

A New Self on a New Trajectory
Ephesians 4:17-24
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Last week we began to read through the second half of Ephesians. Chapters 1-3 feature Paul's exuberant theology, in chapters 4-6 Paul demonstrates how the resurrection life of Christ is manifest in ordinary life. Last Sunday we read the first part of chapter four; Paul called upon the church to "walk in ways worthy of the calling to which we've been called," and he revealed God's strategy to grow us up into spiritual grown-ups through the church.

Today we pick up our study at 4:17. Please look at these verses with me; please take them very seriously, as Paul shows us what's at stake.

Paul speaks with the authority of a credible apostle: *I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord.* Then he warns the church not to fall into a downward trajectory: *you must no longer live* (or as we learned last week) *"walk in the manner" of the Gentiles, in the futility of their thinking.* The word "futility" describes lives caught in a downward spiral of self-centeredness. On your note page I've rendered an image of **downward futility**, when people live for themselves rather than God:

*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. 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.***

In Paul's day this downward futility was obvious. The Gentiles worshipped idols rather than the true God. The saints in Ephesus lived in the shadow of one of the great wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of Artemis. And idol worship brought promiscuous sexuality—ignorance and *heart hardening* led to *losing all sensitivity* and people *giving themselves over to sensuality—every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.* It's why poor girls were conscripted into pagan temple prostitution; it's why homosexual practice became widespread and why teenage boys were frequently assigned to older men for sex. It's the world you see in the movie "Gladiator," when people were brutalized for entertainment.

But we also recognize that this downward futility describes the lives of people in every age, including our own. How often do we see how sin *hardens hearts*, causing people *to lose all sensitivity, giving themselves to sensuality*, eventually *indulging in every kind of impurity with a continual lust for more.* In verse 23 Paul calls this the *old self which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires.* The Greek word, translated here as "corrupted," conveys the tragedy of bad choices increasingly weighing people down—"one thing leading to another," till you're helpless to stop the descent...kind of like "**drowning.**" The downward futility of godless, self-centered life leads to spiritual drowning and eternal death.

Contemporary American culture celebrates this downward futility. The TV and Internet gossip outlets chronicle Lady Gaga's trip to a Berlin sex club and Lindsay Lohan's latest round of self-destructiveness.

Perhaps some Christians are tempted to enjoy watching pagan celebrity "train wrecks." But we also see the downward trajectory of Christian celebrities like Mel Gibson. Just as a few years ago his persistence brought "The Passion of the Christ" to the screen, his lack of spiritual maturity is now a public witness for drunken,

racist, misogynist rage. So we should all heed Paul's warning, *I tell you this, and insist upon it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do!*

Then in verse 20 Paul reminds the church that...

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. 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; 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.

Our heavenly Father wants to break us free from downward futility and put us on an upward trajectory. Christians are *taught that with regard to our former way of life, that we are to put off the old self*, or we would otherwise be *drowning in deceitful desires*. We can *put off the old* and *put on the new* because God does the heavy lifting in changing us. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead seeks to save us from drowning. Remember the summary of the Gospel Paul gave us earlier in this letter, 2:8-10:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

We are saved by grace, through faith, for works, because of the work that God does in us as *His workmanship*.

Though God does the heavy lifting, the early church understood that new believers needed to respond with faith, committing to big changes in their lifestyles in order to follow Jesus. Initially people were baptized as soon as they accepted Christ. But ancient documents reveal that around the end of the first century AD, the church started to have thorough training before people were baptized into the fellowship. They had much to learn about shedding their pagan habits and putting on the life of Jesus. And when the time came to be baptized, a document called the Apostolic Teaching tells us that in some places the men and women were baptized separately, because part of baptism was stripping off the old clothes so you could be baptized in your birthday suit! (I think they did this at night.) Then when you came out of the water they gave you a new, white robe. We giggle, but let's give them credit for grasping how the Christian life was a new and different lifestyle – a new birth! Here at Trinity, we baptize with clothes on, but we strive to this purpose: we administer baptism for adults or children when everyone has prepared for it; and understands that baptism is a sign of how people and families *put off the old self* and *put on the new self*.

Whatever the liturgical expression, the point is to escape the downward futility and begin an upward trajectory. In contrast to drowning in *deceitful lies*, we are ***taught the truth in Jesus*** (v. 21). That gives us a base from which to ascend. The best translation of verse 23 is *we are continually made new by the Spirit*. By the power of God working within us we grow up in Christ. Every day we must make choices to **practice resurrection**. Look at verse 24: we were created *to be like God in true righteousness and holiness*. That was God's desire from the beginning; in the moment of resurrection after death, the image of God will be fully restored, we will become like Christ—recreated in *truth righteousness and holiness*. Perhaps those phrases scare us; the affect of sin within us keeps us from grasping how much joy, how much love, how much peace, how much happiness we'll enjoy in glory, when the slow cycle of spiritual growth ends in our death, then by grace we are launched upward into **eternal life**. In the meantime, we practice resurrection. We consciously

turn away from the attitudes and habits of the old self, and put on the new. Just as in this life, our clothes get dirty each day, and need washing...just as in this life, weeds pop up that need pulling...practicing resurrection is a daily routine. But we can do it because God is at work.

Fourteen years ago I met John James, former lead singer of the News Boys, a star in a Christian hip-hop group. A friend's brother was his agent. He arranged for Lynn, Scott, Trish and I to go to a News Boys concert with a back-stage pass. We were thrilled to meet John James and Peter Furley. We didn't know that John had many personal problems, even addictions; he failed to practice resurrection, and he would soon drop out of Christian music. His testimony in the Beach House this Saturday night will be a poignant reminder that believers can slip into downward futility, yet a powerful reminder that Jesus doesn't abandon us; he continues to challenge us to practice our resurrection and claim abundant life, and by His powerful presence we have beginnings without end!

Sharing Holy Communion gives us an opportunity to remember what God has done, and to ask God to show us the clothes that need washing, and the weeds that need pulling! As you're thinking and praying, ask the Lord to let you see a glimpse of your new self, the beautiful person you will surely be.