

Ephesians 4:17-32 Tools for Transformation

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[0:00] We're in Ephesians, again this morning, Ephesians chapter 4. We're in part 2 of a little series, little mini-series we're engaged in over the last week and this week! Related to this question of personal transformation. How do we make change in our lives?

And if you didn't hear last week's message, I would encourage you to revisit that. I'm missing a button here. One second, please. Oh, it's a microphone conflict.

Let me read starting in verse 17. We'll pick up mostly in verse 20, but let me give us some context here in Ephesians chapter 4, starting in verse 17. Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their hearts. They have become callous and given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ.

Assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds and to put on the new self created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Well, we are going to continue building this toolkit for personal transformation again this week with three additional insights into how the Bible talks about transformation. Now the first thing I want to discuss is this thing we'll see throughout the scriptures, and that is some kind of a reference to two selves. You'll see this a lot, and one of the most interesting things, and I'll tell you about my thought journey on this particular aspect, but you'll see in almost every apostle that writes something in the New Testament, you'll see a reference to an old self and a new self, an old man and a new man, a flesh and a spirit, and it's all presented to you as if you already know what that's about. There's really almost no teaching on the concept itself. It simply employs this kind of language that we see here. Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life, and put on your new self, as if the original audience knew what this entailed. Now let me give you some reasons why I think that's happening.

Why it is is that the original audiences didn't need the explanation that maybe we do to understand what is he talking about here? First of all, don't miss, I just said, this stuff appears in different ways in most of the New Testament sections on ethics. New self, old self, spirit, flesh, new man, old man.

[3:19] It's all the same discussion, but why is it that it's always presented as if the audience knew what was happening? Well, let me give you a couple of tracks to think about. First of all, you know, there is just an Old Testament pattern that these believers would be more familiar with than us, and I would pick that pattern up with the naming that happens in the book of Genesis.

We've got Abram. God decides you're not Abram anymore. You're Abraham. We've got Sarai, and God decides you're not Sarai anymore. You're Sarah. We've got Jacob, and God decides you're not Jacob anymore. You're Israel. So one of the things we see is that after a transformative experience in the Old Testament, a name change takes place that is akin to a kind of identity change.

Now, you could connect that thread to another thing that's going on in the Old Testament, and that is like a pretty early reference to one day I will write my law on your hearts, or one day I will take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh, stuff like that.

So there's a kind of another piece of this, and if you talk about the heart in the Old Testament, you're just talking about the person. It's just the core identity. So when God says, I'm the other person, that's very similar to one person becomes another person, just like with this naming stuff that we see. And then we can track this into the New Testament in the way that Jesus talks about it.

When he starts talking about being born again. So there's a lot of this language already here, and you could see in our verse here, it says, that is not the way you learned Christ, verse 20, assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self. So what is happening early on in discipleship, this is a key to us as we think about how to raise people in Christ and how to make disciples, is they were taught explicitly about this two-self concept right away, early on in their Christianity. I don't believe that most of us were taught that way. I don't believe that we have the Old Testament breadcrumbs that they did, we just don't know the Old Testament as well as they did. I also am not sure that we were taught this exceptionally well when we were becoming disciples of Jesus Christ. It says here that they were.

[5:43] And there's another disadvantage we have, and that is that for sure our culture has a completely different understanding of self. We think of self as this one true authentic thing that's deep inside of you, and that you're always struggling to manifest, and that if you manifest it, you're a hero, and you're brave, you're hashtag brave, you know, all that kind of stuff. And we think of self very differently than almost anyone else in the world today, and certainly in the ancient world. There were just always an understanding that you can change who you are at a fundamental level. The Ephesians, you know, were just so thoroughly embedded in the Roman world, and they just saw this all the time. There were multiple Roman ceremonies that involved the taking off of one garment and putting on of the other garment. This is going to be key for you as you read Ephesians, and any of Paul's writings in particular, when he talks about put off and put on, he's referencing with the same language the way that the Romans would have envisioned this, or they would have described someone changing their clothes in a identity-shifting way. So you're thinking, well, how does someone change their clothes in an identity-shifting way? Well, there were ceremonies about this embedded in Roman culture. Like one of them was you could get out of slavery for a number of ways. Like you could redeem yourself by working for an extra, a particular period of time. The master could take a liking to you and formally adopt you.

