

Introduction

Many years ago—back when the White Pages were a thing—I received a phone call from an unknown number. If there’s any hesitation when I answer I immediately hang up; I’m not waiting for a computer to connect me to some spammer. This was a live person. He immediately said, “Hi, John”. Um...what? Then he said, “I’m calling to see if we can arrange payment for your recent visit to Bronson Hospital.” My what? I told him I have no idea what he’s talking about. He tried to laugh it off as if it were some inside joke shared by the two of us, but I truly had never heard of the hospital.

He kept insisting that I had been a patient there and that I had failed to make payments. I agreed with him on this point: I had not, in fact, made any payments to Bronson Hospital: I had never *heard* of the hospital which, it turns out, is in Kalamazoo. (I live in Grand Rapids; why would I go to a hospital in Kalamazoo?) He kept insisting that I had been a patient there but I assured him I had not. Then he dropped what he thought was a zinger: “If you’re not the right person then how did I get your phone number?”

Um...*the telephone book*? I refused to pay him, of course, and he eventually stopped calling me. It was clear this was a case of mistaken identity. It turns out the person he was after had a similar name. Years later I began tutoring at Palmer School but during the background check I was flagged. Someone with my name had been arrested for drunk driving in Jackson, Michigan. *I had never been to Jackson, Michigan*. I have never driven drunk—I haven’t been drunk!

I had to stop by a Michigan State police station to get finger-printed and verify that I am not *that guy*. This was another case of mistaken identity. In a nation of hundreds of millions of people it is no surprise that you find lots of folk with similar names, resulting in some unfortunate problems.

When I was in the mortgage business I spoke with a man who was desperate to buy a house. He had tried many times but “his” credit was terrible. The problem was his grandfather was Jose Gonzalez. His father’s name was Jose Gonzalez. His name was Jose Gonzalez. Two of his brothers were named Jose Gonzalez. He had a couple cousins named Jose Gonzalez. They each had different middle names! Some combination of two or three of them had either recently had a bankruptcy or were in the process of bankruptcy. Some of those who had not still had terrible credit. Many of these debts showed up on this particular Jose Gonzalez’ credit report, thoroughly destroying his credit.

These were cases of accidental mistaken identity. I cannot imagine the frustration when someone purposefully steals your identity. As that great theologian once said, “Identity theft is no joke, Jim!”

The truth is we are at risk of spiritual identity theft. In Christ we have been given a new identity, for we are now *in Christ*. The old has gone, the new has come. Whether others try to steal our new identity by thrusting our old identity in our faces or we try to cling to our former identity, the struggle of the Christian life is to live out our true selves in Christ. This

is what Paul has been driving at in his letter to the Ephesians. We're in Ephesians 4, verse 17.

Eph 4:17 Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!—²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4:17–24

As I Was Saying...

In verse 17 Paul begins with the words “Now this I say”. What he means is something along the lines of, “As I was saying...” As Paul often does, he started to say something back in the beginning of this chapter and then interrupts himself. After proclaiming the gospel of Jesus to them in the first three chapters, he finally gets around to applying the gospel to their lives. He tells them to walk in a manner worthy of their calling, and their calling is to unity in Christ. They must maintain the unity of the Spirit.

Then he interrupts his flow of thought centered around walking to explain what the unity of the Spirit means. Their lives are centered on the truth of God in Christ. There is one body, one Spirit, one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. There is one God and Father of all. He continues to explain how Christ has given gifts to his church. These gifts are in the form of gifted people, men and women who are empowered by the Spirit to lead the church in particular ways, that the church might do the work of ministry.

This work of ministry is bringing about the maturity of those who are in Christ. Those who are mature are not tossed around by the circumstances of life and are instead rooted and grounded in the truth of Christ. Thus the local church grows in maturity when each part—every single person who is given to the church—is working properly.

Then he writes something like, “Now what was I saying? Oh, yeah! Walk in a manner worthy of your calling!” Specifically here he contrasts their walk with that of the Gentiles. This is interesting, for they were *Gentiles*. There were not many Jews in the church in Ephesus. The overwhelming majority of those in the church were from the nations—they were Gentiles. Paul, however, has already addressed the issue of their true identity.

