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Ephesians 4:17–32, ESV.

¹⁷Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸They 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. ¹⁹They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²²to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

²⁵Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸Let 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 in need. ²⁹Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

The New Life.

The New Life is the subtitle that appears before Ephesians 4:17 in the English Standard Version of the Bible. In the New Living Translation, the title reads: *Living as Children of Light*. In the New Revised Standard Version, the title reads: *The Old*

Life and the New. The title of this section in the New International Version is *Instructions for Christian Living*. In the New King James translation, the title is *The New Man*. Maybe the most appropriate title is the one that appears in the New Jerusalem Bible translation: *The New Life in Christ*. The Catholic Bible, 3rd edition, uses this title: *Renewal in Christ*. The title that appears in the Tree of Life version of the Bible is *Put off the Old, Put on the New*. Modern editors added the biblical titles. Paul did not write them. But I chose the title *The New Life* for this message to remind us that no matter how long we have been practicing Christians, it is always a New Life for us. It is always fresh and optimistic. It is always the future.

Paul here is writing to the believers in the city of Ephesus. In truth, there are many scholars who don't believe that Paul personally wrote this letter. The language, as well as the content of the letter is very different than what we find in letters that we do know that he wrote. The biggest argument against Paul's authorship is that the writing is extraordinarily ponderous and difficult to read, while Paul is normally very disciplined in his writing, working hard to make it easily understandable. It might have been written by a follower of Paul's, and his name was used both to honor him and to give the letter weight. In that time and place this was considered completely appropriate. They wrote to communicate, to pass their feelings and beliefs onto others – not to make money. It is also believed that

Ephesians was written somewhat after Paul had died; the content and overall feel of the letter suggests that time has passed since the Apostles walked the Earth. But either way, the letter is a beautiful overview of much of what it means to be a person of faith – and what follows from 4:17 illustrates this. Here is the beginning:

¹⁷Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸They 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. ¹⁹They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

Our pseudo-Paul tells us that now that we are believers, with faith that is not yet very strong, it's important for us to remember that we must leave our old ways behind us, that we cannot act like Gentiles. Here's something: the believers in Ephesus were largely Gentile, non-Jewish followers of Christ. He's telling these people to stop being themselves. They truly must leave their lives, their ways, their old Gentile beliefs behind them. That's a lot to ask. It seems like a poetic, simple statement to us, and we breeze right past it – but how would you like to be told to stop being what you are? Remember that back then life changed only extremely slowly. Change of any sort was unusual and often represented danger in the form of an invading empire entering their land. The author, and let's just call him Paul, because he might well have written this letter and we have no other name to use, is saying that we have been living darkened lives, alienated from God because our

hearts have been hard and cold. We have been callous people living only for the daily pleasures of this world and to store up the riches of this world, and not for anything any deeper, any more meaningful, any more fulfilling. Next, we are told:

²⁰ 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 tells us that we have, through our faith in Christ, learned a new way to live. We are going to toss off our old selves, along with the desires that come with our old selves. These desires have tricked us into believing that we are unworthy, that we have very little purpose or meaning in any permanent, deep, or spiritual sense. Now, we know that we are literally created in the image of God, that we can obtain true righteousness and holiness. This is a big deal to tell people who have never seen themselves as anything more than unimportant people struggling to survive day by day, living under the thumb of a conquering Empire, the Romans. Now, we have value that rises far above our earthly situation. This was huge news.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

This is a very big deal. Paul is saying that our past lives were out and out false. Furthermore, our faith gives us a bond that is much stronger than simply

being ethnic Gentiles raised as pagans, worshipping statues and icons made of wood, stone, and metal. A new, common faith means so much more than being of the same economic class or racial group, or citizens of the same city.

²⁶Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and give no opportunity to the devil.

This line is frequently quoted because it is so poetic. Don't let the sun go down on your anger. Sure, this sounds great. A woman at the hospital where I am a chaplain, a nurse, recently told me that if you allow yourself to go to sleep while angry with your spouse, if you end the night fighting and then just turn the lights out, it's like leaving milk out on the counter overnight. Are you going to get up the next morning, pick up that sour milk and chug it down, chunks and all? That is indeed handing your life over to Satan, to evil. But as powerful as this statement is on its own, in context of the larger passage around it, these two verses say so much more. They tell us that if we want to put off the old and put on the new, if we want to abandon meaningless lives and live deep, joyous lives of faith, the first thing we should think about is anger. But notice, somewhat unexpectedly, that it says: "Be angry." It is okay and natural to be angry, even with a spouse or fellow believers. There is something that is often called "righteous anger", meaning anger that is truly necessary because it is an expression of our disapproval of evil. But even

though we sometimes must be angry, we must not sin. That means don't leave that milk on the counter overnight. Never let your anger be the driving force in your life. Never let it dominate your relationship with anyone. Anger is to be a secondary emotion. At times, it is necessary and unavoidable. Anger, however, is not what we are. God was angry with us when Jesus was walking the Earth. God took his wrath out on Jesus instead of us. We can do something similar by always making sure that our anger, whether it is justified or not, whether it is unnecessary or necessary, is handed off to God. We must let God carry our anger away and leave us clean hearted. Every morning, we wake up in peace. Next, Paul tells us:

²⁸Let 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 in need.

