

FGBC: Become Who You Are: The Steak and Handbag Deception

Ephesians 4:17-5:7

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Go ahead and grab the Bible from the pew in front of you or open the one on your phone. We are in Ephesians 4 today.

Last week we started part two of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. And if you weren't here, what we mean by part two is that almost every letter Paul wrote starts with a theology section where he outlines who God is and what He has done for us. And he does this with the desire that we are overcome by the radical love of God for sinners.

And then, usually about half way through, he changes gears to look at what we should do in response to what God has done for us – this is part two. And here Paul's hope is that after we've been overcome by Jesus' love we are going to respond by throwing ourselves into pursuing holiness with 100% effort – this is the only logical outcome.

And the big challenge last week to the Ephesian church and to us was that we would stop being infants – people who are immature in our faith. Immature people are lightweights who get tossed around by even the smallest temptations. A temptation comes up and there is no resistance, it's just boom, I'm falling. And the excuse we give for this is "that's just the way I am."

That's a lightweight. That's an infant. And just like the goal in life is to stop sucking on a bottle and pooping our pants, the goal in the spiritual life is to get over this as well – we can't stay infants.

And so if you want to really live; if you want the joy Jesus has for you, then Paul says maturity has to happen. And the two things mature people do are love Jesus' church and use their gifts to build her up.

So nothing ticks a groom off like tearing down his bride. If you want to get punched at a wedding just lean over to the groom when the wedding march starts and say: "Na, I've seen better." Boom! Lights out. And so you simply can't love Jesus and be unimpressed with what He loves. And as broken and full of sinners as she is Jesus loves His bride. He loves the church.

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Today Paul is going to continue this vein of thought as he keeps unpacking what it looks like to pursue holiness. But the big question he is going to answer today is why. Why would Christians give themselves to pursuing morality and attempting to look like Jesus? What's the motivation?

But we aren't quite there yet. Let's pick it up in chapter 4 verse 17.

[Read Ephesians 4:17-19]

So Paul starts out saying “Stop living like Gentiles.” Gentiles here are people who aren’t following Jesus. So he would say to us “Stop living like Canadians.”

So how do Gentiles live; how do Canadians live? Paul says they’ve given themselves over to sensuality. They have darkened understandings which have separated them from God. They aren’t sensitive to His work in the world or in themselves – they feel like He isn’t there.

But they feel this way because at every turn they are hardening their hearts. It isn’t that there is no evidence for God, it is that every time they see evidence they think up a different explanation. Romans 1 says:

Wicked people... suppress the truth.... They know the truth about God because He has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see His invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.
(Romans 1:18-20)

And the result of this suppression is a futility or meaninglessness in their thinking.

Now the best example of what this looks like that I can think of is Solomon. He’s one of those guys that are hard to nail down in the Bible. Like is he a good guy, or a bad guy?

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So King Solomon starts out brilliantly. He is David’s son, and David was the man after God’s own heart - he loved God like crazy.

And then along comes Solomon, and he becomes king at a young age – we don’t know how young, but he calls himself a child. And the first thing that happens to him is God appears in a dream and offers him anything his heart desires. Now if God offered this to my kids we would wake up in the morning to something awesome like a gum ball machine in our living room. I mean what would you ask for? But Solomon weighs his options and chooses wisdom so he can be a good king for God’s people.

Now that’s the right answer! God’s impressed and so He gives it to him, and then He throws in wealth, health and honour as well. And Solomon wakes up from this dream and it comes true! That’s quite a dream!

I had a dream once that I was at work and all of a sudden all my teeth started falling out. Those are the kinds of dreams I have – now you know what’s wrong with me. Solomon starts out well.

But then something incredibly human happens. Because he is so wise and rich he tries to do the one thing no one has ever been able to do. He tries to love both God and himself. So Solomon built YHWH the most magnificent temple anyone had ever seen – it took him 20 years – he did love God. But at the same time, he also invested himself in getting every form of pleasure known to humanity.

