

Put Off the Old Self, Ephesians 4:17 – 5:21  
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This morning I want to talk about fighting sin. This is what the Christian life is all about, and I believe God is giving us a wake up call to motivate us to fight sin in our lives. It's a message for each one of us.

I want us to look at some verses in Ephesians 4-5. Let's start by looking at chapter 4 verse 19 where Paul is describing the unbelieving Gentiles. He says "they have become callous." What happens when you have a callous? There's less sensitivity. Paul uses this as an illustration of moral insensitivity. In 1 Timothy 4:2 he uses a similar word-picture when he speaks of a seared conscience. The conscience has been burned so that it's left without feeling. It is numb to the guilt and conviction of wrongdoing. This callousness is so dangerous, because it leads a person into greater and greater sin. When we're spiritually sensitive, morally sensitive, our conscience is pricked when we do wrong. It bothers us. We're convicted, and we feel the need to confess to the Lord and confess to others and make things right. But when we're callous, when our conscience is seared, then we continue to play with fire. Just imagine how dangerous life is for the person who has no sensitivity to pain. The feeling of pain is what keeps us from harming ourselves. And sensitivity to the conviction of the Holy Spirit is what keeps us from plunging headlong into spiritual destruction. If we lose that sensitivity, we are putting ourselves in a very dangerous position.

Beware, friends, of justifying sin. We may rationalize a seemingly small thing, but that rationalization will begin to callous our conscience. That movie isn't too bad, we might think. It will be OK if I share this little piece of gossip with just one person. I can fudge on these numbers just a little bit, it won't hurt anyone. And as we push away the guilty feelings and the conviction of the Holy Spirit, we make ourselves more and more susceptible to the old self. What we need to do is put off the old self, but when we rationalize sin we are putting ON the old self.

Another application that I want to make is the danger of married men or women developing close friendships with members of the opposite sex. This is such a deceptive way that sin can destroy individuals who are involved in ministry. We need to guard our hearts and guard our marriages. A man and a woman can think, "We're just studying the Bible together; we're involved in ministry together." What could be wrong with that? But then that relationship develops into something that is very wrong and harmful to everyone involved.

Let's be very sensitive to what's going on in our hearts. And let's be aware of our own weaknesses, so that we take the appropriate precautions that will keep us away from compromising situations. Take inventory of your own spiritual walk. Take inventory of your life. What kind of activities are you involved in? What's going on in your heart? Pray for the Holy Spirit to convict you of sin, and then respond to the conviction that He brings. Don't rationalize sin or justify it. Flee from it.

To grow in holiness we must be morally sensitive. We need to be in God's Word, and in prayer. And we need to look at our own souls realistically and critically. We need to analyze ourselves in contrast to the blazing spotlight of God's Word. In the light of God's Word it will become evident how we're falling short. Where am I failing? Where

am I slacking? Where am I justifying sin? We also need to have accountability relationships with others in the church so that we can share our struggles, rather than pretending they're not there. Check your moral compass. Is it in line with God's Word? Or is it losing its true direction because of callousness?

You should know that Jeremy and I have committed to holding one another accountable in some very specific ways. We will be asking each other questions like, "Have you viewed anything inappropriate?" "Have you been alone with a woman?" as well as questions like, "What have you been doing to minister to your wife and children?" and "How are your times in the Word and in prayer?" There needs to be this kind of intentional accountability among the elders, and also among the congregation as a whole. Let's work to foster relationships like this, so that we can help one another put off the old self and protect one another from becoming spiritually callous.

Next, let's look at verse 22, "to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through *deceitful desires*." Those last two words, "deceitful desires," tell us a whole lot about sin, and I want to focus on that little phrase.

Do you see what this is saying about sin, what it's saying about the old self? Sin offers pleasure. That's why we sin. We don't sin out of duty. We don't wake up in the morning and say, "I'm a sinner, so I better go out and sin," like it's our job. No, we don't sin out of duty. We sin because we WANT to! We desire the pleasure that sin offers, whether it's the prideful triumph of putting someone else down, or the vengeful pleasure of getting back at someone, or the momentary exhilaration of sexual immorality, or satisfying your curiosity by talking about people behind their backs, or the strange enjoyment of holding a grudge against another person. We sin in all these ways because there is an offer of pleasure, or at least an opportunity to avoid pain.

The important truth that this phrase points to, however, is the fact that when sin offers us pleasure, it lies! It is deceitful. Sin promises pleasure, but it cannot fulfill those promises. Prideful thoughts may give us a fleeting sense of importance, but it will kill our capacity for joy. Lust may be exciting for a moment, but it is a hollow pleasure, and leaves us feeling empty, guilty, and longing for something that will truly satisfy. Gossip destroys friendships. Dishonesty creates a fear of being caught. Holding a grudge becomes like a cancer that eats away from within. Sin offers pleasure. But it only brings pain and suffering and emotional torment and relational agony.

