

Us Isn't Them! Moving From Darkness To Light

Ephesians 4:17-32

Pastor Jon Haakana

All you have to do is spend a little bit of time listening to many Christians talk before you observe from their conversations an attitude of "Us isn't them!" ... an attitude that marks the boundaries between Christian territory and the territory of the unbeliever, often this is an adversarial demeanor.

However, consider this: According to a study released by Barna Research at the end of 2006, Born again Busters were only somewhat less likely to illegally download music, to smoke, to view pornography, to purchase a lottery ticket, or to use profanity. However, young believers were actually more likely than non-believers to try to get back at someone and to have stolen something. Moreover, on eight of the 16 behaviors, the profile of born again Busters was virtually identical to that of non-born again Busters.

Additionally, 33% of born again pre-Busters believe that cohabitation is morally acceptable. However, among born again Busters nearly twice as many (59%) agreed, representing a majority of young Christian adults. This same response pattern was evident when it came to gambling, sexual fantasies, abortion, sex outside of marriage, profanity, pornography, same-sex marriage, and the use of illegal drugs.

The director of the research, David Kinnaman, pointed out, "The research shows that people's moral profile is more likely to resemble that of their peer group than it is to take shape around the tenets of a person's faith. This research paints a compelling picture that moral values are shifting very quickly and significantly within the Christian community as well as outside of it."

Boomers took moral experimentation to new heights, but Busters now live in a world where such experimentation is the norm, not the exception.

Let me boil all of this down for you: According to Barna's findings, Christians are only marginally different if not identical to the non-Christians in their peer group on an array of moral issues.

Is it any wonder that Paul begins this passage by insisting that the Ephesian believers "no longer live as the Gentiles do"? Obviously, Paul saw a problem in the lifestyle of the Ephesian believers. Obviously, he was aware that some members of the Ephesian Christian Church were living lives that mirrored the lives of their non-Christian neighbors. Obviously, he is concerned that Christians are accepting and owning the life patterns of those outside of God's family more readily than they are others within the body of Christ.

Klyne Snodgrass has written of these verses, “Change the word ‘Gentiles’ to ‘Americans’ or some other relevant label, and we have little difficulty bringing verses 17-19 into our contemporary situation, for they are like a mirror.”

That struggle to maintain a way of life that demonstrates my connection with God in the midst of a world that doesn’t share that connection is the key to the latter half of Ephesians 4, more accurately, the rest of the book of Ephesians.

So often we can be seduced by the world around us to comply to their redefined moral positions, if not vocally, than all too often on the sly, in the closeted recesses of our lives where we hang out our own dirty laundry. If the data is accurate, the biggest difference between believers and non-believers is often that non-believers are just more public with their moral failings.

But as we look at today’s text, that is not how it is supposed to be. In verses 20-24, Paul describes, and urges the Ephesians toward, the transformation that happens when a person moves from a life lived in darkness to a life illuminated by Christ. That transformation happens as we, as Christians, take three determined steps that define the difference between ourselves and those who don’t belong to God’s family. In this transformation, he makes clear what “Us Isn’t Them” should mean in the context of our everyday lives.

The first step of transformation is:

1. We discover truth in Christ.

“You however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.” (4:20-21)

The wording of verses 20-21 is unusual, almost harsh. Literally, verse 20 reads: “You did not learn the Christ this way.” No parallel exists for learning a person. More is intended than mere learning facts about Christ. That is, the readers have been schooled in the Messiah. They know him, have firsthand knowledge of him, and know how radically different his life is from that of the worlds.

Also unusual is the statement they were “taught in him,” but the intent seems to be that the context of their learning was their union with Christ.

“In accordance with the truth that is in Jesus” should not suggest information about Jesus. Paul’s point is that Jesus embodies and encompasses the truth. Find Jesus and you find the truth. Find truth and you find Jesus. Truth does not exist apart from him. This is not surprising, given the expectation in 1:10 that all things will be summed up in

Christ. In sum, verses 20-21 describe encounter with Jesus and instruction from union with him so that truth is found in him.

Jesus is truth ... So what?

