



Ephesians 4:17-24

Parents, if you have never read *The Chronicles of Narnia* to your children, I encourage you to rush out, buy some used copies and start immediately. I'd like to read from one of my favorite scenes in the seven book series. Narnia fans will know this well. Due to his utter selfishness and greed, Eustace turned into a dragon and it appeared that he would remain that way for the rest of his life. That is, until Aslan appeared to him and told Eustace that he must undress. After three futile attempts to scratch away his dragon scales, Aslan said, "You will have to let me undress you." Here's where the story picks up.

"The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off.

"Well, he peeled the beastly stuff right off—just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times, only they hadn't hurt—and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly looking than the others had been. And there was I as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me—I didn't like that much for I was very tender underneath now that I'd no skin on—and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious and as soon as I started swimming and splashing I found that all the pain had gone from my arm. And then I saw why. I'd turned into a boy again.

"After a bit the lion took me out and dressed me——"

"Dressed you. With his paws?"

"Well, I don't exactly remember that bit. But he did somehow or other: in new clothes—the same I've got on now, as a matter of fact. And then suddenly I was back here.

I would consider this to be a picture of salvation and Christ's work of making us into a new creation. However, I believe it is also a good picture of putting off the old self and putting on the new self that we read in Ephesians 4.

¹⁷ 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. 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.

Before we get to putting off and putting on, last Sunday I promised you that we would look deeper into the web of sin and addiction in the first half of this passage. And I know all of you were hoping we'd go deeper into sin. (He says tongue in cheek.) Why would we want to spend so much time talking about sin?

First, as I said last Sunday, the Bible talks a lot about it. Paul could have glossed over their former manner of lives but instead he chose to delve deeply into the inner chambers of it darkness.

Second, and this is the main point, as you look deeper into your former manner of life without Christ, your appreciation for what Christ has done for you grows ever greater. We have all seen the before and after photos of weight loss or exercise advertisements. Let's say you had the before photo of a 210 pound man and the after photo was the same man weighing in at 200 pounds. If he is wanting to lose weight to become more healthy, then losing ten pounds is something to celebrate. However, the before and after photo would look almost exactly the same to you and me. However, what if the before photo was of a man who weighed over 1000 pounds and the after was the same man weighing only 200 pounds and brimming with muscles? We would say, "Wow! Look at the difference!" That's a good way to picture our "before Christ" and "after Christ". Not that we are already perfected but that is another way of seeing who we are in Christ so that we can be who we are in Christ.

The third reason to focus on sin is to better help us understand our present struggle with sin. This ugly description of sin is a snapshot of the Gentiles before Christ but the very fact that he tells them to stop doing these things is evidence that they—and we—still struggle. If we can have a better understanding of our enemy, we will be more likely to defeat our enemy. With that in mind, let's dig into this text some more.

Last week we focused on verse 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.* A quick

reminder that ignorance is no excuse. A lack of understanding, a deep ignorance does not stem from the intellect but rather from the heart.

Peter detailed the same willful ignorance in his second letter.

They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly (2 Peter 3:4-7).

Last week I watched a friend in a facebook debate about the gospel. Two of his facebook friends ganged up on him and attacked him with a barrage of arguments that my friend said were “straight out of the atheist playbook.” I appreciated my friend’s response. He calmly shared more Scriptures with them. The more loud and obnoxious they became, the more he continued to share the Word of God with them. Their problem was not ignorance but a hard heart. But it gets worse.

Then Paul tells us that sin causes you to become callous. Once sin settles comfortably into your heart it develops a callous. Those of you who have every played guitar know the importance of a good callous on the end of your fingers. If you haven’t played for a while and try to play for twenty minutes or so, your fingers become red and painful and you have to quit playing. You let your fingertips rest for a few days and get back at it. In no time at all you have thick callouses on your fingertips and you can play the guitar painlessly.

In the same way that a callous pushed away the pain of a steel guitar string digging into your fingertip, repeated sin will cause callouses to grow over your heart. The first time you sin it stings a little. The second time it hurts less and in no time at all the pain is completely gone. You have become calloused. You didn’t start that way but it was a progression. You have lost all sensitivity to the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

But then it gets even worse. Once your heart becomes calloused, the next step is giving yourself up to sensuality. This is a conscious choice to abandon all restraint. You throw off morals, rules, standards, laws and conscience and you give yourself up to it. In Romans 1, God gives sinners over to their sin but here Paul tells us that the sinner himself gives themselves up to their sin. You begin a downward spiral of sin which inevitably leads to the next step.

