

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON SIXTY-TWO)

“PUT THE OLD MAN OFF”

EPHESIANS 4:17-24

17 This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind,

18 Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart:

19 Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

20 But ye have not so learned Christ;

21 If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus:

22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;

23 And be renewed in the spirit of your mind;

24 And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

In the first **16** verses of **Ephesians** chapter **4**, the Apostle Paul dealt with the nature of the Church, and the role of each believer in its growth and

development. In verse **17**, he commenced to deal with the matter of the believer's relationship with the unbelieving world in which he or she lives.

In verse **17-19**, Paul presents the “**old man.**” He shows to us the persons we were before we were saved. In verses **20-32**, presents the “**new man,**” the persons that we are to be, in light of the fact that we have experienced the saving power of God.

In verse **20** Paul writes, “*But ye have not so learned Christ.*” He is here making a contrast between the saved Gentiles in Ephesus, and the unsaved Gentiles, who were still living in paganism. Earlier, in verse **17**, he had written, “*So I say this, and insist in the Lord, that you no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking*” (**New English Translation**). The phrase, “*that you no longer live,*” implies that some of the believers in Ephesus had either not relinquished their pagan lifestyles, or had drifted back into their old unregenerate ways.

Paul is trying to correct their potentially destructive behaviour by correcting their defective **thinking**. He therefore begins by reminding them that they had been delivered from the moral sewer in which they had once been immersed. He writes, “*But ye have not so **learned Christ.***”

The word “*learned,*” is a translation of the Greek word **manthanó:** (**man-than'-o**), which means “to gain knowledge or skill by instruction.” It conveys a basic meaning of directing one's mind to something and producing an external effect. The idea is to genuinely understand a teaching, accept it as true, **and apply it to one's life**. It is the application of the teaching that makes all the difference.

Paul did not say “You have not so learned **about** Christ,” because it is possible to learn about Christ and never **learn Christ!** It is possible to know **about** Christ and never **know Him** in a saving way. To “learn Christ” means to have a personal relationship with Christ so that we come to know Him with increasing intimacy. It is possible for us, for

example, to learn about Julius Caesar by reading books about his life. But we can never “learn” Julius Caesar or know him because he is dead. But Jesus Christ is alive! Therefore, we can “learn Christ” and know Him through a personal relationship and fellowship with Him. It is important for us to understand and appreciate that Christianity is not merely “**about** Christ.” Christianity **is** Christ!

Paul says in effect to the believers in Ephesus: “Your minds are no longer darkened; your lives are no longer alienated from the life of God; your hearts are no longer hardened and impure. You have learned Christ. Christ is the Subject of your learning and He is your area of interest and activity. You have come out from the world, and you are to show the world an example of the heavenly life that you possess. You are no longer to live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. Your lives now have a purpose and that purpose is Christ. You must henceforth live your lives for the glory of God. **Since you have learned Christ, live Christ!**”

In verse **21** Paul writes, “*If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus.*” The **King James Version** translates “*if*” as the conditional particle of a hypothetical case. This is misleading because it is a particle of a fulfilled condition. The translation should read: “If, as is the case,” or “since.” In other words, what follows is not in any doubt but is taken for granted. The Ephesian believers had in fact heard Christ and had been taught by Him concerning the truth.

The Ephesians had heard Christ. The word “*heard*,” is the translation of a Greek word which means “to hear with attention, to hear effectively.” It refers to hearing with the “ear of the mind” so as to respond appropriately to what has been spoken or taught.

Paul tells us that the Ephesian believers had not only “*heard*” Christ, but they also had been “*taught*” by him. The word “*taught*” is a translation of the Greek word **didaskó: (did-as’-ko)**, which means, “to teach, instruct, or impart knowledge.” The word literally means, “to cause to

learn.” In the New Testament, the word nearly always refers to teaching the Scriptures, the written Word of God in a group setting.

The word **Didaskó** means to teach students in such a way that the will of the students become conformed to the teaching taught. In other words, the teacher’s instruction is so effectual that it results in the transformation of the students. As they are taught, the students change their minds saying in essence “I have to change the way I view things and the way I think and operate based on the doctrine that is being taught.” **Doctrine determines direction.** Effective Scriptural instruction does not merely provide information. It challenges, inspires and transforms. It gives rise to men and women who are increasingly being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, and are increasingly living in responsive obedience to the will of God. In short, it is the teaching and application of biblically sound doctrine that produces biblically sound disciples.

