

The Before and After of Conversion

Teacher 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

The objective of this lesson: to set a context for this quarter's focus in the minds of the students.

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.

Stress the three things that should be grasped as we approach this material. This letter was written to the Ephesians in the first century, not us in the 21st century. The better we understand the values that were to guide their thinking, the better we will grasp the values that are to guide our thinking. It is important to note this study is based on a contrast.

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.

When a person is leaving an existence to begin a new existence, the contrast in actual life is clearer than it is for a person who always has lived in a Christian environment. All the writings in the New Testament to Christians are to persons who are first generation Christians. There are no writings to people who came from a Christian past or environment--those people did not exist in the earliest congregations. The change is more dramatic for the person leaving a truly ungodly environment to be a Christian than it is for a person coming from a Christian environment to be a Christian. In many instances, godly Jewish values were identical to the Christ's values.

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.

For a person leaving a background in idolatry where the worship of multiple gods was permitted, becoming a Christian who worshipped one God involved a distinct contrast in the basic understanding of deity and of spiritual values.

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.

The concept that would be quite different for many Jewish Christians would be this: one did not deliberately irritate others with his/her religious convictions. The concept that would be quite different for many gentile Christians would be this: one did not compromise his/her religious convictions regards of the situation. Note in Acts 17:30, 31 that some of the Asiarchs (NAS) were friends of Paul. These were powerful individuals who were not Christian in any sense.

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.

Society has more powerful influence on each of us than any of us care to see or admit. Often it is society and not God that determines what our personal values are. If society says something is weak, we tend to shy away from it regardless of what God says.

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!

While this statement is in no way a rejection of correct knowledge or its value, we must note that of itself knowledge is insufficient. To know something is meaningless to "me" unless "I" allow "my" knowledge to actively influence "my" behavior.

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.

Stress that Christ does not call us to live as we please or as we were taught. Christ calls us to allow him to determine the values that control who we are as people. Quite often that knowledge requires personal discovery. We do not intuitively know and understand God's values. Sometimes God's values are in complete contrast to society's values.

For Thought and Discussion

1. As we begin this quarter's study, what four things do we need to keep in mind?
 - a. *Change is difficult and demanding for anyone at anytime.*
 - b. *The Christian does not endorse two compatible behaviors as he/she lives life.*
 - c. *The behavioral challenge is often the greatest when Christian values clash with social values.*
 - d. *Salvation occurs when we combine knowledge and personal behavior.*
2. What is difficulty for anyone at any time? Why?

Change is difficult for anyone at any time. We prefer the stay in our "comfort zone," and change is often uncomfortable.

3. In the first century, what were some difficulties Jews faced when becoming Christians?

They often endorsed values that were counter to traditions they had followed all their existence. As a result, they frequently were abandoned by those who were close to them in the past.

4. In the first century, what were some difficulties gentiles faced when becoming Christians?

Use idolatry as an example. Christians did not honor the family's shrine, or the employer's patron god or goddess, or the city's god or goddess. Many feared such behavior would result in the wrath of the gods. Thus, some people regarded Christians as dangerous.

5. What two behaviors never have been compatible in a Christian's life?

The two behaviors are (a) one suitable for a Christian setting/environment and (b) one suitable for an ungodly setting/environment.

6. What has been a constant challenge for Christians regarding behavior?

The constant challenge is finding the proper balance that is true to Christian values but does not unnecessarily irritate ungodly people.

7. When is there no choice to be made?

There is no choice when one would be required to abandon Christian values.

8. Why was (is) the challenge often great? Give some first century examples.

The challenge is great when Christian values clash with social values. Examples would include what is honest and what is weak.

9. In every age, what do too many Christians assume?

They assume they have a right to be saved regardless of how they choose to live.

10. What is extremely difficult to recognize regarding personal behavior?

It is difficult to recognize that something I did before I became a Christian is completely inappropriate Christian behavior.

11. What is and is not the call of Christ?

The call is not, "Live as you please." The call is, "Let me teach you new values that lead you to God."

12. Whom does the Christian represent?

He/she represents God and Christ.

13. What challenge does 1 Peter 2:9, 10 give?

The challenge is to declare the excellencies of God who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Lesson Two

Remember the "Before" Conversion

Text: Ephesians 4:17-19

The objective of this lesson: to challenge us to remember when God had limited or no influence in our lives.

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.

Stress two things: (1) the fact that Paul stressed past convictions about God influenced their daily behavior, and (2) idolatrous people were religious, but had an incorrect view of God.

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.

Note it is possible for people to invite divine wrath on them. Being righteous begins with learning a correct view of God. [The emphasis is not on human perfection in concepts or behavior--an impossibility-- but on not ignoring what should be obvious--like the distinction between creatures and the Creator.]

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.

Stress the concepts of futile and darkness. Emphasize that futile thinking produced flawed concepts of God in fundamental considerations. In thinking about darkness, talk about the importance of light to existence, and transfer those concepts to the importance of an enlightened understanding.

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!

Stress the fact that our stubborn, resisting ignorance can reach a point when God abandons us to ourselves. Note how destructive such abandonment is. Do emphasize that with God's help, recovery is possible. That is the objective of God's grace--to redeem that which appears to be beyond redemption.

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.

This is one of our few sermons presented to a gentile audience. Most sermons in Acts are presented to a Jewish audience or to a Jewish/gentile audience. Note this lesson stressed the nature of God rather than the nature of the Christ. The big issue with a Jewish audience was the nature of the Christ [for example, could the Christ suffer]. The big issue with a gentile audience was the possibility of resurrection.

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.

The way for Christian gentiles to combat futile thinking and darkened understandings began with remembering their lives when futility and misunderstanding controlled them. They needed to remember what kind of people they were when futility and darkness controlled their behavior.

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.

Appreciation of the present often begins by remembering the past. Stress the picture of their behavior before God influenced their lives was NOT a pleasant one!

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.

Stress the manner in which their idolatrous convictions influenced their behavior. Emphasize what we believe will [in a primary way] influence how we behave and how we treat other people. Often it is

NOT that our belief system and behavior are incompatible, but our belief system is pretense rather than reality.

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!