In chapter 2 he reminds them of their former manner of life. They were dead in their trespasses and sins—the very sins in which they once *walked*. At that time they followed the prince of the power of the air, the spirit at work in the sons of disobedience. Paul includes himself at this point, claiming “we all once lived in the passions of our flesh”—even good Jews like he had been. While their sins may have looked very different, at the core, they were all “carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath”.

God, of course, intervened. Because of his love to them in Christ, even when they were dead in the trespasses and sins, God made them alive in Christ. There was a time they were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. Now in Christ they who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Whereas there had been great ethnic hostility between Jew and Gentile, in Christ this hostility has been broken. Paul says Christ tore down the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments. He did this because he was intending to usher in the new covenant that replaces the covenant given at Mount Sinai. Look again at what he says in chapter 2.

Eph 2:14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Ephesians 2:14–16

God’s aim in sending Christ was to take from both Jews and Gentiles and create for himself “one new man in place of the two, so making peace”. Do you see how peace is created in the church? In chapter 4:3 Paul tells them to *maintain* the peace, not *make* the peace. The peace was created when Christ created one new man out of the two groups that were hostile to one another.

Though they were, in fact, from the nations, “Gentile” is no longer their primary identity. This is what Paul meant in Colossians 3 when he wrote,

Col 3:11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Colossians 3:11

Here, *in the church*, there is not Greek and Jew. Ethnic identity is not the primary identity in the church. There is not circumcised and uncircumcised. Religious background is not the primary identity in the church. There is not barbarian and Scythian. Culture is not the primary identity in the church. There is not slave and free. Socio-economic status is not the primary identity in the church. What is? Christ! Christ is all, and in all! This is the unity the Spirit has created in his church.

Paul says, yes, you were Gentiles in the flesh. In Christ you are something new. Your primary identity has been changed. You are no longer who you were. You are now *in Christ*, a new man. Remember in chapter 1 he says we have been adopted *as sons*. This includes women in the church, for in the first-century mind, sons inherited the father’s estate. All those who are in Christ inherit the Father’s estate, for all are adopted *as sons*. This is a status, not a sex.

When a person comes to Christ, he or she remains male or female. Trusting in Christ doesn’t erase your sex. A Scythian who follows Jesus is still a Scythian. Trusting in Christ doesn’t erase your culture. Whether you were an atheist or an Independent Fundamentalist

Baptist, whether you were baptized as an infant or as a believer, trusting in Christ doesn't erase your religious background. When you trust in Christ your skin tone neither darkens nor lightens. What changes is your fundamental identity. What matters most is *who you are in Christ*.

No Longer Walk As the Gentiles Do

Paul tells them in verse 17 they must no longer walk as Gentiles walk. To say this another way, they must no longer walk as they themselves once walked. They are no longer *Gentiles* but followers of Jesus. There is a clean break with their former way of life. Notice what that former way of life consists of: futility of their minds. John Chrysostom helpfully explains what this futility of mind means.

What is meant by “the futility of their minds?” It is being preoccupied with futile things. This is what the Preacher in Ecclesiastes referred to when he said: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” ... “Vanity of vanities” refers to splendid houses, enormous and inflated wealth, herds of slaves strutting about the market, conceit, vainglory, arrogance and boastfulness. All these things are vain. Such things are not created by God but are of our own creating. Why are they vain? They lead to nothing good.

John Chrysostom, Homily on Ephesians 12.4.17

Those who walk in the futility of their minds are those who chase after things that are trivial, things that won't last, things that have no eternal significance. What they chase is only emptiness. They pursue idols that make big promises but can never deliver.

Chrysostom doesn't mean that pursuing home ownership is a problem. He means those whose lives are centered around attaining a home in order to show off their wealth. He means those who find their identities in being homeowners, those who get meaning and purpose from cars and boats and vacation homes and clothing and 401ks. To chase after such things is futility.

