

THE SWEETEST SONGS

SERIES: EPHESIANS: THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST



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Ephesians 4:17-24
Eighth Message
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Ephesians 3:14-21

In Greek mythology, the Sirens, who lived on an island, sing songs of beautiful but deadly power. It was said that no man who heard their songs could resist them and that all who obey the lure end up dead on the shore.

Sin has its allure. We have all heard it, felt it, and capitulated to it at least to some degree. I'm sad to report that as a pastor, I've seen more people than I care to count capitulate to sin in ways that changed the course of their lives—and not for the better. Some have even “made shipwreck of their faith” and rejected Christ altogether (1 Timothy 1:19).

How do we resist sin? How do we embrace righteousness? What measures can we take? The apostle Paul has some words for us.

Walking in futility

Ephesians 4:17-19:

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. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. 19 They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

Paul is writing to a church that includes believing Gentiles, or non-Jews. In verse 17, however, he uses the word “Gentiles” to refer to non-believing Gentiles. The word “walk” is a metaphor for “live.” These Gentiles used to walk, or live, in a particular way, but Paul instructs them to walk in such a way no longer. Paul describes this manner of life in multiple ways.

These non-believing Gentiles walk in “the futility of their minds.” They do not think God's thoughts after him and therefore do not become the humans God designed them to be. In their minds, they may be successful, but

in that they walk in the futility of their minds, they fail to fulfill God's purposes for them.

Such people are “darkened in their understanding.” It's as if they have shut themselves out from the light that could help them see what makes for a meaningful—and eternal—life.

Those who believe in Christ have the life of God in them, because the Holy Spirit dwells in them, but these non-believing Gentiles are “alienated from the life of God,” having pushed God away from them.

Why don't they believe? They don't believe because of “ignorance.” They don't know because they don't want to know. They know that belief requires allegiance. They do not want to give up allegiance to themselves, so they “suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18). That their ignorance is willful is evident in that its cause is “hardness of heart.” They have hardened their hearts against the truth.

As a result of countless decisions to resist the truth, they have “become callous” so that the truth cannot penetrate their hearts. Therefore, steeled as they are against the truth, they have instead “given themselves up to sensuality.” Instead of giving themselves up to God, they give themselves up to sensuality.

Sensuality especially involves unrestrained sexual activity (Galatians 5:19, 2 Corinthians 12:21, Romans 13:13). A little sensuality is usually not enough, so these unbelieving Gentiles are “greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” They have given themselves up to the destructive forces of their own appetites.

A glimpse into Jesus' heart

Paul's diagnosis of these unbelieving Gentiles would be an accurate diagnosis of many people in our day. Many have hardened their hearts against God. What does Jesus think of such people? He encountered many such people. When he met some Pharisees who resisted him, he was “grieved at their hardness of heart” (Mark 3:5).

The Pharisees' hardness of heart gives us a glimpse into Jesus' softness of heart. He loves the Pharisees, his enemies, and wants so much more for them. If you have not yet given your allegiance to Jesus, can you see that Jesus grieves for you? What can penetrate a hard heart? It's love, isn't it? Can you see that Jesus loves you?

Hope for transformation

Paul's purpose here, however, is not to convert unbelievers; it's to instruct believers. Specifically, his purpose is to instruct believers not to live like unbelievers, for it is all too possible for believers to walk in a way that ultimately results in giving themselves up to sensuality, even becoming greedy to practice every kind of impurity. Paul paints a bleak picture of what walking in this way results in so that we will not want to walk in it.

It's always discouraging to read the research done by polls that take note of the yawning gap between the faith and actions of those in the United States who claim to believe in Christ. According to the polls, the ethics of those who identify as believers are little different from those who claim no allegiance to Christ.

Alan Andrews and Christopher Morton observe, "Despite great efforts and countless amazing programs of the American church, transformed and changed lives [are] not the norm."¹

On the other hand, Paul holds out hope that those of us who believe in Christ can be increasingly transformed so that we become more like the one we believe in. Not only does he hold out such hope, but he also gives us an approach for spiritual transformation.

Learn Christ to know Christ

Ephesians 4:20-24:

But that is not the way you learned Christ!— 21 assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, 22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Paul reminds the Ephesians that the "way" of life he described in Ephesians 4:17-19 is not the way they learned from Christ. In fact, they didn't so much learn a way as they simply learned Christ.

Certainly, Christ wants us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling, but the first thing to learn about Christ is Christ. We learn about Christ first to know him. As we learn about Christ in order to know Christ, he opens our hearts so that we embrace the worthy way.