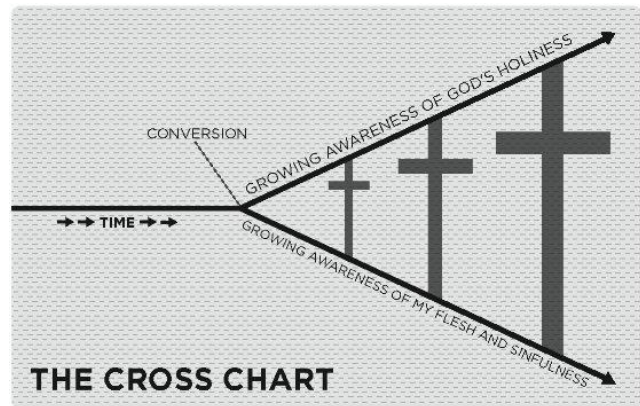
Greedy to practice impurity. A few months ago I gave an illustration about eating a steak—or you could use whatever your favorite food is. The first bite is always the best bite. If it’s a really good cut of meat, the juices of the tender steak swirl around in your mouth and your taste buds nearly scream in delight. But generally speaking, by the time you get to the last bite, the excitement is over and the last bite is not as enjoyable as the first. You might love steak but you are not going to eat five or six more in that meal.

But the downward spiral of sin is just the opposite. Each bite of the forbidden fruit makes you greedy for even more. You develop a severe hunger; an insatiable appetite; an addiction.

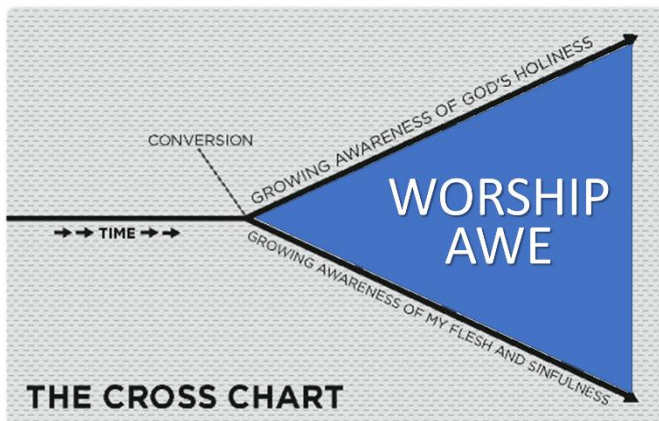
I never heard of this man—and I’m not going to use his name—but apparently he is well known in the evangelical world. He is a pastor, theologian and popular conference speaker in certain parts of the world. In January of this year his wife discovered that he was having an affair with a married woman in their church. Unfortunately, that is all too common in our day but the situation was much worse. It turns out that not only did he have an affair but he was having relations with up to seven women at one time. He was a longtime predator of women, seeking them out and grooming them to satisfy his “greed to practice every kind of impurity.” About two weeks later he took his own life.

I tell such a sad story to remind us that no one is immune—no one sitting in this room and certainly not the guy standing here talking to you. No one. But there is one more benefit from understanding the power and depravity of sin.

4. By comparison, the cross of Christ looms much larger in our lives. I think this diagram is very helpful. The greater the awareness of our sinfulness, the larger the cross grows. The same thing happens when our awareness of God’s holiness increases. Now let’s be careful here. When I talk about the awareness of our sinfulness, I in no way mean to imply that we are utterly sinful and hopeless as believers. We have been justified in Christ. We are a new creation in Christ. We are saints. We are made holy. We are saints who still sin. So I do not want you to view yourself as hopelessly sinful and awful. The awareness of sin that I mean is awareness of what we were. We need to see what Christ has done for us in comparison to his perfect holiness.



In some ways this is another way of saying point #2—It helps you to better appreciate the before and after of conversion. But it’s more than that. Also, we must realize that the difference between our sinfulness and God’s holiness is not continuing to grow. The difference is infinite. The difference between our pre-conversion sinfulness and God’s holiness is an infinite chasm. So what is increasing here is our awareness, our understanding of this difference. Therefore,

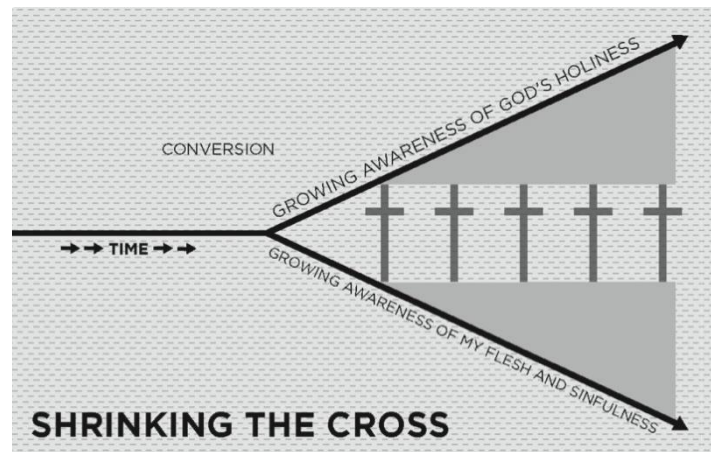


when you comprehend the difference between your sinfulness apart from Christ and his perfect holiness, as the cross looms larger what is actually happening is that your worship and awe of Christ is increasing.