You could move out of slavery into freedom, and that was called a manumission ceremony, and it involved the changing of clothes. The slave's hair was shaved, a new hat was placed on his head, a rod was touched on him so that he would receive freedom from a freed man, and he was given a toga, which in the Roman world was something reserved only for citizens. There's another ceremony that had to do with the coming of age for boys. Between 14 and 17, a Roman boy would dedicate his child locket. All children were given a locket when they were very young, and then they would put off the purple toga of childhood and put on a new kind of toga representing adulthood. There was the sacramentum, which was a swearing-in ceremony for the soldier, and they moved out of the toga and into the armor. And so the people in Ephesians have probably two legs up on us. One, they're just more familiar with the ancient way of thinking about self, and they were watching these things happen kind of on a day-to-day basis, especially in Ephesus, which was a booming, important city in Rome. So if you've ever been curious, why are we just told to do this, to put off and put on old self, new self, but no one ever just really gives us detailed explanation? Well, what does that mean? They were just culturally oriented to that in a way that we aren't. And so the short version of that I would encourage you with is just that this concept has been baked into everybody's kind of understanding of self except for us. And so we just have to catch up on this concept that what God has always talked about is that he encounters us at a particular moment of crisis. This is Old Testament stuff, and he changes our name. Or through the cross, he changes our heart. He changes our citizenship. He changes our status from enemies to sons, and so on and so forth. And so really, the reality is that we just have some trouble understanding that. But the truth is that we are really two selves. We're our old self, and we're our new self. Now, you can imagine back in the Roman days, you've been freed from slavery, or you were a boy, and now you're a man, or you were a citizen, and now you're a soldier. And you can just imagine how hard it would be to catch up to the new identity and shed all of the habits associated with your former way of life. I mean, just imagine being a slave. And, you know, there's a water bowl there for foot washing, and

you walk into a room. What's your first reflex going to be? You know, your first reflex is going to be, that's where I'm supposed to go and sit and wash people's feet. There would just be a massive amount of self-checking as you undo a bunch of muscle memory, even kind of identity muscle memory, from who you were to what you're becoming. I added a second computer to my office. Ang calls it my command center now. And I've got three screens now. And I need every square inch of that. But anyway, I added a Windows machine, and I've been a Mac guy for 20 years. Man, those shortcut keys, those will kill you. Like, I've got one keyboard here that's Windows, and I've got one keyboard here that's Mac. And like, just to copy and paste something are just completely different keyboard situations. And so I'm just like constantly messing that up. Why? Because I lived in this state for a really long time, and developed habits and patterns based on this state. And now I'm over in this state, and I have to kind of like learn the new pattern. Well, friends, if you are any kind of Christian at all, if you are just even saved, you will feel a constant frustration with that very experience as it relates to you as the old man and you as the new man. Now, if you're not a Christian,

Christian, you won't really care. It just won't matter to you. You just are what you are. There's no switching. There's no options. But if you're a Christian, and you have the Holy Spirit living inside of you, and you care about holiness because God cares about holiness, it's just going to frustrate you to experience this on a routine basis. And it might even tempt you to think, will I ever learn the new interface? Will I ever stop entirely being free from the habits of going back into the old clothes and living out the new man and so on and so forth? And the answer to that is no. You will not. The Bible is written in such a way that I can tell you that confidently.

You will never arrive at a golden age of sanctification in which this problem has gone away. You may arrive at a moment of desensitization where you had a certain number of sins that you thought were important enough to care about, and now you have a bunch that you don't notice and don't care about, and you might feel like you fully arrived. But in reality, all of these passages exist because the challenge is constant to resist the old way of thinking and live out the new way. So one of the things I think is very important about transformation is just understanding kind of expectations. And the reality is, is that if you're not focused on living in the new man, you will be living in the old man.

