4-28-19

Ephesians 4:25-32

Here in chapter 4 of Ephesians, we notice a substantial shift from doctrinal teaching to practical application. Certainly, we have covered some application already and we continue to have theology through the rest of this letter, but now we see a lot more of what we are to do. Recall that our strength and ability to do these things comes from the Holy Spirit, but we are still called to act; we are to be active in making these changes in our lives.

In putting the teachings of the Bible into practice, we are dealing with the ideas of morality or ethics. We must be very careful that we don’t divorce the morality that we are taught from the Christian framework. There are many who say that Jesus was simply a moral teacher. While Jesus did teach moral behavior and thought, the moral behavior and thought were tied directly to God; to following His rule and to bring Him glory.

The reason we must be so careful is because there are many different systems of morality and they depend on the foundation from which they are founded. Let me point out that all foundations that are not Christian come from the human heart and are therefore flawed at best and demonic at worst. Let me give some examples.

I think we are all aware of tribal groups, even existing today, that believe killing people outside of their group is a good thing. Murder of others is acceptable and encouraged. Even “civilized” groups have historically found people groups that it was deemed acceptable to try to eradicate. It goes on today.

Followers of Islam are allowed to lie as long as it promotes Islam.

If you have a loved one in the hospital who is near the end of life, you will probably deal with the hospital ethicist. While this person may be very kind and even helpful, their ethics are not based on Christianity and it’s focus on the sanctity of human life.

In Iceland, they claim to have almost completely eradicated Down’s Syndrome. What they mean is that they have almost completely eradicated people with Down’ Syndrome through abortion. While it is easy to look at another country, many countries, including the United States, are working toward the same end.

Even if we go back to the idea of the Bible being a book on morality, Jesus shows us where this is a wrong approach. Consider the account of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19. He claimed to follow all the rules, all the commandments. He followed all the moral teachings. But when Jesus told him to sell all he had and give to the poor and follow Him, the rich man couldn’t do it. He lived a moral life, but he couldn’t live a Christian life.

The problem with trying to live a moral life outside of a relationship with Christ, is that we simply can’t be good enough. We are not able to earn our way into heaven or into a relationship with God. Jesus is the only way. Once we have accepted Christ as Saviour, then we can live the morality He taught. We can do so because as Christians, we have the Holy Spirit. By Him, we have the desire to obey the Bible’s teachings in the first place. Also, by Him, we have the ability to follow these teachings in a way that is pleasing to God.

Paul has exhorted us to simultaneously take off the old man and put on the new. These are active commands; we are to do them. In our reading today, Paul gives concrete examples of what we are to put off, put on, and how they are related to Christianity. We will see that each of these points Paul makes are nothing new; they are all in the Old Testament in one form or another. The important thing to notice is that we are looking at them from this side of the cross; we are looking at them in relationship to Jesus and to His church.

Paul begins in verse 25 with “Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one *of you* with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.” “Therefore”, lets us know that what he is about to tell us relates back to what he has just told us about putting off the old man, putting on the new man, and renewing the spirit of our minds.

Laying aside falsehood is taking off the old man. It can be said so matter-of-factly because it is a very basic fallen human tendency to lie. The word “falsehood” is a little soft sounding; the actual Greek is “the lie”. When we think of lying, we think of the tongue, which leads us to the book of James.

James 3:6

And the tongue is a fire, the *very* world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell.

Wow. We really need to keep track of our tongues; we really need to keep track of what we say. There are so many reasons for us to lie: to get out of trouble, for our own gain, to cause another problems out of a sense of revenge. If we are not careful, the lie is out before we know it. To be set on fire by hell is a way of saying that satan is very quick to use what we say. Although words have no power in and of themselves, their effects can be devastating. (The teaching that words have power, that we can speak situations into being, is a false teaching. Only God can speak something into existence.)

This ties back in with verse 22 where the old man “is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit”. Remember that we lust after things that we think will make us happy, but in the end, we have been deceived. Deceit ties in with falsehood and lying. We can deceive others not only by lying, but also by withholding the truth, by not saying something; sometimes all it takes is a look to deceive another. We are often guilty of deceiving ourselves. We want to believe something we know is not true, and so we ignore the truth. This is why many false teachers are so effective, those who listen to them want to believe them.

Paul does not stop with telling us to put aside falsehood, he tells us how to put on the new man; “speak truth each one of you with his neighbor”. This quote is based on Zachariah 8:16. We who are Christians need to focus on telling the truth; to avoid deceiving others. This is important because in addition to being destructive, the tongue can also be used for good, for building up. How good it is to hear something kind, to hear a word of sympathy, to simply hear the truth so that we can act on it.

