

St. Augustine's Sermons

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The School of Christ

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I have entitled this sermon The School of Christ because in this passage from Ephesians four the Apostle Paul is instructing us as to what it means to be engaged in learning to lives as those who are students of Jesus. In verses 25- 29 he tells us:

25 Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. 26 Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and give no opportunity to the devil. 28 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 in need. 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.

You will notice that in this school as we learn the way of Christ one of the areas that is most significantly influenced is in our use of language. Three of the four directives given here are related to speech.

The three related to language are:

Put away falsehood.....Speak truth with his/her neighbour

Do not let the sun go down on anger Be angry but do not sin

No corrupting or foul talk Speak what is good for building up

Do not steal Work and share with the poor

I want to suggest that to see ourselves as students of Jesus, this is reflected first in how we relate to others with our words, and then in how we use the money we acquire from our work. As we grow in living as students of Jesus we are continually learning that it is only by grace that we are renewed in our minds and therefore increasingly exhibit character traits reflective of those who are Christ followers.

In these verses Paul is challenging us his readers to see that when we learn Christ and the way of Christ a qualitative change happens in our lives. To learn Christ results in our being concerned not with how other people are changing but how I am changing. We are less concerned with how others see us and more concerned with how Jesus sees us. As we are taught the truth in Jesus we notice that it is in the everyday things of life that we are being renewed and re-fashioned.

Such an attitude guards us from judgementalism and creates within us an attitude of humility and caring. Remember back in the earlier part of chapter 4 Paul said it like this:

walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

Each of us is to be concerned with loving our neighbour and asking the Holy Spirit to help us change our inner lives as opposed to loving ourselves and changing our neighbour. That is what the MAC/PC parody was I think saying.

So how is it that we can be in the school of Christ together and live to see Christ's character formed within us? As with all schools there are expectations of the students, expectations of the teachers and anticipated results from study and learning. So there are three things Paul shows us in this passage which can be summarized in the following way. There is:

1. Our work
2. God's work
3. Result gained from this collaborative endeavour

Let us take some time now to look at each of these. Verses 22-24 teach us what our work is and what Christ' work is. Verses 25-27 present to us the results gained from this collaborative endeavour, particularly as we deal with anger.

1. Our work and God's work.

Our work is described first in negative and then positive terms. We are to first of all throw away or put off the old self. We are no longer to associate with our former way of life. Perhaps this illustration will help. Owen Nolan use to play for the San Jose Sharks. Not only did he play for them, he was their captain. But now he is playing for the Calgary Flames. Therefore he has had to both put off his old sweater and loyalty to his old team as he is now battling against the Sharks, as a Flame. This is what it means to be a Christ Follower. We are throwing away the old jersey and our allegiance to the old team, which Paul says is coached by the Satan.

That which Satan desires is expressed not only in a way that is underhanded but the effect of these desires leads to corruption. Look at verse 22:

put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.

Now I need to share with you some grammar here for a minute. Do you see the verb "corrupt"? This verb is in the present tense, but it is a passive voice. The passive voice represents the subject as being the recipient of the action. E.g., in the sentence, "The boy was hit by the ball," the boy receives the action. Because the verb "corrupt" is in the passive voice it means that when people live according to the old deceitful nature the corruption resulting from their way of life is not all of their doing. The forces of evil are at work corrupting the soul of such a person. Because people open themselves up to demonic and malevolent influences when they live this way Paul is very clear about what we are to do. It is a way of life we are to throw away and never dawn its team colours again.

But this is not all we are to do. We are also to put on the new self which is created after the likeness of God. If the corruption of the old accords with deceitful desires, the creation of the new accords with God in the righteousness of truth.

Note especially the word "created." We do not produce our new nature as Christians. We were dead in trespasses and sins (according to 2:1) and were made alive by God's sovereign grace (2:5). We were created anew (born anew!). Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

Our new nature is God's creation, God's workmanship. It is a supernatural work of grace. Just as the word corrupt is in the passive voice, so too is this word created. God by his Spirit is at work within us. But, we ask, if my new life in Christ is God's creation and workmanship, then what is my task? Ephesians 4:23–24 gives the answer. We are to put on this new nature. When God creates in us a new heart, he does not cancel out our consciousness. We are conscious hour by hour of choices—will we follow the way of deceit or will we follow the way of truth? The new creation is not the negation of choice; it's the transformation of the heart that makes choices. The moral choices which you face as a new creature in Christ are just as real and crucial as the choices you faced before you were born again (i.e., created in Christ Jesus). The difference is that your character, your nature, your heart, your will have been radically changed. The source of choice, the root of your choosing is now shaped by the renewing of our minds of which Paul speaks in verse 23.

The tense of this verb "be renewed" is also worth noting. It is in the present tense with the passive voice. This means that as we make choices to live a certain way God by his spirit is renewing our minds. Because it is in the present tense, this indicates that it is a renewing that is on-going.

So when Paul says, "Put it on," he means, "Act it out." If you have been created anew after the likeness of God, clothe yourselves with godly garments. Your clothing is what people see. So when Paul says, "Clothe yourselves with your new nature," he means, "Make it visible in your attitudes and behavior." If the hidden spring has been purified, let the visible streams of your life run clean.

