

The New Self

Ephesians 4:17-24

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Who am I? What is my purpose? What gives me value? All three of these questions probe at the question of identity. The question of identity is central to Enlightenment philosophy because it probes the nature of self-awareness, existence, and individual purpose. René Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, encapsulates this in his famous declaration, “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (I think, therefore I am).¹ Descartes believed that identity begins with self-awareness, with thought being the undeniable proof of existence. For him, the essence of being lies in the mind's capacity to question and understand itself. This intellectual inquiry formed the foundation of Enlightenment ideals of reason and individuality. On the other hand, Søren Kierkegaard, often regarded as a precursor to existentialism, stressed the subjective nature of identity. He wrote, “*The most common form of despair is not being who you are.*”² For Kierkegaard, identity was about discovering one's true self beyond societal pressures. Both philosophers emphasize that understanding who we are, at our core, is essential to the philosophical pursuit of truth and meaning. Descartes and Kierkegaard were Christians, and this influenced their philosophical directions on truth and ultimate reality.

The Bible and Christianity speak to every aspect of human life and seek to answer the question of identity. As we've heard from Paul that is the primary question of the letter of Ephesians. Who are you? And most specifically, who are you now that you are in Christ? Paul has asserted that we have become a new person, and we are continually being made into that new person by God's grace. See, it isn't just our modern moment that is focused on the questions of identity, human flourishing, and what is truly good. Those questions are as old as time. Yet, they need to be answered in every age and generation. The Bible has been offering the same answer the entire time. You were created in God's image and your identity is to be received from him. Our identity isn't merely about becoming animals with a highly ordered sense of morals. It is about something more: becoming like Jesus. As so we hear from Paul that we need our minds renewed by God. **And a renewed mind is about becoming like Jesus in every way possible.**

¹ Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. 1641.

² Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness Unto Death*. 1849.

1. Review

- a. Paul can be kind of hard to read and follow at times. We have seen Paul quickly pause a line of thought to then write a poem or come back to a point that he made earlier. This type of writing can feel disorganized, but it isn't really. We've said in this series that Paul
- b. What have we heard so far from Paul in chapter four?
 - i. **Walk in humility, gentleness, & patience. (4:2)**
 - ii. **Unity in Christ. (4:4-6)**
 - iii. **Gifts to serve. (4:11)**
 - iv. **Maturity is the goal. (4:13-15)**
- c. As we continue in chapter four, Paul is going to continue what he has been teaching.
 - i. The ethical paraenesis, begun in v. 1 and broken off after v. 3 by the digression on the one body, is now resumed and carried on to Eph. 5:20 (if not indeed to 6:20).
- d. The readers are Gentile converts to the Christian faith. They were brought up in the pagan way of life; that must now be abandoned. The darker side of that way of life is depicted in the following clauses, which repeat, but more concisely, the picture of the ethical bankruptcy of contemporary paganism presented in Rom. 1:18–32. "They became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). The terms "futile" and "futility" are sometimes used in the NT to denote idolatry, and although the "futility" of the pagan mind in the present context cannot be restricted to idolatry, it is the result of the idolatrous conditioning of that mind (as is argued at length in Rom. 1:18–32, wrong lines of conduct follow from wrong ideas about God). Even in the ethical field, it is implied, the most strenuous efforts of pagans are vain, because they lack the inner power to enable them to live up to their highest ideals.³
- e. **The question that Paul is asking is an ethical one. It is the question of what is good.**
 - i. See, this question in Paul's mind isn't about what is mostly, moderately, or occasionally good. It is about what is maximally good.
 - ii. So, let's ask that question with Paul. → What is maximally good?

