

The Before and After of Conversion

Study Guide

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An Important Note To Students And Teachers

The world of the first century was very different from the world in which we live. Many of us who are Christians have lived in a Christian environment all our lives. Many of us either grew up in a Christian home or grew up in a social environment that favored Christian values and concepts.

Such backgrounds frequently influence us to hold a specific view of the world. We commonly think everyone has had our experiences and holds our religious perspectives and views. It comes as a rather rude awakening to learn that not everyone thinks religiously as we think.

Certainly that was not true in the first century! That was a very different existence! No one had electricity or the appliances made possible by electrical power. No one burned candles [candles had not been invented yet]. No one read anything in print [the printing process had not yet been invented]. No one spoke in English [the English language did not exist]. Very few people had heard about Jesus Christ [he was born and worked in a very small country with a very small population].

Though Christianity spread quickly in that century, it was still a new religion. In some places it was a misunderstood, unpopular religion. In some places it was violently repressed because it threatened society and other religions as people knew them. Often in the first century being a Christian required both courage and sacrifice. In many instances, Christian existence was not for the uncommitted!

By [even before] the end of the first century, most Christians were gentiles [people who were not Jews]. When Christianity first began, it began as a Jewish movement that was 100% Jewish or Jewish converts [proselytes]. For centuries these people knew the God Christians honored. As long as any of them could remember, they had been devoted to doing this God's will.

When gentiles became the majority among early believers, the Christian movement underwent significant change. Gentiles were leaving a background of idolatry. They were accustomed to acknowledging the existence of many gods. It was quite "normal" to worship more than one god. Their morals and values were different. While devout Jewish people defined right and wrong, moral and immoral, and just and unjust much as Christians did, idol worshippers did not.

What conversion to Christ meant for a devout Jewish person and what conversion to Christ meant for most idol worshippers was distinctly different. Most of the New Testament epistles are to congregations in which gentile Christians were predominant or were the majority. Since most Christians today are gentiles, these letters provide some interesting insights.

The insight that serves as the focus for this series of lessons is this: the spiritual objective in the lives of gentile Christians was to challenge them to behave like the "new self" God made them. The issue was how they thought, felt, were motivated, and behaved after baptism.

This series is devoted to Christian behavior after baptism.

Lesson One

The Context of This Study

Read Ephesians 4

There are several things we need to keep in mind as we focus on this material this quarter. (1) This was written to first century Christians. (2) These Christians were primarily gentile Christians (note 2:1-3 and observe the "formerly" and the contrast between "you" and "we": both gentile Christians and Jewish Christians were dependent on God's rich mercy given through Jesus Christ; note 2:11-13; note 3:1, 6). (3) Pay careful attention to Paul's "before and after" contrast in chapter 2 as well as chapter 4. This is an approach Paul often used (see Colossians 3:1-11 and Romans 6) to challenge gentile Christians to be aware that there was a distinct difference in the way one who belonged to idols behaved and the way one who belonged to Christ behaved.

First, realize change is difficult and demanding for anyone at any time. Do not think that it was easy for first century Christians to commit to salvation in Jesus Christ. If the person was a Jewish Christian, he or she had to break away from some traditions that were thousands of years old and some that were generations old. Since Jesus did not fulfill most Jewish Messianic expectations, the majority of Jews had difficulty understanding "why you [Jewish Christians] are deserting Judaism." When this breakaway involved accepting uncircumcised gentiles as fully saved persons who did not have to become Jewish proselytes, the difficulty was even greater. In being a Christian, a Jewish convert easily could find himself or herself alienated from those with whom he or she previously shared a bond of closeness.

For a gentile who became a Christian, the challenges were as great if not greater. Consider the realities of idolatry. If you belonged to Jesus Christ, you no longer worshipped idols. Yet, idolatry was socially pervasive! It was ingrained in all segments of society--from household shrines, to the workplace, to politics. Thus you no longer honored the family gods, and the family might be "certain" you would bring the wrath of the gods on the family. You no longer honored the patron god or goddess of your work guild [union], and your fellow workers might be certain you would bring the wrath of the gods on the business enterprise. Thus you might lose your job so the owner would not run the risk of irritating the gods! Or, you might be seen as a political traitor to the community because you refused to honor the gods. It was rather simple for some gentile Christians to become outcasts in their own community. It did not always happen, but it happened.

Second, Paul taught these new converts that there were *not* two compatible behaviors in a convert's life--one occurring when you were among Christians and one occurring when you were among those who did not believe in Jesus Christ. Constantly there was the challenge of finding the proper balance between being true to your Christian values and beliefs and not needlessly irritating those who rejected the creator God and His son Jesus Christ. At times that was possible and at times irritation occurred regardless of how the Christian behaved. However, if the choice was between irritating a person who did not believe in Jesus Christ or being true to Christian values, there was no choice--a Christian must be true to his/her values that were Christ based.

Third, the challenge was often great because the values of a Christian clashed with the values of society. The Christian regarded honesty as a virtue. Society often could regard deceit as a virtue. The Christian regarded kindness, tenderness, and forgiveness as positive, life granting emotions. Society could regard anger, wrath, confusion, and slander as positive emotions that made life possible in a "dog eat dog" society. The Christian did not seek control through intimidation. Society often sought to gain control through not only intimidation but through violence. Then as now the Christian expressions of gentleness and consideration were often viewed as expressions of weakness.

Fourth, too many Christians assumed they had a "right" to salvation regardless of how they lived. Put in common terms of the religious of this age, too many Christians thought that theological perspectives saved you regardless of your behavior. Or, if "I" know the "right" views, it does not matter how "I" live my daily life. Thus

one was "godly" if he or she believed the "right" things but deliberately lived in known, understood "ungodly" ways. There is a vast difference between godly knowledge and godly behavior. Godly values exist when godly knowledge expresses itself in godly behavior. That vast difference always has existed!

It is extremely difficult to recognize a behavior that typified your past adult life is an ungodly behavior simply because you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ. The call of Christ is not, "Live as you please as you follow me to God." The call of Christ is, "Let me teach you God's values as you follow me to Him." The Christian challenge is to live in the manner that causes others to see and honor God. If we are Christian, we represent Jesus Christ and God in our lives. Consider Matthew 5:16; 9:8; 15:30, 31; and 1 Peter 2:9,10. That basically means we make our choices and decisions on the basis of God's values and purposes. It takes a very honest person to surrender to God instead of surrendering to self. It is much too easy to substitute our desires for God's values and make ourselves believe that our desires are God's values.

For Thought and Discussion

1. As we begin this quarter's study, what four things do we need to keep in mind?
2. What is difficulty for anyone at any time? Why?
3. In the first century, what were some difficulties Jews faced when becoming Christians?
4. In the first century, what were some difficulties gentiles faced when becoming Christians?
5. What two behaviors never have been compatible in a Christian's life?
6. What has been a constant challenge for Christians regarding behavior?
7. When is there no choice to be made?
8. Why was (is) the challenge often great? Give some first century examples.
9. In every age, what do too many Christians assume?
10. What is extremely difficult to recognize regarding personal behavior?
11. What is and is not the call of Christ?
12. Whom does the Christian represent?
13. What challenge does 1 Peter 2:9, 10 give?

Lesson Two

Remember the "Before" Conversion

Text: Ephesians 4:17-19

Often when Paul wrote to or talked with gentiles, he referred to (a) their past views as idol worshippers and (b) the impact those views had on their behavior. Their objective in becoming a Christian was **NOT** to embrace a new form of religion, but to become a different person. Gentile converts were [as far as the majority were concerned] religious before they accepted Christ. Never was the basis of the call to Christ a plea to be religious. The plea was to come to know the true, living God and His son Jesus Christ.

Consider, as an example, Paul's statement in Romans 1:18-32. Paul said there were a group of people that invited God's wrath on themselves. They were ungodly, unrighteous [note: not non-religious] people who opposed the truth [about God]. These people ignored the obvious. They knew God existed, but they refused to acknowledge the nature of God Who was bigger than they, bigger than creation.

