

LIFE IN CHRIST

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

August 12, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*. The chapter division is in a goofy place, so we'll begin at chapter 4, verse 17 and read through chapter 5, verse 2. It is on page 828 of the pew Bible. In this epistle lesson, Paul speaks of the change that should and does happen in the life of a Christian. Please stand as you are able for the reading of God's Word. From Ephesians 4, beginning at verse 17, we read in Jesus' name.

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.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

^{5:1} Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Does being a Christian make you a better person? Think about that with me. Does being a Christian make us better?

Perhaps we should clarify the question a little bit and ask, “Better than *what*, or better than *whom*?” We should always strive to be better, but acting like we’re better than other people will get us in trouble.

If your neighbor walks up to you with a stern look on his face and says to you in an accusative tone, “Do you think that being a Christian makes you better than me?” it would probably be wise to say, “No.” In order to not come across as arrogant and “holier than thou,” we should probably say, “Of course not; being a Christian doesn’t make me any better. I am still a guilty sinner in need of forgiveness.” And that is certainly true ... sort of. Our sinful nature is still just as fallen and corrupt as it ever was. Our sinful nature never makes any improvement. This is true, and we’d better not forget it. But I hope we all realize that being a Christian should and does make a difference in our lives. It should and does lead to improvement. If our way of life is exactly the same as it would be if we were not Christians, that would be a serious problem. Being a Christian should make a profound impact on the way we think, speak, and act. If our outward action is not better than it would be if we were not Christians, something is wrong, right?

Now it certainly doesn’t mean we should walk around with our heads up high and our chests puffed out because we’re morally superior to other people. Humility is one of the virtues Christians are called to. And besides that, the purpose of good behavior isn’t to be morally superior to other people. That desire is actually sinful. The purpose is to do works that are pleasing to God and beneficial to our neighbors.

The purpose is also not to earn credit with God. We do want to do works that are pleasing to God, but our good works do not make *us* pleasing to God. God is already well pleased with us because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (5:2). So good works are pleasing to God, not because they make us more righteous in God’s sight, but because they are beneficial to our neighbors, and God loves our neighbors, and he wants good things to be done for our neighbors.

So our good works should be motivated by two things, and only two things: the love of Christ and the needs of our neighbors. Our own desire to become more righteous or more holy should be excluded, because that is actually selfish and prideful, and those things are sin. Our good works should be motivated only by the love of Christ and the needs of our neighbors.

In the love of Christ we see that God has already forgiven us for Jesus’ sake. There is nothing left to add to our righteousness, so we don’t need to worry about where we stand. So we can take our eyes off of ourselves. We can stop checking our good works to see if they are enough. Instead we can start looking to the needs of our neighbors.

Now a third thing plays into this as well: the Law of God. God’s Law obviously has something to say about good works, but it’s not the motivation. What I mean is, we should not do good works in order to increase our righteousness or earn rewards. So the Law is not our motivation; it simply informs us what a good work is. The motivation, or the driving force of our good works, is the love of Christ and the needs of our neighbor.

So when we’re debating in our minds whether or not we should do a certain good work—and I think we find ourselves doing this sometimes—we sometimes consider whether or not we’ve done enough good works already in the day. We might think, *Well, I haven’t done much to help other people today, and I kind of want to get some points on the board, so I’ll give this*

homeless guy five bucks. Or, on the flip side, we might think, I did a great job at work today, so I don't really need to give my family much attention tonight. Those are both really bad ways to think about it. And they're bad because they look inward. God's not keeping score, and neither should we. Rather, we should always be looking outward. We should be looking to Christ, remembering the great love with which he loved us, and we should be looking to our neighbors—the strangers on the street, the family in our homes, and everyone in between. What do they need?

Or sometimes you hear people say, "I like to do good because of the feeling of accomplishment I get." Now that sounds kind of good, and I'm glad people enjoy doing good things, but if that's the whole reason, it's kind of selfish. What happens when that feeling wears off? Instead of looking to ourselves and our own feelings, we should consider the love of Christ for us and the needs of our neighbor. And those things never change. The love of Christ is unchanging, and we will always have neighbors in need of good our works.

So, yeah; being a Christian should make us better. It should reorient the way we think, and that should change the way we speak and act. We shouldn't think of ourselves as better than others, and we shouldn't act like it either. We should not keep score of where our good works place in relation to God, and we should not keep score of where they place us in comparison to those around us. We should not think of ourselves as better, and we shouldn't act as if we are better. But if being a Christian doesn't change the way we think, speak, and act, there's something wrong.

In this text Paul speaks to Gentile Christians. And he actually speaks to them as if they *used* to be Gentiles. This is kind of interesting. He says, "You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do" (4:17). Now we generally think of Gentiles as anyone who isn't Jewish. But that's not quite right. From God's perspective, at least, a Gentile is anyone who is outside of his household, whether their ancestry is Greek or Jewish or English or Klingon or whatever. So from God's perspective, you and I are not Gentiles. We are his children and, therefore, true Israelites (Gal. 3:29). And Paul uses God's perspective when he writes to the saints in Ephesus. They are no longer Gentiles, and because they are no longer Gentiles, they "must no longer walk as the Gentiles do" (4:17).

