

Ephesians 4:17-24¹

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.*

This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between the verse range listed above and the notes given below.

B. Live in Holiness ([4:17-32](#))**1. Description of the old unregenerated person ([4:17-19](#))**

¹⁷With the Lord's authority I say this: Live no longer as the Gentiles do, for they are hopelessly confused. ¹⁸Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him. ¹⁹They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasure and eagerly practice every kind of impurity.

Notes**[4:17](#)**

they are hopelessly confused.—Lit., “they walk in the futility of their minds” or “they live without purpose.” Their confusion is the result of a life without purpose.

[4:18](#)

Their minds are full of darkness.—The literal rendering “their minds are being darkened” gives a better sense of process.

because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him.—The NLT rendering appears to suggest two parallel causes but more likely the latter cause is built on the former cause. So it could be rendered “because they have shut their minds due to their hardened hearts against him.”

[4:19](#)

They have no sense of shame.—The idea is that they have become calloused and thus insensitive to God's will and way.

lustful pleasure.—Lit. “licentiousness,” meaning “freedom with no boundaries,” usually referring to sensual appetites.

Commentary

This is the second of five sections delineated by the use of *peripateō* [^{TG}<[G4043](#)>, ^{ZG}4344], which is literally “walk,” and means “to conduct one's daily life”; at the head of each section, *peripateō* is used in conjunction with the inferential conjunction *oun* [^{TG}<[G3767](#)>, ^{ZG}4036] (therefore) ([4:1](#), [17](#); [5:1-2](#), [7-8](#), [15](#)). Having discussed unity in the first half of the chapter, Paul now instructs believers on how to walk in holiness. Holiness is not automatically a result of unity; otherwise, there would be no need for instruction. This portion

1. Philip W. Comfort, ed., *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary – Volume 16: Ephesians-2 Thessalonians, Philemon*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 91-97.

of the chapter is divided into two parts: negatively, how believers should not live ([4:17-19](#)), then positively, how believers should live ([4:20-32](#)).

Paul began this section by exhorting his readers not to live as unbelievers ([4:17-18](#)), continuing the exhortation of [4:1](#) to live worthy of their calling. The ungodly live in the futility of their minds. The noun *mataiotēs* [^{TG}<G3153>, ^{ZG}3470] (futility) occurs only three times in the New Testament (see also [Rom 8:20](#); [2 Pet 2:18](#)) and has the sense of being unable to achieve one's goals. In this case, futility (in connection with the mind) is a moral attitude or disposition whereby the mind cannot achieve its goal of receiving the revelation of God and thus cannot make proper moral decisions necessary for life ([Rom 1:18-32](#)). Since the unbelievers' minds cannot receive the revelation of God, their understanding is darkened—referring to spiritual darkness. Further, they are alienated from the life of God due to their ignorance, which is the result of their hardened hearts. This description is parallel to that found in [Romans 1:18-32](#), where Paul describes human degradation in terms of people purposefully rejecting the manifest knowledge of God through creation. Instead of glorifying or thanking God, people allowed their reasoning process to become purposeless, and their senseless hearts became darkened as they exchanged God's incorruptible glory for corruptible idolatry. Such is not innocent but deliberate refusal of God and his will; it is twice pronounced as inexcusable ([Rom 1:23](#); [2:1](#)). As in [Romans 1](#), the present context makes it clear that the hardness of their hearts caused their insensitivity to God and his ways. In these two verses a series of causes and effects becomes clear. In reverse, the hardness of their hearts causes their ignorance. Their ignorance of God and his will causes their alienation from the life of God, their alienation from God causes their minds to be darkened, and their darkened minds cause them to walk in the futility of the mind. This is in sharp contrast to those who are believers who have been enlightened by God to do his will.