Then Paul used two of his favorite words in this discussion: **futile** and **darkness**. Rather than acknowledging the obvious, they became futile in their speculations and darkened in their foolish hearts. Futile referred to an inner condition produced by idolatrous thinking that resulted in wrong views of God. Instead of these wrong views producing the light of understanding, these views had the opposite effect. They produced darkness rather than light. What idol worshippers thought was a form of ignorance that ignored the obvious. Thus, though they declared themselves wise, their convictions and the behavior produced by those convictions made them fools. They substituted the forms of men who died and decayed, of birds that died and decayed, of four legged animals that died and decayed, and of reptiles that died and decayed for an eternal God. They worshipped the created instead of the Creator.

The result was terrifyingly destructive! God abandoned them (a) to their own lusts, (b) to degrading passions, and (c) to a depraved mind. In their idolatrous convictions, they were their own worst enemy, and they never realized it! The behavior resulting from their foolish worship of the created rather than the eternal God Who created included every destructive form of excess known in human attitudes and acts! They without hesitation endorsed the practices that destroyed them!

Paul's use of the approach to gentiles who worshipped idols can be seen in Acts 17:22-31. (a) He used their ignorance to appeal to their curiosity. He noted their acknowledgment of the Unknown God, and said, "What you worship in ignorance, I proclaim to you." He then discussed God as the Creator that was not dependent on human beings. He declared God was close and knowable. He then declared God's nature should not be reduced to a human form presented by human thoughts in art work. While ignorance was excused in the past, repentance was then [and now] expected. God acted, and people were accountable for their decisions.

In Ephesians 4, Paul urged gentile Christians to remember what it was like when they knew nothing about Christ. "Remember when your life was guided by futile thinking like godless people presently are? Remember how such thoughts darkened [not enlightened] your understanding? Remember when ignorance about the true nature of the living God caused your heart to be hard [you were people incapable of being compassionate]? Remember what it was like being people with an insensitive, callused heart? Remember when you had no conscience, put no restraint on yourself? Remember when your lifestyle and objectives were motivated by impure goals and greed?" Remembering again contrasted what they had been to what they were.

Sometimes a person has to remember from what he or she was delivered to appreciate who they are and where they are after deliverance! They were morally and spiritually dead when they lived the idolatrous lifestyle (Ephesians 2:1, 5). Even worse, when they were in that condition they had no awareness of how awful their condition was or what consequences they faced! They could take no credit for what God did for them in Christ.

The solution to their problems arose from God's mercy expressed in Christ, not from any deservedness on their part.

The impact of their former convictions in idolatry made them (a) an uncaring people (b) who existed in the darkness of ignorance about the true nature of the living God Who created. The combined influence of these two forces ruled them prior to their being Christians. It made them selfish people who were insensitive to the injustices and sufferings of others. Was that now who they really wanted to be? Was that the existence they once again wished to embrace? Sometimes you have to remember what you were to be committed to being different.

The decision of faith to belong to Christ involves a "becoming," not merely an acknowledgment. One is converted to Jesus Christ in order to become something he or she was not. For the person who is completely alienated from God, there is an awareness of what I was without God in my life. For the person who was blessed by the influences of a godly home and Christian environment, there is the desire to give God complete control over his/her continued development as a person. In both situations, there is the inner, personal desire to allow the eternal God to determine (a) who I am and (b) how I live as I mature and develop. It involves a conscious choice! It involves a leaving as well as a becoming!

Who would you be as a person, a spouse, a parent, a friend, or a worker if all influences of God were removed from your life? If Jesus Christ was not at work in any aspect of your life, who would you be and what would you do?

For Thought and Discussion

1. Often when Paul wrote about idolatrous gentiles, to what two things did he refer?
2. The call to Christ in the New Testament was never a plea to be what? What was the plea?
3. In Romans 1:18-32, what group did Paul say existed?
 - a. What two words did Paul often use when talking to or about idolatrous gentiles?
 - b. To what does futile refer?
 - c. What substitution did idolatrous people make?
 - d. To what three things did God abandon them?
 - e. What were these people?
4. How did Paul use idolatrous ignorance in his sermon in Acts 17?
5. What did Paul encourage gentile Christians to do in Ephesians 4?
6. Sometimes a Christian has to do what to appreciate deliverance?
7. Faith's decision to belong to Christ involves what?

Lesson Three

Learning About Christ

Text: Ephesians 4:20, 21

Everyone has to develop a view of what his or her adult life is about. There is no doubt that your cultural framework significantly affects that view. There is no doubt that the possibilities within the framework of your social and economic situation powerfully influence that view.

Yet, within your cultural, social, and economic framework, you are confronted with a number of possibilities. We all need to understand that possibilities confronting a person poverty bound by the caste system of India and possibilities confronting a person who is part of a wealthy, influential family in Europe are quite different. However, it is still true that the person decides, "Who will I be and what will I be" [within the framework of my possibilities].

Our primary concern lies within the social and economic opportunities confronting us in our American sub-culture. [As an example, the situation for numerous Americans whose *roots* are in Spanish speaking countries, Asian countries, native American origins, or other countries differ within this nation.] Yet, every person in this nation must decide, "Who am I? To what do I aspire?" Is the primary orientation of my life the role others would thrust upon me? Is it pleasure? Is it power? Is it power in money, or power in lawlessness, or power in personal influence, or power in some form of success, or power in education, or power in occupation? Will I base my concept of who I am on other's opinion of me or on my opinion of myself? Will I just follow the influences around me ["go with the flow"] or will I follow my own moral compass? If I follow my own moral compass, what is the foundation of my value system?

Note how Paul used the value system in orienting the moral compass of converted gentiles. First he asked them to remember who they were (a) when they had incorrect concepts of divinity and (b) before they met Jesus Christ. He specifically asked them to remember the type of influences those two things has on their minds and behavior. Second, he called to their attention to the fact that learning correct concepts of God by understanding who and what Jesus Christ was [and is] changed them as people. The message concerning Jesus Christ did NOT say, "Wonderful decision to be in futility and darkness! Futility and darkness are excellent states of existence! Continue to be what you are in your ignorance and (a) your life will be wonderful and (b) lead to a very desirable conclusion."

Rather, Paul called their attention to the fact what confirming a lifestyle that was (a) ignorant of the living God and (b) enslaved to behaviors that opposed God was NOT what they learned when they learned about the Christ. And they knew it! The objective of learning about Jesus Christ involved the challenge to deliberately leave the old lifestyle and embrace a new lifestyle that had to be learned. This challenge was a part of learning about Jesus Christ! In fact, if they wanted to know the truth about how to live and life's purpose, they had to learn about Jesus!

Two long discussed questions [for about a century] are (1) what is the core of the gospel [good news] and (2) what is the core of learning Jesus Christ. Those questions are not as simply answered as might first be perceived. Evidently, John the baptizer preached the gospel to Jewish audiences by focusing on the expected kingdom (Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:1, 4; Luke 3:2, 3) and that seems to have been the early message of Jesus as well (Mark 1:14, 15; Matthew 4:17). Paul's letters to gentile congregations focused on God's redemption achievements in Jesus Christ (for example, consider Philippians 3:8-12). Please remember that Jewish Christians like Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Aquila, Priscilla, etc. did not represent the majority view among Jewish Christians (consider Acts 14:24-15:5 and 20:20-22). In the New Testament, there is not a letter [book] directed to a Jewish Christian congregation in the manner that Paul directed his letters [books] to gentile Christian congregations. In fact, he clearly stated in Romans 14 that Jewish Christians in Rome did not need to

express their faith as did gentile Christians in Rome, and gentile Christians in Rome did not have to express their faith as did Jewish Christians in Rome.

The following is suggested on the basis of Paul's New Testament writings:

(1) "Learning Christ" would radically change a person's view of deity. Consider Acts 17:22-28, a statement from Paul. No longer could God be represented as a human artistic expression. He must be seen as Creator. "Learning Christ" would include a radical change in the concept of deity from an idolatrous view to a Creator view (consider Romans 1:18-23).

(2) "Learning Christ" would understand that God's purposes were to involve a human response to God. God was not aloof and unconcerned about human affairs (see 1 Kings 18:27 and Romans 5:1-11). He was and is infinitely concerned about us, infinitely involved in our affairs.

(3) "Learning Christ" would involve understanding God's value system. The Gospel of John repeatedly makes the point that God was the source of Jesus' teachings, values, and actions (John 4:34; 5:19, 30; 6:38; 8:28; 12:49, 50; 14:10). When one heard [hears] the concepts/values of Jesus, he or she hears the concepts/values of God. Consider Matthew 12:7.