2. What is maximally good?

- a. Paul is helping to unpack the question, what way of living will lead to my maximal good?
 - i. Fast forward → He is going to unpack how this all works out in the family dynamic. Just as he is showing how it works out in the church dynamic.
 - ii. **4:17–24 applies the admonition to the overall realm of ethics. Paul does not preach morals; he witnesses (v. 17) to the consequence of the great antithesis that illuminates the Christian life, the crisis between this world and the next that is revealed in Christ and has overtaken believers.**
- b. **An ethical term – Good:** In its adjectival form as an ethical term, *good* means, basically, **morally excellent**. *Goodness*, in turn, means the state or quality of being good. The nature of this moral excellence, however, has been one of the central questions explored by ethicists throughout history. Whereas the focus of the debate in the Greek philosophical tradition has been on the

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 354–355.

issue of what constitutes a good human, the biblical perspective begins with the moral excellence of God. **As a consequence, Christian ethics does not leave the good at the level of an abstract philosophical concept.** Rather, the ground of goodness is the personal God who is active in human history, who enters into covenant with creation, and who is supremely manifested in Jesus Christ.

- i. **This God is the standard for goodness and determines what is the human good.**⁴
Sometimes God and his Word is referred to as the *summum bonum*. A Latin term that means literally “highest good.” In ethical theory, the good in relation to which all other values are ordered, or in accordance to which all other values are measured.⁵
- c. **To be truly good is to only and always produce goodness.**
 - i. “Almost” & “Mostly” do not measure up here.
- d. The simple reality of when it comes to being “good” or what is “good,” is that if something or someone is good, it can only exude and exhibit goodness. That is nothing but goodness can come from it or be created by it. Consider in Genesis, when God creates the world and everything in it, he pronounces it, *good*. Why? Because he who is good, is creating it and therefore, nothing can come from him that is not good. However, for you and me, we have a complicated relationship with this topic. Why? Well, because we aspirational like to think of ourselves as good. But, to be truly good, we must and only ever exude and exhibit goodness. Yet, we are all very aware of the fact that is not true. Why? Because we are very capable of exuding and exhibiting things that are not good. So, if we yearn to be *good*, but can’t on our own, what hope is there for us? What source can we turn to for a reformation into goodness? Here is where we examine the Word of God.
- e. A renewed mind isn’t merely about engaging in some vision of a mild morality. It is about becoming like Jesus in every way possible. → **What is my greatest good?**
 - i. The knowledge of God is never divorced from walking in his ways: to know him is to be like him, righteous as he is righteous, holy as he is holy.⁶

3. The way we were.

- a. Again, a reminder from Paul.
 - i. **We were held captive by this world. (2:1-3)**
 - 1. Our “natural” way of thinking is in alignment to the ways and values of the world. Which is opposite of the kingdom of God. Paul will emphasize this in chapter four when he defines it as, “sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”
 - ii. **Separated from Christ. (2:12)**
 - 1. They had to learn Christ → But you’, the apostle says to his readers, emphasizing the personal pronoun, ‘can no longer walk in that way. *You did not so learn Christ!* The truth of God and of his purpose has come to dominate your minds, and this truth has ethical implications. Your lives are no longer dark, your minds

⁴ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 47–48.

⁵ Stanley J. Grenz and Jay T. Smith, *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 114.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 359.

no longer vain. You are no longer alienated but walking step by step in the full light of the Lord, and in fellowship with him. So you must finish with all immorality, and the passion for what is impure, and for what outrages the souls and bodies of others.⁷

iii. We were tossed to and fro. (4:14)

1. Like ships at sea without adequate means of steering, they are tossed about by the waves and carried this way and that according to the prevailing wind. Maturity brings with it the capacity to evaluate various forms of teaching, to accept what is true and reject what is false. The mature “have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14).⁸

iv. Hard and calloused hearts. (4:18-19)

1. This idea of the “hardening of their hearts” is carried on in the statement that they have “lost all moral sensitivity”—a classical term which means primarily that one’s skin has become callous and no longer feels pain⁹

b. “Put off what’s old.”

- i. **There must be the complete abandonment of the old way of living, and the working out of the new in personal life, and also in human relationships.**¹⁰

1. **Again, this isn’t a mild or polite social morality.** It is a total transformation.