So a passage like this one that teaches us about the utter sinfulness of mankind will serve to broaden this gap and will increase our worship and awe. Likewise, when we

study passages that teach us about God's holiness, this gap will broaden and our worship and awe will increase. Ideally, you consider both side of the triangle at the same time as both are true.

Now I assume you will understand what happens when you shrink the cross. Most people don't like to touch God's holiness. They would not want to go on record as saying that God is not as holy as he says he is. At least most evangelical Christians don't want to go there. As we downplay our sinfulness the cross is shrinking. If you in any way chafe at this description of our sinful state apart from Christ, then you are downplaying the sin nature in every person.



The diagnosis/cure illustration is usually helpful here. Two weeks ago I mentioned the 59 year old former church member from Sauk Prairie whose funeral we attended. We stayed and had lunch with the youth pastor and his wife, Rod and Jane Spillane, for those of you who were at the Valentine's dinner two years ago. As we sat there, I began to shake. It wasn't like a low blood sugar or dehydrated sort of shaking but much worse. We weren't doing anything other than sitting there around the table talking. It kept getting worse and worse so I finally mentioned something to Karen. Then she could see that I was shaking. Given that I had no idea what was wrong with me and we had a 90 minute drive home, we decided to go to urgent care just to be on the safe side. After an exam and blood tests the ER doctor said, "I have no idea what is causing this but I don't think it's serious." That's not always helpful but of course it's better than telling me I'm having a heart attack.

Now let's say that I had some blockage in my arteries and they told me I had to have an emergency stent put in. I'd probably sign the papers and get it done. But what if the ER doc told me that there was nothing wrong with me but they want to rush me into the OR in put stents in my arteries? There's absolutely no way I would let them do it. The cure is dependent on the diagnosis, right? The worse the diagnosis, the more drastic the cure. If you don't think that your sin was all that bad then the cure is not all that great. It all comes down to awareness—awareness of what you were without Christ and awareness of God's infinite holiness.

But it's not all past tense for us, is it? We are saints who sin but we still sin and we are warned to no longer live this way, with these kinds of heart attitudes. He knows there will be struggles but he also has hope for his readers. In verse 20 he wrote, *But that is not the way you learned Christ!* Understand that there is no exclamation point in the Greek language but if there were, there Paul would certainly have put one at the end of this sentence.

Ryan and Ethan's favorite sport is basketball and they talk about proper shot form, the position of the forearm, the bend of the elbow, the flicker of the wrist and fingers. Now let's say that

Ethan started shooting with two hands and sort of awkwardly pushed the ball forward. Ryan would look at him and say, “That’s not the way you learned to shoot!” And how did Paul know that? He knew that because he was the one who taught the believers in Ephesus. He knew that they were taught the correct way and therefore he had hope for them.

Now why did he say that is not the way you learned Christ? Think about it for a minute. He was warning them to no longer live as the Gentiles do. He was warning them not to live in darkness, alienated from God with willful ignorance and hardened hearts. He could have said, “That’s not the way you learned to live” or “that’s not the way you were taught to be a good Christian” or “That’s not the kind of moral behavior that you learned.” But instead he said, “That’s not the way you learned Christ.”

Do you see what I am driving at? Paul equated "learning Christ" with all of those moral standards. He equated the totality of the moral behaviors as “learning Christ.” Learning Christ is not just believing in Jesus. It’s not merely believing facts about who he is. It starts there of course. If you don’t understand and believe the right things about Jesus they won’t help you live rightly in the end. But learning Christ is not mere knowledge. Learning Christ is something that impacts your entire life. You trust him. You submit to him. You allow all of his teaching to shape how you think, how you act, how you feel. It is a total life transformation, slow as it may be, but nothing should ever be hidden from its light.

The solution to living this way is to put off the old self and to put on the new self. We’ll cover that in depth next week but let me leave you with a practical summary of what that will look like. One of Campus Crusades most popular publications is their little blue book called *Have You Made the Wonderful Discovery of the Spirit-Filled Life?* In the booklet is something Bill Bright called *Spiritual Breathing*.

Spiritual breathing (exhaling the impure and inhaling the pure) is an exercise in faith that enables you to continue to experience God’s love and forgiveness.

Exhale -- confess your sin -- agree with God concerning your sin and thank Him for His forgiveness of it, according to 1 John 1:9. Confession involves repentance - a change in attitude and action.

Inhale -- surrender the control of your life to Christ, and appropriate (receive) the fullness of the Holy Spirit by faith. Trust that He now directs and empowers you; according to the command of Ephesians 5:18, and the promise of 1 John 5:14, 15.ⁱ

Spiritual breathing is daily exercise of repentance and surrender. I like this because think about how many times you breathed during this sermon—about twenty times per minute on average. Not that you need to confess twenty times every minute of every day, but you get the idea. It’s a lifestyle. Breathe out the confession, repentance. Tell God that you own what you did, make no excuses. Breathe in forgiveness, submit to our King and receive his mercy and grace.

Rich Maurer
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ⁱ <https://www.cru.org/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/the-spirit-filled-life.html>