Paul does not say “You have heard **about** Christ, and have been taught **about** Christ.” He says, “You have heard **Him** and have been taught **by Him.**” The “*Him*” is emphatic in the Greek. It was **Christ** that the Ephesians had heard and it was **by Christ** that they had been taught. Paul is certainly not implying that they had seen and heard Jesus Christ in person. They had not seen or heard Him in the flesh, but they had seen and heard Him in the Apostle Paul. Paul is implying that Christ Himself speaks and is heard in those who proclaim the truth concerning Him. As our Lord said in **John 10:27**, “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me*”

Paul refers to the truth “*in Jesus.*” The word “*truth*” is a translation of the Greek word **alétheia: (al-ay’-thi-a)** which refers to “the reality lying at the basis of an appearance; the manifested, veritable essence of a matter.” In ancient Greek culture, the word **alétheia** was synonymous for reality as the opposite of illusion. When Paul writes that the truth is **in Jesus**, he is testifying to the fact that ultimate reality is embodied in Jesus Christ. He is the personification of truth. Our Lord said as much in

John 14:6 when He declared, *“I am the way, **the truth**, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”* In other words, truth apart from the Person of Christ has very little power or efficacy.

Truth is the conformity between a reality and a declaration which professes to set it forth. To say it another way, words are true when they are consistent with objective reality. Persons and things are true when they correspond with their profession. Hence a truth is a declaration which has corresponding reality, or a reality which is correctly set forth. Since God is Himself the great reality, that which correctly sets forth His nature is pre-eminently the Truth.

Brothers and sisters, it is very important for us to understand and appreciate that our fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and with each other, is based on the **Word of God**. We can be taught “the truth” as it is in Jesus Christ. The better we understand the Word of God, the better we know the Son of God, for the whole Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments, is a revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. In **Luke 24:25-27**, our Lord reprimanded two of his disciples on the Emmaus road, with the following words,

25 “You foolish people—how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!

26 Wasn’t it necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and enter into his glory?”

*27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things written about himself in **all** the scriptures.*

(New English Translation)

The reference to *“Moses and all the prophets”* in verse **27**, is a way to say that the message of Christ, or Messiah, runs throughout Old Testament Scripture from first to last.

In **John 5:39-40** our Lord said the following to the Jewish religious leaders:

*39 You study the scriptures thoroughly because you think in them you possess eternal life, and it is **these same scriptures that testify about me,***

40 but you are not willing to come to me so that you may have life.
(**New English Translation**)

The unsaved person is spiritually ignorant and as a result, he or she does not know Christ. But the believer is intelligent in the things of **the Word**. As a result, he or she has “*learned Christ,*” and he or she grows in his or her personal knowledge of Christ day by day. Because believers have “*heard*” Christ and have been “*taught by*” Christ, as the truth is in Him, they have believed the **Truth** and have received the **Life**. Paul is therefore, urging us to walk in the **Way** and not to walk after the example of the unsaved world.

Beloved brethren, our experience of salvation goes even deeper than hearing Christ and being taught by Him. Our salvation experience has resulted in a whole new position before God! As believers, we have not merely changed our minds. We have totally changed our citizenship. We belong to God’s “*new creation*” in Christ, according to **2 Corinthians 5:17**. The **New English Translation**, renders the verse as follows: “*So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away—look, what is new has come!*” Because the believer is “*a new creation in Christ,*” he or she is no longer to allow the ideas and desires of the old creation to control his or her life.

Accordingly, Paul writes in verse **22**, “*That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts.*”

The **New English Translation**, renders the verse as follows: *“You were taught with reference to your former way of life to lay aside the old man who is being corrupted in accordance with deceitful desires.”*

The phrase *“That ye put off,”* gives the intention of the instruction given. Believers have learned, by having heard, and being taught by Christ, to “put off,” or “lay aside,” the “old man.” The words *“put off,”* or *“lay aside,”* are the translation of a Greek word which means, “to put away (literally or figuratively), to cast off, to lay aside.” The word literally means “to put or take something away from its normal location and put it out of the way.” It was used literally of runners participating in the Olympic Games, who cast off their clothes and ran nearly naked in the stadium. Figuratively, the word conveys the idea of a person ceasing to do what he or she was previously accustomed to do. The word is in a tense in the Greek which calls for a definite action. In **Ephesians 4:22**, the verb signifies a change of identities, calling us to live like the **One** in Whom we are now positioned.