(4) "Learning Christ" would involve living a new lifestyle. The behavior condoned by and often encouraged by idolatry would have no place in one's Christian existence. Consider Colossians 3:1-11. Lifestyle changes are not made quickly or by accidental convenience.

(5) "Learning Christ" would involve learning a new purpose for existence. The Christian focuses on life after death, not physical existence before death. Consider 1 John 2:15-17 and Romans 12:2; 8:12, 38-39.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What must every person develop?
2. What must every person decide?
3. Where do most people's primary concerns lie?
4. What did Paul first ask the Ephesian Christians to remember?
5. What is the second thing Paul called the attention of the Ephesian Christians to?
6. Paul called their attention to the facts that being ignorant of God's nature and being enslaved to behaviors that was opposed God were not what?
7. What two long discussed questions are noted?
8. Discuss the fact that Jewish Christians with Paul's evangelistic perspective were the exception in the Jewish Christian community.
9. Give five influences of "learning Christ."

Lesson Four

The Truth Seekers

Text: Ephesians 4:21

The objective of every American [and I suspect every person in all other cultures] is to escape an empty life and find a life with meaning. Some may see an attempt to achieve such an escape as hopeless even before the effort begins. Most find the definition of emptiness in life changes as one's age changes.

Paul indicated that one reason for these gentile Christians turning to Christ was to find truth in him. Paul commonly appealed to idol worshipping gentiles to realize the foolishness of worshipping idols.

Consider his speech in the Areopagus to well educated, idol worshipping gentiles found in Acts 17:22-31. Note his following emphasis to thinking people.

1. God is Creator of everything. (verse 24)
2. God is Lord of heaven and earth [the all encompassing Lord, not Lord of a sphere]. (verse 24)
3. God is not confined to temples made with human hands. (verse 24)
4. God does not depend on humanity for existence. (verse 25)
5. God is over humanity, not dependent on humanity. (verses 26-28)
6. God's nature cannot and should not be reduced to created materials and images that are a product of human art.
7. God will judge the world by His [not our] concept of righteousness.

Paul's presentation of God's nature was in distinct contrast with most idol worshippers' concept of God's nature. Idol worshippers [whether they realized it or not] embraced concepts of the nature of deity that made deity dependent on humans. Paul stressed that God was independent of humans in every area and consideration of existence.

Consequently, when gentile idol worshippers became gentile Christians, they were seeking truth about God and themselves in Jesus Christ. Idols did not represent the truth about deity or the truth about humanity. Jesus revealed the truth about God and the truth about humanity.

Just as Paul called those at the Areopagus to note some of their convictions about divine nature, you are asked to contrast faith in Jesus Christ with some prevailing attitudes in the American culture today.

1. Some hold the conviction that acquiring money and possessions is the key purpose of life. This conviction presents itself in many forms. One form is seen in just plain greed. Another form is seen in the declaration, "I do not want lots of money; I just want the lifestyle lots of money makes possible." Another form is measuring one's personal significance in terms of his worth. There seems to be a direct relationship between age and the significance of money. The older one gets, the emptier having money becomes. There is a time in life when "look at what I have" seems significant. There is a time in life when "look what I have" becomes the height of foolishness.

2. Some hold the conviction that having 'fun' is the key purpose of life. Interestingly, those that are beyond retirement age likely lived through periods in life when surviving was the primary consideration and having 'fun' was never mentioned. Of equal interest, it is likely that many 30 or under never lived when having 'fun' was not a significant consideration. The first went through periods when there was no 'disposable income'. The second never existed in conditions when 'disposable income' was not a normal monetary situation. As maturity advances, the concept of having 'fun' changes. There is an age when one cannot have 'fun' physically in any manner he or she had 'fun' in the past. There is a sad emptiness when having 'fun' is relegated to one's memories.

3. Some hold the conviction that 'success' is the key purpose of life. Those who hold this conviction often define success either as achieving a goal or as receiving recognition for accomplishments. True, it is always a special joy to receive the appreciation of others. However, if you link 'success' with the purpose of life, reflect on some questions. How does a person measure his or her success? What happens when you can no longer pursue your goals? Is present life made meaningful by looking at past awards? Does life lose meaning because a person can no longer pursue past important goals? Is life to be divided in the 'meaningful' and the 'meaningless' period as a result of 'success' surrendering to one's past measurements?

Numerous other things may be substituted in the quest of the key meaning of life. The single point to be made is this: passing time, deteriorating bodies, and age make meaningless pursuits we considered as central to our earlier existence.

Paul reminded gentile Christians that when they were in idolatry, idolatry destroyed them and gave them wrong concepts of God. It was only Christ that gave purpose and meaning to their lives. Christians today need to be reminded that when we substitute a declared purpose in life for the one given us by Jesus Christ, life becomes empty and meaningless as it nears its physical end. Few horrors are greater than nearing the end of one's life, looking back, and seeing a life that was incorrectly focused and misused.

For Thought and Discussion:

1. What is the objective of every American?
2. What was one reason Paul often told gentile Christians that they turned to Christ?
3. State 7 things Paul told the people at the Areopagus about God.
4. What about God was in distinct contrast in the Christian's and idol worshipper's views?
5. What two things were gentile Christians seeking in Jesus Christ?
6. State 3 things people commonly consider the key to life's purpose in this culture.
7. What single point is made in the three illustrations question 6?
8. Of what two things did Paul remind gentile Christians when they lived lives of idol worshippers?
9. What is a great horror for some when they near the end of life?

Lesson Five

The Changing of Self

Text: Ephesians 4:22-24

At the core of conversion [speaking in regard to religious concepts] is a change. You have redirected life and self. Before conversion you were not what you became after conversion. After conversion you are defined by a set of values that you did not acknowledge prior to conversion. After conversion you, by desire and commitment, deliberately became someone you were not prior to conversion.

Let's begin by realizing that what we in the churches of Christ commonly think of as conversion is not the same experience for everyone. It never has been. As an illustration, consider conversion for a devout Jew [Luke 1:5, 6; 2:25; 2:36-38] and the conversion of an idolatrous gentile [Acts 17:22-32] in the time frame of the first century. Did the devout Jew know the living God? Yes! Were his or her moral values consistent with the values/concepts of God? Yes! Were they accustomed to surrendering to the will of God? Yes! Did they acknowledge God to be Creator? Yes! Did the idolatrous gentile know the living God? No! In fact, he or she had to change his or her concept of deity in order to respond to the living God. Did idolatrous gentiles respect the values of the living God in their daily behavior? No! In fact, conversion often involved [for idolatrous gentiles] a redefinition of right and wrong. Was the idolatrous gentile accustomed to surrendering to the values of the living God? No! Often the values of the idolatrous gentile were based on self-indulgence. Did idolatrous gentiles acknowledge the living God as Creator? No!

The conversion experience for the devout Jew who always honored the living God as Creator and for the idolatrous gentile who lived in ignorance of the living God as Creator were different. The first involved an increased understanding of God's will and purposes. The second involved understanding Who God was and what His nature was.

That is a radical [but true] illustration of what should be fairly obvious to everyone. Realize the situation became more complex. Just as among those professing to be Christians today, among first century Jews were those devoted to the Law (Acts 21:20, 21); converted Pharisees (Acts 15:5); and those publicly recognized as sinners [many of whom made no pretense of following Jewish traditions or the teachings of the Law] (Matthew 9:10-13). The gentiles also included proselytes to Judaism (Acts 2:10); God fearers [gentiles who believed in the living God but who had not submitted to the requirements of proselytism] (Acts 10:1, 2; 13:16); and those who at times visited the Jewish synagogue (Acts 13:44-49). Even in the first century, the understandings that led people to conversion to Jesus Christ were not the same awarenesses for all who came to Christ.

Obviously, today, the understandings that lead a prostitute or a drug dealer to conversion to Jesus Christ and the understandings that lead a child in a Christian environment with devout Christian parents to conversion to Jesus Christ are not identical understandings. Therein lies our major spiritual challenge in God's family today. What is said to a 6 year old child in a Christian family who wants to be baptized and what is said to a 17 year old person steeped in an evil environment and evil behavioral practices cannot be the same thing.