4. Put off what’s old – Be renewed.

- a. **This is a continual process.** → To have God’s promise is to lay aside the old and to put on the new (vv. 22–23). It means: become what you are! and not what you are not! **But to become what we already are is a continual task for anyone, something we must *call to mind* again and again as long as we live.** Therefore admonition is necessary: be renewed by the Spirit in your *thinking* (v. 23).
- b. What is the pace of spiritual growth? → Two options. - **Crockpot vs Microwave.**
 - i. Dallas Willard wrote that “**the path of spiritual growth is a path of lifelong learning**” and that “**it is a slow and steady process that involves the transformation of our entire being.**”¹¹
 1. When we talk about following Jesus in a life-defining way, we are talking about the transformation of our entire being.
 2. This

⁷ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 135.

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 351.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 355–356.

¹⁰ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 132.

¹¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1988), 10.

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- ii. We live in a cultural moment that not only desires, but evaluates the success of something based on the quickness of its development or progress. → The faster, the better.
 - 1. **Examples:**
 - a. 24-hour news cycle – There is always something new to report and speed is more important than accuracy.
 - b. **Chic -Fil -A – Unreal efficiency- the average drive-thru time at Chick-fil-A was 284.85 seconds (or just under 5 minutes) which was the fastest among major fast food chains in the US.**¹²
 - c. Internet load times – 2008 average page loading time was 22 seconds. In 2021 it was 7.8 seconds. In 2023 it is 2.5 seconds!¹³
 - 2. What is the major factor for most of us replacing a digital device? → The speed of that device.
- iii. All around us we are surrounded by messages that tell us speed and efficiency are the most important things and the markers of our ultimate value.
 - 1. The consequence from this is that we become wired for speed and think that everything should be microwaveable.
 - a. Have we considered how this has affected Gen Z and emerging young adults?
 - 2. **A study published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology in 2019 found that people are experiencing more stress and negative emotions than they did 30 years ago.**¹⁴
- iv. **The healthy reality is that our spiritual lives should not and ultimately cannot be microwaved. We are to embrace the spiritual pace of a crockpot.**
 - 1. Jn. 15 – Jesus talks about abiding with him.
 - a. This is such a helpful picture for us.
 - 2. Ps. 1 – Talks about the righteous person bearing fruit in season... that implies we go through seasons.
- c. **Pace matters and reframes our expectations.**
 - i. Consider how “conquer” is used in Rev. 2-3 – This is a repeated word through the seven churches section. This word is not picturing the finality of victory, but the process of fighting, working, soldiering towards victory.
 - ii. **Microwave spiritual formation says:**
 - 1. “You’re taking too long.”
 - 2. “You should know this already”
 - 3. “Why are you growing faster?”
 - a. This leaves us empty, discouraged, frustrated, and burnt-out.
 - b. Ultimately, microwave spiritual formation is absent of grace.
 - iii. **Crockpot spiritual formation says:**
 - 1. “This is a process and not instant, look at what has already happened.”
 - 2. “There is plenty of time left to keep growing.”
 - 3. “Don’t underestimate what God can do through a long obedience.”

¹² <https://www.qsrmagazine.com/drive-thru/drive-thru-performance-study-2019>

¹³ <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/marketing-strategies/app-and-mobile/mobile-page-speed-new-industry-benchmarks/>

¹⁴ Twenge, J. M., Cooper, A. B., Joiner, T. E., Duffy, M. E., & Binau, S. G. (2019). Age, period, and cohort trends in mood disorder indicators and suicide-related outcomes in a nationally representative dataset, 2005-2017. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 118(2), 305-328.

- a. This takes the pressure off and positions us to enjoy God and walk in righteousness through repentance.
 - b. This is bathed in grace.
- d. **A life of Radical Generosity and Purposeful Responsiveness.**
 - i. We **recognize** that faithfulness is about doing the next right and Godly thing.
 - 1. Faithfulness is not an activity of perfection, nor is it to be dismissed as something that does not matter.
 - a. We tend to go to one of these two extremes while the truth is in the middle.
 - 2. Faithful people are marked so by doing the next right Godly thing. → Don't get overwhelmed and waylaid by worrying about things that are days, weeks, or months ahead of you. → Do the next right Godly thing.
 - 3. **The quality of my outer life begins with the quality of my inner life.**
 - ii. **Key Question: If I am saved and transformed by grace... What is my intentional next step to live out of my received identity of grace?**