Consider the statement of truth in Christ in contrast to Paul's assessment of the intellectual acuity of unbelievers: "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts." (4:17-18)

"Understanding" and "ignorance" both point to the mind. Why are our minds so important? Because what we think determines the choices we make, which in turn shapes the path of our lives. As the old saying goes, "Where the head leads, the rest will follow."

Unfortunately, unbelievers have "darkened" their minds by blocking out God's light. Their minds have been twisted by a distorted self-interest. And they are ignorant of God's ways, having alienated themselves from the Source of truth. Their disordered, sinful, spiritually dead lives are merely the logical outgrowth of a deeper problem – disordered, sinful, spiritually dead minds.

The mind is the important element, but all dignity is lost when thought omits God and centers on self. Without God the mind is cross-wired and without aim. Its energies go in the wrong direction.

What a shock wave this statement must have sent through the people of Paul's day. The Greco-Roman society thought the human mind was the best, noblest, and most worthwhile part of the human being – they considered it divine. They earned salvation by conquering their corrupt, evil flesh with the sword of reason. And with geniuses like, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to boast of, they took great pride in their intellectual enlightenment.

How offended they must have been when Paul called their light 'darkness' and their salvation 'exclusion'. No matter how powerful their intellects were, they lacked spiritual perception, and they floundered in the darkness.

Like the Greeks of old, we, too, take pride in our intellects and in our philosophical and technological achievements. And many brilliant people today, as in Paul's society, won't accept the simple truth of the gospel. Their minds are agile, but they still need God to 'turn the lights on,' to illuminate their spiritual minds.

When Paul instructs us to renew our minds, he is telling us to take a 180-degree turn from the mind mired in futility. How do we renew our minds? We give them a spiritual education. Paul's use of the terms learn, heard, and taught tell us that he had the image of a school in mind. As was mentioned before the primary curriculum was Christ, not just information about Christ, but a comprehensive understanding of him ... training in the mind of Christ.

A commentator on this text said, "[This text] could have been written this morning as a telling commentary on us. We give ourselves to trivialities and diversions. Our minds are given to sports, movies and sitcoms to avoid thought. Our self-centeredness alienates us from God. We do not acknowledge our need of God, do not have time for him, and if we think about him at all, our thoughts are juvenile."

If Christ is characterized by truth, his people should be as well. This means first of all that we discern truth in God. He is the source of truth by which we live. If taken seriously, this should separate us from much of our society, which seeks to live lies. The entertainment industry creates illusion and perversion and seeks to pass them off as truth. Our society asserts that immediate pleasure is the goal and denies the reality of death and judgment for our actions. The lies around us must be identified and challenged.

We, as Christians, need to take the extra step to developing a Biblical mind and a Christian world-view. Too often we allow our social, political, and educational perspectives to inform and shape our theology, rather than seeking to have our perspectives transformed by our theology.

This coming week is report card pick-up for the Chicago schools. How are you doing in the School of Christ? What grades are you bringing home in actually engaging and developing the mind of Christ ... understanding his thoughts, embracing his outlook?

I want you to take a moment, and in your bulletin, give yourself a grade. For a moment, get real with yourself and evaluate how thoroughly you have cultivated the mind of Christ. Let's face it none of us gets an A - God doesn't grade on that deep of a curve. Do you deserve a B, "85% of the time my thoughts and my attitude are consistent with Christ's"? What about a C, "Just over 70% of the time, I think the thoughts of Christ"? Maybe a D, well over half of my attitudes and my thoughts reflect the mind of Christ. Is it possible that any of us honestly deserves an F? We are so busy, so consumed with our own lives, and our own thoughts, that we have failed to cultivate in ourselves the mind of Christ.

Take time to learn. – Ephesian devotionals (these are written to help us develop the mind of Christ), Bible School/Small Groups

But our transformation does not end at an intellectual level. Many are the churchgoers who profess right beliefs yet look, act, speak, do and walk in the footsteps of those who haven't learned Christ. We must take the second step.

The second step of our transformation is:

2. We discard our distorted lives of sin.

“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires;” (4:22)

The picture that Paul has in view here is a homeless street person replacing the soiled clothes of years on the streets ... clothes have been ripped and repaired until all that remains is the tattered seams of countless stitchings, clothes that have had dirt, garbage and excrement eternally ground into the fabric, clothes that years ago passed the stage of low-quality rags.