Note that WHY one is a Christian is quite important. Correct motives must be the reason for doing correct acts. The fundamental reason for becoming a Christian is the conscious intent to be a godly person. Becoming a Christian should be the exercise of individual choice.

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?

Challenge class members [students] to seriously reflect on these two questions.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Often when Paul wrote about idolatrous gentiles, to what two things did he refer?
 - a. *Their past views as idol worshippers and*
 - b. *The impact those views had on their behavior.*
2. The call to Christ in the New Testament was never a plea to be what? What was the plea?

It was never a plea to be religious. It was a plea to know the true, living God and His son Jesus Christ.

3. In Romans 1:18-32, what group did Paul say existed?

A group who invited God's wrath on themselves.

- a. What two words did Paul often use when talking to or about idolatrous gentiles?

Paul often used futile and darkness.

- b. To what does futile refer?

An inner condition [perspective, thinking] that produced wrong views of God.

- c. What substitution did idolatrous people make?

They substituted worship of the created for worship of the Creator [the eternal God].

- d. To what three things did God abandon them?

(1) their own lusts; (2) degrading passions; (3) a depraved mind.

e. What were these people?

They were their own worst enemy, and did not know it.

4. How did Paul use idolatrous ignorance in his sermon in Acts 17?

He used it to appeal to their curiosity.

5. What did Paul encourage gentile Christians to do in Ephesians 4?

He encouraged them to remember.

6. Sometimes a Christian has to do what to appreciate deliverance?

Sometimes he/she had to remember what he/she was delivered from.

7. Faith's decision to belong to Christ involves what?

It involves a becoming.

Lesson Three

Learning About Christ

Text: Ephesians 4:20, 21

The objective of the lesson: To stress the importance of 'learning' Christ in Christian existence.

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.

Everyone does have a personal view of the purpose of life--whether he or she recognizes it or not. Usually that view provides the person with his or her 'compass' on how to use and focus life.

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].

We all face and cope with some limiting factors. No one's situation [arguably] is ideal. Yet, with the limitations of our personal situations, we all decide the kind of person we wish to be. We may decide, "I do not want to be like him or her," or, we may decide, "I do want to be like him or her," or we may choose our own direction and goals, but we choose and decide.

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?

The decision of who and what I am is inescapable. The American culture is big on blaming 'my' mistakes on others. It often stresses evading personal responsibility. Yet, some who experience horrible backgrounds become truly worthwhile people whose lives bless others.

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."

Conversion to Christ commonly involves resetting the person's moral compass--conversion often changes the North direction! Often what was considered good becomes evil, and what was

considered evil becomes good. In such situations, one must remember who and what he or she was prior to the influence of Jesus Christ before he or she can determine the urgency of learning new concepts. Conversion to Christ is not a call to 'live as you please.'

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!

Christians sometimes need to be reminded of the contrast of life before Christ and life after Christ. It is a learning process, not an involuntary, instantaneous change.

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.

It is not unusual for it to take a Christian a while to realize these questions represent legitimate concerns for a Bible student who looks to scripture for guidance. Christians always [from the beginning of Christianity] had difficulty accepting those who place faith in Christ but are not 'just like me.'

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

Paul addressed these matters in ways other writers did not.

(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).

To change a person inwardly, he or she must change his or her view of God. We do Christ's church a great disservice when we attempt to reduce the message of the gospel to a process rather than realizing it is about a person [Jesus].

(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.

The fact that we respond to God's gifts in Jesus does not make them any less gifts. Obedience is motivated by appreciation. It is not an attempt to earn God's gifts. God loves us enough to give us incredible gifts!

(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.

To become a part of God's family through Christ involves the desire to live by His values and not my own.

(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.

When my values change, my lifestyle must change.

(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.

When my values and lifestyle change, my purpose for living must change.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What must every person develop?

Every person must develop a view of what his or her adult life is about.

2. What must every person decide?

Every person must decide, "Who and what will I be?"

3. Where do most people's primary concerns lie?

Most people's primary concerns lie within social and economic opportunities.

4. What did Paul first ask the Ephesian Christians to remember?

Paul asked them to remember who they were when they had incorrect concepts of God prior to meeting Jesus Christ.

5. What is the second thing Paul called the attention of the Ephesian Christians to?

He called their attention to the fact that learning correct concepts of God and learning who and what Jesus Christ was changed them as people.

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?

These were not what they learned from [about] the Christ.

7. What two long discussed questions are noted?

What is the core of the gospel? What is the core of learning about Jesus Christ?

8. Discuss the fact that Jewish Christians with Paul's evangelistic perspective were the exception in the Jewish Christian community.

The discussion should include this first century Jewish conviction: gentiles can become Christians only if they first are proselytes to Judaism. The focus was on the appropriate way to get idolatry [paganism] out of gentiles.

9. Give five influences of "learning Christ."

- a. *It would radically change a person's view of deity [God].*
- b. *It would understand that God's purposes involved a human response.*
- c. *It would involve understanding God's value system.*

It would involve living a new lifestyle.

- d. *It would involve learning a new purpose for existing.*

Lesson Four

The Truth Seekers

Text: Ephesians 4:21

The objective of this lesson: To stress that truth regarding the purpose of human existence is still found in Jesus Christ.

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.

It is common for all to seek the meaning or purpose of his or her existence. To conclude there is no reason 'for my existence' is distressing for almost everyone.

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.

Paul stressed that believing in and being in Jesus Christ added to the meaning and purpose of physical life in ways idolatry did not.

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.

To add to the significance of Paul's observations about God and His nature, read Acts 17:22-31 prior to observation/discussion.

1. God is Creator of everything. (verse 24)

God's creative powers were an important part of the understanding of God's nature in Judaism and in the early church. God held His position as God and deserved honor and praise because He was creator.

2. God is Lord of heaven and earth [the all encompassing Lord, not Lord of a sphere]. (verse 24)

To His creative power was ascribed the fact that He brought everything humans see into existence. He was responsible for more than just the creation of the earth and all that is on or in it. He was (is) also the source of all that exists in the physical heavens.

3. God is not confined to temples made with human hands. (verse 24)

God is too enormous to be confined to a building constructed by humans. Read 1 Kings 8:27 to see the Jewish view of the temple Solomon presented God. Also see Isaiah 66:1,2 and Acts 7:48-50.