In Ephesians Paul addressed gentiles who left idolatry to be Christians (Ephesians 2:1-3; 4:17-20). Please understand that conversion to Christ did not and does not result in an immediate, involuntary, automatic change. One does not suddenly know and understand things he or she never knew before. There must be a transitional period involving teaching and understanding. A new moral code for governing behavior must be developed and implemented. [In a true sense, this is a lifelong experience.] It is most unfair for third generation Christians to expect converts from a godless environment to know and understand what the third generation Christians know and understand simply because faith in Jesus Christ resulted in repentance of known sins and baptism.

The mere fact that Paul would mention lying, anger, stealing, ungodly language intended to show disrespect for others, and resisting God's influence in their lives was a definite indication that these problems continued among them after conversion. [Note the way verse 28 is worded--Paul addressed an existing problem among those Christians.]

There was a former lifestyle typified by the expression 'the old self'. There was a new lifestyle typified by the expression 'the new self'. The transition between the selves is characterized by a 'renewing of your mind'. That statement reminds us of Paul's statements in Romans 1:28; 12:2; and Colossians 3:2; Jesus' statement in Matthew 16:23; and Peter's statement in 2 Peter 3:1. There is a 'function of the mind' component to converting to and following Jesus Christ just as there is an 'obedient surrender to God' component of converting to and following Jesus Christ. Conversion involves both the mind and behavior of the person.

Their 'old self' was controlled [corrupted] by the selfish focus of the 'lusts of deceit'. The 'new self' was in the process of recovery Paul called being created in God's likeness by a dedication to God's concept of right doing in which they set themselves apart from ungodly influences for God's truth.

Conversion with its dedication to the 'new self' begins a journey back to the person God intended us to be in His first creation. That journey will be completed when we live in God's presence after our resurrection.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What is at the core of conversion?
2. What do churches of Christ need to realize regarding conversion?
3. What radical, but true, illustration is used?
4. What understanding did the conversion of a devout Jew involve?
5. What understanding did the conversion of an idol worshipping gentile involve?
6. What should be obvious today in the conversion of a person from a godless environment and the conversion of a child from a Christian environment?
7. Whom did Paul address in Ephesians?
8. What does conversion not result in?
9. What marked the transition from the 'old self' to the 'new self'?
10. What controlled the 'old self'? What journey was the 'new self' taking?

Lesson Six

"The Truth Speaker"

Text: Ephesians 4:25

The values and characteristics which follow in Ephesians 4:25-32 are the values and characteristics either lacking or needing support and encouragement in the Christians at Ephesus. A person does not transition from a godless background to a godly background instantly. Gentile Christians anywhere in the first century world did not go from an idolatrous value system and mindset instantly to a Christian value system and mindset. The first thing to be realized is this: There were still some ungodly perspectives governing the behavior of Christians in Ephesus.

Long ago in West Africa I heard a mature, older African Christian man say publicly, "We Christian adults are 40% Christian. Maybe our children will be 60% Christian. Maybe our grandchildren will be 80% Christian." He publicly addressed the difficult transition from animist religions to a Christian lifestyle with its values. I am much impressed, not with his time table or his lack of commentary on the concept of God's grace, but with his insight on the difficulty of transition. This mindset is often lacking among us American Christians as believers are challenged to make transitions from materialistic or pleasure centered lifestyles to sacrificial Christian values and concepts.

The second realization is this: Christians did not have to be "perfect" to be "in Christ" and thereby a part of his church. (1) If Paul wrote these Christians because their behavior and lifestyle was less than spiritually mature, and (2) if these Christians had obvious moral flaws but were still considered by Paul as Christians (Ephesians 1:1; 3:14-21), it should be obvious that human "perfection" expressed in "ideal conformity to our expectations" is not the primary key to "continuing congregational membership," or being "in Christ," or being "Christian." The key is found in divine grace and mercy as converted individuals grow and mature in Christ. That single, simple understanding would transform the manner in which we treat each other and people with whom we disagree. We would see the key to spiritual growth is not found in passing unconcerned judgment on people's behavior, but on encouraging spiritual growth as we challenge immature Christians to have a new grasp of what is godly and what is not. We must want people's spiritual maturity to be based on faith in Jesus rather than based on a terrified conformity to our human expectations. All of us need to learn from God's patience as we seek to encourage each other in Christ.

The third realization is this: We look for growth as people behave as the "new self" in Christ. We look at changes in people rather than justifications from people. There is a distinct difference in the mindset, the value base, and the behavior of the converted man or woman who seeks change in Jesus Christ and the questionably converted man or woman who seeks the status quo of self-justified behavior.

We are not speaking about the spiritual growth rate of a person, but about the spiritual growth of a person. Most of us grow at different rates. The individual's spiritual growth rate depends on a number of personal factors including degree of past godless background, the need to be exposed to the concepts of the Christian lifestyle and value system, and the need to learn. The rate of spiritual growth and development of the person who grew up in and lived as an adult in a godless background and the spiritual growth and development of the person who grew up in and lived as adult in a godly environment will not be the same.

The first Christian value Paul stressed the Christians at Ephesus needed to incorporate in their lives was the importance of being truthful. We could discuss the value of truth, the importance of truth, the color of deceit [black and white lies], the reality of deceit in our economy or our families, etc.--all of which is good but might miss Paul's point. Deceit was a part of much of the Roman world lifestyle. Speaking falsely was often regarded a normal part of survival in their patronage systems, the competitions of the market place, and their exclusive societies [that commonly excluded rather than included]. The converted to Jesus Christ "laid aside" falsehood

because it was a destructive part of the "old self" which they were to "lay aside." Why? They found truth in Jesus (verse 21). They could not represent him in whom they found truth by being a people who used falsehood. How can you represent truth by using deception?

The "speaking truth with each other" comes from Zechariah 8:16. God said He would bless Jerusalem if they would speak truth to each other rather than using deceit to by-pass justice. Two things are called to your attention. First is the new relationship caused by people being in Christ. Instead of seeing each other as rivals who are threats, they see each other as neighbors whom they care about. Second is the organic illustration. They are members of each other. You cannot do harm to another person in Christ without hurting yourself. You cannot do good to another person in Christ without blessing yourself.

In deceit there is a curse. In truth there is a blessing. A Christian cannot represent the Jesus of truth (John 1:14; 14:6) and the God of truth (Exodus 34:6; 2 Samuel 7:28) by being a person who deceives. If we function on deceit, Satan is our father (John 8:44).

For Thought and Discussion

1. What can be said about the values and characteristics in Ephesians 4:25-32?
2. What transition does a person not make instantly?
3. What first realization should come from this paragraph?
4. What second realization should come from this paragraph?
5. What two things should be understood by Paul writing to these Christians?
6. Where is the key found to being in Christ?
7. How would that single, simple understanding transform the way we treat each other?
8. What third realization should come from this paragraph?
9. In what is there a distinct difference?
10. We are not speaking of what? Why?
11. Among the things that factor in a person's spiritual growth rate are what three considerations?
12. What is the first value Paul stressed?
13. Give two reasons Paul gave for their being truthful with each other.

Lesson Seven

Rejecting Anger

Text: Ephesians 4:26, 27

Anger of itself is not evil. There are times when God is described as being angry (Exodus 4:14; 15:7; 32:10, 11; Numbers 11:1, 10, 33; Deuteronomy 4:25; Joshua 7:1; Judges 2:11, 12; Psalm 78:49-51; etc.). When God gave a self-description in Exodus 34:6, the holy God said He was slow to anger, not absent in anger. There were times when Jesus was angry (Mark 3:5; perhaps Matthew 21:12, 13, and John 2:15, 16).

When anger acts unjustly it is evil. See James 1:20. In humans anger often expresses itself in an emotional response that acts impulsively and suspends thought. In humans anger commonly expresses itself through injustice because it either overreacts or it expresses the fury of long stifled slights. Often human anger is selfish as it focuses on self and injustices (whether perceived or actual) without considering the actual "whys" of the other person's behavior, emotions, or aggressiveness. Human anger often seeks to return evil for evil.

Three things are called to your attention in today's text. First, the injunction against anger in Christian existence is to make certain anger events are brief, not none existent. Second, the reason for making anger brief is to prevent Satan from using our anger as a doorway to temptation. Third, if the Christian will practice one and two, he can be angry and not sin.

