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**Christian Education**

Calvary Baptist Church of New Haven

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**Ephesians 4:17-24:** 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. 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. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ! – assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

**Introduction:**

Well, we are in the midst of a sermon series on the book of Ephesians, where we’ve been exploring the central question of what the church is all about. Needless to say, this year has marked a crucial juncture in Calvary’s history, and there have been a lot of ups and a lot of downs. Yet through it all we said we want to make sure that we are seeking after Christ no matter what, by living into his design and purpose for our church-community. For this reason, we turned to Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians, because this letter acts as a theological blueprint for the church. It points us to Christ as our cornerstone, and teaches us how to live with one another upon the foundation of his gifts.

This week we are continuing in the latter half of Ephesians, which, if you remember, mainly consists of Paul’s practical advice to the church. In the first three chapters, Paul has shown us the reality of Christ in and through which the church lives, moves, and has its being. And in these final chapters, Paul is now saying that this is what it practically looks like for you, the church, to participate in that reality. In other words, this is how you are to conduct your life together if you are now to be a part of what God is doing in the world.

In this morning’s text, Paul is showing us where we currently stand in all of this. He is showing us the location of our existence within history. That we are living in the tension between this world and the world to come, in the already but not yet.[[1]](#footnote-1) So, just because Christ has made the reality of new life and new existence possible for you doesn’t mean you can assume it has already taken place, which is why Paul says in Philippians 3:14, “I press on *toward* the goal…” Thus, it is now your responsibility to appropriate, in your own life, the effects of what Christ has done through his life, death, and resurrection, so that you become what Christ is calling you to become.[[2]](#footnote-2) Which means effort is required on your part.

So, what is the effort? We can think of this in terms of layers. First, there is the outer layer of laying aside the old and putting on the new.[[3]](#footnote-3) As we see in vv.22-24, no longer living your life according to the standards of this world, but rather living your life according to the standards set for you in Christ. However, that is not the starting point. For Paul, the starting point is in the inner layer, or it begins on the inside, that is, of being “renewed in the spirit of your minds.” Why? Because if you don’t learn to think differently from the way the world thinks, then you can’t expect to live differently either. It has to take place from the inside out.

Notice, Paul isn’t exclusively using heart language in this passage. Often, when we think of transformation, we think it’s simply a matter of the heart. But Paul says it’s a matter of your mind as well. In his prior preaching, Justin rightly pointed out for us that Paul does not think it is a sign of faithfulness when Christians are overly sentimental about their faith while lazy and sloppy in their thinking. And this is exactly why. Living the Christian life, in a manner that is faithful to Christ, is a matter of the heart *as well as* the mind. Maturing in righteousness occurs alongside the maturation of your mind.

And what we see in this text is that this comes about through receiving a certain kind of education, which I’ve decided to call a “Christian education.” Now, before I go any further, I do want to point out that I am using this word, “education,” intentionally. The reason why I am not using “knowledge” is because knowledge seems to imply a motionless set of information. Education, however, suggests an *ongoing* process of learning and growing, which is more appropriate within the context of this passage, not to mention the overall book. The other thing I’d like to say a word about is the label. By “Christian,” I don’t mean to suggest high theology, or an education that is exclusive to other forms of education or types of knowledge. In fact, it’s precisely the opposite. By Christian education, I am suggesting something that is deeply integrative.[[4]](#footnote-4) It’s about living lives that are holy and righteous through growing in our knowledge of Christ and seeing everything else in light of him.

With the remainder of our time, we’ll unpack this a bit more, by narrowing in on the text. Afterwards, I’ll leave us with an application, to help us see how the Christian faith is even able to turn our academic education into an opportunity for discipleship. As we go through these things, my hope is that we’ll begin to better understand why Paul is saying what he is saying, that is, why it’s important to not only be robust in our faith but also in our thinking, and why there is such a close connection between living lives of holiness and renewing our minds.