4. God does not depend on humanity for existence. (verse 25)

The relationship between God and humanity does not involve God existing in a dependent relationship on humanity. Idols were dependent on humanity for everything. People do not take care of God. God takes care of people.

5. God is over humanity, not dependent on humanity. (verses 26-28)

See the comment on observation # 4.

6. God's nature cannot and should not be reduced to created materials and images that are a product of human art.

To reduce God's nature to precious metals or human artistic expression demeans the reality and position of God. God is beyond physical worth or human depiction. Humanity has never seen the Holy God. (See Exodus 33:18-23; 1 Timothy 6:16; John 1:18.) Having never seen God, how can humanity depict God?

7. God will judge the world by His [not our] concept of righteousness.

God is so superior to humanity, He will judge humanity by His standards.

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.

Christianity and idolatry had contrasting concepts of God's nature. Idolatry often depicted the gods as being disinterested in human affairs. See 1 Kings 18:27-29. In most instances, idolatry's concept of the gods' natures was quite compatible with the concept of fate.

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.

We understand the truth about ourselves when we understand the truth about God as revealed in His giving us Jesus and allowing Jesus to die and resurrecting him.

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.

The challenge to see God's nature also includes the challenge to understand ourselves.

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.

To surrender to the conviction that the purpose of human life can be found in or defined by money or possessions is to fall to a form of deceit that produces emptiness.

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.

In this culture, having 'fun' often depends on the physical abilities and coordination of youth. Amazingly, what was great 'fun' when we were young is a difficult demand never associated with a pleasurable experience when we are old.

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?

What represents success at early age commonly does not represent success at a later age. Do you not find it interesting that 'successful' people change focus for their lives several times prior to death?

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.

These three things are not the only three things in which people who reject Christ seek to find the key to the meaning of life. These are just three common pursuits for meaning of life in our culture.

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.

Some pursuits destroy the meaning of life rather than enhance the meaning of life.

For Thought and Discussion:

1. What is the objective of every American?

The objective of every American is to escape an empty life and find a life with meaning.

2. What was one reason Paul often told gentile Christians that they turned to Christ?

Paul told gentile Christians that one reason they abandoned idolatry to turn to Christ was to find truth in him.

3. State 7 things Paul told the people at the Areopagus about God.
 - a. *God is creator of everything.*

- b. *God is Lord (supreme ruler) of heaven and earth.*
 - c. *God is not confined to temples made with human hands.*
 - d. *God does not depend on humanity for existence.*
 - e. *God is over humanity, not dependent on humanity.*
 - f. *God's nature cannot be reduced to created materials and human art forms.*
 - g. *God will judge mankind by His concept of righteousness.*
4. What about God was in distinct contrast in the Christian's and idol worshipper's views?

God's nature was in distinct contrast.

5. What two things were gentile Christians seeking in Jesus Christ?

They were seeking truth about God and truth about themselves.

6. State 3 things people commonly consider the key to life's purpose in this culture.
- a. *The purpose of life is found in money or possessions.*
 - b. *The purpose of life is found in having 'fun'.*
 - c. *The purpose of life is found in success.*
7. What single point is made in the three illustrations question 6?

The single point is that passing time, deteriorating bodies, and age make meaningless pursuits out of things we considered as central to existence.

8. Of what two things did Paul remind gentile Christians when they lived lives of idol worshippers?
- a. *Idolatry destroyed them.*
 - b. *Idolatry gave them the wrong concepts of God.*
9. What is a great horror for some when they near the end of life?

The great horror is looking back and seeing a life incorrectly focused and misused.

Lesson Five

The Changing of Self

Text: Ephesians 4:22-24

The objective of this lesson: to increase insight into the process of conversion.

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.

Stress that the core concept of religious conversion is personal change in mind and behavior.

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!

Discuss these things: (1) There were righteous Jews before Jesus. (2) There were gentiles who were disillusioned with idolatry. (3) The conversion understandings of a devout Jew and of a gentile were basically different. The devout Jew increased his or her understandings of the purposes and will of God. The idol worshipping gentile changed his concepts of the nature of God.

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.

Note there is a significant difference prior to conversion in the person who knows the living Creator God exists and in the person who has basic concepts of deity that are wrong concepts about God.

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.

Note, just as today, conversion was a complex situation for a Jewish person or for a gentile person. Not all Jews were alike in their understandings, and not all gentiles were alike in their understandings.

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.

The message of the gospel must be made relevant to the need and situation of the person considering conversion. The core message of the gospel [good news] does not change, but the spiritual needs and situation of the person are addressed with the hope of the gospel.

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.

It must be understood by today's Christians that conversion does not result in an immediate, involuntary, automatic change. The converted person cannot know what he or she has not been taught. It is not spiritually just to expect a newly converted person who had a non-religious background to be 'just like us' because he or she was believing, penitent, and baptized. The objective of conversion to Christ must go far beyond convincing a person to be baptized into Christ.

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.]

Paul did not write words just to be writing. He addressed real needs and struggles. To transition from one lifestyle to a completely different lifestyle is difficult regardless of your faith!

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.

Conversion involves the thought process as well as the behavior [act] process. Conversion is not merely a matter of 'doing the right things in the right way.' The understanding of the converted person is as critical as the acts 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.

The motivations of the unconverted person and the converted person are quite different!

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.

Christians definitely need to understand that conversion begins a confident journey [the confidence is in what God did in Jesus' cross and resurrection] rather than viewing it as a 'one time accomplishment' that is preserved by a thoughtless existence.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What is at the core of conversion?

At the core of conversion is a change.

2. What do churches of Christ need to realize regarding conversion?

We need to realize it is not the same experience for everyone.

3. What radical, but true, illustration is used?

The radical, but true, illustration contrasted the conversion of a righteous Jew and the conversion of an idol worshipping gentile.

4. What understanding did the conversion of a devout Jew involve?

He or she had an increased understanding of God's will and purpose.

5. What understanding did the conversion of an idol worshipping gentile involve?

He or she had a new understanding of Who God was and what His nature was.

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?

The personal understandings in the two situations will be quite different.

7. Whom did Paul address in Ephesians?

He addressed gentile Christians who converted from idol worship to Christian existence.

8. What does conversion not result in?

Conversion does not result in an immediate, involuntary, automatic change.