The verb translated "learn" is related to the noun translated "disciple." As disciples of Christ, we're learners. We learn Christ first to know Christ and second to follow him.

We learn Christ not least in the gospels. Especially, we learn Christ from his "I am" statements in the gospel of John, where he tells us who he is. For the seven weeks after Easter, we'll be preaching from those statements on Sunday mornings. We're going to learn Christ to know Christ.

With the use of the word translated "assuming," Paul conveys to the Ephesians that they have indeed literally "heard" Christ, not heard "about" Christ, and have been "taught in him" by the apostles. Again, consider the wording, which conveys intimacy. We have not so much heard "about" Christ as we have heard Christ. We have not so much been taught "about" Christ or even "by" Christ as we have been taught "in" Christ—in an extremely personal way.

Moreover, "the truth" is in Jesus. Paul doesn't say that Jesus speaks the truth, though of course he speaks the truth; he says truth is "in" Jesus. Here Paul's words are close to those of Jesus, who says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). Jesus embodies the truth. The truth is a person. The truth is Jesus.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul tells us that the Spirit transforms us as we "behold the glory of the Lord" "in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:7). As we behold Christ, the Spirit transforms us to be like Christ. It makes sense, doesn't it? If you spend a lot of time with someone, that person tends to rub off on you. To walk in a manner worthy of our calling, the first order of business is to know Christ.

Put off and put on

Knowing Christ, we practice the way of Christ, which involves putting off the old self, being renewed in the spirit of our minds, and putting on the new self.

The old self, literally the old "person," which embodies the former belief system, was corrupted by "deceitful desires." Essentially, the old person, before

coming to Christ, was deceived. The old person, for example, walked in the “futility” of his or her mind.

Instead of being corrupted by deceitful desires, the new self, literally the new “person,” which embodies the new belief system, has been “created”—or recreated—“in the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Essentially, the new person, after coming to Christ, believes the truth. The new person, then, walks in “righteousness and holiness”—the way of Jesus.

The first words that Jesus speaks in the gospel of Mark are these: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Paul says elsewhere that we who believe in Jesus have already “put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:9-10). The initial choice to turn from sin and turn to Jesus becomes the pattern for the rest of our lives.

We have choices, day by day and even moment by moment, to live according to the old person or the new person. Paul likens these choices to the choice we have each day concerning what to wear. Do you want to wear old clothes or new clothes? The proper choice involves recognizing the old clothes and the new clothes for what they are. The old clothes are dirty and smelly. The new clothes are clean and fragrant.

I’m a strong advocate for Camp PBC. Our family has gone every year for the last twelve years or so. Those who go usually experience community in a powerful way. On the other hand, they also experience dirt in a powerful way.

One year, I somehow neglected to load my duffel bag into our minivan. When we arrived at Lake Siskiyou, some five or six hours away from home, the only clothes I had with me were the clothes I was wearing. Although I still managed to have a good time, by the end of the trip I was more than ready to put off the old and put on the new.

Are you ready to put off the old person and put on the new person? As they teach the pupils in elementary school, make good choices.

Be renewed

To make good choices, we must “be renewed.” The wording “spirit of your minds” conveys one’s inner life, which involves one’s mind, or the way one thinks. The

imperative to “be renewed” is in the passive voice—meaning that the renewing is done to us. The Holy Spirit renews our minds.

On the other hand, Paul tells the Romans to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). We therefore have a part to play in the renewing of our minds, and the Holy Spirit helps us and enhances our efforts so that it can be also said that our minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit.

As we renew our minds, and as our minds are renewed, we are able to see what’s true and what’s false, what is life-enhancing and what is life-diminishing. Or, to use Pauls’ imagery, to see the old person and the new person for what they are and to choose accordingly—to put off the old person and to put on the new person.

The sweetest songs

In Greek mythology, Odysseus, on his way back from the Trojan war, has to sail past the island of the sirens, so he orders his men to stop up their ears with wax. However, he wants to hear the Sirens, so he also orders his men to tie him to the mast of the ship, with his ears open.

Jason, who also had to sail past the island, opts for another way. He brought with him Orpheus, a musician of incomparable talent. When Jason sailed past the island, he didn’t order his men to stop up their ears with wax, nor did he order them to strap him to the mast. Instead, he ordered Orpheus to play his most beautiful, most alluring songs. The Sirens posed no threat because the men were absorbed in something more beautiful.