**Enlightened Minds:**

The first thing to point out is illumination. In v.17, Paul tells the Christians at Ephesus that they must no longer walk as the pagan Gentiles do. Now this word “walk” has repeatedly come up in prior sections of Paul’s letter, for instance, in 2:2, where Paul says, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins *in which you once walked*…” And here, it shows up again. But what does that mean exactly? Well, ‘to walk’ is the literal translation of the Greek word περιπατέω, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word הֲלַךְ (*halak*). The ancient rabbis would use this word to speak of one’s conduct of living, or how one carried oneself in this world.[[5]](#footnote-5)

So, when Paul says you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, he’s saying there is something about the gospel message that simply causes people to live in a manner that is radically different from the way the rest of the world lives, assuming that they’ve genuinely received it. Now therein lies the crucial difference between the Christians and the pagan Gentiles: one has received the gospel, but the other has not. For Paul, apart from that crucial difference, there is nothing else that separates Christians from non-Christians.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Now notice how he describes their manner of living in v.19. He uses some harsh words. He says they have given themselves up to sensuality and are greedy to practice every kind of impurity. It’s kind of funny actually, that Paul doesn’t think it’s worth listing out all of their sins, because they are too numerous to count. He sums it up by saying, “Pretty much everything bad you can think of, the Gentiles are doing it. That’s how they live.” But remember how Paul started this passage. He said the *Christians* must *no longer* walk as the Gentiles do, which suggests that the Christians are, to some degree or another, still living this way.

Yet this isn’t necessarily bad news for Paul, because, again, Paul doesn’t think accepting the gospel means one’s life is, therefore, just completely changed overnight. This is clear from what Paul says in Romans 7. Instead, the fact that they’ve begun to live in manner that is holy and righteous shows that the power of the knowledge of the gospel, which has been rooted in their minds [and hearts], is doing its work within them; but the fact that parts of their lives still resemble that of the world’s shows that the gospel’s work is not yet complete. And it’s that incomplete part of their lives that Paul is encouraging them in.

Here, what’s important is that the gospel has made it clear that there is a particular end towards which their minds and their lives are to be aimed and directed, namely, Christ. Paul has shown that, through the knowledge of the gospel, Christ is drawing them to himself. Because *Christ* is holy and righteous, the closer they move towards him the more they resemble his holiness and character. Yet the reverse is also true. The more they strive to resemble Christ’s holiness and character the more they are moving closer towards him. In short, learning Christ is not only learning *about* him, but it’s about being shaped by the living Christ, which makes clear that this is not an *intellectual* achievement on their part.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Paul never says the Gentiles live the way they do because they are stupid. There is nothing in this passage that would suggest to us that they are on unequal, intellectual footing. It’s not that they don’t have understanding per se, but, as we see in v.18, it’s because they are *darkened* in their understanding; in other words, the gospel has not illuminated their minds. And this darkened understanding is what has caused their thinking to become futile. Now, this word ‘futile’ is also worth dwelling on. The Greek is ματαιότης. This word, according to one biblical scholar, denotes finitude and transitoriness, but also an emptiness, folly, and ultimate pointlessness that affects the faculty of intellectual and *moral* perception of unbelieving persons.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In other words, what Paul is saying is you can be the smartest person in the world, but if you don’t have your mind seated on the foundation of the gospel, then your knowledge ultimately amounts to nothing. Indeed, what Paul is stating is an absolute fact. There is no amount of knowledge you can gain and have apart from Christ that would give you the surest confidence – at the deepest level of your soul – about why you were created, what it means and looks like to live a moral life, what true justice is, what true love is, why there is so much suffering in this life, why there is so much good in this world, and what all of this will amount to in the end. There is no knowledge in this world that can answer these things, and, in addition to the answer, give you peace and hope, except Christ.

You know I have met some incredibly smart people in my lifetime, but unfortunately smart people who do not know Christ. And as much as I envy their knowledge, I pity their lives even more. That they can have this incredible wealth of understanding, but yet have absolutely no idea what it means, what they’re supposed to do with it, or why it ultimately matters. Smart people who carry knowledge that is not positioned within truth, resulting in lives that are either dull, destructive, or senseless.

