Walking Differently

Believers are to live a life that is different from those who reject Christ.

Ephesians 4:17-32

When going to a job interview, we carefully select what to wear. We want to make a statement in some way. We may choose something that makes us feel more confident or that makes us look like we fit the part. Most of us know that showing up in a tie for an entry-level construction job is not required. We may choose a color that matches the company logo or a sport team we believe the owner supports. Setting ourselves apart from other applicants is the goal.

What might a person do to set themselves apart from others applying for a job?
UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

EPHESIANS 4:17-32
The entrance of believers into a relationship with Christ is described as a calling at the beginning of Ephesians 4, as Paul transitioned from indicative truth to imperative behavior. He began the chapter with a rallying cry to walk worthy of the gracious work of God. The very notion of calling implies movement from one condition to another, from darkness to light (Eph. 5:8). The word call or calling occurs three times in the first four verses of Ephesians 4. It is one of the great words in Paul’s vocabulary, appearing in several places as a description of our salvation. (See Rom. 11:29; 1 Cor. 1:26; Eph. 1:18; Phil. 3:14; 2 Tim. 1:9.)

This idea of movement is seen in the mandate to grow in one’s Christian experience after salvation. The word grow or growth occurs three times in the first half of chapter 4, with the idea also showing up in expressions such as “reach” (4:13), “no longer” (4:14) and “building up” (4:16). Our calling to salvation as believers cannot be separated from the admonition to grow in maturity of faith.

As we see these truths of calling and growth come together in the fourth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, it becomes apparent that the Christian life is a new walk, a changed life, and a transformed lifestyle.

What Paul described in Ephesians 4 is what theologians and Bible teachers often refer to as sanctification. The apostle referred to it frequently in his letters. We can summarize by saying it begins at salvation, increases throughout life, and is completed at death and the return of Christ. As a crucial Bible doctrine, it should not be confused with justification, which occurs at a point in time and is entirely God’s work in us through faith in Christ. Sanctification is a process in which we cooperate with God through obedience to His Word. Apart from it, believers will not live a life that is distinctive and different from those who don’t know Christ.

Reflect on the contrasts found in Ephesians 4:17-32 between what was and what should be. How does the contrast point to the power of Christ?
EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE OLD (EPH. 4:17-19)

17 Therefore, I say this and testify in the Lord: You should no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their thoughts. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them and because of the hardness of their hearts. 19 They became callous and gave themselves over to promiscuity for the practice of every kind of impurity with a desire for more and more.

VERSE 17
There is seriousness in Paul’s words when we read about his intention to testify in the Lord. It is a word used to solemnly assert something, to offer firsthand authentication of a fact that relates to an important issue. The important matter in view is living a life that is morally distinctive from the Gentiles. Of course, many of Paul’s listeners were Gentiles (Eph. 2:11), but here he was referring to those who were unbelievers (2:12). The lives they lived, from the perspective of the believing Ephesians, could be depicted as the old way of life.

Two important points are made about this lifestyle. First, it is marked by futility. Essentially, this word means “empty” and denotes appearance as distinct from actual being and reality. It can also carry the idea of that which is pointless. Secondly, this lifestyle originates in the thoughts of those who do not know Jesus. Every action is rooted in a thought.

The pursuits of many people are meaningless and, in the end, their lives are tragically wasted on empty things. Surely this is sufficient motivation for believers to live lives that matter, both now and forever.

In what way is life prior to knowing Christ “pointless”?

VERSE 18
Paul continued to discuss the futility of life apart from Christ and to explain the causes of this futility. Primarily it was due to darkened
minds and hard hearts. The Ephesians had come to know the truth that was in Christ (4:21), but their fellow unbelieving Gentiles had not come to that place yet. Because they did not possess the truth, they missed out on the essential nature and purpose of life itself. While lost people may possess all types of practical and helpful knowledge related to this world, the truth that ultimately matters is lost on them. Because of this ignorance they are excluded from the life of God. Paul previously affirmed the state of deadness among unbelievers (2:1).

VERSE 19
Every time a person fails to respond in faith to the prompting of the Holy Spirit through the truth of Scripture, his or her heart becomes a little harder. With every act of disobedience, it becomes a little bit easier to disobey the next time.

As unbelievers give their lives over to more promiscuity and impurity, this pursuit breeds more desire for sin. Their calloused hearts become less sensitive to godliness and simultaneously become more attracted to sin. A vicious cycle begins, seeking fulfillment through carnal behavior but unable to find satisfaction. The picture Paul painted here was not a pretty one. It served to remind his listeners of how futile it was to live in bondage to sin. It should serve the same purpose for us today.

Why is it important for believers to remember what life apart from Christ was like?

THE CHANGE (EPH. 4:20-24)
20 But that is not how you came to know Christ, 21 assuming you heard about him and were taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus, 22 to take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted
by deceitful desires, 23 to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 
24 and to put on the new self, the one created according to God’s 
likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth.

VERSES 20-21
In a classroom setting, the teacher is distinct from the lesson. He 
or she teaches certain information, but they are distinct from it. 
Paul informed the Ephesians that Christ was both the teacher and 
the lesson. This is how they came to know Christ and they were 
taught by him.

In contrast to the desensitizing work of sin prior to their faith, 
Paul reminded the Ephesians that their old way of life did not lead 
them to freedom in Christ. Rather, they found Him and a new way 
of life through the message of the gospel. That truth was found in 
Jesus, in a relationship with Him through faith. So Christ was the 
teacher, the lesson, and the very classroom in which they came to 
know Him.

