

Cultivating Holiness

Ephesians 4:25-32*

In the fourth chapter of Ephesians Paul is beginning to deal with Christian conduct, the practical application of those great doctrinal teachings declared in the first three chapters. But he has led into it indirectly. First, Paul has reminded the believers at Ephesus of what they were before God saved them. They were hardened against God, darkened and futile in their thinking, separated from God's life, and insensitive to holiness so that they indulged in every kind of sensual vice. Second, he has reminded them that in spite of this dark background they nevertheless had been saved by God and had come to know Jesus Christ, who leads his followers in an entirely different way. His argument was, "Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus" (v. 21).

But what is this new way that is in Christ? And how are we to walk in it? Here Paul lists five specific examples of the new way, prefacing these with an illustration of what it means to walk in this way rather than another.³

1. Christ-followers tell the truth (25)
2. Christ-followers control their anger (26-27)
3. Christ-followers are honest (28)
4. Christ-followers speak kindly (29-30)
5. Christ-followers forgive & love others (31-32)

—John R.W. Stott on Ephesians 4



What is the theme which has run right through chapter 4 and spilled over into chapter 5? These chapters are a stirring summons to the unity and purity of the church; but they are more than that.

Their theme is the integration of Christian experience (what we are), Christian theology (what we believe) and Christian ethics (how we behave). They emphasize that being, thought and action belong together and must never be separated. For what we are governs how we think, and how we think determines how we act. We are God's new society, a people who have put off the old life and put on the new; that is what he has made us. So we need to recall this by the daily renewal of our minds, remembering how we 'learned Christ ... as the truth is in Jesus', and thinking Christianly about ourselves and our new status. Then we must actively cultivate a Christian life. For holiness is not a condition into which we drift. We are not passive spectators of a sanctification God works in us. On the contrary, we have purposefully to 'put away' from us all conduct that is incompatible with our new life in Christ, and to 'put on' a lifestyle compatible with it.

Two words stand out as summarizing this theme. In 4:1 Paul begs us to lead a life that is *worthy* of God's call, and in 5:3 he tells us to avoid immorality, 'as is *fitting* among saints'. It is most unfortunate that the word 'saints' has come to be used, if not for the heroes of the church who have been canonized, then at least for exceptional and often eccentric people who are distinguished from others by their pallid countenance, heavenward look and invisible halo. But 'the saints' are all God's people who have been reconciled to him and to each other. Therefore, certain kinds of behaviour are 'worthy', or 'fitting', being appropriate to who we are, while certain others are 'unworthy' or 'unfitting', being inappropriate.

Let no-one say that doctrine does not matter! Good conduct arises out of good doctrine. It is only when we have grasped clearly who we are in Christ, that the desire will grow within us to live a life that is worthy of our calling and fitting to our character as God's new society.⁴

* These notes are prayerfully provided to aid, not replace, your personal study of God's Word.

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1988), 165-166.

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*. The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 193.