Sin entices us with certain superficial pleasures, but it is so deceitful. Sin is not the pathway to lasting pleasure. It is the pathway to death. The momentary pleasure now will kill you in the end. So what we need to do is hold on to the truth. We need to study the truth of God's Word. We need other believers in our lives who are going to speak the truth to us. We need to meditate on the truth, and pray according to the truth, and preach the truth to ourselves. And then the enticements of sin will lose their luster. We will see sin for what it is, and we will be better equipped to combat the deceitful desires.

Some of you are on the brink of doing some radical things in your pursuit of true joy. Some of you have been living the Christian life half-heartedly. You have a love for Christ, but you are too attached to the world. I pray that today will mark a significant break in your life. Be done with the deceitful pleasures. Don't waste your life on the petty and seductive pleasures of the world. Pursue real joy, and make your life count for Christ.

Next, I want to talk about how to walk according to the new self. How do we kill the old self and live in accordance with the new creature we have become in Christ? And the answer is: the old self will gradually perish and the new self will increase in power as our desires are purified. This goes right along with the previous point. It's just the other side of the same coin. On the one hand we need to realize that the pleasure of sin is deceitful. The desires of the old self are deceptive desires, and when we can recognize them as such, it will sever the root of their power over us. And on the other hand we need to realize that the only true and lasting pleasure comes from knowing God and beholding His awesome nature. To behold the beauty of God Almighty and to experience the splendor of the Gospel: this is true joy. To know that God sent His beloved Son Jesus Christ to save sinners like you and me, and to know that our salvation does not depend on us but on Him: this is true life. This is abundant life. This Gospel. This God. This is what will get you out of bed in the morning with a zeal and a passion for life.

So how do we kill the old self and live according to the new self? First we need to realize that this involves a fight. It's not a fight against other Christians. It's not a fight against non-Christians. It's not a political fight. It's a fight against the sin in my own heart. It's a war that I need to wage against my own sinful flesh.

Secondly, we need to realize that what we're fighting for is greater pleasure. This is the main thing I want you to get this morning. The fight against sin is a fight for greater pleasure. When we fight against the sin in our own lives, it's not a fight to deny pleasure. It's a fight to deny lesser pleasures in favor of greater ones.

C. S. Lewis makes this point so well in this famous quote from his address "The Weight of Glory." He says, "If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is not part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

In other words, many people wrongly assume that the Christian life is about denying pleasure in order to simply do your duty. I have to suppress my desire for happiness and just do what I'm supposed to do. But that's not the case. We don't need to diminish our desires, we need to increase them and set our affections on Him who can actually satisfy. We are far too easily pleased, and we need to strive for higher pleasures.

It's a fight, and it's a fight to deny ourselves the deceitful desires that will bring us only small and hollow pleasures, and then leave us searching for something else. We must deny those pleasures in order to experience the infinitely greater pleasures offered to us in Christ.

Let's move to chapter 5 now and look at verses 3-7. In these verses Paul warns against sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talk, and crude joking. Now we need to clarify what these terms are referring to, because in our relativistic age it would be easy for anyone to claim that their personal ethics are above board. Someone may claim to be sexually moral even though their lifestyle is totally

against what the Bible teaches. Our tendency is to compare ourselves to others (mainly others we deem to be worse than ourselves), and we conclude that we're doing OK. But it doesn't matter whatsoever how my behavior measures up to the average morality in this culture. What matters is how my behavior measures up to God's standard. So as we look at these admonitions, you should be looking in the mirror and thinking about how you fall short of God's moral standard.

First of all, "sexual immorality," which comes from the Greek word *porneia*. This includes any sexual involvement outside of marriage. God designed sex to be enjoyed within the relationship of a husband and a wife, and it is a perversion of God's ideal if there is any sexual activity otherwise. If you are sleeping with someone who is not your spouse, you are sinning against God. If you're in a dating relationship and you're asking the question, "How far is too far," then you are most likely sinning in your physical relationship. That's exactly the wrong question to be asking. You should be asking, "How pure can we be?"

Pornography is another sin that certainly falls under this category. Remember that sin is in the heart. And Jesus said in Matthew 5, "everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Don't think that looking at pornography isn't a big deal! It will destroy your life. If you're married, it will destroy your marriage. Flee from it. Fight it. Do whatever you have to do to get help from others in overcoming the sins of sexual immorality.