[12:49] Paul says in Galatians, to walk in the spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh and the spirit are opposed to one another to keep you from doing what you want to do. And so he's telling Christians, you're always going to have to be asking, am I walking in the spirit or am I walking in the flesh? Which set of clothes am I putting on today? Which set of clothes am I putting on right now? Am I in new man mode or old man mode? It will just always be a thing.

And I would encourage you to understand that it will always be a thing so that you live a life of proper dependence and fear and reverence toward the Lord and that you never feel like you've arrived. You haven't. You will always need to evaluate yourself based on this question. Well, the second tool we see in our text is imitation. The first one is just an understanding of your identity. That's point number one, identity. Point number two, imitation. What we see, as we've done for the last few weeks, is that God has a very explicit plan for you to change. And that plan is basically that you would imitate Jesus Christ. That's the basic plan, that you would imitate Jesus Christ. You can see this working all the way through chapter four in verse 13. We're told that we are attaining the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. What is maturity in the Christian life? It is looking more and more like Jesus. Jesus is our specification. You can think of it as, what am I growing toward? I'm growing toward Jesus. Jesus is also our destination, verse 15.

Growing into him, not simply admiring him from a distance. Rather, verse 15, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. We're looking to Jesus as our standard. We're headed to Jesus as our destination. And not only that, but he's our curriculum. Christ is our curriculum. We sometimes use Christianity as like this thought of like, develop a bunch of things so that I can learn how to be mature. And it's like, well, that's fine. But if it's not Christ-centered, it's not what God wants. Christ isn't just our Savior. He isn't just our Lord. He's our entire curriculum. He is what we study. He's what we seek. Knowing him is life. Not knowing him is death at every possible tier of existence. We see that in verse 20. But that is not the way you've

learned Christ.

Christ is our curriculum. God's likeness is our design pattern. Look at verse 24. We're told that we're supposed to put on the new self created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Well, who's the likeness of God? Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of overall creation. And so we're studying Jesus. We're imitating Jesus. And that imitation is made explicit in verse 32. Look at verse 32. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. So what am I doing? Well, I need to understand that I have two identities, and one of them is kind of living after the pattern of this world, what we call the dark trinity of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

[16:04] And that old self was imitating all of that, but the world has been clever to us in the last, you know, hundred years to tell us that we're being original and authentic and individualistic. We just so happen to have the exact same nose ring as all the other rebels, you know? Like, where we just so happen to wear the exact same, you know, clothes as all the other individualists. It's like, you know, no. Like, you have been imitating people your whole life, but the world has been telling you that you're being true to yourself, which is what you tell someone that was in a cult, right? You tell someone that was in a cult that you're experiencing full self-individuation, and like, you're not. You're just following a different leader. And what's glorious about Christianity is it's all just out there. Jesus just says, imitate me.

Just do what I do. Follow me. Do what I say. None of the other cult leaders are honest enough. They're all persuading you that it's your idea. It's like, no, Jesus just says, here's the deal. I'm God. Do what I say. Follow me. Imitate me. I'm the best thing you could possibly imitate. So Christianity is just unabashedly about imitation. The world sometimes recoils because we've been told that to be individualized and authentic is the real goal. That just doesn't exist. You've been imitating people your whole life. You always will. And you should accept that and then decide, well, who is most worthy of imitation? And the answer is Jesus Christ is the most worthy of imitation. You'll never find anyone else as worthy of imitating, as studying, and modeling your life after as Jesus Christ. What other possibility could there be but to spend the rest of your life in God's word, in particular in the Gospels, friends? Don't spend too much time outside of the Gospels. Because what you've got there is you've got humanity in its perfect form, in the form of Jesus Christ. And so you need imitative instructional wisdom. You need a pattern to follow. So you want to be in the Gospels relatively frequently because that's a person who's living a life, a hard life, perfectly.