So he got himself the biggest house and the nicest gardens his money could buy – and he had all the money. Then he filled his house with thousands of slaves and hundreds of concubines. In Ecclesiastes he says “Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure.” This is Solomon. And the world we live in says “this is making it.” But after reaching the very top Solomon concludes:

But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless.... So I came to hate life because everything done here under the sun is so troubling. Everything is meaningless— like chasing the wind. (Ecclesiastes 2:11;17)

Does that seem like a crazy thing for someone who is literally living the dream to say? Are you pretty sure that you could do better? Don't be so sure.

This week celebrity chef and TV host Anthony Bourdain died at 61. He had the life. He had given himself to traveling the world and eating and drinking the very best food and wine earth has to offer. But it wasn't enough – suicide. This week fashion designer Kate Spade died at 55 - suicide. And that's just this week. These are some of the most successful people in our world and yet they were desperately unhappy.

You know Kate was married with a beautiful 13-year-old daughter. She was worth 2.4 billion dollars. Why does someone like that hang herself in her closet while her family eats breakfast downstairs? Hear this: you kill yourself because life is meaningless no matter how many handbags you've got. You weren't made for handbags.

So Anthony Bourdain and Kate Spade are illustrations of Paul's point. If you want to waste your life and end up with less than nothing just give yourself to getting the bigger and better version of everything you already have. Aim to have more steak and handbags than anyone else and you are going to win – nothing. But Solomon is an illustration of an even more deceptive danger. If you give yourself to trying to love God and something else you are going to win the same thing – meaninglessness. And Paul says Christians aren't designed for that.

Look at verse 20

[Read Ephesians 4:20-24]

Paul says if you know Jesus, you know better. You know you were created to be like God – full of righteousness and holiness. And in order to get there you have to put off your old way of thinking that has been corrupted by evil desire.

What Paul is saying here is different than what I think we often get at church. We often think the big issue is our actions – our sins. Like God just wants us to stop lusting and stop being greedy and stop throwing shade at people.

But notice the problem isn't on bad actions, it's our desires. Our problem is that our old way was looking for joy in life in something other than God. But looking to fill the God-shaped void in our hearts with steak and handbags is not only never going to work, it's evil. We are saying "I think this handbag is worth more than You, God." And so God's answer to our problem is not to get us to stop sinning, **God doesn't want to change what you do, He wants to change what you want to do.**¹ He wants to change you so that you want to make Him God in your life.

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So I've had a particular conversation with several people over the last few years. We usually meet after there has been a disaster of some kind in their life. And this has them seeking for answers beyond steak and handbags. They just have this deep feeling like there has to be something more.

And as we talk about Jesus they get excited and throw themselves into it. Forgiveness sounds beautiful to them. Acceptance sounds beautiful to them. And it is.

But then quickly, and I'm talking usually a couple weeks, things start to cool off. And so as I am reaching out to them and asking how things are going it comes out that they aren't really reading the Bible much, because it seems more like work than fun.

And instead they are back doing the things they love. They love steak and handbags and sleeping with their girlfriend. This is really living. And they don't want to give that up. And when I ask about Jesus their response is usually "I haven't given up on Jesus. I love Him. But I love this stuff too. And I don't want to miss out. Can't I do both?"

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It's a good question, but Paul says the answer is "no." If you are going to live for Jesus the old way has to die. The old self must be taken off, and the new self put on.