This is an interesting statement. It does not mean that we should all go out and find ourselves a thief and then cleanse him and help him become a useful member of society. The thief is us. We are to stop doing the selfish things we used to do, and now, in the name of our new faith, in the name of God, we are to offer our lives in compassion for, love of, and empathy for others. Honest work refers to honest work in a spiritual sense. This statement of Paul's is a metaphor. We are to stop being spiritual criminals and become people who live every second of our lives

in complete spiritual honesty. We are to be true in our faith, not hypocritical. We are not to be Sunday Christians. That is what it means to put on the New.

²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Again, this is a poetic way of saying something very fundamental. Our speech is a primary way of interacting with those around us. But our actions, even our emotions, also impact other people. What we do in this world, whether we love or hate others - these control how we live in the world with our fellow humans, all of whom are also made in the image of God. So, when we interact with others, don't break people down. Build them up. Let them feel the grace of God. Let us pass on the blessings that God gives us. Help others become all that they can be. Let our fellow Gentiles do what we are doing and live in God's name, not the name of selfishness and anger and hatred. Listen carefully to what Paul says next:

³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

In biblical language, when we "grieve" the Holy Spirit, we are disappointing and disobeying the Holy Spirit, who lives within us. We must remember that we are "sealed for the day of redemption". The Greek word that is used here is a form of *sphragizó*, which can refer to a seal or to be marked with a seal. We are indeed marked, as believers, as Christians, because we do live according to the guidance

of the Holy Spirit. Our main motivation for obeying God, for living in the Kingdom of God and not in the corrupt, earthly city of Ephesus, is that seal. That mark promises that we are going to be with God now and for all of eternity.

³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

We are back to this issue of anger, of bitterness. We are also again considering the main way we interact with others – by our speech. We are to get rid of the old, destructive ways of living among our fellow humans. We are to be kind, even tender. We must always remember this central belief of Christians: because God forgives us, we must always forgive others. Always.

That nurse who told me about curdled milk works with oncology patients. She is specially certified to inject people with deadly chemicals that will hopefully only kill their cancers. We were talking about our common feelings over a disruptive patient who would not comply with the people who were trying to help him. He refused his meds. He cursed at the staff. He sent the physical and occupational therapists away, unwilling to let them help him regain his mobility. He was unwilling to accept the help offered to him. He was very sick, and if he didn't change his ways, he was going to poison his own future by refusing the medical poison that was being offered him. His cancer was quite curable, but only

if he could overcome his churlish nature and let others treat him. Much of the staff was angry with him. This nurse wanted to wash her anger away before she went home from her twelve-hour shift. She knew that it was very unhealthy to let herself be overwhelmed by her emotional response to this patient. When we don't shake anger off quickly, when we don't let go of our anxiety, when we remain stressed, those emotions will metastasize just like untreated cancer. Our negative feelings will grow way beyond the bounds of God's plan for us. My answer to this nurse, who is a Christian, was to tell her that we need to think about our spiritual health and not just our physical health. When we are healthy spiritually, we are calm. We go to sleep with cleansed minds, with no anger or hatred, and wake up truly refreshed. Paul says that we can live healthy lives, that we can overcome the traditions of our culture and find a healthy spiritual, emotional, and physical life through our faith. A healthy spirit means working hard to walk away from anger.

The next section of the letter to the believers in Ephesus is titled *Walk in Love* in the English Standard Version and *Living in the Light* in the New Living Translation.

It begins with a beautiful two verses that I try to always remember:

5 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ²And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

This sums things up perfectly. We should not imitate the people around us, the people who are walking in the Kingdom of humanity. We should mimic Jesus Christ, just as a child mimics the behavior of the parent. We reach for the heavenly best, even if we cannot obtain it, rather than settling for an earthly compromise. We all have varying levels of blessing when it comes to our earthly, biological parents. Some of us had beautiful parents who taught us to live in joy and faith; others of us had highly flawed parents and we have had to work to unlearn what they taught us by example and with their words. But when it comes to our heavenly father, we are all equally blessed. So, we should without a doubt mimic God. The primary way of doing this is to offer love, even if we must sacrifice ourselves, just as Jesus sacrificed for us. We must put off the old and put on the new by dropping our anger and our selfishness and treating others with love. Our New Life is one where we care about others as much as we care about ourselves – and this is difficult at first, but over time, this new life becomes a source of vibrant joy. Please pray with me.

God, our request is simple. Help us stop our anger from curdling our faith overnight. Help us let go of the frustrations that arise by trying to find happiness in the earthly kingdom. Help us give faith, joy, and love to others. Let us wake up each day truly feeling the pure joy of being a tender person of faith. Amen.