In **Acts 7:58-59**, we read the following in the context of the stoning of Stephen:

*58 And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses **laid down** their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul.*

59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

Verse **58** informs us that the men who stoned Stephen to death had *“laid down”* their outer garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. The words *“laid down”* are a translation of the same Greek word that is translated *“put off,”* in **Ephesians 4:22**.

The men referred to in **Acts 7:58**, “laid down” their outer garments so that they might do their evil, devilish work with the least amount of restriction. Paul is urging believers to lay aside the “old man,” characterized by a lifestyle of sin, in order that they might live the

righteous, Holy Spirit inspired life-style characteristic of those who are the children of God, with the least amount of restriction.

This reminds us of what the author of the letter to the **Hebrews** wrote in **Hebrews 12:1**: “*Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.*” The phrase “*lay aside*” in this verse is also a translation of the same Greek word translated “*put off*” in **Ephesians 4:22**.

Brothers and sisters, I ask that you follow me very carefully now. The Greek word translated “*put off,*” or “*lay aside,*” as it is used in **Ephesians 4:22**, is capable of being interpreted in two ways. It may be understood firstly, as referring to **an action completed in the past, on behalf of the believer**. Such an understanding would be an indication of the believer’s **position**. Secondly, the phrase may be understood as referring to **an action that the believer is to carry out himself or herself**. Such an understanding would be an indication **not** of the believer’s **position**, but of his or her **responsibility**.

I am of the opinion that Paul’s intention was for the words “*put off,*” or “*lay aside,*” to be interpreted **in both ways!** I am persuaded that the words “*put off,*” or “*lay aside,*” are to be understood as both **an action completed in the past, on behalf of the believer**, as well as **an action that the believer is to carry out**. The first interpretation emphasizes the bestowal of God’s sovereign grace on the believer in salvation, thereby guaranteeing the security of his or her **position** in Christ, while the second interpretation emphasizes the believer’s **responsibility** to walk in the light and power of the grace bestowed.

John Piper expressed this twin reality beautifully, in an article entitled “*Thirteen Ways to Kill Sin:*”

“1 Take heart from the truth that the old sinful you is decisively **already** dead (**Romans 6:6; Colossians 3:3; Galatians 5:24**). By faith

we are united to Christ so that His death was our death (**Romans 6:5; 2 Corinthians 5:14**). This means three things: **(a)** The mortal blow to our 'old man' has been struck; **(b)** the old self will not succeed in domination now; and **(c)** his final obliteration is certain.

2 Consciously **reckon** the old man dead; that is, **believe the truth of Scripture** about the old man's death in Christ **and seek to live in that freedom (Romans 6:11)**. **Living out the reality that you are, is the proof that you are.** One clear illustration of becoming what you are is found in **1 Corinthians 5:7**: *'Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened.'* It sounds strange, but salvation is a strange and wonderful thing: **Clean out the old leaven of sin, because it is really already cleaned out.** If you try to play logic games with this reality and say, 'I don't need to fight sin because it is already cleaned out,' **you will prove only that you are not among the number who are cleansed."**

In other words the "old man" has already been crucified with Christ. Paul states this clearly in **Romans 6:6**. The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows: *"We know that our old man was crucified with him so that the body of sin would no longer dominate us so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin."*

The truth that the "old man" has already been crucified with Christ, is an accomplished fact, but it is a truth that believers must continually reckon or count as true. Paul makes this point in **Romans 6:11-14**. The **New English Translation** renders the verses as follows:

8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

9 We know that since Christ has been raised from the dead, he is never going to die again; death no longer has mastery over him.

10 For the death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God.

*11 So you too **consider yourselves** dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its desires,

13 and do not present your members to sin as instruments to be used for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who are alive from the dead and your members to God as instruments to be used for righteousness.