VERSES 22-23
What was the message that the Ephesians had been taught by 
Christ? It was a two-fold declaration of the gospel. First, they had 
heard the message to take off your former way of life, the old self. Paul 
reminded them of this—how they had repented of their old lives 
in a marvelous and beautiful experience of conversion. Why would 
persons desire salvation if they believed their way of life was a good 
one—a means to personal flourishing? As they begin to question 
their lifestyle and behavior, then they are ready to hear the truth 
and realize there is a better way. The image here is that of taking off 
an old, dirty garment. In salvation, somehow by the grace of God 
and in spite of callous hearts, we are able to perceive the damage 
that sin inflicts on us. We come to see our behavior like soiled, 
putrid clothing of which we want to rid ourselves. That is where 
salvation begins.

While there are many things that distinguish a believer in Christ 
from an unbeliever, none are more decisive than that of perspective 
and outlook. Paul described it to the Ephesians as being renewed 
in the spirit of your minds. Previously, he had depicted their sinful 
lifestyles as being conducted in “the futility of their thoughts” (4:17). 
Just as a darkened understanding sustains the depraved life, so a 
renewed mind in Christ brings a different walk in Him.
VERSE 24

The second aspect of the gospel message taught to the Ephesians was to put full reliance in and on Christ as our salvation. The lesson that Christ teaches is that righteousness is only found in Him. In our act of faith, we put on the new self, like a new, clean garment, which covers our shame. In other places, the Scripture calls this “regeneration,” and, just like human births, it is not something we effect for ourselves. It is the one created according to God’s likeness. We put off the old out of disgust and we welcome the new in faith. This allows us to live a life free from self-condemnation and guilt.

How is salvation like putting on a new set of clothes?

KEY DOCTRINE: Justification

Justification brings the believer unto a relationship of peace and favor with God (Rom. 5:1).

THE NEW (EPH. 4:25-32)

25 Therefore, putting away lying, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, because we are members of one another. 26 Be angry and do not sin. Don’t let the sun go down on your anger, and don’t give the devil an opportunity. 28 Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need. 29 No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear. 30 And don’t grieve God’s Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. 32 And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.
VERSE 25
Paul wrote specifically about what a new walk in Christ looks like. In doing so, he employed a characteristic pattern of his—beginning with what is true and then moving to what should be done in response to that truth. The apostle offered examples of new life in Christ, with both negative and positive commands as well as a spiritual foundation on which they are based. Since those who believe in Christ have taken off the former way of life, they should be characterized by putting away lying. Falsehood is a contradiction of having come to know the truth that is in Jesus (v. 21).

VERSES 26-27
A second example of renewed Christian living involves control of one’s emotions, particularly anger. The command given here is not to be angry but to avoid sin. Anger provides a fertile opportunity for the devil to wreck havoc. Paul quoted Psalm 4:4; the second part of that verse calls for reflection. As we examine ourselves, we will realize that many of our responses of anger were sinful and selfish in nature.

VERSE 28
Living differently in Christ involves a reorientation of one’s work. Servants were notorious for petty filching of that which did not belong to them, but Paul demanded adherence to a higher standard. Not only was behavior to be different but also one’s motivation for work. It was not simply to be done to meet one’s own needs but also to fund generosity to others. This is a radical outlook on a person’s livelihood.

VERSE 29
One’s language is transformed through Christ. As with the previous examples, the negative prohibition is accompanied by a positive injunction. Paul identified a dual objective in the words we speak. They should be edifying in nature, building up someone in need. They should be vehicles of grace, ministering hope and strength to others in their own pursuit of godly character.

VERSE 30
With a direct connection to the previous verse but also to all of the examples given by Paul, the apostle connected the impact of those actions in regard to the Holy Spirit. Failure to do these things he has mentioned would grieve God’s Holy Spirit. A saying commonly
heard is, “Sin doesn’t just break God’s law. It breaks His heart.” This is perhaps the most important spiritual principle for putting off our former way of life before Christ.

Of the practices listed by Paul, which one creates the greatest impact for the cause of Christ?

“Sin doesn’t just break God’s law. It breaks His heart.”

VERSES 31-32
These verses could be viewed as a catch-all catalog of relational behaviors, both negative and positive. While using a different verb from verse 25, the idea is the same in that these things must be put off from the life of a follower of Jesus Christ. There are six types of hateful speech that must be forsaken by believers. Since the thought life is the source of behavior, Paul called for the attitudes of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness. As attitudes, they inevitably manifest themselves in corresponding actions. Most importantly, these three virtues are characteristic of the attitude of Christ toward each us. Only as they are practiced in our daily lives will the world see Christ in us as well.

BIBLE SKILL: Compare passages that include the same phrases.
Compare Ephesians 4:17-32 with Romans 6:6; Colossians 3:5-10; 1 Corinthians 2:14; and Galatians 5:19-23. Write down some notes about what each passage adds to your understanding of the old and new man. How can the old man still be a problem if he was crucified with Christ on the cross (Gal. 2:20)? Why is the battle between the old man and the new man such an important concept for daily living?
IN MY CONTEXT

• Believers must not forget the futility of living in bondage to sin.
• People are given a fresh start through faith in Christ so we can live without guilt.
• Believers are to live Christlike lives as a result of their salvation.

Discuss as a group ways your small group can hold one another accountable for avoiding behaviors characteristic of non-Christians without lapsing into judgmental and elitist attitudes.

With what type of lingering or free-floating guilt do you need to deal? Take time to talk to God about this guilt.

Identify a neighbor or coworker who is lost. How can you use these passages to explain salvation to the person you identified?

Prayer Needs