It is the conscious ambition of the Christian man or Christian woman to set aside all aspects of life in a deliberate attempt to properly represent God. He or she will seek to be holy [set apart for God] by God's definition of holiness and purity so [as God's son or daughter] he or she can point to God's holiness to explain (1) the person he or she has become (2) as demonstrated in the way he or she behaves.

In a practical application of sanctification in the matter of anger, ask these questions. When I am angry, how does my anger affect my blood pressure? Affect my facial expressions? Affect my emotions? Affect my voice? Affect the pitch and tone of the way I verbally express myself? Affect my reasoning? Affect my desire to hurt the other person as I vent my anger with accusing words or hostile acts? Affect my behavior?

When I am angry, do I lose control of my body? Do I lose control of my emotions? Do I lose control of my reasoning? Do I become jealously suspicious of the one at whom I am angry? Do I behave in a manner that deserves an apology when I "cool off"?

Do I feel my anger makes me a better or poorer representative of God?

Commonly the issue of anger in an environment that knows and respects godliness is "losing my temper." Frequently the issue changes radically in a godless environment that either (1) does not know God, or (2) does not respect godly behavior.

Many of the Christians in Ephesus came from what we would consider a godless environment. The most powerful, influential religious expression in Ephesus was idolatrous. The principal temple of Diana or Artemis was located in Ephesus (see Acts 19:8-20, 23-41). Most of these Christians had "come out of" idolatrous experiences. What often was seen as a virtue in an idolatrous or godless existence was declared evil in a Christian existence. While expressing anger and nursing anger was seen as an admired strength in the ungodly lifestyle of people who worshipped idols, expressing or nursing human anger was declared a horrible way to represent God in the Christian lifestyle. Such was seen by Paul as an expression of the control of "the old self" rather than learning the new values of the "new self." Note this was a discussion of a lifestyle, not just an occasional event.

Perhaps we gain better insights into the problem [or problems] that concerned Paul if we illustrate anger in this manner. "Do not make him [or her] mad! When he [or she] gets angry, he [or she] is unpredictable! The only thing you can be certain of is that someone will get hurt! Not only does he [or she] react, but he [or she] never forgets! He [or she] will get even! And he [or she] is cunning! The time means nothing! He [or she] will plot revenge, and the amount of time that passes is meaningless! Never forget if you cross him [or her], you will get hurt! He [or she] will get revenge!"

The use of anger in a godless environment is often a control mechanism. The person easily angered controls other people's behavior through a fear of his [or her] angry behavior. The Christian seeks to influence others' behavior through the positive expressions of love, caring, and kindness because God is in control of him [or her].

This declares the core of the anger issue: Do I seek to control/manipulate others through anger, or do I let God control me by influencing me to be loving, caring, and kind? If a person lived [or lives] in a "controlled violence" atmosphere regulated by people's anger, learning to become loving, caring, and kind would be [is] a major transition. Loving an enemy would become a major, unnatural challenge that simply "did not make sense"!

Anger presents a major opportunity to the devil! Anger is the door to bitterness, slander, rage, confusion, and hate! Commonly, anger precedes injustice not justice, spite not kindness, hurtful acts or words not compassion, and revenge not forgiveness. Lingering anger is never a friend to or encourager of godly behavior!

For Thought and Discussion

1. Discuss this statement: "Anger of itself is not evil."
2. When is anger evil?
3. How does anger often express itself in humans?
4. Why does human anger often use injustice?
5. Illustrate the fact that human anger can be selfish.
6. Human anger often seeks to do what?
7. List the three things called to your attention in today's text.
8. What is the conscious ambition of the Christian man or woman?
9. In practically applying sanctification to anger, state some questions to be asked.
10. The use of anger in a godless environment is often what?
11. State the core of the anger issue.
12. Why does anger present a major opportunity to the devil?

Lesson Eight

Rejecting Stealing

Text: Ephesians 4:28

Just today's text within itself is fascinating. It clearly indicates that the problem of stealing was ongoing in the Christian community at Ephesus. It declares the responsibility of work. It states a Christian ethic in earning. All three of those things contain surprises.

First, consider the significance of the ongoing problem of stealing by Christians revealed in the words, "Let him who steals steal no longer."

The attitudes of some congregations of Christians include these: (1) "When a believing, penitent person is baptized into Christ, he or she immediately ceases all ungodly behavior, all ungodly attitudes." (2) "If a baptized person does not immediately and abruptly begin behaving as a mature Christian after baptism, it is the church's responsibility to kick him/her out of the fellowship and keep the church pure." (3) "Everyone knows what is right! What is godly is self-evident to every person!"

Observation one for your consideration: Paul wrote about real problems to real people. If Paul clearly stressed a problem in a letter to a congregation, that congregation had that situation or problem. For example, when Paul wrote Romans 12-15, the Christians in Rome struggled with the problems of arrogance, proper treatment of others, proper attitudes toward government and its authorities, properly godly conduct, judging each other, and proper treatment of the weak. When Paul wrote Colossians 3-4, Colossian Christians struggled with keeping their focus on Christ, with behaving as God's community, with living in peace with each other, with appropriate family relationships, and with proper attitudes in owner-slave relationships as Christians. Paul did not discuss other congregations' problems--he discussed their problems!

Observation two for your consideration: The people Paul wrote were first generation Christians who [for the vast majority] left generations of idolatrous behavior to enter Christian behavior. The people Paul wrote in the letters to congregations did not have Christian mothers and/or fathers or Christian aunts and/or uncles to learn from or to set examples for them. They were the first Christians in their families! They previously lived in idolatry! In the society they left, it was okay to get drunk; or to be what Christians called sexually immoral; or to use anger to dominate people; or to steal! For many of them, it was a major transition to go from a socially acceptable behavior to an evil behavior--when the behavior under consideration had not changed!

This situation is increasingly a problem for today's congregations. We cannot convert people culturally different from us to Christ [whether it be from an inner-city environment or from an ethnic group with roots outside the USA] and refuse to let them be an active part of our faith community! We cannot look upon such people as second class Christians! The adjustment problems are as much "ours" as "theirs."

Perhaps the most striking statement Paul made is read in 1 Corinthians 7:21-24: "**Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, each one is to remain with God in that condition in which he was called.**"

Paul in this context wrote to Christian slaves who were household slaves in non-Christian families. Non-Christian families often bought slaves for a dual role: (1) to work for the family the home and (2) to do sexual favors for members of the family. To refuse the requests of an owner could result in death. Paul said to Christian slaves (1) do not worry about existing as a slave with no rights. (2) You do not have to escape from slavery to be a Christian. (3) If you are able to be free, that is fine. If you are not able to be free, that is also fine.

(4) In human circumstances you may be trapped in slavery, but the Lord regards you as free. That is not at all the attitude we would express today! It is easy to tell the rest of the world how they should act when we are not in their situation and do not confront their problems!

There were Christians at Ephesus who lived by stealing. Paul said stop! Stopping is your choice! God and Christ cannot be properly represented by people who use and exploit others! You cannot tell a person how much your God loves him or her while you steal from him or her! If God loves the person enough to forgive him or her, you must love him or her enough to care about the person instead of selfishly stealing from him or her.

Second, consider the responsibility of the Christian to work. Christians are to labor, personally involving themselves in doing things that are good [honorable]. Christians do what is good in God's eyes rather than society's eyes. Remember, society and culture were basically idolatrous. Christians do not do what is socially acceptable [in a godless society] or culturally tolerated [in a godless world]. They do what is good.

In their world, the vast majority of labor involved agriculture or building. Labor was manpower intensive. Most honorable labor [by God's standards] involved physical exertion. Christians did not seek to escape labor by stealing, but embraced labor by physically investing themselves in their work.

Third, consider the objective of Christian work. Their dedication to work involved more than providing for themselves. Not only did they labor to provide for their own needs, but they worked in order to have something to share with those in need. God's people always have been devoted to helping those in need [as an example of this truth, read Deuteronomy 15:1-18 and 24:19-22]. Helping those in need is not "a responsibility of convenience and desire," but a Christian objective in his or her work. Being benevolent is not an option but a goal.

For Thought and Discussion

1. State three reasons for today's text being interesting.
2. What statement indicated stealing was an ongoing problem among Christians?
3. State three troublesome attitudes in some of today's congregations.
4. Discuss the first observation given for your consideration.
5. Discuss the second observation given for your consideration.
6. Why is the situation in observation two an increasing problem for today's congregations?
7. What was Paul's instruction to Christians at Ephesus who were stealing?
8. What is a conscious objective of the Christian in his work?

