

LIVING THE NEW LIFE (2) CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN A NUTSHELL

Ephesians 4:30-5:2

Having set out his theology of reconciliation and unity in the first part of this letter (chapters 1-3), and having pointed to this unity as a key factor in the practical outworking of the Ephesians' faith (4:1-16), Paul has turned to some specific issues, and particularly points out that the Christian life is a balanced life. We are called not only to put off the old, but also to put on the new (4:17-32). He is about to turn his attention to some further specific situations (5:3-6:9) but before he does this Paul sums up the Christian life, reminding his readers of what has already been said and preparing them for what follows.

Paul starts by pointing out an incongruity: why would any Christian want to bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved (30) He is the very one who has marked you with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance (1:13f). In fact, the language Paul uses here seems to be drawn from Israel's Old Testament experience, where Isaiah of the Exile uses the same expression to describe Israel's rebellion

*Yet they rebelled
and grieved his Holy Spirit.
So he turned and became their enemy
and he himself fought against them.*

(Isaiah 63:10)

Seen in this context Paul is pointing out the seriousness of living a new life. He is not giving us a list of suggestions that may, or may not, help us to live more rounded lives. This new life is both an acceptance of God's claim on us, for we are not our own, we are bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19f) and a reflection of his life, lived out in us as we are holy, just as he is holy (Leviticus 19:2).

This duel approach is picked up in the next four verses. First, Paul repeats his 'put off... put on...' formula (31f). His list is not random. Each of the first five negative that we are to be rid of are sins of disunity. Don't forget, these are directed towards Paul's Christian readers, and each sin mentioned is a breakdown in relationships between brothers and sisters. ('Brawling' (31 NIV) is better translated 'clamour' (ESV, LEB) or 'harsh words' (NLB).) The final sin mentioned is malice, and it summarizes the motivation, the hostility, behind the other five. Here is a picture of disunity and the breakdown of relationships.

However, instead of these very worldly values Paul urges the Ephesians to take a very different path. Not malice, but kindness and tender heartedness. And why should we have to put up with other people, no matter how they may rub us up the wrong way? Because that is how God treats us. If we allow our difficulties and disappointments to become malice we become like the character in the parable of the unmerciful servant who refused to forgive his fellow debtor when he himself had been forgiven (Matthew 18:21ff).

But our new life is more than simply maintaining good relationships with our fellow Christians. We are called to reflect God in our lives. We are to take our character from him, walking in love just as Christ did (1 Corinthians 11:1). In the end, it all comes down to this: the Christian life is to be a Christ-like life. We are, after all, God's children and it is expected that there should be a family likeness.

Amen.

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