And remember that the battle for purity is not just a battle to deny yourself pleasure. It is a battle to deny yourself sick and unfulfilling pleasures in order to experience the infinitely greater pleasures that God offers. Saint Augustine, living back in the 300s, experienced this transformation in his life. He had been in bondage to sexual sin. He lived with a woman who was not his wife for 15 years, and even when he finally felt convicted of that and sent her away, he then took another mistress. But when God regenerated Augustine's heart, he was able to see the beauty of chastity and purity. Augustine wrote in a prayer to God, "How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose. You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy." God is far more satisfying than the momentary pleasures of immorality, and in that truth we find the power to overcome sin.

Next, the phrase "all impurity," is a general reference to all kinds of ungodly behavior. And then the third term in verse 3 is "covetousness," or "greed." The unending desire for more. Never satisfied or content, but always pursuing the next pleasure, the next possession, wanting what others have. In verse 5 the covetous person is called an idolater, and that is exactly what happens when we're greedy. We make a god out of stuff. We think that a certain thing, or toy, or possession, or relationship, or experience, or position of power or prestige, or whatever, is going to make us happy. But then even when we get what we thought we wanted, we're still not satisfied. That is the deception of covetousness and greed. The answer is not in getting the next thing. The answer is learning contentment with what we have and finding our ultimate satisfaction in God Himself.

In verse 4 three more sins are listed, and while verse 3 focused on conduct, verse 4 focuses on speech. The first word, "filthiness," is obscene talk. Speech that trivializes and perverts God's beautiful design for sexuality. The second word, "foolish talk," would be anything that is empty and absurd. Idle chatter that can become degrading and

detracts from holiness. And finally, “crude joking,” which, like obscenity, is an offence against the beauty of God’s creation and his design for sex and marriage. These are the locker-room jokes or the break room jokes that spiral downward into indecency. The sexual innuendo or double-entendre. Christians should have no part in this kind of speech.

This is a time for each of us to test ourselves. Let God’s Word shine into the depths of your heart. May the Holy Spirit convict us of sin, and give us grace to fight for greater pleasure.

We’ll close by looking at the warnings in verses 5-7. Paul gives some serious warnings here against the ungodly behavior that he has just described. He refers back to the three sins he listed in verse 3 and says that “everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” This is a severe warning. If you are in bondage to sexual sin or to covetousness or to any impurity, and if you are not fighting against those sins (in other words, if you have justified and rationalized those sins and you don’t have a desire to be free from them), then you are probably not saved. Because when God justifies a person (saves a person) He immediately begins to sanctify that person (to make that person holy). This is how God works. He saves us by granting us faith in Jesus Christ and we are counted righteous in Christ (justified). But that’s not the end. It’s just the beginning. It’s the beginning of a long and painful process called sanctification, which is the process of gradually becoming holy. This process will not be completed in this life, but it is something that is taking place in the life of every true believer. The point is: Are you fighting? Is God convicting you of sin and giving you the desire to flee from sin? Or are you just following the path of least resistance and allowing sin to master you?

The letter of 1 John has some important things to say about this. On the one hand, the letter is clear that even though we’re Christians we’re still sinners. 1 John 1:8 says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” So even though God has saved us from the punishment of sin, we will continue to wrestle against the power of sin in this life. On the other hand, though, 1 John 3:9 says, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.” So, yes, we will sin. But if we make a practice of sinning, if there’s no resistance to sin, it’s evidence that we’re not Christians. That’s a scary thing to consider. So let’s test ourselves. What are we doing to combat the pleasures of sin and fight for a much greater pleasure in God?

Verses 6-7 tell us that in our fight against sin we need to protect ourselves from those who will seek to lead us astray. We should not associate with them, as verse 7 says, meaning that we should never be pulled down into their sinful behaviors. There are individuals around us constantly who will seek to deceive us with empty words. Whether it’s co-workers or friends or family members or classmates or radio personalities or characters on a TV show: the world is constantly trying to minimize the seriousness of sin and, in fact, celebrates sin. Verse 6 says, “because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.” Sin IS serious. It’s nothing to trivialize. It’s nothing to make light of. If you pursue a life of unrestrained sin, you will not only have no inheritance in the kingdom, you will also bear the eternal wrath of God.

Don’t be deceived when someone says, “Lighten up.” “It’s not that bad.” “Everybody’s doing it.” “It won’t hurt anyone.” Those are empty words. Those are

deceitful words. Pursue holiness with all your might, and don't allow the foolish and empty words of others to stand in the way of that.

God is teaching us, brothers and sisters. Let's not miss the lessons He wants us to learn. Sin is serious. It's destructive. It's deceptive. And it will destroy us if we do not fight. We have to hold on to the truth, and preach the truth to ourselves, and fight for higher pleasure, real pleasure, lasting pleasure. Oh, I pray that God will use this season in the life of our church to bring us to our knees and to cause us to pursue Him with a renewed passion and fervency.