14 For sin will have no mastery over you, because you are not under law but under grace.

Based upon the truth that the “old man” has already been crucified, Paul is exhorting us to make it a practice of “putting off,” or “laying aside,” this already crucified “old man.” It is our responsibility to put off in our daily walk, what has already been put off when we died with Christ.

When Christ died on the cross, we died with Him **positionally**. When He was raised from the dead, we were raised up with Him. We are to reckon or count these facts to be true in our **daily practice**, so that we will not yield to sin.

Why do we need to put to death what has already been crucified? I believe that we must daily apply, **practically** and **experientially** the facts that are true of us **positionally**. We must live out and experience in a practical way the reality of the “old man” crucified with Christ.

When slavery was abolished in the British Caribbean in 1834, a period of apprenticeship followed. “Full Freedom” actually occurred in 1838. Although the slaves were officially free, many of them continued living as if they were still slaves. The Act of Emancipation, passed in Parliament in England gave them **legal** standing as free citizens, but it could not emancipate them from **mental** slavery. **Positionally** they were free, but **practically** and **experientially** they were still in bondage. They

did not reckon or count the accomplished fact of the abolition of slavery to be true as it related to them.

What these newly freed slaves needed to do was to think and live in accordance with the new facts. They needed to live as free people because that is what they really were! When they were tempted to think like slaves, they needed to say, “No, the truth is we are now free men and women!” They needed to appropriate that truth into their daily experience. Emancipated sinners need to do the very same. We must think and live in accordance with the truth that our “old man” was crucified with Christ. **We must consider ourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.**

In the context of **Ephesians 4:22**, **J. Vernon McGee** made the following comments:

“We are to put off the old man and put on the new man in the same manner that we change our clothes. It is like putting off an old and unclean garment and then putting on a garment that is new and clean. **The putting off the old man and putting on the new man cannot be done by self-effort, nor can it be done by striving to imitate Christ’s conduct. It has been done for the believing sinner by the death of Christ.** We are like babes who cannot dress themselves. I have learned with my little grandson that a child doesn’t do very well when he tries to dress himself. As Christians we never reach the place where we can do that, and we don’t need to try. It already has been done for us. We are told in the Epistle to the **Romans** that the old man has already been crucified in the death of Christ. *‘Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin’ (Romans 6:6).* In view of the truth that the old man has already been crucified with Christ, we are to put it off in the power of the Holy Spirit.”

This act of putting off the “old man” had to do with the “*former conversation,*” or the “*former way of life.*” The “old man” is described

as “*corrupt according to the deceitful lusts.*” The words “*is corrupt*” are the translation of a present participle in the Greek. The idea is, “*which is in the process of being corrupted.*” It speaks of the progressive condition of corruption which characterized the “old man.” The unsaved person is thus subject to a continuous process of corruption which grows worse as time goes on. The “old man” is decaying day by day, like a decomposing corpse. Every trait of the “old man’s” behaviour is rotten and rotting, ripe for being carried away to be buried.

This process of corruption is dominated or controlled by the passionate desires of deceit, deceit being personified here. Paul’s point is that lusts possessed of deceit are seductive and give a false impression in that they promise joy, satisfaction and fulfillment but they fail to produce. All this, the believing sinner put off when he or she was saved.

Brothers and sisters, the reality is that lost humanity is a “work in progress,” but unfortunately that “work” is not progressing for the better, but for the worse. It is in the process of decaying, a process that will culminate in out and out rebellion against God headed by the most corrupt and depraved human being of all, the Antichrist! That is why Paul exhorts us so passionately in verses **17-21**:

17 So with the wisdom given to me from the Lord I say: You should not live like the unbelievers around you who walk in their empty delusions.

18 Their corrupted logic has been clouded because their hearts are so far from God—their blinded understanding and deep-seated moral darkness keeps them from the true knowledge of God.

19 Because of spiritual apathy, they surrender their lives to lewdness, impurity, and sexual obsession.

20 But this is not the way of life that Christ has unfolded within you.

21 If you have really experienced the Anointed One, and heard his truth, it will be seen in your life; for we know that the ultimate reality is embodied in Jesus!

(The Passion Translation)