[18:23] And that's your main job, is to live a hard life for the glory of God. And so, boy, I just keep you back and back and back in the Gospels. Doesn't need to be a lot. Just put some Jesus walking on the earth, saying things, doing things, in your regular devotional habit. Because you are an imitative being, you need to see the person you're supposed to imitate. The second tip I want to give you about imitation is that I will post on Basecamp, I can do this today, Ang Dove, accountability check.

I will post a list of God's attributes and just some scriptures for each one. God is love. God is patient. God is omniscient. God is sovereign. What I would really encourage you to do for your Bible study is to make your Bible studies more doctrinal and topical, at least partly, and not always chronological. And here's why. Especially if you have something you're trying to change. Say you're trying to change your patience level. Well, then grab this topical understanding of God's patience as an attribute and study it and get to know it and absorb it and learn who God is in this area of patience.

Meditate on it. And what you'll see is that imitation begins to embed itself in you and you start living out what you're studying, what you're beholding. That's one of the most fundamental truths about Christian transformation is we become what we behold. So if you're trying to grow in a particular area, and I've had this my whole life, where something is just like God's like, now Chris, you're doing this, you're figuring this out now. Well, the way that I would do that is I would, number one, read about Jesus in that area. I'd maybe do some Google searches or whatever, or you can ask

me, how does Jesus handle frustration? Whatever. Read that, and then also just look in your Bible and say, let me find verses about God's patience. And you'll be spending time looking at the proper model instead of yourself or instead of someone else. So that's number two.

The first one is identification. The second one is imitation. And the third point is engineering. Third point's engineering. A lot of you are going to like that. A lot of you have, are either engineers or have the souls of engineers. So let's look at verse 25. Let me read from verse 25 to verse 32. Verse 25.

[21:27] Now, I mentioned this last week, and I just feel like it's probably the least understood aspect of transformation. And that is the designing of a system that allows you to obey God's word.

The point I made last week was rooted in verse 28. Verse 28 says, let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor doing honest work with his own hands so that he may have something to share with anyone else in need. That's the command. And what Paul does not explain is how to find employment. He says nothing about how to write a letter of introduction and acquire it or to acquire a trade or to understand what trade he ought to pursue. There's nothing in here about economic trends, job stability, local companies that are hiring, nothing about approaching a potential employer or managing one's wages when they begin coming in. He simply says to the thief, stop stealing, go get a job so that you can give to those in need.

All of that other stuff is going to come primarily out of his connection to other brothers and sisters in the local church who help him design systems that allow him to overcome his past sin and enter into or put on his new identity.

And what we often see are people that are extremely well-meaning, very frustrated with a life-dominating sin. And man, they've looked at Jesus, they're like, this is not how Jesus acts. They know exactly they're living in the old man, and they're like, what else can I do? It's like, well, there's actually a ton of just structural life ordering that we need to do in order to be sanctified.

[23:38] And a lot of that is like going to, if our life isn't properly ordered, it will show up in certain places where our flesh is especially weak, and we will see constant sort of eruptions of the old self.

And if you're seeing that, I would tell you, like, man, I am so grateful that you are, you incline yourself toward the spiritual questions associated with that. Do I really love God? Am I reading his word? So forth.

Thank you. I'm glad that you're thinking that way. But I would tell you, if this is a recurring thing, you need to sit down with someone and ask, are my systems disordered?

Because in reality, almost all obedience that we're called to undertake requires certain kinds of environmental adjustments, insofar as it depends on us, to make those changes.

There's a list of things that we're supposed to stop doing here. We're supposed to stop lying. We're supposed to stop having unresolved anger. Each one of those is almost always going to rear its head habitually when your systems are broken, when you don't understand how to design your day, your life, your situation toward obedience.

[24:51] I'm working on my next album for my nephews and nieces. I do this thing called Uncle Theology, where I make goofy theology music for my nieces and nephews, and I pass it on to you when it's done.