Now, to stop there would be a mistake. Most folks know that it is better to tell the truth than it is to lie. But sometimes we can think of a really good reason to lie; at least in our own minds. Here is where Paul ties the morality into the Christian foundation: “for we are members of one another”. We need a higher reason; a reason that is outside ourselves.

The word neighbor reminds us of Jesus’ story of the man who fell among robbers and was in need of help. The priest and the Levite passed him by but the Samaritan stopped and took care of him selflessly. The point being that the Samaritan acted as a neighbor and that is how Christ expected His followers to act.

Additionally, when Paul says that we are members of one another, he is returning to the body metaphor of the church. The church is the body of Christ, we are a unity. How can we exist and deceive each other? If Jesus is truth, and we are in Him, then we have to be truthful among ourselves. There is probably no more destructive force in a church than lying. Lying is always selfish and so will end up pitting church members against one another. As our Lord said, A Kingdom divided against itself will not stand. A church membership must be based on truth; and in particular, the truth in love.

In verses 26 and 27 we read, Be angry, and *yet* do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. The old man will become angry and will sin in the process. The new man can become angry, but must be very careful not to sin in doing so.

There is such a thing as “righteous anger”. We have accounts in the Bible of Jesus becoming angry and yet, we know that He did not sin. In Mark 3:1-6 is the account of the man with the withered hand whom Jesus healed on the Sabbath. The Pharisees had placed him there in order to have reason to accuse Jesus. Verse 5 tells us, “After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.”

At the same time, we are warned against anger in the Bible. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks about anger.

Matthew 5:21-22a

You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court.

Unfortunately, we as fallen human-beings have a hard time with anger. In general, we tend to believe that righteous anger is what we ourselves feel, while everybody else’s anger is unrighteous. I can assure you that this is not the way to tell the difference. Righteous anger seems to be directed at sin; but not at the people.

As Christians, we ought to be angry about abortion. However, we need to treat with compassion any who have undergone the procedure and we need to pray for any who propagate abortion. We ought to be angry about homosexuality and transgenderism being forced upon children as normal and proper. But we need to be compassionate to those who are confused by it or under its sinful influence.

Because anger is an emotion, sometimes we will get angry with someone else. It may be a stranger, a family member, an acquaintance, or a fellow Christian. It is obvious that anger between members of a church will cause problems for the whole church; it can ruin the unity of the church. But, if handled properly, it can strengthen the unity of a church by allowing the Holy Spirit and Christian principles to prevail.

Paul goes on to give us three points for dealing with anger. The first is to not sin. This is hard but we really need to step back and look at our anger and determine the reason for it. Did we take offence because our pride was hurt? If so, the problem is our own and we need to seek forgiveness ourselves. Did we already have some dislike for that person and so, looking for a reason to be angry? That is certainly not a righteous anger. Are we angry because of spite or jealously? Even if none of these reasons apply, we must make sure a spirit of revenge doesn’t enter the picture. This would cause sin.

For the second, Paul says not to let the sun go down on your anger. This is metaphorical for a short duration. There are some places like Greenland where the sun may not go down for three months. However, this can also be taken literally. It is very good for a husband and wife to never go to bed angry. If there is a problem, it needs to be worked out. Jesus tells us that if we are bringing our gift to the alter and remember a brother who has something against us, that we are to leave our gift and go to be reconciled with our brother. The point is to not let anger fester, which leads to the third point.

Do not give the devil an opportunity. This is what happens if we hold on to anger. Satan will use it against us and the person we are angry with. We will dwell on the problem and in our minds, it will become bigger and bigger. We will begin to think evil of the other person and then we are in sin. Sin always grows and will overcome whoever is living in it. Stop it before it gets to that point. If it gets to that point, confess and ask forgiveness; forgive the person you are angry with; try to calmly work out the problem with them.

This last point is where we find our Christian foundation. Everyone knows that its not good to get angry. But for the Christian, we know that it gives satan a foothold and he can then bring about a lot of destruction. This can be destruction in a church or in a family. Satan is happy with the destruction of anything that is good and is pleasing to God. Don’t help him. Be part of what brings shame to satan by bringing glory to God in Jesus Christ.

Prayer

LORD God, we thank You for the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us and provides us what we need to become more like our Saviour, Jesus Christ. We ask for a greater portion, that our desire to be pleasing to You and to bring You glory would grow. Strengthen us that we may live holy lives so that others may see and give You glory.

Keep us truthful and from unrighteous anger, that we may build Your church and not be a hinderance to it. We desire for the body of Christ to be fruitful and to become a perfect bride for our Saviour. Make us presentable to You.

As we continue in our lives, we struggle against the flesh, the world, and satan. You know this, but You have given us power by the Holy Spirit. Renew our minds so that it is always our desire to use this strength for what is pleasing to You.

It is in Jesus’ name we pray

Amen