

# Session 6

## THE IMAGE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

*Ephesians 4:17-24*

### Memory Verse

*<sup>20</sup> But that is not how you came to know Christ, <sup>21</sup> assuming you heard about him and were taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus, <sup>22</sup> to take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires, <sup>23</sup> to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, <sup>24</sup> and to put on the new self, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth.*

– EPHESIANS 4:20-24, CSB

## The Image of Righteousness

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** Sanctification means being transformed into Christ's image, including freedom from condemnation for sin.

The recent release of the live action version of *The Lion King* (June 19, 2019) has once again transported audiences to the African savanna to walk through the life of Simba, the lion cub who will one day be king. With the announcement of the movie's making, fans of the original 1994 animated classic crashed websites and social media platforms looking for the slightest glimpse of what a live action adaptation of their beloved favorite might look like.

It is a small wonder why the original movie drew such a wide fan base. It deals with deep relational and generational dynamics. Perhaps the most poignant moment in the story involves identity. As Simba is forced into exile as a cub, he quickly loses sight of his father's promise that he would one day be king. As the plot speeds toward the climax, the royal advisor, Rafiki, realizes that the once-young Simba is alive, bearing a striking resemblance to his father. With anticipatory glee, Rafiki chants repeatedly, "Remember who you are!"

Being mindful of one's identity is critical for Christ followers due to the life-changing nature of what it means to be a Christian. Wrestling with what it means to be a new creation, to be a joint heir with Jesus, to have victory over sin, and so many other benefits of salvation is a critical process for Christians. On the other hand, not paying attention to one's identity can lead the Christian to be continually harassed by his or her old nature and the former sins that accompany it.

**?** What roles do you find identity in (i.e., spouse, mother, father, friend, volunteer, employee)? Which roles are you the most proud of? Which ones would you like to change?

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**?** What do you think it means for a Christian to know his or her identity in Christ? What passages might be used to help explain that to another person?

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## Session Summary

In this week's session, Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus in order to remind them of the trajectory of their discipleship. Paul knew the debauchery and paganism that the Ephesian believers were coming out of and that they would need guidance in walking in Christ. In drawing the line of demarcation between the old self and the new self, Paul pointed the believers to the example of Christ as the model for living in righteousness.

### 1. Farewell to the Old Life (Eph. 4:17-18)

The culture within which the Ephesian church attempted to grow faced incredible opposition. Ephesus, in addition to being a major trade center, was a den of pagan worship in dozens of different varieties—most notably that of the cult of Diana. Not surprisingly, then, there was also an incredible fascination for and devotion to the occult and black magic in Ephesus. Despite such a wicked setting, the gospel was spread and the church began to grow. As the congregation, made up of Gentile converts, began to grow, however, there was a tremendous struggle among the new believers to break free from the practices and carnal pleasures of their former lives. Paul's admonition was clear and stark: "You should no longer live as the Gentiles live." The catch was, they were Gentiles. Paul's intent was to draw sharp distinction between who they were before Christ and the new creation that existed as a result.

In depicting the scene in Ephesus, pastor and author Max Anders states, “The Gentiles in Ephesus were particularly sinful. . . . The worship of Diana involved the worst immorality of degraded pagan religion. That influence made Ephesus a wretched hive of scum and villainy, a wicked place indeed. Temple prostitution, graft, crime, immorality, idolatry, and every conceivable form of sin abounded.”<sup>1</sup> Because no person comes to Christ in a vacuum, but rather from the context of his or her own particular form of darkness into the glorious light, the Ephesian converts had much to overcome with regard to their own habitual sinfulness.

Paul described the thoughts of the Gentiles as being futile. As scholar F.F. Bruce explains, “The terms ‘futile’ and ‘futility’ are sometimes used in the [New Testament] to denote idolatry, and although the ‘futility’ of the pagan mind in the present context cannot be restricted to idolatry, it is the result of the idolatrous conditioning of that mind.”<sup>2</sup> Against the context of the preceding verses (vv. 1-16) in which Paul encouraged the Christians to be of one mind and to grow into Christ in every possible way, this admonition to forsake the former way of living was a necessary first step.



Why did Paul choose to use “darkened in their understanding” as a way of referring to the Gentiles who did not know Christ? What does the term “ignorance” tell you about life without Christ? Do you think Paul was being insulting here?

