunction against theft was a challenging one. This meant they needed to urgently find employment. It also meant the church needed to help supply the needs of the unemployed until they could find work.

Paul uses a word in verse 29 that's politely translated "evil talk," but more accurately in another version for the kind of speech heard in the fallen world: "foul or abusive language" (NLT). Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse,

*"Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift."*

All speech and communication is to be consistent with the Spirit of Jesus and to the end that others will be encouraged. Each one of us should leave this church building today asking ourselves, "How has my speech and conversation served to encourage someone and to strengthen the unity of the church body today?"

When I was a child, when we found ourselves in a shouting match in a play time that had gone bad, I remember the taunt,

"Sticks and stones may break my bones,  
But words can never hurt me."

I never agreed with that. I would usually prefer a swat with a stick or a pelt from a rock to hurtful words that stick in the mind and pierce the heart,

sometimes for a lifetime. Our angry, unkind and hurtful words can cause great damage to others and to the church. I still remember the hurt caused by my words and words that hurt me as well. I've counseled with people who, many years later as adults, were deeply hurt by the angry and destructively critical words of their parents.

The disciple of Jesus is different from the world because of the work of the Spirit within, producing the fruit of the Spirit, which includes these virtues of love, kindness and the grace to forbear with patience and to be forgiving (Galatians 5:22f). In a world that is increasingly harsh, self-serving and unforgiving, how these virtues will stand out! These are expressions of the sacrificial love of Christ, which is to be the distinguishing mark of the disciple and the church.

We're to be different from the world by pleasing God instead of grieving him. These words to not grieve or sadden the Holy Spirit are set in the middle of these injunctions against our worldliness of sinful, unclean speech, and acts of bitterness and unkindness toward one another. The Holy Spirit is made sad by the way we treat one another as dearly loved children of God, who are called to love and encourage one another in being different from a world that is often hostile to us.

This is how the world will see our difference from them—by our love for one another (John 13:35). We're to be different from the world by the way we're "just like God" by our kindness, compassion and forgiveness of one another. The Greek word for kindness is "chrestos" and "Christians from the beginning saw its peculiar appropriateness...because of the obvious assonance with the name of Christ (Christos)..." (Stott). When people see genuine kindness they are likely to see Jesus Christ. That's different in the best way.

The word "Christian" wasn't an official title conferred on the first century church. Rather, it was the logical description given to the church folks in Antioch. They were called "Christ's ones" because they seemed so essentially different from the fallen culture around them and so much like Christ (Acts 11:26). What's different about us?