And Paul describes the Gentile lifestyle in rather disparaging terms. "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God," hard hearted, and callous (4:18-19). They practice sins of sensuality, greed, and impurity (4:20). This is what the Christians in Ephesus used to be, so Paul tells them to "put off [their] old self, which belongs to [their] former manner of life" (4:22).

Notice that Paul always grounds his commandments in statements of reality. It's never, "Put off these old things *so that* you can become new," or, "Stop sinning *so that* you can become a child of God." That's a backwards order. It's, "Put off these old things *because* you already are new," and, "Stop sinning *because* you are a child of God." Do you notice the difference? The commandments to live in a new way are based on the reality that we have already been made new in Jesus Christ. So Paul tells us to "put off [the] old self" (4:22) and "put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:24).

And this gets back to the issue of motivation that we were talking about earlier. We are moved by the love of Christ and the needs of our neighbor. But there's more to it than simply

that. It's not simply that we want to do good because we are thankful for God's gifts. There has actually been a change to our nature. A new person has been created. A new will has come into being. Before Christ, we were simply the old sinful person. Our will was thoroughly corrupt. But a change occurs at conversion. Conversion is not us deciding to change sides. Conversion is God creating something new in us. Our old sinful nature stays the same. The old self is not converted. That's why we can still say that we are no better than our unbelieving neighbors. And we can say that with a straight face. But there is now a new person, a new self, a new will. And this new self is not corrupt—not even in the slightest bit. The new self is perfectly righteous and holy. That's why we can also say that there should be a significant change between our lives as unbelievers and our lives as Christians.

Now for many of us, we can't really remember a time when we weren't Christians. I know some of us can, but some of us can't. So we don't really know what that change from darkness to light is like. We just have to take God's Word for it that there is a marked difference between a life of unbelief and a life of faith.

Some of you do know what that change is like. But it doesn't result in a perfect and instantaneous change. That won't happen until the Resurrection of the Dead on the Last Day. This old self still clings to us. The life of faith is a life of constant repentance—putting off this old self and putting on the new again. So if you expected an instantaneous and complete change when you were converted, and it didn't happen, don't lose heart. The total package is still coming. And if you wonder if you might not really be a Christian because your behavior isn't as holy as you think it should be, don't be alarmed. That's normal. It's not good, but it's normal.

If conversion were just a perfect and complete transformation with no struggle afterwards, Paul wouldn't have to tell us to put off the old and put on the new. But he does have to tell us, and we constantly need to be reminded of this. We need to remember that the old self still clings to us, but it's not who we are anymore, and our lives should be lived in the new reality God has created.

And remember, it's not that we live differently now in order to become different. It's that we live differently now because we are different. The calling is to live according to who God has declared us to be and who God has made us to be now.

And we get confused about this, don't we? The natural opinion of mankind is to think that God will be pleased with us if we do what is right, and he will be displeased with us if we do what is wrong. That's natural theology. And it's wrong. The problem is that we tend to think of God as a master or a boss. That's natural theology. But Christian theology is different. Christian theology teaches us to think of God as our Father. It doesn't take away God's authority. If anything, the authority of a father is even stronger than the authority of a master or a boss. But the relationship between a father and a child is radically different than the relationship between a master and a servant or a boss and an employee. In those relationships, the favor of the person in authority is always based on the merit of the person under the authority. The boss is happy when the employee shows up to work on time and does a good job.

But it's different with God. As a father, his favor is based on love. It's based on *his* love. God's favor is not based on any quality in us; it is based on all the qualities in him. You can have an extremely rebellious kid, but if the father is good, that father is going to do everything in his power to love, protect, teach, and restore that rebellious kid. And it's not driven by any quality in the kid. It's driven solely by the goodness of the father. And this is how we should think of

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God. This is the picture that reflects the greater reality of God's fatherhood over his children. We run into all kinds of trouble and uncertainty when we think of God merely as a master or boss. Those images are just too impersonal, and they're based on our worthiness. The only right way to think of God is as our Father. That's the way God has taught us to think of him. That's the way God has commanded us to address him when we pray to him. He is our Father, and not just any father, he is our perfect and almighty heavenly Father.

So Paul says, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (5:1-2)

This is the basis for everything in our Christian life—the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us. His death and resurrection is the source of our forgiveness. It's the event that makes it possible for us to become children of God. It's even the source of the new life of faith and obedience God calls us to. The new self came to life in your Baptism, but not because water has any special power. It's because the water and the Word connect you to Christ's death and resurrection. And this death and resurrection is the source of life—both the new life now, and your perfect transformation on the Last Day.

God calls us to be different. He has made us to be different. This is not for our sake. It is not so that we can feel superior to those around us. It is not for our own personal holiness. God has given Christ for our sake, and he has given us for the sake of our neighbors. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.