But I'm doing a song right now. It's about this consistent theme in Proverbs, is make me neither rich nor poor. And the idea of that text is, is that if you make me rich, I'll forget your law.

If you make me poor, I'll steal and defile your name. So the plea is make me neither rich or poor. That's a person thinking in systems, and he's thinking about himself, and he understands if the system is too good, I'm going to be a punk.

And if the system is too sterile and unrewarding, I'm going to be a different kind of punk. And so he's thinking, he's asking God, help me to have the system that best promotes the godliness that you require of me.

And I believe that we as Christians are really relying far too much on what we think of as mystical intervention, when God's like, well, actually, you could order your life in ways that would be better situated for you personally to produce godly outcomes.

[26:15] Some people just don't have any business in an extended conversation with other known gossipers. That would be a structural flaw.

It's like, you just don't have the grits to withstand that much tea in one conversation. So you just need to be like, you know, like, see you, you know, like, disappear into the shrub, like Homer, you know.

You just have to step away from the situation. It's like, I structurally, this is not optimal for me. And you could just think about this. We would never put our kids in certain situations.

And usually some of them are universal, but others are specific to each kid. You have a kid who's tempted towards self-righteousness. Well, there's a whole way you've got to manage that structurally in your home as you serve the Lord, as you serve the church together.

There's just wisdom all over the place related to building the right system. So let me just give you three kind of thoughts about this, and we'll start wrapping up. The first is this saying that we use in men's ministry all the time.

[27:20] It's from an author named James Clear. Dove and I have one or number of books that we share as favorite books, and one of them is Atomic Habits. But he always says, you do not rise to the level of your goals.

You fall to the level of your systems. You have to build structures that are promoting godliness. You have to build structures that are making sin less likely.

Number two, when you build systems, bear in mind that you are most likely building that system using your most self-controlled and ordered self, which is not the self that's going to need the system.

So let's say you have a habit of looking at bad things on the internet at a particular point in time, and you come out of this sermon like, I'm going to build a system. I'm not going to do that anymore. Here's the system I'm building. It's like, well, the system you're building right now is being built by someone who has self-control and feels inclined toward godliness and feels zealous for good works, but that's not the person that's going to be there at 2 p.m.

[28:32] when you have 30 minutes of free time and no one's watching. So one of the big things I'd want to introduce is just something that, it's well known throughout all church history.

One way of talking about it is this thing called acedia. The Desert Fathers referred to it, and it's sometimes translated sloth, but that barely touches it. Acedia was also known as the noonday demon.

And it's not just at noon, it's just this, just pick up the vibes here. It was this idea that temptation strikes precisely when discipline is the most demanding and reward feels the most distant. It's this particular moment when your commitments that you've made seem foolish, stupid, unsustainable, unnecessary, overreacting, that God doesn't really care that much about X, Y, or Z. And this noonday demon, whatever time it is for you, that's the one you've got to build a system for. Like, let's say that we've got a thief here, and he's been radically saved, but in his former life, he stole because he was lazy.

[29:46] And he didn't want to work, and he loved the low-friction opportunity of gaining a bunch without any work at all. And he knows that's sin.

And so Sunday morning, he leaves, and he's like, I am definitely getting a job this week. There's a version of him that gets the door closed on his face ten times who will look back at all of his moral resolve and think, maybe this isn't for me.

Like, God, if you wanted me to do this, I mean, you would have probably shown me a way, and so forth. So if you want to actually, and if you're a Christian, you do, want to be godly and put on the new self and follow Christ, you have to think about the version of you that needs the system and design a system around that.

And I think at this point, that's a small group conversation. That's not a pulpit conversation. I don't even know how it would help you from this setting in that respect. You need to have that conversation with other Christians.

You need to be thinking about what does this look like for me? How can I grow in godliness by thinking wisely about systems? And the third thing I just want to point out, and it's in our text explicitly, is the third thing I would encourage you as you think about structures and as you think about how you live your days, is you just need to remember that you are always in the presence of God.