9. What marked the transition from the 'old self' to the 'new self'?

A renewing of the mind marked the transition.

10. What controlled the 'old self'? What journey was the 'new self' taking?

The 'old self' was controlled by the lusts of deceit which commonly appealed to a person's selfish nature. The journey the 'new self' takes is back to the nature God intended us to have when He first created humanity and will end in God's presence at our resurrection.

Lesson Six

"The Truth Speaker"

Text: Ephesians 4:25

The objectives of this lesson: (1) To stress that Christians at Ephesus were still spiritually developing; (2) to emphasize the importance of the Christian value of truthfulness.

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.

Spiritual development is a process, not an event. Certainly there is a moment when conversion culminates and forgiveness begins (Acts 2:38). However, that moment is the beginning of one's spiritual journey, not the end of it. Consider 1 John 1:5-10. By God's grace, forgiveness is a continuing reality in the lives of those in Christ.

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.

This man understood that (1) transition is a process that (2) depends on a spiritual environment.

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.

Our primary responsibility as Christians is not to determine another Christian's spirituality but to encourage his/her spirituality. Certainly there may be times when it is necessary for us to call a Christian's attention to his or her lack of spirituality (as Paul did in this text). However, in such instances we must proceed with self-examination and caution to be certain we are concerned about the person and God's values, not about a violation of our preferences. Consider Galatians 6:1-5.

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.

Conversion to Christ results in the change in the person. The issue is not the rate at which change occurs, but that change is occurring.

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.

Many factors determine how quickly change occurs. A redefinition and understanding of what is godly and what is ungodly is a huge challenge. For the person who has little or no religious background, the challenge is enormous. However, in some instances, change is more visible in a person coming from a godless background than a person coming from a spiritual environment.

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 truthfulness [faithfulness] of Jesus and God the Father lies at the core of our trusting Jesus and God. Each of them will keep promises. That is commonly what is meant when God's faithfulness is stressed (1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24). The Christian realizes he or she can trust what God says. It is essential that trustworthy people represent the trustworthy God.

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.

It is essential that Christians understand that the call to God is the call to a new relationship with people. We share the blessings of God by being a blessing.

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).

Deceit comes from Satan, not God. The Christian realizes that "The end justifies the means," is a deception.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What can be said about the values and characteristics in Ephesians 4:25-32?

They addressed either what was lacking or what needed support and encouragement in the Christians at Ephesus.

2. What transition does a person not make instantly?

One does not make the transition from a godless background to a godly value system and mindset instantly.

3. What first realization should come from this paragraph?

There were still some ungodly perspectives governing the behavior of Christians in Ephesus.

4. What second realization should come from this paragraph?

Christians did not have to be "perfect" to be "in Christ" and thereby a part of his church.

5. What two things should be understood by Paul writing to these Christians?
 - a. *These Christians' behavior and lifestyle were less than spiritually mature.*
 - b. *These Christians had moral flaws but were still considered Christians by Paul.*
6. Where is the key found to being in Christ?

The key is found in divine grace and mercy as the converted seek to grow and mature in Christ.

7. How would that single, simple understanding transform the way we treat each other?

We would see each other differently in positive terms; therefore we would treat each other differently.

8. What third realization should come from this paragraph?

We look for growth as the person behaves as the "new self" in Christ.

9. In what is there a distinct difference?

There is a distinct difference in the mindset, the value base, and behavior of the converted person and the one who seeks the status quo of self-justification.

10. We are not speaking of what? Why?

We are not speaking of the spiritual growth rate of a person. Growth rates vary from person to person.

11. Among the things that factor in a person's spiritual growth rate are what three considerations?
 - a. *The degree of his or her past godless background*
 - b. *The need to be exposed to the concepts of a Christian lifestyle and value system.*

c. *The need to learn.*

12. What is the first value Paul stressed?

The first thing Paul stressed to them was their need to be truthful.

13. Give two reasons Paul gave for their being truthful with each other.

a. *The first was their new relationship with each other.*

b. *The second was the organic illustration of belonging to each other [members of each other].*

Lesson Seven

Rejecting Anger

Text: Ephesians 4:26, 27

The objective of this lesson: to understand how anger can work against being a person set apart for God's purposes.

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).

Many things before the perversion of evil were good. For example, sexual desire in its original state of creation from God was good. The statement, "They shall become one flesh," in Genesis 1:24 is a reference to the human sexual nature. People were not recreated into sexual beings after they surrendered to temptation. Sexual natures were perverted. The ability to conceive did not begin after surrender to temptation. Pain was multiplied in childbirth (Genesis 3:16). Work was a part of original creation and was good (Genesis 2:15). Yielding to temptation did not result in work. It resulted in the perversion of work. Work after temptation involved resistance to effort, in toil [or sorrow], and struggle (Genesis 3:17-19). The problem with anger is not found in the fact that it exists, but in its perversion. That which is unjust and opposes the holiness and purity of God should produce anger. The human problem is that anger quickly becomes a negative, emotional, unjust reaction that is wrongly expressed. It easily becomes a matter of selfish venting that ignores thought and just response. It quickly becomes concerned about misconceived vengeance and forgets entirely about forgiveness or compassion.

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.

In humans, anger is used to serve Satan's purposes, not God's.

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.

Look at today's text, and note all three things.

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.

A major objective in responding to God's power to sanctify us is accepting the responsibility of sanctification. That responsibility is expressed in two ways: (1) Behaving consistently with the existence of a person who has been made holy by God (see Galatians 3:23-29 and give special attention to the concept of being clothed in Christ); (2) representing God in the person we have become in Christ to those who do not know God.

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?

The questions are intended to be self reflective. They are more directed to a "think about it" answer to self than a sharing answer to the group.

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"?

Challenge students to consider how anger affects them personally.

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

Do people see God's influence or Satan's influence in me when I am angry?

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.

The "anger issue" radically changes as the environment of the person changes. The issue in the Christian community is more of a "control self" issue, while the issue in godless environments is likely to be a "how do you control others" issue.

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.

Likely the issue Paul addressed in this text was focused on "the control of others" issue. Remember, these people were first generation Christians who came out of an idolatrous environment. The environment they came from commonly considered the use of anger as a virtuous gift, not a destructive expression of ungodliness.