It isn't only about chasing *possessions*, however. He says futility consists of conceit and vainglory and arrogance and boastfulness as well. Vainglory is excessive pride. This pride is a treasured marker of our modern American culture. We embrace vainglory. Pride comes in two forms. First is that pride we all think of: thinking too much of yourself. When you think you are better than everyone else, this is pride. Pride is also thinking of yourself too much.

When you think you are the *most important* person in a conversation, you are filled with pride. You may not think you're the *best* person or the *greatest* person in a conversation, but the *most important*. When every interaction has to become focused on you, you are filled with pride. This is vainglory. It's often masked for the focus doesn't have to be how great you are; all that matters is that the focus is on you. We often see this when people project a “woe is me” attitude. Rather than brag about how *great* they are, they brag about how *bad* they are. The most important part being about how *they are*.

This is our culture's desire for social media fame. So many want to be influencers. So many want others to click “Like” on their entire lives, which of course is posted online.

Vainglory is the need to be noticed and noticed *constantly*. Paul's says we must no longer walk as Gentiles walk, and a significant part of that walk is a self-centered life. (We will see this more clearly next week.)

In verse 18 Paul lists a progression, but in reverse. If we read this text backwards, it will make more sense. The Ephesian church, made up of Gentile believers in Jesus, must no longer walk as Gentiles walk, which is a futile way of thinking. They spend their time pursuing and desiring empty things that can never satisfy. They chase after life but only ever find death in the things that promise life.

Paul says this is, ultimately, because of their hardness of heart. Their hearts are hardened toward God. They do not desire to worship God. This hardness stems from ignorance that is in them. Though God has revealed himself generally through nature and fully in Jesus, they remain ignorant of him. This ignorance results in alienation from the life of God. As Gentiles they had no hope and were without God in the world. This alienation from the life of God is what causes their minds to be darkened. Without the life of God their thinking, their entire way of being, is darkness. There is no light in it. Without the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ shining in their darkness, the only possible outcome is their walk in futility.

It is no surprise, then, they become callous. The word callous means void of feeling. One who is callous is not bothered by the implications of his or her actions (BDAG). There's a deadness. Paul says they have "given themselves up to sensuality". This is a voluntary handing of themselves over to it. They have no regard for the impact their behavior will have on others. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus used this word to describe a Roman soldier on the temple mount exposing himself to those who were there to worship. He had no regard for the impact his actions had on others. In his callousness, he gave himself over to *sensuality*.

This is the very progression Paul is describing in Romans 1.

Rom 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Romans 1:18–23

Though God has revealed himself sufficiently through nature for people to worship him and only him, this self-revelation is rejected. Do you see the progression? By denying him and by not honoring him, their thinking becomes futile—the same word as the one in our text, only the verbal form. This pursuit of futility is connected to the darkening of their hearts. Less and less light is allowed into the darkness, resulting in more darkness. They exchange God's glory for images of things that will not last—mortal man and birds and animals and such.

This is what Paul is getting at in our text. The Gentiles walk in a manner that has utter disregard for God and his glory, and so they become callous and give themselves up to sensuality. They “are greedy to practice every kind of impurity”.

The Likeness of God

In verse 20 Paul declares why the Ephesian believers must no longer walk as the Gentiles walk: this is not the way they learned Christ. After detailing the non-Christian way of thinking, the way of *darkness*, Paul says this is not how they learned *Christ*. Notice he does not say how they learned *of* Christ, or *about* Christ or *the way of* Christ: this is not how they learned *Christ*.

New Testament scholar Clinton Arnold points out this is a very unusual use of the word “learn”. You learn things, facts, propositional truths. When a religious student learns, that student learns laws and statutes and principles—*content*. That student learns an ethic for living, a pattern to follow. Paul says they learned Christ—a *person*, not a *content*.

Pay careful attention to the contrast here. Paul tells them they must no longer walk as the Gentiles walk, which is to say, to no longer think like non-Christians, which results in behavior that comes from hardness of heart and is seen in giving themselves up to sensuality—a callous disregard for its impact on anyone else. Notice very carefully: the contrast with sinful behavior *is not the avoidance of sin*. The contrast with sinful behavior is *being like Christ*.