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Application: How would you describe what it means to live in “futility of thought”? What are some temptations that might lure a Christian into such patterns?

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Paul's use of "darkened in their understanding" referred to those whose decisions could only bring about divine wrath because they lacked the spiritual insight to follow God's will. They were darkened because they lacked God's wisdom, which was readily available to the new Christians through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The ignorance Paul described was an emphatic way of describing the darkness. These highly educated, worldly traders were ignorant because their hard hearts kept them from God. Max Anders notes, "Paul did not contend that they had no knowledge. He contended the knowledge did no good in leading them to a lifestyle that pleased God. Without such a lifestyle, their minds did not function properly."<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Contrasting the Old Life and the New Life (Eph. 4:19-21)

In these three verses, Paul painted opposite pictures of the old self and the new self. Due to their hardness of hearts, the unconverted Gentiles became callous, which referred to their complete loss of sensitivity with regard to their immorality. Callousness comes from repeated exposure to abrasive, eroding elements. The analogy fit well with the hearts of the Ephesians, who no longer felt the venomous sting of their repeated sexual depravity. The idea of giving themselves over to promiscuity referred to a complete removal of any sort of limitation or restraint. No matter how perverse or defiled, the Ephesians viewed nothing as off-limits in their pursuit for pleasure. Tragically, they discovered repeatedly that fulfillment was never achievable by such means. Their emptiness continued to push them to greater and more unthinkable impurity, in a perpetual but futile quest for contentment.

Paul confronted the characterization of the Ephesians who did not know Christ with the strong adversative, "But that is not how you came to know Christ . . ." In other words, Paul succinctly reminded the believers that this was not the modeled lifestyle they learned from their knowledge of Christ. Their knowledge of Christ had been preached to them by Paul himself. Therefore, as he had done in so many other letters to churches, Paul reminded them of the manner of life that the Ephesian Christians had seen lived out in his own life.

❓ If you are a Christian, what changes have you seen in your own life with regard to blindness to sin after coming to know Christ? Why is it important for Christians to remember who they were before Christ so that they might appreciate anew who He has made them to be?

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❓ Application: How do you respond when you are confronted by the moral erosion in our community? How does the realization of the depth of immorality in Ephesus impact your view of the church's opportunity today?

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Paul's assumption about the Ephesians' teaching regarding Christ did not express doubt about the instruction they had received. Rather, Paul was "assuming" that they had gleaned something about how to live in Christ. The possibilities for interpretation of this verse are many, but the core idea is that Paul was reminding the Christians not only of the physical education they had received at the hearing of the gospel, but also of the fact that Christ's presence was now perpetually among them through the indwelling Holy Spirit. They had heard of the life and ministry of Jesus, learned how to apply those truths to their life, and this stood in sharp contrast to the life they had formerly known.

### 3. Living the New Life (Eph. 4:22-24)

Paul now turned to a series of applications for living the new life in Christ. One of the things that the Ephesian believers had been taught was "to take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires." Bruce clarifies, "The 'old man' is the sum-total of their former practices, propensities, and attitudes; he is a prey to harmful desires which beguile people into sin and error."<sup>24</sup> The 'old man' is a debilitating weakness that leads to repeated submission to every sinful desire.

According to Anders, taking off the old man means that “once you have become a Christian, you are to leave behind the attitudes, habits, values, and actions that you had before being born again—similar to taking off an old work coat and putting on a new coat to go out for the evening.”<sup>5</sup> The deceitfulness of the old man lies in the promise of fulfillment, while only delivering ever-deepening bondage to the sinful patterns it propagates.

**?** What patterns of behavior can you think of that might falsely promise fulfillment? What does life look like for a person who continues to chase fulfillment down that road?

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**?** Application: What media outlets and information avenues contribute most significantly to what your mind thinks about? What differences do you notice when those habits change—for the good or the bad? What influence have you learned certain environments have on you?

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The dire hopelessness Paul presented in his description of the old life without Christ is countered by the presentation of the glorious opportunity to live the new life in Christ. Still, this would require some discipline for the Ephesian believers in their quest to break free from the entanglements of their former sin and darkness. First, they were to be renewed in the spirit of their minds. It is critically important to realize that this was something that would happen to them; they were to be renewed, not to do the renewing. They were to let the sanctification of the Holy Spirit in their lives have its full effect.