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!"

This illustration of anger is intended to cause us to think about the fact that human anger can be used to manipulate the actions of other people.

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].

Ungodly anger is often used as a control mechanism. That control is the opposite of the influence of godly behavior which seeks to bless others for their benefit rather than control them for selfish purposes.

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"!

From the perspective of people who live in a "controlled violence" atmosphere, seeking to influence through efforts to be loving, caring, and kind is unnatural and ridiculous. God's approach to influence trusts the facts (1) that evil is defeated by doing good (Romans 12:21--and remember Jesus' death and resurrection) and (2) this physical existence is just a prelude to life after death.

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!

Anger in humans provides Satan with many opportunities for evil behavior and God with few opportunities for righteous behavior.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Discuss this statement: "Anger of itself is not evil."

Included in this discussion should be the facts that both God and Jesus have known anger. Thus all forms of anger do not oppose purity and righteousness.

2. When is anger evil?

Anger is evil when it acts unjustly.

3. How does anger often express itself in humans?

It often expresses itself in the human by an emotional response that acts impulsively and suspends thought.

4. Why does human anger often use injustice?

In human anger injustice is often used because it overreacts or expresses the fury of long-stifled slights.

5. Illustrate the fact that human anger can be selfish.

It often focuses on self and perceived injustices with little or no consideration of the other person. It often assumes his or her motives in his or her provocation.

6. Human anger often seeks to do what?

It often seeks to return evil for evil.

7. List the three things called to your attention in today's text.

a. *The injunction against anger is to make anger events brief, not non-existence.*

b. *Making anger brief limits Satan's opportunities.*

- c. *By practicing the above two, one can be angry without sinning.*

8. What is the conscious ambition of the Christian man or woman?

The conscious ambition of the Christian is to be a sanctified person [set apart from evil for God's use].

9. In practically applying sanctification to anger, state some questions to be asked.

Some of the questions are found on page one beginning with paragraph five (of the student lesson).

10. The use of anger in a godless environment is often what?

Human anger in a godless environment is often an attempt to develop a control mechanism.

11. State the core of the anger issue.

Do I seek to control/manipulate others through my anger, or do I give control of myself to God so He can influence others through my behavior?

12. Why does anger present a major opportunity to the devil?

Human anger serves as a doorway to such godless attitudes and emotions as injustice, spite, revenge, slander, confusion, and hate.

Lesson Eight

Rejecting Stealing

Text: Ephesians 4:28

The objective of this lesson: to note the problem of stealing among the Ephesian Christians and to examine the significance of this statement in scripture.

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.

Note the three emphasizes in today's text.

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

The fact that the present tense is used definitely indicates it was a current and ongoing problem according to the NAS translation. Though translated in different words, the KJV, the Living Bible, The Message, the RSV, the TEV, the NIV, The Jerusalem Bible, and the NEB all state that the Christians who stole must stop stealing, thus indicating a continuing problem. A "before" conversion activity must not continue as an "after" conversion activity.

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!"

Obviously, this "before" conversion activity had not stopped. Those who continued to steal had not grown spiritually to the point that they realized that their stealing contradicted their conversion. Paul does not seem to treat this as a rebellious act but as an act of ignorance.

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!

For the sake of context, we need to understand these instructions were not written directly to us. Paul wrote to specific people in specific places. By understanding what Paul said to them in their situation, we can apply his instructions to our situation. If we do not understand that fact, we can come to conclusions that are in error. We can make some of Paul's instructions mean something Paul did not intend.

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!

In most instances, these people had no Christian encouragement. They did not have good Christian examples to follow. At times what society considered good and what Christianity considered good were in direct opposition and contrast. Changing understandings of right and wrong, good and evil, or beneficial and bad are difficult!

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."

Years ago there were some communities that were primarily one culture communities. Such communities today are rare. When they exist they are often prejudicial and artificially preserved.

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!

This passage and statement deserves careful consideration. While most of us have lived for generations in a situation where we are free to choose what we wish to do, that is not true for many people today [and in past generations] in this world. Many live in environments where they have no choice or say in what happens to them physically. Paul said a slave could be a Christian even if he or she lived in an environment that used him or her physically in ways he or she could not control. God is more tolerant than we are.

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.

The behavior of stealing was one over which the person had control. He or she was not stealing because he or she was forced to do so. He or she was stealing because he or she found that an easy

way to provide for his or her needs. A concerned God cannot be represented by an unconcerned people.

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.

God's definition of "good" should determine how he or she worked. This person would not switch from the dishonorable pursuit of thief to another dishonorable pursuit. It was not a mere transition Paul sought. He sought a transition from something that did not represent God's values to something that did represent God's values.

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.

"Working with his hand" does not restrict all Christian labor today to something physical. In the context of their times, it was the admonition to do honorable 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.

Among other reasons, the Christian works to help others. Consider 1 Thessalonians 1:8-12 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6-9. A Christian does not look at work as a means to be selfish. He or she looks at work as (1) a means for providing personal needs and (2) a means to help those who are in need.

For Thought and Discussion

1. State three reasons for today's text being interesting.
 - a. *It states some Christians at Ephesus were stealing.*
 - b. *It urges Christians to accept work as a Christian responsibility.*
 - c. *It declares an ethic for work.*
2. What statement indicated stealing was an ongoing problem among Christians?

"Let him who steals steal no more."

3. State three troublesome attitudes in some of today's congregations.
 - a. *When a person is baptized, he [or she] immediately ceases all ungodly behavior and attitudes.*
 - b. *If a person does not abruptly begin to live and act like a mature Christian, it is the congregation's responsibility to kick him [or her] out.*
 - c. *Everyone knows what is right. Right is self-evident!*

4. Discuss the first observation given for your consideration.

Paul wrote about real problems to real people.

5. Discuss the second observation given for your consideration.

Paul wrote to people who were first generation Christians who did not come from Christian environments.

6. Why is the situation in observation two an increasing problem for today's congregations?

We increasingly convert people from cultural backgrounds differing from the majority in our congregations.

7. What was Paul's instruction to Christians at Ephesus who were stealing?

Stop stealing!

8. What is a conscious objective of the Christian in his work?

They wanted to share with those in need.