The natural outgrowth of the unbelievers' condition is their conduct ([4:19](#)). Their lack of care for what is right and wrong is described as callousness, resulting in moral apathy. Giving themselves over to immoral ways indicates their wanton freedom and usually encompasses sexual desires. The same concept is found [Romans 1:24, 26, 28](#), where it states that God gives people over to their immoral conduct because of their refusal to accept his revelation. As people exercise their perversion of free will and give themselves over to sin, so God responds by giving them over to the sin that enslaves them. Therefore, they practice every kind of impurity, particularly moral impurity. This impurity is closely linked with greed. Normally, greed is used in connection with coveting material things ([Luke 12:15](#); [2 Cor 9:5](#))—a desire for more of everything ([5:3](#); [Col 3:5](#); [2 Pet 2:14](#)). In secular and biblical literature, it conveys unfavorable or undesirable characteristics, selfishness to the nth degree, the opposite of moderation. That which is coveted becomes the center of one's life; hence it is identified as idolatry ([Col 3:5](#)). The powerful combination of moral apathy, impurity, and greediness describe the unregenerate, who are totally consumed with themselves. The selfishness in which the godless are immersed stands in direct contrast to Christ, who was selfless in offering himself as a sacrifice to God for the sins of the world ([5:2](#)).

2. Description of the new regenerated person ([4:20-32](#))

²⁰But that isn't what you learned about Christ. ²¹Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, ²²throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. ²³Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. ²⁴Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.

²⁵So stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbors the truth, for we are all parts of the same body.

²⁶And "don't sin by letting anger control you." Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry,

²⁷for anger gives a foothold to the devil.

²⁸If you are a thief, quit stealing. Instead, use your hands for good hard work, and then give generously to others in need. ²⁹Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.

³⁰And do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption.

³¹Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. ³²Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.

Notes

[4:20](#)

But that isn't what you learned about Christ.—What Paul refers to is more than learning “about” Christ. The purpose is to know him personally.

[4:21](#)

Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him.—Lit., “inasmuch as you heard about him and were taught in him, just as the truth is in Jesus.”

[4:22](#)

throw off.—This is an imperative in the NLT, but the Greek may well have an indicative force. The verb is literally an infinitive (“to throw off”); two more infinitives follow, at the beginning of each of the next verses. They serve as complements of the verb “you were taught” in [4:21](#). Their function in this context is debated (see commentary). The first (“to put off”) and third (“to put on”) are aorist middle infinitives, whereas the second (“to be renewed”) is a present middle infinitive.

your old sinful nature and your former way of life.—The Greek *ton palaion anthrōpon* [cf. ^{TG}<G3820>/<G0444>, ^{ZG}4094/0476] is better translated “the old person” rather than “sinful nature.” Paul was not making a dichotomy between two natures but was referring to the old unregenerate person in contrast to the new redeemed person.

corrupted by lust and deception.—More likely this could be rendered “in accordance with deceptive desires” or better “in accordance with the desires coming from deceit.”

[4:23](#)

Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes.—Again, this gives an imperative sense, when it may well be an indicative force. The literal rendering of the Greek text, “but to be renewed by the spirit in your mind” is difficult to unpack; the NLT's rendering makes good sense.

[4:24](#)

Put on your new nature.—Again, “new nature” is not a good rendering of the Greek, which is *ton kainon anthrōpon* [^{TG}<G2537>/<G0444>, ^{ZG}2785/0476] (the new person). As in [4:22](#), Paul was not making a dichotomy between two natures, but making a contrast between the old unregenerate person and the new redeemed person.

truly righteous and holy.—A better rendering would be “righteousness and holiness that originates from truth.”

Commentary

In this section, Paul discusses the position (4:20-24) and practice (4:25-32) of the “new person.” God not only redeems a person but also demands and enables a new lifestyle to be practiced before the world. Regarding the position of the new person, Paul reminded his readers of what they had been taught previously (4:20-21a). The new person, who stands in contrast to the old person (4:17-19), did not come to know (literally “learn”) Christ by the previous lifestyle. The word “learned” does not refer to the factual knowledge about Christ but rather a personal knowledge of him. The new life of believers is not ordered by knowledge of the law but by hearing about Christ and thus “learning” the living Christ so as to live a life pleasing to him. Though the Ephesian believers did not hear Christ personally, they heard him through Paul and other preachers and teachers.