Second, they were to put on the new self, which was created according to God’s likeness in righteousness. This referred to the new creation in Jesus Christ. Anders says putting on the new self means that Christians “allow the new self to govern our activities. We are to begin living the lifestyle that corresponds to who we have become in Christ. This new holy self shows we are maturing, growing in unity with the body, and doing our part of the body’s work.”<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is an encouraging manifesto of what it means to live with others in Christ. The power of the church in a darkened environment is an applicable message to Christians today. As gospel conversations continue to happen and people of all ages come to Christ, it is important to realize that, just like the Ephesians, no one comes to Christ in a vacuum. The environments that we come from shape us all. In that light, his directive to the Ephesians offers several important points of application for Christians today.

First, Christians must live out their true identity. At the crux of the issue Paul dealt with was the Christian's identity in Christ. At the moment of salvation, the Holy Spirit indwells a Christian and makes him or her a new creation. That new believer is a brother or sister in Christ, an adopted child of God. Paul's word there would be something akin to ". . . so act like it!" This is infinitely easier to say than do. Sin contends with the Christian daily, so adjustments in lifestyle and habits are required. Christians can begin by noting those places that most closely and experientially remind them of their old self and work to avoid them. In addition, an ongoing evaluation of relationships, occupations, and activities is useful for identifying those elements that draw Christians back to temptation.

Second, Christians must pursue the renewal of their minds. "Garbage in, garbage out" is an effective cliché for considering the renewal of the mind. Certainly, the renewal of one's mind begins with the Holy Spirit's drawing that person to Christ in the first place. It continues as the Holy Spirit prompts and convicts the Christian about the content that he or she dwells on. The Christian's cooperation can include a healthy filtering of those streams of content that draw them away from the character of Christ. Those avenues can include media, bosses, confidants, close relationships, or any other source that exerts influence over the Christian's worldview and daily perspective.

Third, the Christian must be connected to other Christians. The letter to the Ephesians was written to a community. The verses immediately preceding this week's passage discussed the Christians existing as a body over whom Christ is the Head. Discipleship happens best when it happens in community. In order for any Christian to have the best chance to put on the new self daily, allowing the leading of the Holy Spirit to guide their thoughts, actions, and decisions, he or she must be in real community with other Christians who can encourage and even confront when needed.

❓ Have you experienced new life in Christ? If so, what would you say is your greatest area of struggle in living the new life? What strategies do you have in place to counteract that? Who helps you and prays for you in this regard? If not, how is God calling you to respond today?

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❓ When you think about your mind being renewed, what are the first thoughts that jump into your mind about what you listen to, look at, read, talk about, and so on? Are those things beneficial or harmful to your mind's renewal? How should you act accordingly?

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❓ Who do you know who is making choices with darkened judgment or futile thoughts? How might you seek to have a gospel conversation with this person?

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**CHRIST CONNECTION:** Christ's atoning work provides freedom from condemnation for all who call Him Savior.

**MISSIONAL APPLICATION:** The Spirit-empowered freedom Christians enjoy frees them to follow Christ and continue His ministry in the world.



# FOR NEXT WEEK

## The Image of Righteousness

### Main Passages

- Ephesians 4:17-24

### Session Outline

1. Farewell to the Old Life (Eph. 4:17-18)
2. Contrasting the Old Life and the New Life (Eph. 4:19-21)
3. Living the New Life (Eph. 4:22-24)

### Memorize

*<sup>20</sup> But that is not how you came to know Christ, <sup>21</sup> assuming you heard about him and were taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus, <sup>22</sup> to take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires, <sup>23</sup> to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, <sup>24</sup> and to put on the new self, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth.*

- Ephesians 4:20-24, CSB

### Daily Readings

- Monday - Ephesians 4:17-24
- Tuesday - 1 Peter 1:14-16
- Wednesday - 1 John 3:6-10
- Thursday - 2 Corinthians 7:1
- Friday - 1 Thessalonians 5:23
- Saturday - 1 Peter 2:24

### References

<sup>1</sup>Anders, Max. *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, & Colossians*. Holman New Testament Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 1999.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce, F.F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. NICNT. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1984.

<sup>3</sup>Anders.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce.

<sup>5</sup>Anders.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.