

The Necessity of Change Ephesians 4:17-5:21

This morning we are going to continue studying in the book of Ephesians and we'll be covering a large passage where Paul deals with the issue of whether or not you need to change your behavior when you become a Christian. I think a lot of people would agree that you should change, but do you need to change? And more specifically: Do you need to change in order to be saved? That's a huge question that I hope everyone takes very seriously because it deals with the staggering realities of heaven and hell and nobody wants to be surprised at the end and find out they were believing the wrong thing.

What if you believe that you have to change and you depend on that to save you only to find out that you were wrong? Or, what if you believe you don't have to change and continue to live in sin and depend completely on your faith in Christ to save you only to find out you were wrong? The issue of life change and Christian behavior is a huge issue that we all need to understand rightly.

And if you look at church history, that's been a real struggle. The Roman Catholic Church was far off on one side and taught that you had to make changes and do certain things in order to be saved, and they used that to manipulate and abuse people for hundreds of years. But then the Reformation happened because people began to see that salvation is a gift from God that is received only by faith and not by works. So they strongly rejected what the Catholic Church taught and many went to the opposite extreme and rejected the notion that good works and obedience had anything to do with salvation at all – you simply had to believe. All of a sudden God's grace gave people the license to sin, as long as they believed.

So you can see that this is a complex issue that is easily misunderstood in both directions and it's something we need to get to the bottom of for our own spiritual well-being. It's the same issue that has been around ever since the gospel was first preached, and in writing to the Ephesians Paul takes a good deal of ink to address it. We already know he doesn't believe what the Catholic Church taught. It couldn't be any clearer than what he wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*" But did Paul think that change and obedience had nothing to do with salvation? Could a person go on living the way they used to as long as they believed? We'll see what he told the Ephesian Christians beginning in Ephesians 4:17...

Read Ephesians 4:17-24.

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!—²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus,²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

So Paul obviously believed that they must not continue to live like they used to. Those who live that way do so because of the futility of their way of thinking. Their understanding is darkened, their hearts are hardened, and they've become callous. That's why they do what they do. It's all they know. They're spiritually blind. And that's the way Paul's readers used to be, but everything was different now. They had been enlightened by the power of the Holy Spirit when the gospel was preached to them. They had a new heart and a new mind along with a new sensitivity to the truth. When they came to Christ they were taught (or they should have been taught) to put off the old self which was corrupted and to think in a completely different way. They were to put on the new self – to become more like God in true righteousness and holiness.

It's interesting because in verse 21 it seems like Paul is hinting at the possibility that they may have been taught something different, and I think he's referring to people who may have taught them that because they were saved by God's grace through faith they could go on sinning. But Paul strongly refutes that in these verses. Salvation by grace through faith does not give a person license to sin! It's completely out of place for God's people. So they must no longer live that way. Grace doesn't give license to sin; it transforms your life. Therefore, you must put off your former manner of life and put on your new life in Christ.

One of the best pictures of this is in the musical "Les Miserables." It is the story of Jean Valjean who was a bitter and hardened ex-con. On the first night after his release he tried to find an inn where he could sleep, but he was rejected by everyone because he was a felon. He finally arrived at the home of a kind Bishop who opened his door and took him in. Jean Valjean returned his kindness by assaulting him, stealing his silverware and running away! The next day he was arrested and dragged back to the bishop to confirm his crime. But the Bishop did

something shocking. Rather than condemning him, he scolded him for not taking more of the silver. He claimed the silver was a gift. This shocked the police officers who had no choice but to free him, and the Bishop's grace changed Jean Valjean's life forever. His mind was enlightened by grace and he couldn't go back to his former misery.

Grace doesn't give license to sin; it transforms your heart and mind to become like the one who saved you. Because of that you put off the deeds of darkness you once did – you discard them like filthy clothes. And you put on the deeds of righteousness and holiness to become more like God. Paul continues in the next paragraph by giving them several examples of what that would look like.