The Ephesian believers not only heard “about” Christ but they were also taught “in” him. The preposition does not express means (“taught by him”), as suggested by the KJV, because the Ephesians never saw Christ. Rather, it is the sphere or locale of the teaching, “in connection with him” or “in communion with him.” As such, Christ is the object and the sphere of a believer’s learning. By contrast, followers in other religions may continue to study about their chosen religion but never experience an intimate knowledge of the leader and/or founder of their religion. Believers in Christ not only “learn” Christ at the time they hear the gospel but they continue to “learn” him as they study God’s Word and as they are ministered to by gifted people in the body. The nature of the instruction is the truth in Jesus (4:21b). This truth is not relative truth, which assumes that what may be existentially true for one person may not be true for another. Truth here denotes reality, in contrast to that which is false or deceptive, as seen in the next verse, where Paul characterizes the unregenerate Gentiles mentioned in 4:17-18. Jesus is the embodiment of truth (John 14:6). The Messiah promised in the Old Testament was the Jesus of history, who died to pay for sins, brought forgiveness (1:7; 2:13-18), and rose to guarantee the truth of his predictions and the validity of redemption. Some conjecture that there is a difference between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history. Not so, they are one and the same person.

As noted above, scholars have proposed various interpretations of 4:22-24 with respect to the use of the three infinitives: put off, be renewed, put on. Most scholars understand them to have imperatival force (Barth 1974:543-545; Lincoln 1990:283-284; Best 1998:430-431). The support for this rendering is that every other occurrence of an aorist infinitive in indirect discourse in the New Testament relates back to an imperative, but in all these cases the indirect discourse relates back to a verb that implies a command. Another support for this view is that it fits the context well in that believers are first taught in principle to “throw off” and “put on” (4:22, 24) and then they are given specific applications relating to that principle (4:25-32). In addition, it is thought that since this is the practical section of Ephesians, it would be natural for these infinitives to function as imperatives. Others suggest that these infinitives of indirect discourse function analogously to indicatives in direct discourse or as complementary infinitives—yielding the translation: “you were taught that you have put off the old person, you are renewed in spirit, you have put on the new person” (C. F. D. Moule 1959:126; H. C. G. Moule 1886:225-226; Turner 1963:78; Wallace 1996:605). Support for this view comes from the fact that it is common in the New Testament to have infinitives of indirect discourse after verbs of perception, as here: “you were taught.” I prefer the position that views the infinitives of indirect discourse functioning analogous to indicatives in direct discourse. Otherwise, if 4:22-24 are viewed as being imperative, then 4:25-32 would seem redundant. Furthermore, the parallel passage in Colossians 3:9-10 supports the second view because the aorist passive participles indicate that the putting off and the putting on has already been accomplished. These participles are used in conjunction with imperatives (Col 3:8, 12), namely, they are commanded to put off sins like anger and wrath because they have already put off the old person.

Thus, Paul was not instructing the believers to put off the “old person” because that was accomplished at the time of conversion. The old person is characterized by a lifestyle that is rotten to the core and full of lust—both of which are engendered by deceit. This deceit, which brings people to ruin, is based on the false idea that fulfillment of natural desires is all that is necessary for human life. Self-centered lusts are deceitful because they promise happiness but fail to provide it. This old person was put off at the time of conversion. It is an accomplished fact. In [4:23](#) Paul states that the Ephesian believers were being renewed by the spirit located in the mind, or in other words, by the spirit that governs the mind. Although this speaks of the human spirit, ultimately only the Spirit of God quickens the human spirit. Such renewal will transform lives in very practical ways. Paul continues in [4:24](#) by stating that believers have put on the new person, who is created in God’s likeness of righteousness and holiness that originates from truth. Righteousness and holiness refer to right actions or conduct before God and people. This verse stands in contrast to [4:22](#) in three ways. First, it speaks of having put on the new redeemed person as opposed to having put off the old unregenerate person. Second, the new person has been created according to God’s likeness in righteousness and holiness that is based on truth, whereas the old person’s lifestyle was being corrupted by desires that were based on deceit. Third, conduct based in righteousness and holiness is truth, whereas the basis of lustful conduct is deceit. In conclusion, the Ephesians were taught that they have put off the old person and put on the new person at the time of their conversion. The new person is characterized by righteousness and holiness based on truth, and the resulting attributes will be manifested in many ways, as seen in [4:25-32](#).