Lesson Nine

Christians and Healthy Speech

Text: Ephesians 4:29

The objective of this lesson: To encourage Christians to understand that if they are devoted to Jesus Christ and God they must exercise great care in what they say, the motives behind their statements, and the words they use.

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."

Christians in general can be tempted and deceived more easily by what they say than by anything else. It is so easy to justify what we say! Nothing makes it more evident that each of us struggle with evil from within than the statements we make and the true motives we have in our hearts.

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.

Fertility of everything--livestock, crops, families, nations--was an essential key to survival among people of all nations during ancient times. It was a world without convenient forms of preservation or mass production. It was a world in which quantity was important for survival [not merely prosperity, whether speaking of the number of children one had, the productivity of crops, or the size of the flocks and herds one had].

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!

It seems the desire to meddle in the affairs of other people and the desire to gossip are ageless desires that exist in every century in all societies. The less privacy there is, the more temptation there

is to meddle and to gossip--"did you know," or "if you knew what I know." The concept of halls is fairly recent. Multiple rooms can be afforded even now by the prosperous.

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!

Sexual behavior is a "private" behavior unless privacy does not exist, or there are weakened or no values.

What commonly is acceptable in society might not be acceptable in the person who chooses to live in Christ.

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!

It is a too common perspective in the church that the way to achieve one's desired results is to either destroy a person's reputation or to make the person afraid to function in ways outside "my or our" imposed restrictions.

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 Christian can often give himself/herself a personal "wake up call" in regard to his/her attitudes and motives by honestly examining his/her words. Words often incite our behavior as well as reveal our hearts.

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.

A key to changing behavior is changing words. Words reveal what is within the person. Words consistently change when the person changes internally.

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."

It was common for words in their societies to destroy. In Christ, words are used to encourage and uplift. Christians need to exercise great care in the way they use speech daily.

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?]

Christians seek to help others, not discourage others. They will be kind even in an unkind society. Instead of spreading anxiety, they give hope.

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.

In Christ, persons are people to be valued rather than objects to be used to achieve a desired end. People are persons of value to Christians because people are persons of value to God. Since God is a God of grace and mercy, Christians consciously seek to be a people of mercy and grace. They want to be God's people.

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).

The migration in one's behavior from the selfish to the unselfish is the migration of conversion. Maturity in Christ is the change between a "me" focus to a "you" focus.

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.

A definite distinction between the person in Christ and the person out of Christ should be evident in the speech of the Christian.

Discussion Question:

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

The focus of this discussion should be on two considerations: (1) the times when we as Christians should keep our mouths shut and (2) always being kind in our responses. Never assume we are like Jesus in our statements--he knew hearts and we do not!

Lesson Ten

Cooperating With God

Text: Ephesians 4:30

The objective of today's lesson: to stress the importance of encouraging God's influence in our lives.

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.

Be certain that your students understand the role of the Spirit among first century Christians and the role of the Spirit among Christians today is not the same role. The purpose of this lesson does not include a lengthy study of similarities and differences of those roles. One (just one) factor to be considered is the absence of a collected and written New Testament at that time.

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."

Make certain that your students are at least exposed to the realization that God is active in every age. Stress the fact that in every age a significant evidence of God's activity is the changed behavior of God's people. God gives strength for His people to endure even when there is adversity.

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.

The point you wish to be certain to communicate to your class is this: God deeply desires for you to be spiritually mature in Christ. God wants you to be everything you can be in Christ. He is on the Christians side, not a form of opposition to the Christian.

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.

Were God in opposition to us, all He had to do was refuse to send Jesus. We were condemned before he came, and we would be condemned without him. Jesus is the forever evidence that God cares about us and wishes to help us.

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.

God's solution to our continuing struggle with evil is ideal. We cannot be sinless, but we can be forgiven. If we exist in Christ in a perpetual state of forgiveness, our problem with evil is solved. It is not solved because we are ideal, but because a compassionate God will forgive. Consider Romans 4:1-8, Galatians 3:26, 27, and 1 John 1:5-10. Our commitment is to be in Christ. God's commitment is what He does for the person in Christ.

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.

John's statement stresses God's solution is a solution we need. To fail to see our need is to reject God Himself and to declare God is deceitful.

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 opening of Hebrews 6 focuses on Christians who experienced God's kindness, but rejected Him. When your best kindness and consideration is refused, there is no other basis on which to appeal to the one who rejects you. The problem lay in these Christians' inability to repent, not in God's ability to forgive.

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).

They began with total commitment, grew tired, and thought they could bring their struggle to an end if they just renounced Christ. The renunciation would not involve rejecting God, but abandoning Christ. The basic message of the entire writing is this: abandoning Jesus is rejecting God because Jesus represents God's purpose in its ideal form. Thus abandoning Jesus is not an option to the person who seeks God.

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!

Stress two things. (1) God does not give up on struggling people as quickly as many Christians do. (2) Relationship with God through Jesus is not a fragile thing.

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

Paul knew God's commitment from personal experience

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!"

Christians should endure because they know God is dependable--He will not abandon them when they struggle through times of weakness.

For Thought and Discussion:

1. With what awareness is it suggested that we approach today's lesson?

The role the Spirit served in the first century Christian community and the role the Spirit serves in today's Christian community is not the same role.

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?

- a. *God is always active in our world--in every age!*

- b. *A key evidence of God's activity in every age is the behavior of His people.*

3. In what emphasis does the admonition not to grieve the Spirit appear?

It appears in a paragraph that stresses the essential importance in Christian existence of a changed human behavior.

4. Summarize the emphasis in "do not grieve the Spirit?"

Do not resist God's influence in your life as He seeks to make you a holy person.

5. State a reason given in this lesson for believers repenting and being baptized.

He or she wishes to become all he or she can become in Jesus Christ.

6. Give evidence of the fact that God is actively interested in you maintaining faith in Christ.

A basic evidence is found in John 3:16-21. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is the basic evidence of God's active interest in us.

7. Why is Romans 8:1 mind-boggling?

Jesus Christ is God's perfect solution for our problem with evil.

8. State why John would loudly AMEN Paul's assurance.

John stressed it was a continuing solution that began at baptism and continued throughout our lives.

9. What is God's desire? What is not God's desire?

God's desire is our salvation, not our destruction.