I once heard a story about a guy named Mickey Cohen who was a gangster who attended a Billy Graham crusade. And during the altar call Cohen responded and accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour. But then later when he was told by the follow up team that he needed to cut his ties with crime, Cohen became incredulous. "You never told me that I had to give up my career. You never told me that I had to give up my friends. There are Christian movie stars, Christian athletes, and Christian business men. So what's the matter with being a Christian gangster? If you have to give all that up – if that's Christianity – then you can count me out."²

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¹ This line taken from Mark Clark's sermon "Ephesians #46: Put off your old self" (Accessed June 7, 2018)

² Adapted from: <http://transformetrics.com/forum/showthread.php?t=9174> (Accessed June 8, 2018)

Humanity's problem is not sin, it is our lack of desire to trade what we perceive as the good things of life for the life Jesus has for us. But Paul says the things we think are good are actually bad. We've been deceived. Now we have a hard time seeing this in ourselves, but we can see it in the people around us. Like when was the last time you saw a truly joyful gangster skipping down the street? We have to trade in our old desires for new ones.

And this is what God changes in us. Verse 23 says we are "made new in the attitude of our minds." See, God doesn't want to change what you do, He wants to change what you want to do because it is only when you want what is good that you are going to do.

Now that's the reality, but there is another side to this. Our series is titled "Become who you are" because while Jesus followers have been taught the importance of putting off our old, deceived ways, this doesn't happen automatically. It takes effort and work to fill our old desires for steak and handbags with something that will satisfy. So look where Paul goes next. Verse 25:

[Read Ephesians 4:25-5:4]

Paul says "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood..." Don't just believe the right stuff, do something about it. Practice the new way of life in order to get good at it. And so Paul gives us a list of things that Jesus followers give ourselves to practicing. Now this isn't an exhaustive list, it's just some examples. So don't lie, don't sin in anger, don't steal, don't speak trash, don't grieve the Holy Spirit. Weed out bitterness, rage, slander and malice from your life. And cut off every hint of sexual immorality.

This kind of living is inconsistent with a life pleasing to God. You simply can't love God and do these things. If you are trying you are still living deceived like Solomon.

And this kind of living doesn't win on earth, and even more than that it doesn't win in the world to come. Look at the terrible words that start in verse 5:

Read Ephesians 5:5-7]

If we want to win we must live out who we are. The new life we are to put on has to be different from the old life. Paul doesn't say "Just believe that telling the truth is important. Just believe in forgiveness. Believe in hard work." No. It doesn't matter what we believe, it matters what we do.

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But Paul doesn't leave it there, and this is good news. Throughout Ephesians there is a very clear "why" and "how". And this is where the gospel enters the message.

You see if you take this passage of scripture by itself it is bad news. The message would be that God wants you to be good. And if you aren't good then you are going to miss out on God. He's going to reject you. But that's works salvation, and that is the opposite of what Jesus is about and what Paul is saying.

And so here I want to shift away from talking about the difference between the old life and the new life we are called to live and talk about why and how. Because without the why and how there is no way we can actually pull this off.

First the why.

Here Paul calls us to morality, but the reason he gives is not “because the Bible says so.” It is because we have been transformed by Christ. Every action we are called to in the Christian life starts with God coming to us.

So look again at verse 25. Paul does say “Put off falsehood and speak truthfully,” but he adds something after that. He says “for we are all members of one body.”

And the body we are part of is Jesus’ body. That’s what he said back in verse 15:
Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him who is the head, that is, Christ. (Ephesians 4:15)

So the answer for why be moral is not because the Bible says so. It is not: be moral because it is good, or even because this is going to lead to the best life possible – though that is true. The answer to why be moral is because you have been saved by Jesus and made part of Him. In another place Paul says: Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. God lives in you.³

And so Jesus-people live out the reality of the spiritual world, and there are two sides to this. First, we don’t wrestle against flesh and blood. It isn’t your boss who is out to get you; it isn’t your significant other who is bane of your sanity. It is the devil who is out to steal, kill and destroy you. And so we live looking like Jesus to defeat him. That’s what Paul is getting at in verse 26. Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” When we look like Jesus we defeat the devil. Do you want to do that?