The verb 'corrupt', which in the active signifies 'to ruin or destroy,' is used here in the passive to refer to the ongoing moral corruption of the 'old self', a process of decay and ruin that finally ends in death.

So Paul instructs us to pull up the dumpster up to our closet, and start cleaning those things that have distorted our lives out of our spiritual wardrobe.

What exactly is that distorted life we are called to discard? In the surrounding verses, Paul states several particulars. Look back at verse 19: “Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.” (4:19)

In Ephesus, this statement would have been shocking to a culture drunk on the sexual escapades of the temple to Artemis, the Greek goddess of fertility, and the hundreds of temple prostitutes that plied their services on the temple mount.

The lust of sexual freedom in our day mirrors the sexual indulgence of Paul's day. Having lost sensitivity to God and fellowship with him, we give ourselves to sensuality, trying through pleasure and especially through distorted sexual expression to recover the intimacy for which God created us.

In verses 25-32, Paul offers several more pieces of apparel we must discard: “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood ... (4:25a) - Stop the lying.

'In your anger do not sin'; Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (4:26-27)

The command in this verse is a quote of Psalm 4:4. The Psalmist has been accused, quite unjustly, of some crime or sin, and though he knows he is innocent, the accusations against him hang heavily upon him. But God replaces the anger, which resulted from the lies of others, giving him instead a heart full of joy and peace. So he admonishes his hearers, as he further consoles and strengthens himself, not to sin in their anger.

But what about when I have a justified reason to be angry? There is a proper place for justified anger, but also the 'subtle temptation to regard my anger as justified and other people's anger as sheer bad temper. If ours is not free from injured pride, malice, or a spirit of revenge, it has degenerated to sin.

To guard against devolving into sin, Paul uses a common time limit. Paul's limit is not literal, but a firm warning against brooding in anger and nursing it into some expression of hostility.

He who has been stealing must steal no longer, ... (4:28a)

Notice the precise phrasing, "He who has been stealing..." Somebody in the church has been running the neighborhood theft ring which has been helping itself to the contents of peoples' houses and garages, or maybe dipping his hand in the offering till. Paul had to call him on the carpet.

But stealing is, also, played out in those less obvious ways: office supplies from work that make their way home; extra money from the cashier that is received as a blessing; or neglecting to return the borrowed item that the lender has surely forgotten about by now anyway.

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, ... (4:29a)

Unwholesome talk is in reference to destructive language that demeans the value of others.

Over the last week, we have daily doses of this issue thanks to Don Imus' statement about the Rutgers female basketball team. However, not to excuse him, isn't there a growing culture that is gaining influence in our time that has made it acceptable for some people to use these very same terms, along with other chose substitutes, to describe their mothers, their sisters, or even their girlfriends or wives? Hundreds jumped

out to offer their condemnation of Don Imus, while at the same time pleading the rights of a rap culture that has popularized the terms he spewed.

One ESPN anchor went so far as to say that Don Imus' statement was demeaning and prejudice, yet argued that the hip-hop culture has embraced the term as a term of affection and made it acceptable by robbing it of its negative meaning. If that's true, if 'ho' is a term of affection, than why did Snoop Dog come out against Imus?

If the words are demeaning, they are demeaning, and we all need to clean them from our vocabulary. How are you doing here?

Then interestingly, Paul adds in verse 30: And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. (4:30)

Why do you think that Paul would talk about grieving the Holy Spirit among all of these commands about relationships? The Spirit, the agent of reconciliation and unity in the body, is brokenhearted when members of the body demean one another.

Finally, Get rid of all bitterness (stewing resentment), rage (an indignant outburst) and anger (a steady festering or seething anger), brawling (unrestrained screaming at one another) and slander (profane defamation either by lies or gossip), along with every form of malice (a desire to bring others down)." (4:31)

None of us are guilty of such things, are we? Surely, we aren't carrying these dead bodies around. Let's go back to the information from Barna. What did we learn from him? Here it is ... one of two things: either the world has elevated its morals to the level of Christ-likeness, or too many Christians have failed to discard their old way of life. Which do you think it is?