10. Paraphrase Ephesians 4:30.

Examine the suggested paraphrase in the last paragraph of the lesson's text, the paragraph just before "For Thought and Discussion."

Lesson Eleven

The Power of Negative Emotions

Text: Ephesians 4:31

The objective of this lesson: to emphasize the importance of converting negative, ungodly emotions to Christian values by using speech as an example.

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.

Stress the importance of including our emotions in our conversion. Stress the fact that the problem is not in theoretical conviction but in behavior in the every day world. The values of a Christian are not the values of the godless. It is not a contrast between good and evil, but between those who place confidence in God and those who do not.

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.

It is easy to say in generalities that Christians internally should belong to God by giving God their hearts. As long as we speak in general considerations [theory], the conversion of the emotions is an easy concept to hold.

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.

As long as we keep this discussion of the conversion of the emotions on the ideal, every Christian is for more love and less hate.

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 challenge of the conversion of the emotions is found in the everyday, practical experiences of life. It is simple in general [nonspecific] terms to encourage internal commitment to Christian values, or in theoretical terms to be for a loving spirit. It is hard to keep one's focus internal on actual motives

or to display a genuine spirit of love when the anxiety level is high. When a hurt occurs, it is simple to return evil for the evil received. It seems much more natural to "defend the purity of the church" than to show a kind spirit.

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.

It is easy to subscribe to Christian concepts in theory, but demanding to put them in practice in daily experiences.

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).

To add the genuine power of Christ to this concept, it is extremely important to place the verse and its concepts in the context of the flow of Paul's discussion in the chapter and the paragraph. The contrast must be seen between the "pre-conversion behavior" (verse 22) and the behavior of "the new self" in Christ (verse 24).

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.

Focus on the internal feelings and the statements or words that vent those feelings.

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.

Note how commonly words or statements can express ungodly emotions.

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 Hymenacus 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!

Discuss two things. (1) Discuss the way ungodly words and statements can discourage people who are committed to following God. (2) Discuss the ease with which approaches that are ungodly in society can enter the Christian community and prove effective.

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].

Note the manner in which Paul demonstrates that ungodly behavior has no place in the Christian community. (1) The ungodly behavior was consistent with pre-Christian existence. (2) Ungodly behavior was inconsistent with Jesus Christ. (2) Ungodly behavior was inconsistent with the created purpose of the "new self."

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

Christians must live in the awareness of how encouraging or discouraging their words and statements can be. We must accept responsibility for governing our language. Remember Jesus' statement in Matthew 12:36, 37.

For Thought and Discussion

1. With what acknowledgment should we begin?

We should begin with the acknowledgment that conversion involves our emotions.

2. On what two plains do we widely agree that emotions should be part of our conversion?

We widely agree that our emotions should participate in our conversion if we speak (1) in generalities [theory] or (2) the ideal.

3. On what plain do we experience difficulty in agreeing emotions should be part of our conversion?

We have difficulty when we consider the practical plain of everyday life.

4. What concerns make this discussion difficult?

Our anxieties make this discussion difficult.

5. In what personal conviction can Christians excuse using ungodly emotions?

We easily can excuse the use of ungodly emotions if we use the personal conviction, "This is in the best interest of the congregation."

6. What is the intended point?

The intended point: the conversion of emotions is desirable in theory, but questionable in the real world of daily anxiety.

7. What is the emphasis of the paragraph in which Ephesians 4:31 occurs?

The emphasis of the paragraph is on the correct behavior of the "new self."

8. What contrast occurs in this paragraph?

It is the contrast between pre-conversion behavior and "new self" behavior.

9. How does bitterness verbally vent itself?

It verbally vents itself through words and statements of hatred, resentment, confusion, or the destruction of another person's credibility.

10. When could the mastery of ungodly speech be a useful tool?

It could be a useful tool in attempts to gain power and leadership prestige.

11. When should Christians exercise great caution?

They should use great caution in what they do and do not say.

Lesson Twelve

The Christian Develops Positive Emotions

Text: Ephesians 4:32

The objective of this lesson: to stress the importance of God's positive emotions in the formation of Christian motives.

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.

Stress the fact that this lesson centers in God's priorities and His concept of positive emotions, and not a human concept of positive and negative emotions. Too many factors can influence our concepts of what are positive or negative emotions if we abandon God's priorities.

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.

Definitions frequently are a primary influence on our concepts and priorities. If we are Christian, we must be open to God's definitions and priorities as we form our concepts. That means we always are willing for God to redefine a concept we regarded as being settled. Such openness to God is a challenging, difficult position to accept or develop.

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.].

First, emotion is a genuine part of all concepts. Emotion is definitely a part of God's reactions [He expresses both love and anger, both compassion and wrath]. Second, if Christians do not exercise extreme caution, we are not open to a redirection of emotions or concepts ["You know that cannot be right," or, "That is obviously wrong," or, "That is ridiculous!"] When a person substitutes reactions for thought in determining a godly emotion, he or she is in trouble.

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.

Reflect on the fact that in the first century among first century gentile converts, there often had to be a complete change of concepts requiring a complete change in understandings of good and bad emotions. Reflect on the challenge and difficulty of completely changing one's definitions of good and bad or of totally changing one's emotions. That is hard!

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?

If you are the "stronger one," functioning on the basis of fear is simpler than functioning on the basis of communication. It is much easier to exercise control than it is to create dialogue. It is easier to intimidate than it is to reason.

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.

The godly person [man or woman] cannot continue in his or her goals developed by a godless focus.

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.

Christ commonly stresses values and priorities that conflict with an ungodly society's values and priorities.

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.

If a Christian is to change the values that guide his or her daily life, he or she must change the way he or she thinks. Different values and priorities require a different thought process.

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.

To place God in charge of my understanding of good and bad (evil), I must seek God's priorities and not society's ambitions.

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.

One of the best illustrations of this change in concepts, values, and priorities is the cross on which Jesus died. To the Roman world and Jewish society, the cross was a symbol of weakness and disgrace. To God in Jesus' death, the cross was a symbol of victory. It is what God did in the crucifixion of Jesus that allowed kindness, compassion, and forgiveness to defeat bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice.

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.