Jesus sings the sweetest songs. It’s not enough to say no to sin, which is attractive though destructive. You can’t go through life with your ears stopped up or your body strapped to a mast, so to speak, because siren songs of sin are everywhere. You also have to say yes to Jesus, who is more attractive and creative.

The Lord your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will quiet you by his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.
(Zephaniah 3:17)

Jesus sings the sweetest songs—literally! He is, of course the Lord, and he exults over us with loud singing! Can you imagine? What would you rather listen to, the deadly songs of sin or the life-enhancing songs of Jesus?

In light of Ephesians 4:20-24, Paul's prayers at the end of Ephesians 1 and 3 become especially important. He prays that the Spirit would enlighten the eyes of our hearts so that we may know "what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe" (Ephesians 1:18-19). He also prays that we may "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:19).

The path to transformation

To be renewed, we must encounter the truth, and the truth, as we have seen, is in Jesus. It is also in the word of God, which features Jesus. Bill Hull observes, "There is no other path to Christian spiritual transformation than through meaningful interaction with the Word of God."²

There are, of course, different ways to interact with the word of God meaningfully, in ways that open us up to spiritual transformation. Let me share with you one of my ways.

I have a collection of verses and phrases based on verses that I have at the ready. When I encounter a verse or develop a phrase that's especially meaningful to me, I add it to my collection. I usually spend at least thirty minutes in the morning in prayer and reflection. At some point during this time, I speak some of these, either to the Lord or to myself.

For the last several years, I prayed three brief prayers most mornings based on the Hebrew word "*hesed*" from the Psalms. The word is difficult to translate into English. It conveys the Lord's covenant love, his faithful love, his undying love. When I pray, I use the Hebrew word:

—Let me hear your *hesed* in the morning (Psalm 143:8)

—Satisfy me in the morning with your *hesed* (Psalm 90:14).

—Because your *hesed* is better than life, my lips shall praise you (Psalm 63:3).

I'm not only praying; I'm also renewing my mind with the truth.

I can also deploy these and other verses and phrases throughout the day, especially as I encounter trying circumstances.

New verse, new phrase

A few weeks ago, I added another verse, and a phrase based on that verse, to my collection.

For some reason, a Bruce Springsteen song was ringing in my head:

Jesus was an only son
In the hills of Nazareth
As he lay reading the Psalms of David
At his mother's feet.³

On the one hand, Jesus wasn't an only son. On the other hand, he was God's only Son. Springsteen was imagining what Jesus must have felt. In any event, the song prompted me to read some psalms of David.

For no particular reason, I started with Psalm 20. I came to verse 4: "May he grant you your heart's desire and fulfill all your plans!" Wouldn't it be nice, I mused, if the Lord granted me the desires of my heart? So, I articulated to the Lord the desires of my heart.

In the next psalm, David, in a prayer, says that the Lord has given him "his heart's desire" (Psalm 21:2). I had an uneven response to this verse. On the one hand, although indeed the Lord has granted many of the desires of my heart, and even many desires that I didn't even know I had, there are still desires that he has yet to grant. Part of me was a little resentful. I thought, "Good on you, David!" On the other hand, I realized that my life's not over yet—and there's always the new creation to look forward to.

I kept reading. Finally, I came to Psalm 33:21: "For our heart is glad in him, / because we trust in his holy name." There was that word "heart" again, but it was unaccompanied by the word "desire." Our heart is glad, irrespective of whether the Lord has granted the desires of our heart. Why? Because we trust in his holy name.

Whether or not the Lord grants the desires of my heart, my heart can be glad in him because I can trust him with the desires of my heart. I can trust him to grant them or not to grant them. He can be trusted with the desires of my heart. Therefore, my heart can be glad regardless of whether he grants its desires or not.

Trusting the Lord creates more than peace; trusting the Lord also creates joy.

So, I have a new verse to add to my collection (I've changed the plural pronoun to a singular pronoun): "For my heart is glad in him, / because I trust in his holy name." I have a new phrase, based on that verse to add to my collection: Trust creates gladness.

Speak a verse or phrase

Your assignment this week is to speak a verse or phrase that's meaningful to you a few times in the morning, after you wake up, and a few times in the evening, before you go to sleep. If one of the verses or phrases from my collection is meaningful to you, feel to use it.

Renew your mind.

Endnotes

1. Alan Andrews, general editor, *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 13.
2. Andrews, 117.
3. Bruce Springsteen, 2005. "Jesus Was An Only Son." Track 8 on *Devils and Dust*. Columbia, Record.