Indeed, let’s not forget that it was the leading intellectuals of the twentieth century that committed the most heinous crimes this world has ever seen or known, because gospel ignorance led them to fundamentally lose their grip on reality.[[9]](#footnote-9) In this, we see that knowledge in and of itself cannot teach you what you’re supposed to do with knowledge. Only Christ can do that. Which is why gospel ignorance, for Paul, is never benign. Knowledge without *the* illuminating knowledge of faith, which comes through the gospel of Jesus Christ, is not only pointless but it is also very, very dangerous.

And so, this comes as a warning to us. Don’t assume that your conduct is worthy of Christ simply because you call yourself a Christian, or simply because you do things that look Christianly on the outside. The most harmful acts, in fact, are often the ones that seem to be the most harmless.[[10]](#footnote-10) But Paul says the moment you begin to subject God’s word to *your* own reason is when your mind becomes darkened, and the moment your mind becomes darkened is when you start to live like the rest of this world. It’s the inevitable outcome. Thus, if you are not careful, you can lose the one thing that differentiates you from the rest of the world.

So, Christians need to do the deep work of excavating their minds, to see whether their understanding is truly enlightened by Christ, and whether their thinking truly proceeds from him. If you’re still having a hard time making sense of all this, then start with prayer. Pray to God and ask him: “Christ, how are you shedding light on the way I understand things? How are you speaking to me through this poem? Through this work of art? Through this piece of music? Through the land I am standing on? And how are you calling me to live as a result of that?” As we’ve seen, asking these sorts of things is not superfluous; for Paul, it’s simply a matter of discipleship. This entails that you continually subject your reason, your understanding, your thinking to God’s word, and allow him to change the habits of your mind, so that, as things take on new life and new meaning, your life also increasingly takes on the shape of holiness and righteousness.

**Faith and Education:**

In vv.20-23, Paul says that being in the truth of Christ, and growing in your knowledge of that truth, is not only an illuminating process but also a sanctifying process, which makes you become more like Christ. In the prior section, we explored these dynamics. Here, what I’d like to do is spend some time in helping us to think about this from our own experience.

Right now I’d like to speak to the students in the room [i.e. students who are either in college, going to college, or are preparing for college]. When we hear “Christian education,” I’m sure what comes up in most of your minds are the parochial images of bible studies, VBS lessons, sermons, Sunday school, or anything else that directly pertains to learning things about God. However, I’m going to expand the argument here, by saying that, if you are a Christian, everything is already a *Christian* education in the sense that there is nothing in this world that is not already bathed in the light of Christ, whether it be physics, sociology, world history, or French literary theory.[[11]](#footnote-11)

As I mentioned in the beginning, Christian education is not – and never has been – exclusive to your academic one. In fact, I’ve argued, from Paul, that Christian education, namely, the education of continually being shaped by Christ through growing in your knowledge of him, actually seeks to illuminate these other things, not only by pervading and reworking them to God’s glory, but by showing us how God’s glory is *already* there. The theologian, Abraham Kuyper, once said, “There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!” In other words, there is nothing you could possibly learn or discover that isn’t at the same time trying to point you back to the One who made it? Are you aware of that? Are you aware that everything you learn about in school and beyond has been created by him, through him, and for him?[[12]](#footnote-12)

Because everything is a Christian education in that sense, we can’t say sanctification is simply a matter of sermons and Sunday school lessons; rather, it’s a part of your academics as well. You bring your faith and knowledge of the gospel to these things, and try to understand how they reflect the grace, the beauty, and the intelligence of their Creator. Church, this is the mark of a mature Christian who has a mature mind. And once you start to see the world, and all that’s within it, as truly God’s domain, you can be sure that the way you live within this world will never be the same again.

Right now you are called to be a student, and, for this reason, you ought to take your calling seriously, and be faithful in it. Not with the intention of making copious amounts of money later on – again, that’s how the world thinks. But so that you can love God more through the process, in seeing his pervasive beauty and goodness throughout all creation. This is a part of what it means to be faithful in your education. Now, having said that, there is another crucial component to this, and that is being faithful in the *type* of education that you pursue.