Lesson Nine

Christians and Healthy Speech

Text: Ephesians 4:29

Words get us in trouble frequently! James wrote in James 3:2, 6, "For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well ... 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." Isaiah wrote in Isaiah 32:6, "For a fool speaks nonsense, and his heart inclines toward wickedness: To practice ungodliness and to speak error against the Lord, to keep the hungry person unsatisfied and to withhold drink from the thirsty." The writer of Proverbs wrote in 10:19, "When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise." In Matthew 12:34-37, Jesus said, "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

In the first century world, two dominating themes in speaking were sex and slander. Sexual activity even played a dominant role in some forms of idolatrous worship. For centuries people were concerned about fertility. Having children, especially sons, meant your name continued after you died. It also meant you had immediate family to care for you when you were old. In times of small populations, having your family continue after your death was quite important. In times of no societal safety nets [like social security], having a number of children was important. In fact, having lots of children helped in the needed family labor for survival! Since wealth was often measured in live stock, having fertile live stock was a key to prosperity. Since crops producing well protected your family from starvation, it was essential for what one planted to produce well! Fertility! Thus, the god or goddess who claimed to be a key to fertility was often respected and worshipped.

People also liked to meddle in other people's affairs [consider 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12; 1 Timothy 5:13; 1 Peter 4:15, 16]. With little or no privacy, it was simple to know about other's personal lives and affairs. In Roman society and its patronage system, it was profitable [literally] to have inside knowledge of "what is going on." Discrediting your competitor was financially advantageous!

In those two preoccupations, little has changed! Today, we live in a society saturated with sexual behavior. Forms of pornography from around the world prosper as they deliberately exploit people [both the used and the users]. Prostitution is an integral part of the "happening scene" in most societies. Sexual behavior for selfish pleasure and profit will always exist!

For both personal entertainment and financial advantage, people still enjoy slandering and meddling in other people's affairs. This focus continues to be financially advantageous!

One aspect of life quickly influenced (1) by exploitative sexual behavior [regardless of foundation reasons] and (2) by involving oneself in other peoples' private affairs is words. Sex, slander, and meddling have vocabularies of their own, and those involved in any of the three learn, adopt, and yield to those vocabularies quickly.

A part of conversion always is a reformation of personal speech both in words used and motives behind those words. The Christian abandons those vocabularies and the motives behind those vocabularies.

In our text, the word translated "unwholesome" in the NAS and NIV literally means "rotten." It is also translated "corrupt" (KJV), "evil" (RSV), and "bad" (NEB). It does no injustice to the concept to paraphrase the injunction in this way: "do not use words that cause a life to decay or a person to be destroyed."

Please note the change in motives. Whereas they used [and perhaps continued to use] words that had destructive impacts, as Christians they would use words that encouraged, met needs, built up, and gave grace. Their words would extend undeserved kindness! That would include forgiveness when forgiveness was not sought!
[Remember Romans 5:8-10?]

Note the 180 degree change in perspective (1) from what was commonplace in society and their lives prior to conversion (2) to what was characteristic of people in Christ who represented the Creator God after conversion. No longer did they speak of people as sexual objects to be exploited, but as persons to be valued. No longer did they demean others, but now they encouraged others. No longer did they selfishly use what they knew about others for personal benefit, but they focused on others' needs. Their goal: be a conduit of God's grace to others. It was a profound blessing to them, and they wanted others to experience that blessing.

Note in the list of changed behaviors, there is a definite, deliberate migration from selfish considerations/behaviors to considerations/behaviors increasingly committed to the good of others based on others' needs rather than "my" selfish desires or ambitions. (1) Instead of deceiving my fellow believer in Christ, "I" see him as a part of "myself." (2) "I" let my anger pass quickly instead of allowing you to be the object of "my" wrath. (3) "I" do not steal from you to meet "my" needs. Instead, "I" work so "I" can help you with your needs. (4) "I" do not destroy you with "my" words. Instead, "I" encourage you and build you up with "my" words. "I" look at you as being more important than "me" (consider Paul's admonition in Philippians 2:1-4).

Paul urged Christians not to talk [use words] like people who were not in Christ used them. Christians will reflect God's rule in their words. Christians belong to a God of grace Who seeks to build up rather than to destroy.

Discussion Question:

State ways that understanding this admonition will affect our silence and our speech.

Lesson Ten

Cooperating With God

Text: Ephesians 4:30

Approach today's lesson with an awareness. What is considered as "normal" in the church among us today and what was considered to be "normal" among Christians in the first century is different. In their context, they experienced miracles, tongue speaking, interpretation of tongue speaking, special gifts, and Spirit possession in ways that do not exist among us. If those things suddenly existed among us as they did in the first century, that situation would make us anxious and nervous. These forms of God's activity among them were "normal" among Christians then. Such circumstances existed among Christians from the beginning of Christianity. For example, those Christians never envisioned a time when "unusual [to us] manifestations of God's Spirit" would not exist in the fellowship of Christians. Those things were just a "normal" part of being in the first century Christian community. It was common for those Christians to assume their situation always would continue unchanged.

Rather than debating or probing into the Spirit on a "today" versus "the first century" consideration, focus on two considerations. (1) The first consideration: God always is active in our world. God is not a passive God. God always had been and continues to be an involved, active God. Never should the discussion be about the fact that God continues to be active. The discussion [when conducted] should have as its focus, "In what ways is God active today?" (2) The second consideration: even in the first century, the evidence of God's activity among Christians was changed human behavior. The admonition, "... Do not grieve the Holy Spirit ..." appears as part of a paragraph emphasizing the essential importance of changed human behavior in being "the new self" created by God "in righteousness and holiness of the truth."

For the sake of today's emphasis, summarize "do not grieve the Holy Spirit" into this emphasis: "do not resist God's influence as He seeks to make you a holy person." From the moment of faith in Christ, God wants you to be all you can be in Jesus Christ. One reason that a person who believes in Christ repents and is baptized is this: he or she wishes to become all he or she can become in Jesus Christ. Repentance is a conscious redirection of one's life. Among other things, baptism is a visible commitment to holiness in Christ. The person wants all to know he or she is no longer committed to evil or sinfulness. God's forgiveness is joyfully accepted by the person because he or she wishes to become all he or she can be in Jesus Christ.

God has an active interest in you living your life as a person who has faith in Jesus Christ! God did not send His son to die for us because God is disinterested (John 3:16-21). Jesus did not come as an act of divine condemnation, but as God's commitment to our salvation.

Paul's affirmation in Romans 8:1 is mind boggling! Jesus Christ is God's perfect solution for our problem with evil! It is literally impossible for one belonging to Christ to "out sin" God's forgiveness! What God does for us in Christ is incredible! In the same Romans 8, Paul declared nothing external of ourselves, not even evil spiritual forces, could separate Christians from God's love (Romans 8:31-39). Only a knowing, deliberate rejection of God removes a person from His love--the Christian [not God] initiates the first act of deliberate rejection.

John would loudly AMEN Paul's assurance! Read 1 John 1:7, 9. Note the "alls" in the cleansing from "all sin." Note the "cleanses," present tense, a continuing process. Baptism based on faith and repentance begins God's forgiveness that lasts a lifetime if the person chooses to remain in Christ.

In Hebrews 6, those Christians experienced every kindness God could extend (Hebrews 6:4-6) before they rejected God. The problem was in the fact that their rejection of God destroyed their ability to repent, not that God no longer cared about them. The Christians to whom this writing was written were dangerously flirting with a conscious decision to reject Christ.

The Christians who were written previously suffered for faith in Christ, endured ridicule, were not ashamed to help imprisoned Christians, and endured the confiscation of property--and still clung to Christ (Hebrews 10:32-34). Afterward, they considered abandoning their commitment to Christ (Hebrews 10:23), and some distanced themselves from the Christian community (Hebrews 10:25).

If such "weak" Christians among us were considering that course of action, many of us would think it was past time to leave them and destroy their influence among us. That was not the suggestion of the writer! He urged them not to discard their confidence! Their reward was still available to them! He was confident they were not shrinkers, and challenged them not to be a part of those who shrank back to destruction. God's desire is our salvation, not our destruction! Salvation in Christ is not some fragile state easily destroyed by some thoughtless, ignorant human act! God is committed to our salvation--Jesus' death and resurrection are evidences of His commitment!