[31:10] I think one of the main things that this ascidian thing does to us is it makes God feel distant at the right moment when our flesh is just broiling up.

God seems more like a deist kind of God at this moment. Far away, not super interested in what I do, pretty passive, pretty permissive, doesn't really matter.

And if you think about it, like a lot of the sins that we struggle with that have that sort of indulgence flavor to them, what is Paul's main antidote to that? It's always the Holy Spirit is inside of you, bro. That's the 1 Corinthians 7 argument against lust. The Holy Spirit is inside of you. So when God feels distant and He will and the day is turning long and there is a familiar off-ramp, look at this verse in verse 30.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

[32:33] You know, I've been traveling just a crazy amount and thankfully that's all passed and I don't see that happening again hopefully in my lifetime. Like, the sad news is that I spent more nights with other pastors than I did my wife and liked by a lot in February.

But you know, when you're traveling with someone it's like it's just a constant dance of agreeability and thoughtfulness or else it doesn't work.

You know, you've got to get a sense of your roommate. You know, I'm still at the pastor level importance where I'm still the coach share a room with someone else level of importance. Coach flights share a room with other people.

And I don't imagine that will change either. But you know, when you're in a room with someone you've got to negotiate all that. Like, putting my toothbrush in a certain spot doesn't matter to me necessarily, but how does he like his toothbrush?

Picking up all of my dirty clothes may not be that relevant to me. I have my own travel system, but is this guy like firm on that? Does he care? Food, where are we going to eat? What's our sleep routine?

[33:40] How are we going to handle that? Fan on, fan off. Because when you're traveling with someone you're just, if you're not a jerk, you're just trying to be mindful the whole time of what this other person prefers, needs, requires, and so forth.

And the reality is, is that if I could just put a chip into me and a chip into you that would upgrade our spirituality today, it would be that we would never forget that God is with us at all times.

and that he is our constant companion, we're sojourning with him, is what Psalm 15 says. And, you know, what is the ultimate, like, in the moment answer to this ascetic malaise?

It's like, one thing is, is that you are with someone right now, and you will be with that person the rest of your life, and that's the Holy Spirit of God, and he can be grieved.

And that should give us pause. Well, that's probably enough for today. I can cover the next section next week. Let's close by looking at verse 32.

[34:58] Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God is in Christ forgiving you. What a great way to pivot to the Lord's table. every behavior we're called to is just downstream of this particular action.

That God, though Jesus in the form of God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but took the form of a servant and humbled himself even to the point of death, death on a cross, so that he could win for us the forgiveness from our many sins, so that we could walk in newness of life.

As I said last week, the table is a system we've built in, the Lord's table is a system we've built in to our worship service to force us to always land on the most important thing that's ever happened, and that is that God took on flesh so that he could die for our sins.

So if you're a Christian here today, I'd really encourage you, if you're a Christ follower, whatever maturity, whatever struggle state, let this table teach you week after week that the Lord is good, that he has made a way for you to walk with him for the rest of your days until the day of redemption.

Let me pray. Father, we pray that you would turn this information into our hearts and help us, God, not only begin to meditate on it individually, but also, God, make this the theme of many conversations we have over the coming weeks.

[36:25] Lord, we pray that you would help us to be good friends to one another, not judgmental, but kind, faithful, parakaleo, the one who comes alongside and calls and encourages as we figure out how we can build systems in our life that would help us to live in the new man and keep our eyes on Jesus.

Lord, we do confess that we take your feelings for granted, and we need to grow in our understanding of grieving you and pleasing you, not in a way that becomes a tyranny of the subjective over us, but that, God, we just do think about you throughout our day and that we are walking with you and we are considering what pleases you in doing it, as chapter 5 will say. Father, most of all, we have to land on the firmest foundation we know, which has nothing to do with our works, our success, our effort, and that is that Jesus Christ shed his blood to save our souls. so would you bless our time of communion, in his name we pray, amen.