When I say *type* I mean this in a very broad sense. It can mean anything from the classes you take, the colleges you apply to, the academic mentors you place yourselves under, the books you read, the curriculums you subject yourselves to, etc. And the reason why this is so important is because certain educations are more substantive than others, which means certain educations will be more conducive to your sanctification than others.

Because this is a very complicated, multi-faceted issue, I won’t be able to go into all of it here. However, allow me to share with you a quote from an article that helps us to think more critically and deeply about the type(s) of education we pursue. This quote comes from a Catholic political scientist/philosopher, named Patrick Deneen, who teaches at the University of Notre Dame. Here, he’s writing *about* his students. It’s quite scathing but quite convicting. He writes this:

My students are know-nothings. They are exceedingly nice, pleasant, trustworthy, mostly honest, well-intentioned, and utterly decent. But their brains are largely empty, devoid of any substantial knowledge… At best, [students] possess accidental knowledge, but otherwise are masters of systematic ignorance. It is not their “fault” for pervasive ignorance of western and American history, civilization, politics, art and literature. They have learned exactly what we have asked of them – to be like mayflies, alive by happenstance in a fleeting present.

Our students’ ignorance is not a failing of the educational system – it is its crowning achievement. Efforts by several generations of philosophers and reformers and public policy experts — whom our students (and most of us) know nothing about — have combined to produce a generation of know-nothings… Above all, the one overarching lesson that students receive is the true end of education: the only essential knowledge is that we know ourselves to be radically autonomous selves within a comprehensive global system with a common commitment to mutual indifference. Our commitment to mutual indifference is what binds us together as a global people.

Our education system produces solipsistic, self-contained selves whose only public commitment is an absence of commitment to a public, a common culture, a shared history. [Students these days] are perfectly hollowed vessels, receptive and obedient, without any real obligations or devotions… They won’t fight against anyone, because that’s not seemly, but they [also] won’t fight for anyone or [for] anything either.[[13]](#footnote-13)

So, according to Deneen, it seems like you can have the best education anywhere in the entire world, yet still turn out to be aimless and empty. Which goes right back to what Paul was saying. Minds, bright minds, that are utterly darkened in their understanding. Even with all that education, what do their lives have to show for it? Sure, maybe they have no direct role in this world’s sufferings, but isn’t it just as bad that many are indifferent *to* the world’s sufferings? This is why, students, you should not overestimate what an academic education, in and of itself, can do for you. And this is why Paul warns against you creating false dichotomies between faith and schoolwork.

You have an important responsibility and calling in life right now to go to school, to go to church, and to allow these things to speak to one another. “How does the gospel shape my understanding of this? And how does this enhance my understanding of and appreciation for the gospel?” You are to use the minds that God has gifted you with to think creatively and to think deeply about everything. Why? So that you can better serve the church and the world. This is what Christian education is about. Christian education is about the work of God’s Spirit, to equip you with the sort of mind, as well as temperament, to respond to the deepest and most urgent needs of this world. It’s about softening and preparing your heart, so that you would not only hear Christ when he calls but would also be ready to obey and respond when that time comes.

1. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We tend to see Christian faith, and its contents, as separate, antithetical, or indifferent to other forms of ‘secular’ knowledge, which betrays the current condition of the Christian mind and theological imagination: opaque and uncreative. Interestingly and ironically, it shows the work of secularism operating within faith itself. What Charles Taylor refers to as the disenchantment of secularity, which, in this case, is the disenchantment of faith for our thinking and living. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 93-94, 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 1 Timothy 6:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Stanley Hauerwas, *Without Apology: Sermons for Christ’s Church* (New York: Seabury Books, 2013), 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Colossians 1:16 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Patrick Deneen, “How a Generation Lost Its Common Culture,” *Minding the Campus*, February 2, 2016, https://www.mindingthecampus.org/2016/02/02/how-a-generation-lost-its-common-culture/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)