Paul knew the depth of God's commitment! Read 1 Timothy 1:12-16. If God could save Paul, God can save anyone!

Paul's encouragement in Ephesians 4:30 could be accurately paraphrased in this manner: "God is on your side! His influence in your life is seeking to make you all you are capable of being spiritually. Do not work against His influence! Do not make His commitment to you harder! Wear the mark of your devotion to him gladly! He is not ashamed of you. Do not be ashamed of Him! Willingly, cooperatively become who He seeks to make you!"

For Thought and Discussion:

1. With what awareness is it suggested that we approach today's lesson?
2. Rather than debating or probing into the contrast of the work of the Spirit today versus the work of the Spirit in the first century, what two considerations are suggested for our focus?
3. In what emphasis does the admonition not to grieve the Spirit appear?
4. Summarize the emphasis in "do not grieve the Spirit?"
5. State a reason given in this lesson for believers repenting and being baptized.
6. Give evidence of the fact that God is actively interested in you maintaining faith in Christ.
7. Why is Romans 8:1 mind-boggling?
8. State why John would loudly AMEN Paul's assurance.
9. What is God's desire? What is not God's desire?
10. Paraphrase Ephesians 4:30.

Lesson Eleven

The Power of Negative Emotions

Text: Ephesians 4:31

Let's begin by acknowledging that conversion involves our emotions. Most of us would quickly agree with that statement. Our problem is that our behavior at times does not acknowledge that statement.

Perhaps illustrations more easily would allow us to understand the problem of allowing our negative emotions "to be a conscious part" of our conversion. If we speak in generalities and theory, we quickly say, "Yes, our emotions need to be part of our conversion." So, if we talk about internally belonging to God, or discuss the importance of the heart following Christ, or discuss how essential it is to set our minds on things above, we agree on the importance of converting our emotions. We rather easily discuss the consequences if the conversion of negative emotions does not occur when the discussion is on this plain. It is rare to find a Christian who would disagree that, generally, and in theory, emotions should participate in our conversions.

If we speak on the ideal plain, we again find wide-ranging agreement. If we discuss some noble or notable godly emotion, or if we discuss some horribly ungodly expression, most of us will quickly agree. We all are for more love among Christians and less hate in the world.

However, when we descend to the practical plain of everyday life, agreement is not as easily reached. If the discussion involves one of our high anxiety concerns, it is rather simple to convince ourselves that "the end result justifies the means we need to use to achieve that result." Thus we declare, because the objective of our pursuit is noble, the means used to achieve our objective are justified. So, we can spread incorrect information, partially correct information, or an unsubstantiated rumor with impunity because the objective is good. Christians often can do such acts in the personal conviction, "I am behaving in the best interest of the congregation." This is the conviction that ungodly emotions will produce godly results. Or, anxious Christians can engage in character assassination. It becomes a noble expression of godly concern to destroy a brother or sister's credibility. As long as the goal is considered a noble expression of godliness, ungodly emotions become at best a secondary consideration.

The intended point is this: the conversion of emotions is desirable by Christians in theory, but is often objectionable in the daily anxieties of the real world.

Again, please note this verse (Ephesians 4:31) occurs in a paragraph devoted to the behavior of "the new self" who has been created to be in God's likeness, formed in righteousness and holiness of the truth. It occurs in a paragraph that contrasts behavior that is not "new self" behavior with behavior that is "new self" behavior. The negative emotions that must be "put away" are emotions that (1) likely existed in the Christian community at Ephesus; (2) were commonplace in their world and their past; and (3) did not characterize what they learned about Jesus Christ (4:20, 21).

Consider these emotions for a moment. Commentators commonly relate all of them to the "unwholesome" (rotten, diseased) speech in verse 29. Bitterness [internal ill will] verbally vents itself through statements of hatred, or resentment, or confusion, or destruction of another's credibility. No expression of contempt should be voiced by the Christian. Giving contemptuous expression to ill will must not characterize the speech of Christians.

While all ungodly behaviors [stealing, for example] are not matters of speech in this paragraph, speech is prevalent. Lying (verse 25), destructive language (verse 29), confusion [quarrelsome shouting or verbal brawls] (verse 31), and slander [a verbal destruction of another's credibility] (verse 31) are specifically mentioned.

Some also suggest there were verbal elements in the anger of verse 26 and the grief of the Holy Spirit in verse 30.

In a world that honored destructive verbal skills to gain power and leadership prestige, a mastery of ungodly speech could be a useful tool. It certainly could prove useful in the patronage system of the Roman Empire! Typically what wins society's approval finds useful and effective ways to enter the Christian community (consider Hymenaeus and Alexander in 1 Timothy 1:20 and Diotrephes in 3 John 9, 10). For example, society often defines leadership concepts in the church rather than God's values defining His concept of leadership in the Christian community. For the person converted from Roman influences and its patronage system seeking power and position in the Christian community, foul and destructive language could prove useful. Vilify a brother as an enemy, then destroy him with your words. If other Christians lost confidence in that brother, then the attacker was the victor. The attacker achieved his objective just as he did in a godless society!

Consider the context of the passage. Christians were not to follow the godless behavior and values of those outside of Christ (verses 17-19). This was not the message communicated to them about being a part of Christ (20, 21). There was "old self" and "new self" behavior (verses 22-24). Those who committed to "new self" behavior were created anew in God's likeness (verse 24). Therefore, there were behaviors and speech in the Christian community at Ephesus that must cease. In the matter of speech, deceit, internal ill will, verbal expressions of hate, confusion, and destructive verbal attacks had to come to an end (verses 25-31). Such words and statements had no place "among you" [if those words and statement had to be "put away from you" (verse 31), those words and statements had to be among them].

Christians exercise great caution in what they do and do not say.

For Thought and Discussion

1. With what acknowledgment should we begin?
2. On what two plains do we widely agree that emotions should be part of our conversion?
3. On what plain do we experience difficulty in agreeing emotions should be part of our conversion?
4. What concerns make this discussion difficult?
5. In what personal conviction can Christians excuse using ungodly emotions?
6. What is the intended point?
7. What is the emphasis of the paragraph in which Ephesians 4:31 occurs?
8. What contrast occurs in this paragraph?
9. How does bitterness verbally vent itself?
10. When could the mastery of ungodly speech be a useful tool?
11. When should Christians exercise great caution?

Lesson Twelve

The Christian Develops Positive Emotions

Text: Ephesians 4:32

As this lesson begins, we need to stress some facts. The declaration of what is a "positive emotion" and a "negative emotion" can be completely reversed in our view. That often occurs when a godless community is contrasted with a godly community within a society. The more influence God has in a sector of society, the more that social group considers God's concepts as positive influences. The less influence God has on a sector of society, the more inclined that group is to consider God's concepts as a negative influence.

There are numerous reasons for this divergence of views of what are positive and negative emotions. One reason is this: differences in definitions. For example, if by definition religion is considered to be based in superstition, applied in narrow-minded thinking, and judgmental in tone, any concept associated with God is typically regarded a negative social influence. If by definition, Christianity is seen as kind, compassionate, merciful, and helpful, a concept associated with God is typically regarded as a positive social influence. As another example, some regard Christian as another word for hypocrite. Others regard Christian as a word meaning gentle, understanding kindness.

One's initial view of an emotion is impacted by the concepts and definitions in one's family and community of origin. Typically our basic impressions of what is a positive and negative influence is significantly impacted by the impressions and experiences of our social group. For example, in a stereotypical focus, people from the deep South are ignorant Rednecks, and people from the far North are Yankees lacking common sense. [The "luxury" of stereotyping is found in ignoring the need to deal with the individual. All southern people are not ignorant, and all northern people do not lack common sense.].

The issue at hand in Ephesians 4 is life in the Roman Empire. In that society, power was the admired, supreme value. In the Roman Empire's concept of power, kindness resulting in forgiveness or tenderness resulting in compassion were negative emotions threatening the ambition of being powerful. In that environment, Christian conversion required a total reversal of values. Bitterness felt for someone considered an enemy or rival could produce dread or fear (1) because of the manner in which one's wrath or anger might be expressed or (2) because of the damage done by the bitter person's clamor, slander, and malice.