The Complete Biblical Library *Ephesians 4:17-24²*

[4:17](#). There is a long-standing debate about what happens to the fallen, sinful nature of a person who becomes a Christian. For example, some individuals think it is completely eradicated at conversion. Others take a "group encounter" approach in which through a "self-discovery" or "catharsis" method they attempt to bring the sinful nature under control. The Bible clearly expresses the fact that God does not remove the sinful nature at salvation, but its power is broken so a Christian need no longer be governed by it, though he still must grapple with it. Instead of removing the Adamic nature when a person becomes a believer, God places a new nature within the person, the indwelling Holy Spirit ([Romans 8:9](#)). Romans, chapter 7, [Galatians 2:20](#); [5:13-26](#); [Colossians 3:1-17](#), as well as many other passages, describe the constant internal warfare within the Christian between the "new nature of Christ" and the Adamic nature. [Ephesians 4:17-32](#) is one of these passages.

Paul approached the matter by first explaining the negative aspect of the process and further showing how God broke the power of the sinful nature at the person's conversion. The apostle first encouraged the Gentile believers not to live as they had before their conversion to Christ. They formerly lived "in the vanity of their mind," the way pagans were living. They had lived in the sphere of the emptiness of their minds, denoting an ignorance of divine things, a lack of knowledge that involved moral blindness.

[4:18](#). They were ignorant because they had hardened their hearts against God. The "blindness of their heart" or hardening of their hearts led to a condition of callousness that made it impossible for them to experience true spiritual life that comes only from God. The apostle made these Gentiles personally responsible for what had happened to them. He certainly did not teach some fatalistic kind of approach that they had no responsibility for their actions. While Paul definitely believed in the sovereignty of God and constantly emphasized His grace, he balanced that view by stressing man's freedom of choice and the necessity for exercising faith.

2. Thoralf Gilbrant, ed., *The Complete Biblical Library – Galatians-Philemon*, (Springfield, IL: World Library Press, Inc., 1995), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 141-145.

4:19. This hardening of their hearts led to a condition of "being past feeling." This latter term relates to losing all sensitivity to pain. This calloused condition prevented them from experiencing any moral consciousness. Just as thick callouses prevent people from feeling physical pain, willful rebellion against the work of the conscience eventually makes the conscience completely ineffective.

The description of a constant falling more deeply into sin is reminiscent of [Romans 1:18-32](#) where Paul again characterized the Gentile world away from God. A careful search of that passage, especially [verse 20](#), will show the same general emphasis on human responsibility, so it is impossible for a person to justify his lost condition.

"Lasciviousness" refers to "sensuality" which leads to all types of impurity or uncleanness that goes deeper and deeper into sin because it never is satisfied. In Romans chapter 1 the apostle Paul also dealt with the subject of homosexuality that is described here in [verse 19](#). Three times he said that God gave them over to something. First, "God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another" ([Romans 1:24](#), NIV). Secondly, "God gave them over to shameful lusts" ([Romans 1:26](#), NIV). Thirdly, "He gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done" ([Romans 1:28](#), NIV).

4:20, 21. This verse begins with a very important "But." Because God had performed a miracle in the Ephesians, they no longer existed in this state of ignorance and separation from God. He said, "Ye have not so learned Christ."

Paul could write these words with assurance because he and the members of his evangelistic team had much to do with teaching the Ephesian Christians what they knew about Christ.

4:22. Even though the legal work of salvation had taken place in these lives, it was necessary for them to discard completely the old way of life. This passage contains one of the great paradoxes of Scripture because, after explaining the legal work of salvation God had performed in their lives, Paul went on to appeal for an experiential casting off of sin. The same verb appears in [Colossians 3:8](#) with the same basic idea of putting off a former way of life. A person does this by denying the cravings of the sinful nature ([Romans 6:13](#); [Galatians 2:20](#); [5:13](#)).

4:23. Now we come to the positive aspect of the process. Because the Christian life is not a void, people need to "be renewed." This phrase comes from a present passive infinitive (*ananeousthai*). It is present because it is a continuous process. It is passive because God accomplishes the work only as believers yield to the Holy Spirit. It takes place "in the spirit of your mind," a probable reference to the fact that the will is involved in causing the process to continue.

4:24. At the same time Christians must also "put on the new man," a reference to allowing the Holy Spirit to be the controlling force in their lives. If they are doing this it will manifest itself in "righteousness and true holiness." The Greek word for "new" (*kainos*) here refers to newness in quality. God is not only the pattern but also the author of this new life.