Read Ephesians 4:25-32.

- Verse 25: *“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.”* So put off falsehood – lying, deception, dishonesty; and put on truthfulness – be honest and accurate and tell the whole story.
- Verses 26-27: *“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil.”* So put off sinful anger, unforgiveness, unresolved anger, justified anger – and deal with your anger as Christ would – put on forgiveness, peacemaking, self control.
- Verse 28: *“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.”* Put off stealing; put on honest work to earn a living with the goal to share with those in need.
- Verse 29: *Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.* Put off corrupting talk – talk that degrades, puts down, slanders, grumbling/complaining, negativity, perverseness; Put on talk that builds up – encourages, compliments.
- Verses 30-32: *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”* Put off all these deeds of darkness and put on the light.

That's what the Christian life is to look like. You don't do these things in order to be saved, because you're saved by grace through faith alone. But you do these things because that's what happens when grace transforms your life and if you're

not doing them it proves you haven't been transformed by grace and you're still dead in your sins. Make sense? Paul continues then in chapter 5 to flush this out in even more detail.

Read Ephesians 5:1-2.

¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

So he's calling them to live a life of righteousness and holiness so that they will imitate God their father and become like Christ who died for them. That's the goal and we talked about that last week – we are to become like Christ. God gives us the gift of salvation through faith so that we will become more and more like him on this earth and bring glory to him. That's the Christian life. That's the gospel and any other version of that is false. Change doesn't save you, but change is necessary in God's work of salvation.

Paul goes on to teach the Ephesians other things that were common in their culture that they must no longer do.

Read Ephesians 5:3-8a.

³ But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. ⁴ Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.

⁵ For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷ Therefore do not become partners with them; ⁸ for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Again I think Paul is confronting the false teaching that says God's grace gives you license to sin. Some were teaching that and trying to deceive them, but Paul says "Don't listen to them. It's because of these kinds of sinful behaviors that the wrath of God is coming." There seems to be an even higher level of urgency to rid themselves of these kinds of things that would have been so common in their culture (and in ours) - sexual immorality, all impurity, covetousness. This includes filthiness (obscenity), foolish talk (empty conversation about nothing – like when someone is under the influence), and crude joking (vulgarity, perverse joking). Those whose lives are characterized by these things have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. So don't continue to do them and don't join in with

others who do them – don't be partners in sin with them. It's not who you are anymore – you no longer belong to the darkness, but you are now light in the Lord. He continues by teaching them what they should do.

Read Ephesians 5:8b-14.

*Walk as children of light*⁹ (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true),¹⁰ and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.¹² For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.¹³ But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible,¹⁴ for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Having been brought into the light, they were to walk as children of light, which is what he's been talking about throughout this passage. They were also to try to discern what was pleasing to the Lord, so that they would make the right decisions about their behavior. And they were to expose the unfruitful works of darkness. This he expands on a little bit and basically says that when we have the courage to expose sin by saying that it is wrong and shameful, God can use that to bring people who are doing those things to repentance. That's what he's getting at in verse 14. He quotes a hymn: "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Paul finishes this section with three summary statements...

Read Ephesians 5:15-21.

*Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise,*¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

So he calls them to be wise about how they live in light of what he's written and the wickedness in the culture around them. They should not be foolish and ignorant, but understand how God wants them to live. And, using the imagery of drunkenness as an example and how alcohol consumes and controls a person, they should be filled with and controlled by the Spirit in that way, so that they would encourage one another, worship the Lord, give thanks to God, and submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

So you can see throughout this whole passage that there is a major difference between those who truly know Christ and have been transformed by grace and those who do not. Change does matter – it's a very big deal. It doesn't save you, but it is required of those who have been transformed by grace.

So do what Paul says, be wise, understand what the will of God is and live that way. In that way you won't be surprised in the end. And if you look at your life and see that you haven't been living for the Lord, today is a perfect day for repentance. Receive God's free gift of mercy and forgiveness and start living your life for his honor and glory.