Yes, if the spring has been purified, the streams will run clean. If the tree is good, it will bear good fruit. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth will speak. Christian morality is the experience of an inner miracle. But the experience in moment by moment living includes conscious choices to go the way of truth not deceit. These choices are the fruit that signify a good tree; they are the words that reveal the abundance of the heart; they are the clean streams that provide the

purified spring; they are the obedience that confirms your calling and election.

If we fail to understand Ephesians 4:22–24, we will surely go astray in what follows about anger. The practical, nitty-gritty, day to day living of the Christian life is the experience of a miracle. If it were not, then all our moral choices and all our pursuit of holiness would be done in our own strength; it would signify our own merit and it would redound to our own glory. And the whole purpose of God to be glorified in his creatures would fall. So there are immense things at stake in the ordinary issues of truth-telling, and anger, and stealing which Paul deals with now in verses 25–29. We will restrict ourselves to the problem of anger.

And here we move into the second point of the sermon which is:

2. There are tangible results gained from our collaborative effort with God. One of which is in how we deal with anger.

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

Keep in mind that the general admonition is:

"put off the old nature and put on the new."

Now Paul gives as a specific example of this as the getting rid of bad anger and only having good anger. In other words, when you are born again, you are given a new nature, you become a new creature; and Paul says here that your newness will show itself in the way you experience anger.

Two Assertions About Anger:

Verse 26 makes at least two assertions about anger:

- 1) There is a time to get angry;
- 2) The time to stay angry is short.

Or there are good grounds for getting angry, but no grounds for holding grudges. "Do not let the sun go down on your anger," means, "Let the day of your anger be the day of your reconciliation" And if reconciliation is impossible, even so, do not stroke your wound, or cherish revenge, or hold a grudge. For Satan seeks a gap called

grudge, and if he finds it, he will enter and ruin life with all manner of bitterness.

Let's take these two points one at a time: There is a time to get angry, and the time to stay angry is short.

1. There Is a Time to Get Angry:

First, there is a time to get angry. "Be angry but do not sin." Not all anger is wrong. But some anger is clearly wrong. Verse 31 says, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger . . . be put away from you." What's the difference between good anger and bad anger?

Two Characteristics of Good Anger

I would suggest two things that characterize good anger:

- i) It is based on God, and
- ii) It is mingled with grief.

It Is Based on God

James 1:19–20 says:

Know this, my beloved: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 or the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

In other words, we should be slow to anger because the anger which rises quickly is very likely to be mere human anger which will not accomplish God's righteousness. But if we are slow to anger, if we rule our spirit and consider the matter carefully, then our anger, if it comes, may be the very anger of God. That is, our anger may be owing to the fact that God's character is dishonored not ours, and God's aims are resisted not just ours. In short, good anger is based on God not just ourselves. Its target is sin against God, not just assaults on us.

Do we not see this clearly at work in the life of the Lord? As Jesus goes into the Jerusalem Temple during Holy Week he looks around at what is taking place there and then leaves for Bethany. On the following day he returns and exhibits a righteous anger as he overturns the tables of the money changers and so judges the Temple. But this action was not

a sudden outburst but thoughtfully considered over many years spent in and around the Temple.

So not only is good anger based on God:

ii) It is Mingled with Grief

The second thing that characterizes good anger is that it is mingled with grief. We see this in Mark 3:5. Jesus was in the synagogue on the Sabbath about to heal a man's withered hand. The Pharisees were adamantly opposed. It says,

"Jesus looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart."

Here is where we fail so often. Our grief over the sinner gets burned up in the zeal of our anger against the sin. A person does something wrong and we get angry, but there is no grief over the person's hardness. We express our indignation for his sin, but we show no longing for his softening or reconciliation. This is natural, but it is not good. As long as there is hope for change, good anger should not only be directed against sin but also be mingled with grief for the sinner.

2. The Time to Stay Angry Is Short:

So there is a time to get angry—that's the first thing verse 26 teaches: "Be angry but do not sin." But the time to stay angry is short—this is the second thing the verse teaches: "Do not let the sun go down on your wrath." This does not mean that the Inuit at the North Pole may hold a grudge for six months while the sun is up and those at the equator may only hold one for twelve hours. It means that anger, for all its possible legitimacy, is a dangerous emotion and should not be nurtured into a grudge. Anger is the moral equivalent of biological adrenaline. It is good and healthy to experience periodic secretions of adrenaline in reaction to dangerous situations. But a steady flow would damage the heart. So it is the same with anger. It has damaged many hearts because it was not put away, but nurtured again and again into a life-destroying grudge.

Therefore we are to forgive from the Heart—Put On the New Nature, Which brings us back to where we started—"from your heart," from your new nature, the purified spring, the good tree. The only way to

get victory over anger is to put off the old nature corrupted by desires of deceit—Satan's deceit, and to put on the new nature, by acting according to the truth.

Conclusion:

I like the phrase “Christ Follower” because it says something about how I am living my life. To follow Christ is a way of Christian discipleship that sees me as a student in the school of Christ, where he is my teacher. As I put off the old self and put on the new self I can experience more of the renewing of my mind so that my outward life is created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. As I live in this way, I can then show anger, but do so in a way where it is appropriate and short lived.

Yes, to be a Christ follower is not to be pre-occupied with my physical suit but my spiritual suit. It is not about how I look, but about who I am becoming.

Let us together continue to be students in the school of Christ as we follow our teacher Jesus in the renewing of our minds.

Amen