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The other side of this is that when we look like Jesus we are a testimony to the people we’ve been placed beside. We are the Jesus the world gets to see. So verse 24 says “Put on the new self created to be like God.” And chapter 5 verse 1 says “Follow God’s example... and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us.”

The reason why the Jesus follower is to live morally is because we are the presence of Christ in the world.

So Paul says become who you are. Become like your Dad because He saved you by dying for you so that you would die to yourself to lead the people beside you to His salvation. This is why we are moral. We look like Jesus. So we are saying to the world this is what resurrection power looks like. I’m what it looks like to be saved.

³ 1 Corinthians 6:19

Now that's heavy right? I mean when people come over for dinner you are thinking I need to look like Jesus, so these BBQ's burgers had better be amazing!

If we left it there this would be a terrible message. I'm just not that awesome. I'm not much like Paul, I'm a lot more like Peter. Do I have a witness?

Paul was a superhero Christian. There wasn't anything you could do to him. When you threatened to kill him he said "no problem, to die is gain." And so if you said, "Well fine, we will let you live." He would say "To live is Christ." And if you tortured him he said "These light and momentary afflictions are preparing me for an eternal weight of glory." There was nothing you could do to this guy. But Peter's my kind of Jesus follower.

Peter was passionate. He loved Jesus. But he was a train wreck. So one minute he is saying "Jesus you are the Son of the living God." And Jesus is commending him: "You nailed it. God has revealed this to you. Your name is Peter and I'm going to build my church on you."

And Peter turns around and chastises Jesus when He says He is going to die. And so Jesus calls him Satan. It's bad when Jesus calls you Satan!

You see Peter can talk himself up and then fail like nobody's business. His spiritual gift was sticking his foot in his mouth and kicking himself off his high horse. Does anyone else love Peter? I love Peter. And like Peter I don't need to just know why, I need to know how I can possibly look like Jesus.

And Paul gives us the how in our text. We get it in verse 22.

[Read Ephesians 4:22-23]

Here's what God wants to do. He doesn't want to change what you do, He wants to change what you want to do. He wants to change what you love to do. He wants to get into your will so that you want to live for His glory.

Wouldn't it be amazing if instead of wanting what everyone else has, and craving lust and greed and every kind of impurity – wouldn't it be amazing if you actually wanted what was best for you? Wouldn't it be so much easier if you wanted to live your life for God's glory?

This is what God wants to do in you. He wants to reverse the futility of your thinking. He wants to enlighten your understanding and soften your heart. He wants to change the attitude of your mind. And He does this by leading you to repentance.

You see repentance isn't turning away from sin. Sin isn't the problem, it is the result of the problem. And so the solution is a new mind that wants Jesus. What you think about is what you do. Your thoughts define you. This is why God is after your mind.

And here's the good news. God is in the mind transformation business. He is brilliant at taking broken, messed up people like Peter and renewing our minds with His power.

And here's the most beautiful thing about all this. As this starts to happen you won't find yourself doing stuff you hate. You will actually find your desires changing.

So where once you loved and lived for your own pleasure, all of a sudden you are going to find yourself saying "I actually feel awesome when I speak good about someone and build them up. I could do that again." "I'm so glad I'm not stealing people's junk. That made me miserable. Now I'm working and giving stuff away, and it feels awesome." "I used to be angry, but now I forgive people who hurt me and I can breathe!" Friends, God doesn't want to change what you do, he wants to change what you want to do.

Jesus wants you to win at life. He wants the best things for you, and He knows that this is only going to happen when you want what is best for you. And He's committed to doing that transformation. So will you let it happen? Will you pursue it with everything you've got?

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Here's the challenge. The challenge is that God won't change what you want to do if you aren't in the game. Verse 17 says "I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do." There is a call to action in this.

So stop giving yourself to futile steak and handbag thinking. Stop giving the devil a foothold. Stop grieving the Holy Spirit. Instead give yourself to following God's example so that He can pour His power into your life and transform your mind. Do you want that?