A key to amassing power is making the opposition afraid of you. The old, pre-conversion ways of speaking and acting were useful if one's goal was amassing power. However, who will fear the person who is kind, compassionate, and forgiving? Who can hope to gain power [in Roman society's concept] if you are "too considerate" to make people afraid of you?

Note the change in goals. In pre-conversion, society admired the person who amassed power. Thus, if one wanted to be "successful" in the eyes of peers, the goal was to gain power. However, ambitions completely changed in conversion. Now the goal was to accept Jesus Christ as the example and become Christ-like in personal character.

Christ stressed the opposite values of those admired in Roman society. Christ stressed the humility of kindness rather than the indifference [arrogance] of power. Christ stressed the servitude of concern instead of the fear of reprisal. He stressed compassionate forgiveness rather than domination. In Christ, you gave the dead life. In Roman society's concept of power, you counted the dead.

In conversion, it was essential that the convert learn a new way to think. Transformation in Christian conversion involved learning a new way to think, or in Paul's language "a renewing of the mind" (Ephesians 4:23; Romans 12:2). Why will a Christian learn to think in new ways? He or she will do so because he or she has changed

goals. No longer does he or she exist to win the approval of a society that does not care about the living creator God. He or she exists to let Jesus Christ, the suffering servant, be his or her example.

Conversion changes the criteria used to determine the success or worth of one's life. While it seemed perfectly normal to accept Roman society's standards to fashion personal standards, that was no longer the case for one converted to Christ. No longer were standards formed on the anvil of bitterness. After conversion, standards were formed by the example of self-sacrifice. Standards that declared defeat in a pre-converted existence spelled success if the person used Christ as an example.

The cross that was Jesus' instrument of death shouted "weakness." Roman society regarded that dehumanizing form of execution as the absolute proof of weakness. However, that same despised cross shouted "victory" to Christians because it was proof of total surrender to God. The values switched! Bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice were defeated by kindness, compassion, and forgiveness.

The Christian endorsing "new self" existence allowed God to create him or her. He or she used God's acts in Jesus as a blueprint for personal behavior. Just as God in Christ was kind to him or her while he or she was still God's enemy, he or she was kind to others. Just as God in Christ was compassionate to him or her when he or she did not even understand, "I need compassion," he or she was compassionate to others. Just as God in Christ forgave him or her of offenses that deserved punishment, he or she forgave others.

Would their society acknowledge their victory as Christians? No! Their society probably considered them stupid! Would God acknowledge the victory of the "new self"? Yes! He would declare them wise!

Do not expect people who do not know God or who hate God to admire what you become in Christ. If one cannot value the concept of God expressed by Jesus Christ, he or she will not value the Christian. Perhaps it is the eloquence of your "new self" behavior that says more to them than your words ever will!

For Thought and Discussion

1. Explain how the declaration of what is a positive or a negative emotion can be reversed.
2. Explain how definitions can be a part of this reversal.
3. What impacts a person's initial view of an emotion?
4. What was admired as the supreme value in Roman society?
5. In what two ways could bitterness produce dread or fear?
6. Discuss the change in goals of a converted person.
7. In conversion, it is essential to do what?
8. Use Jesus' cross to illustrate conversion changes the criteria used to determine success.

Lesson Thirteen

"In Conclusion"

Text: Ephesians 5:1,2

Paul often used the word "therefore" in his letters in the same way we of today would use the statement, "In conclusion," or, "Because these things I have shared with you are true, this should be our focus." [Consider Paul's use of "therefore" in passages like Romans 5:1; 1 Corinthians 8:13; 2 Corinthians 12:10; Galatians 4:7; Ephesians 2:7; Philippians 2:28; Colossians 2:6; 1 Thessalonians 4:18; 1 Timothy 2:8; 2 Timothy 1:8; etc.]

Remember Paul wrote to former idol worshippers who converted to Jesus Christ [gentiles] (Ephesians 2:1-12; 4:17, 18]. In our lessons and texts this quarter, Paul instructed these Christians not to behave in ways consistent with their unconverted lifestyle, but to behave like the new creatures God made them in Christ (4:22-24).

Today's lesson focuses on the conclusion that points to the motivation for appropriate Christian behavior. The new self will imitate the God Who created him/her in Christ. Christians will imitate God, not the emotions, thoughts, and behavior of their pre-Christian existence. This imitation will occur because they are "beloved children" of God. God was their Father, and He was quite willing to acknowledge them as His children.

In the Roman world of the first century, it was possible [and common] for a man to have sons by his wife who would be his heirs, and also to have sons by a woman who was not his wife who would never be heirs. Such sexual involvement with a woman not your wife was not considered immoral by the standards of that time. It was just a fact of life. Those sons who were not the man's heirs were often neglected by their physical father.

God does not have sons who are not His beloved heirs. Though they were gentile converts rather than Jewish converts, they were not second class, tolerated offsprings. They were full children of God, children whom God felt no hesitation to accept as His (Paul made the same type of argument in a different context in Galatians 4:6, 7). God has no children He rejects or refuses to acknowledge as His heirs.

Consider Paul's argument in this text. Idols produced slaves for the religion to the benefit of the religion--the concept being exploitive. God produces beloved children for His family. Idols functioned on the basis of obligation. God functions on the basis of love. In idolatry one functioned on the basis of giving a benefit. In Christ one receives the benefit.

Examine the contrast. [As you do, remember Paul did not write in chapter and verse divisions. Chapters and verses were added long after New Testament writings existed and were collected to make it easier to locate statements. Because there is a chapter break between chapters 4 and 5 does not mean the content of 4 has no connection with the thoughts in 5.]

As chapter 4 ended, there was a powerful contrast between their past and God's kindness, between their bitterness and God's love, between the fruit of malice and the fruit of forgiveness. In the contrast, God is the example. The proof of His love was [is] His gift of Jesus to us.

So what is the conclusion? Imitate God, not the idolatrous society. Imitate God as would children who are loved by their father. Allow the love that guided Him to send the Christ for your forgiveness to guide you to imitate His love. You imitate God's love by allowing your behavior to be lead by love for others just as God's behavior was expressed by love for you.

God's love expressed in Jesus Christ led to two behaviors in him. First, Christ loved you. Second, Christ sacrificed himself for you. In doing those two things Jesus became an offering to God. That offering was a pleasant smell. The issue is not "would a burning sacrifice smell good to us." This was a world where sacrificial

worship [in the ancient form of burning parts of butchered animals] at times filled the air in all societies [whether the Jewish or the idolatrous] and created a scent associated with respect of the divine. This is NOT intended as a verification that God is a human, has a nose, and has some scents He enjoys more than others. It is a declaration to a society accustomed to animal sacrifice that God was pleased with the surrender, dependence, and praise Jesus' sacrifice represented.

The point is that surrender to God involves much more than determining the "correct" rules and regulations, and following "properly" those rules and regulations. Do not miss the point that Paul wrote to people who believed in the resurrected Jesus Christ, who had turned from sins [repentance], and who had been baptized (Ephesians 1:1). While certainly important [not to be minimized], that was not enough.

Paul focused on their behavior after baptism. As Christians, they could not lie and deceive; they could not ignore the well being of others; they could not nurse anger and let it fester; they could not steal; they could not use words that corrupted; they could not grieve God's Spirit; and they could not be a bitter people. They could not imitate society. They must imitate God. Deceit, neglect of others, prolonged anger, stealing, corrupt words, grieving God's influence in their lives, and becoming a people who resented others did not imitate God! Had God treated them in that manner, there would have been no salvation resulting in forgiveness and redemption.

The conclusion: those who belong to Christ imitate God's character, not a godless society's values.

For Thought and Discussion

1. How did Paul often use the word "therefore" in his letters in the New Testament?
2. Who should we remember were the recipients of Ephesians?
3. How did Paul instruct them to behave?
4. On what does today's lesson focus?
5. Why should they willingly imitate God?
6. What kind of sons [children] does God not have?
7. What was Paul's argument in this text?
8. What was the contrast at the end of chapter 4?
9. What is the conclusion in the first two verses of chapter 5?
10. How would they imitate God?
11. In what two behaviors did Jesus Christ express God's love?
12. On what behavior did Paul focus?