Paul doesn’t say to no longer walk as the Gentiles walk but instead walk in a sinless sort of way. He says to no longer walk as the Gentiles walk but instead *be like Jesus*. He does add they have heard *about* him and have been *taught* in him. As we saw earlier in this chapter, our faith is based on propositional truth: there is one body, one Spirit, one hope; there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; there is one God and Father of all. The truth of God, he says, is in Jesus.

A behavior, however, is not the standard. The lifestyle of a follower of Jesus must be different from that of non-Christians, but the standard is not a list of things to avoid or even a list of things to do. The standard for Christian living is the Lord Jesus himself. The Ephesians have learned *Christ*.

He explains they have been taught to put off their old self, which belongs to their former manner of life. Remember what that former manner is. They were dead in their trespasses and sins. They once lived in the passions of their flesh. They once were by nature children of wrath. As he says in our text, they once were darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They once had been callous and had given themselves up to sensuality and were greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

They must not walk that way, which means their behavior must, in fact, be different, but Paul’s emphasis isn’t on changing their behavior! They must put off their old self, for their old self belongs to their former manner of life. He means their former *identity* is that of Gentiles, those who walk in the futility of their minds, those whose thinking is broken.

The Gentiles’ identity is what gives them meaning and purpose and value. It’s what drives them. For some that identity is self-chosen. They seek to be seen as rich and so they pursue large homes, as John Chrysostom said. Or they pursue a carefully crafted online

persona. Or they spend hours in the gym to look a certain way or they dress so as to be seen. Maybe they pray or smile in church, for *that looks good*. This is all encapsulated in the futility of their minds. They pursue an identity of their own choosing.

Sometimes that identity is thrust upon them. You're told to, as the song says, live your own truth—do whatever makes you feel good. Get rid of boundaries! The rules are *stifling*. Chase good feelings, for soon we'll be gone. How does that turn out? You will find yourself more lost than ever, enslaved and bound to your desires. You will pursue your own selfish gain regardless of the impact your behavior has on anyone else. You will find yourself living for someone else's expectations for your life. That's not freedom!

This former manner of life is corrupt through deceitful desires. This is what the song is getting at. "Pursue this empty and vain thing and your heart's every desire will be fulfilled!" No, it won't. Only the Lord Jesus can satisfy. Deceitful desires lie to you, whether it's the desire for financial stability or for popularity or for pleasure. Deceitful desires may be found in the need to be seen a certain way, whether athletic or funny or organized *or really good at following Jesus*.

Yes, this means you can "follow" Jesus in a way that requires repentance. That is, sometimes we must repent for the way in which we follow Jesus, for if we follow him in order to be seen in a certain light, we are not following him in a way that glorifies him, but *us*. That sin is a bit harder to see, is all. That's the only difference.

Such people are often deceived, for deceitful desires—the desire for self—can be very convincing. "No, no; you read your Bible today and you spent this amount of time in prayer today and you didn't *actually* cheat on your wife today..."

Not only must they put off the old self, the former identity, Paul says they must be renewed in the spirit of their minds. This means putting on the new self—embracing their new identity in Christ.

Sanctification By Faith

Look at verse 24 again. Paul tells them to no longer walk as the Gentiles walk, but to put off their old self and be renewed in the spirit of their minds,

Eph 4:24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true
righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4:24

He says they are to put on their new self. Implicit in this is the declaration there is a new self, a new identity. Something is there that was not there before. This new self is "created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness". He does not tell them to become new, to make themselves new, to *renew themselves*. He declares they are new. This new self they are to embrace has already been created by God.

This is why he said back in chapter 2 they were dead in the trespasses and sins in which the once walked, but *God made them alive* together with Christ. This is something God did. God has acted powerfully in their lives, giving them new life, causing them to be born again. As he says in 2 Corinthians 5, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away and the new has come.