Don't look around you at the lives of Christians that surround you ... that is the easy way out. Look hard ... at your own life. What aspect of a distorted life of sin have you failed to discard? What remnant of the old man have you been holding onto? What dead body have you been carrying around on your back ... continually calling you back to your life of sin?

It is time to put it down. Symbolically, write the moral issue that still has a grip on you in your bulletin. Quickly pray over that issue, and when you are ready cross it out, as an act of discarding that sin. After we step out of our old clothes, we are ready to be fitted for a new wardrobe.

3. We display the loving character of God.

When it comes to clothing, we've come a long way since Adam and Eve. Instead of the first pair's "fig-leaves-for-all-occasions" wardrobe, we have a mind-boggling array of shoes, socks, pants, shorts, shirts, blouses, hats, accessories, outer garments, and undergarments from which to choose for any conceivable situation.

With this endless array of choices, how do we determine what to wear? Without exception, we choose our attire based on our purpose. If we were going to compete in a swimming meet, we wouldn't wear a tuxedo or an evening gown. Neither would we wear mechanics overalls to a sophisticated gala ball. If we needed to storm a beach or capture an enemy outpost, we would choose something a little more practical than our pajamas – say, military fatigues and combat helmets.

The Christian life is no different. After we have disrobed from our old lives, we must replace those items with the appropriate apparel for our new life in Christ. Paul says it this way in verses 23-24: "... to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." (4:23-24)

What are the new clothes that we are to don and display? Our new clothes are the righteousness and holiness like God. Together the terms holiness and righteousness refer to virtuous living as a whole. The nature of that life is again defined in the ensuing verses that speak about our loving relationships within the body.

"... speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body." (4:25b)

We replace the lies with truth. But this isn't in-your-face, "I don't care if you like it I'm telling you anyway", truth-telling. In verse 15, he already established the parameters of truth-telling with the phrase in love ... with a compassionate concern for the well-being of the person told, rather than to just get it off my chest.

"... but must work, doing something useful with his own hands that he may have something to share with those in need." (4:28b)

Think of that: "The thief is to become a philanthropist." This may be the most striking description of conversion in the New Testament. The person who did wrong in order to meet his own selfish desires must now work in order to contribute to someone else's need. Part of the new life is engaging others at the point of their social need.

In contrast to demeaning words, we are to speak "... only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." (4:29b)

"Building others up" brings to mind Paul's concern in 4:16 to build up the body. And why are these constructive words offered? Literally, to grace those who listen. We receive grace from God for salvation and ministry so that we may extend God's grace to others.

How are you doing here? Is your mouth a well-spring of gracious words that heal the souls of others? Do people find refreshment in the words that come from your lips? Does your tongue's words build value into the lives of others?

That links us to the final verse: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (4:32)

Forgive as God forgave ... for some of us, this is our battleground. We are okay with forgiving. We are good at burying the hatchet. We just make sure that we have marked where it is buried in case we need to retrieve it as some point.

This last verse is key. It all comes down to God's gracious forgiveness. God has gone the extra mile ... he has loved as compassionately as is divinely possible ... he has taken our betrayal, or deceit, or rebellion against him and through the sacrifice of his very own son, his own son, granted us forgiveness that never looks back. God has forgiven thoroughly, completely, and unashamedly.

Conclusion

This whole transformation of our life only comes about because God is a God who forgives, a God who buries the hatchet, a God who chooses to have a bad memory, when it comes to his children's sin. Because of his grace, we are freed up to live a life that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, reaches to achieve all of the righteousness and holiness that he sees in us. Perhaps all too often we settle for something less than God has created us to be.

R. Kent Hughes challenges us to act like the new people we are:

"We have our part to do in dressing ourselves with the divine wardrobe, for here clothes do make the man – and the woman! We must daily set aside the rotting garments of the old man. We must formally reject sensuality and selfish pride and materialism and bitterness. We must read the Word and ask God to renew our minds through the Spirit. We must work out of salvation by doing those things that will develop a Biblical mind. We must put on our new, shining garments of light. We must put on what we are!"