To adopt a Christian existence in Christ requires--literally--that the person allow God to remake him or her. The Christian consciously imitates God. See Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:43-48.

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!

When we exist for God's purposes, we understand that people [in or out of the church] who do not exist for God will not understand us.

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!

If devotion to God is dependent on the appreciation of others, we are creating an opportunity for Satan to tempt and trouble us.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Explain how the declaration of what is a positive or a negative emotion can be reversed.

At the core of this discussion, there needs to be the awareness that there is a huge contrast between a godly community and a godless community within a society.

2. Explain how definitions can be a part of this reversal.

At the core of this discussion, there needs to be the awareness that one's concept of religion being a positive or negative social influence powerfully influences one's concept of God being a positive or negative social influence.

3. What impacts a person's initial view of an emotion?

His or her family environment when young and his or her community's view of religious influences impacts a person's initial view of an emotion.

4. What was admired as the supreme value in Roman society?

Power [in the sense of the ability to control or intimidate others] was admired as the supreme value.

5. In what two ways could bitterness produce dread or fear?
- the manner in which bitterness expressed wrath and anger*
 - the damage done by the bitter person's clamor, slander, and malice*
6. Discuss the change in goals of a converted person.

At the core of the discussion should be the contrast between appeasing peers and making Jesus Christ the example.

7. In conversion, it is essential to do what?

In conversion, it is necessary to learn a new way to think.

8. Use Jesus' cross to illustrate conversion changes the criteria used to determine success.

At the core of this discussion must be an understanding that Roman society considered death on a cross the symbol of weakness, but Christians considered it a symbol of divine victory.

Lesson Thirteen

"In Conclusion"

Text: Ephesians 5:1,2

The objective of this lesson: to stress the importance of Christians imitating God in their behavior. Let the Father influence the way you behave every day of physical life.

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.]

Stress the importance of learning, knowing, and following God's priorities in God's values.

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).

Stress the fact that these Christians were just in the process of learning God's values and priorities as declared in Jesus Christ. These new Christians previously had worshipped through idols, and the common values in idolatry were quite different to the values found in Jesus Christ. There is quite a difference between having faith in Jesus' identity and God's resurrection of Jesus and having the kind of faith in Jesus that changes your daily behavior. The first is adequate for conversion. The second is necessary for a godly existence. The person who is converted to Christ but does not live a godly existence cannot imitate God.

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 last paragraph of Ephesians 4, Paul contrasted the godless behavior of idolatrous existence with the godly behavior of Christian existence. In the first two verses of Ephesians 5, Paul drew the obvious conclusion about daily, godly living: people who belong to God through Christ use God's character to imitate in their character.

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.

Stress the fact that those who understand God's values know there are no inferior children of God. Though Jewish converts had known God's true identity and will for generations, gentile converts were in no way inferior, no less loved by God, and no less valuable to God as heirs. God was not ashamed of gentile converts! In the same emphasis, God today does not regard a person who is a fourth generation Christian as being superior to someone who is a first generation Christian. Even if there is

a difference in the spiritual maturity level in the two people, God in no way is ashamed to acknowledge the first generation Christian as His full heir!

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 hesitance 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.

God is not ashamed of any child who trusts and follows Jesus Christ. His grace and mercy is abundant with every child! The issue is a person's willingness to learn, not his/her rate of learning.

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.

Paul's point is understood in the contrast between being a slave and being an heir.

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.]

Stress the continuation of thought as chapter 4 ends and chapter five begins.

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.

Rather than being bitter like godless people, we seek to be loving as God is. Because of God's influence in our lives, Christians seek to forgive rather than hurt.

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.

Stress the fact that Christians choose to let God, not a godless society, be their primary influence in daily behavior and in the motivation for their attitudes and emotions.

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.

Stress that different smells had different meanings to them, just as to us. The smell of garbage is not to be confused with the smell of honor. God knows when someone is giving Him garbage and when someone is giving Him honor!

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.

One might get the impression in some of today's congregations or from some of today's individual Christians that God's primary concern for people is the baptism of an individual. As essential as baptism is as a "faith and repentance response," baptism is not the stress of the New Testament epistles. The letters to congregations and individuals stressed the importance of the way the baptized lived after baptism. Conversion is essential, but it is not the end of response to Christ and God the Father. A life of maturing surrender to Christ and God reflected in the behavior, motives, and attitudes of the person is a continuing response to Christ and God.

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.

There are attitudes, motives, emotions, and behaviors that are unworthy of the man or woman in Christ. Such are unworthy of the Christian individual because such attitudes, motives, emotions, and behaviors do not imitate God the Father. They first learn God's priorities and values by reflecting on the way God reacted toward them when they were still God's enemies, and how God reacted toward them when they rejected rebellion against Him.

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

The stress is on who or what you allow to form your character.

For Thought and Discussion

1. How did Paul often use the word "therefore" in his letters in the New Testament?

He often used "therefore" as we would use "in conclusion," or, "Because these things I have shared with you are true, this should be our focus."

2. Who should we remember were the recipients of Ephesians?

We should remember that Paul wrote to former idol worshippers [gentiles] who converted to Jesus Christ.

3. How did Paul instruct them to behave?

He instructed them NOT to behave in ways consistent with their unconverted lifestyle, but to behave as the new creatures God made them in Christ.

4. On what does today's lesson focus?

It focuses on the proper motivation for appropriate Christian behavior.

5. Why should they willingly imitate God?

God was their Father and was quite willing to acknowledge them as His loved children.

6. What kind of sons [children] does God not have?

God does not have sons [children] who are not His beloved heirs.

7. What was Paul's argument in this text?

Paul's argument in this text is that idolatry produced slaves who functioned for the benefit of the religion, but God produces loved children for His family.

8. What was the contrast at the end of chapter 4?

It was the powerful contrast between their past and God's kindness, their bitterness and God's love, and the fruit of malice and the fruit of forgiveness.

9. What is the conclusion in the first two verses of chapter 5?

The conclusion: imitate God, not the idolatrous society.

10. How would they imitate God?

They would imitate God as children who are loved by their father.

11. In what two behaviors did Jesus Christ express God's love?

- a. *Christ loved them.*
- b. *Christ sacrificed himself for them.*

12. On what behavior did Paul focus?

He focused on their behavior after baptism.