If you are in Christ, hear this directly: you are a new creation. The old you is dead and gone; the new you has been raised to new life in its place. You are not the old you anymore. You haven't been since Jesus first saved you. You are the new you. The problem you and I face is we like to *act like* the old us is still around. We commit identity theft with ourselves. This is what Paul is getting at here: stop acting like the old you is still alive and acknowledge with your behavior the new you is all there is.

If you are in Christ your fundamental identity has changed. You are no longer a Jew or a Gentile. You have been plucked from one of these categories and you have been adopted into God's family. Now what matters is what God himself says is true of you. Because you are a new creation, one who has been created after the likeness of God, you must act like it!

Here's the thing. We're all good Protestants here. We believe in justification by faith. We believe we are declared to be righteous in God's sight by faith and faith alone. We deny that good works result in our justification. Justification is by faith. *So is sanctification.* Sanctification is by faith alone!

God declares what is true of you in Christ. You must believe this. You must believe that what God says is true and trustworthy. God says you no longer walk in the futility of your mind, so stop walking in that manner! Don't let your true identity be stolen from you. Don't listen to the lies of the enemy who tells you you will never be anything but what you once were. Church, either the enemy is lying, or *God is lying*, for God says you are a new creation!

We are sanctified by faith. That is, we are made holy in our behavior by trusting what God says is true of us. If God is true then what he says of us is true. Ephesians scholar Steven Baugh put it this way:

Sanctification is by faith. We will never see enough good fruit to satisfy our conscience if we look to that fruit as the source of our hope (1 John 3:19–20). If you have truly entrusted yourself to Christ Jesus, you are a new creation. You are light, now walk as children of the light by faith!

S. M. Baugh, Ephesians, EEC, 378

When we look to ourselves to evaluate how *we* are doing, we will never measure up. That's crushing. We must examine ourselves, but as we do so we must constantly look to Christ and what he says about us. When we contemplate what the Lord says is true of us our thinking will begin to be changed. We will be renewed in the spirit of our minds.

This is the contrast Paul is making. The darkness of the mind of the Gentiles results in their behavior. The light of the gospel transforming the thinking of those in Christ also results in a change in behavior. This is why striving to *manage sin* is itself futile. Trying to prevent yourself from sinning by merely placing safeguards around you can only transfer the sin inward. Your *mind* needs to be changed. Your *thinking* needs to be changing. Your *identity* must be rooted in who Jesus is and what he has done and further, you must believe what he says is true of you.

When we try to merely manage our sin, which looks a lot like trying to avoid sin and trying to replace it with something we do, we're focusing on ourselves. We try really hard to stop sinning and think that if we can do that we will have arrived. That was never the standard!

Sanctification is the process by which God makes us more like Jesus. It is the process the Lord brings about in our lives that leads to us loving what he loves and hating what he hates. To put off the old self and to put on the new self is to trust God's declaration that we are, in fact, new creations.

I love how Clinton Arnold summarize this section of Ephesians:

The theme of identity formation reaches a high point in this section of the letter as Paul prepares to deliver a series of moral exhortations. His point here is that change comes only as a result of bringing one's life into conformity with their new identity in Christ.

Clinton Arnold, ZECNT

Church, this happens through faith. This happens as the spirit of our minds is renewed when we focus on who Jesus is and what he has done *in us* and what he says is true *of us*. Following Jesus is simply living in a manner that agrees with who we are in Christ. As we've been seeing, this can only happen in community. The spirit of our mind is renewed through our brothers and sisters in Christ speaking into our lives, praying with and for us, encouraging us and exhorting us.

When we try to go it alone we get lost in our own thoughts, our own deceitful desires. We forget who we are in Christ and we allow our true identity to be hidden from us. Whether we go down the rabbit hole of anxiety or worry, or we become obsessed with our particular struggle with sin and focus entirely on our lack of fruit, or we begin to think of all the things we should do and should not do rather than Christ, we need each other to point us back to Christ.

The reality of who we are is this: God in Christ through his Spirit is making all things new. This includes us. The work of God in Christ through his Spirit is to transform us into the image of Christ and this comes about as we, by faith, trust in him as he works.