

Ephesians 4:20-5:2 “Live Like a Christian” 9/26/21

I am sure that all of you are familiar with certain trees that keep their dead leaves until springtime - Most notable in our area are oak trees - But also beech and some varieties of willow trees cling to their dead leaves until fresh ones start to pop out in the spring

That phenomenon occurs most years - But occasionally some dramatic weather event, like a howling blizzard or hurricane, will strip the leaves away before springtime

My family and I weathered out Hurricane Sandy at our home in Freehold - It is north of where that storm made landfall on Long Beach Island, and therefore saw the most severe winds

The day before that storm raged ashore, most of the trees were showing off their fall colors, as they normally do at the end of October - The day after Sandy, it looked like winter - All the trees that were still standing, had their leaves stripped off by the hurricane's winds

I can remember a blizzard in either '09 or 2010 doing the same thing along the ocean in Cape May County - But these times are the exception to the rule - Most years, oak trees may be seen with their dead leaves clinging to them until the new leaves push them off in Springtime

Since this is not a science lecture on deciduous trees that experience marcescence - This is obviously a sermon illustration - And my point is we are just like an oak tree clinging to some dead leaves when we first become believers

Ephesians 4:22-24 (You were taught) “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”¹

¹ Unless otherwise noted Scripture quoted has been taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version,
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Here in these verses, the Apostle Paul exhorts us to put off our old selves, which are being corrupted by deceitful desires - In our conversion experience we are transformed - But there are things that cling to us, like a dead brown leaf clings to an oak tree

To move from that first moment of belief to living like a Christian there are some things we need to shed - First and foremost we should get rid of sin, or things that lead us into sin - Things like crude joking, untruthfulness, bearing a grudge, lewdness, and unwholesome talk

Or to use Paul's words, Ephesians 4:31 "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice."

In one of my 19th century commentaries² W. L. Watkinson noted that we should shed anything that would tend to lead us away from being practical in our lives - He went on to name the theatre, intoxicating drink, cards, music, fiction, plus he noted that there are probably a hundred other things

And while not all of those things may be particularly sinful, Watkinson felt that they all have the potential of distracting us from our walk of faith because of the company they cause us to keep, the influence they exert upon us, and the habit of mind they tend to foster

All these things, like an oak tree sheds its dead leaves in the springtime, should be shed as we put off our old self - The success of our living a Christian life depends on getting rid of worldly influence - And not just in avoiding sinful behavior

If we allow the things of the world a foothold in our lives - Deceitful desires are sure to follow

James 1:14-15 "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."

² The Biblical Illustrator, Joseph S. Excell, editor, originally published 1887 in London, England, © public domain

Therefore, if we prevent worldly influences from being present in our lives, we will also stop the evil desires that spring from them

Another lesson that we may learn from the oak tree is from that moment when it normally sheds those dead leaves in the springtime - Those leaves come off when the new season's leaves begin to appear - When the oak tree begins to grow

So, if we are serious about shedding the influence of the world - We should not merely deprive ourselves - But instead we should embrace a practice of our faith - Study God's Word - Embrace a new devotion - Try a new prayer discipline - Encourage someone - Get involved in a mission

Then instead of doing without, we will be growing in our faith instead - Instead of feeling deprived - We could have a sense of accomplishment

A little devotional called Daily Grace contrasted two similar looking animals that often reside side-by-side in the streams and ponds of North America

One animal, the beaver, works throughout the day toppling trees to create large river dams - The other animal, the river otter, delights in making a game of everything

Otters catch what they need to survive, but also make time to chase after pebbles, slide down slopes, and tweak the tails of their more industrious beaver neighbors

Both animals live about the same length of time, but it sure looks like the otters enjoy life just a little bit more

Otters seem perfectly content if they have enough food and are happy to live in little mud holes along the river

Even in old age, they never miss the opportunity to toss a stone in the water and catch it before it hits bottom³

The point that the Daily Grace is trying to make is to take joy from the life that God has given us - But I would argue that beavers are equally likely to enjoy the life that God has given them as otters

Some of us are wired like otters and like to do fun things - Others are wired like beavers and are quite industrious - Beavers undoubtedly take as much pride in what they accomplish as otters do in the amount of fun they can have

God's people are also as different as a beaver is from an otter - So when you put on your new self by embracing some new discipline - Don't pick one that will be drudgery for you

If you love study, maybe Bible study, journaling, writing, or teaching is for you - If you are spiritual, maybe a new devotional or prayer practice, something musical, or encouraging others is for you - Or if you like going and doing, go and do

You get the idea - If God has given us an otter's personality, we will never be happy cutting down trees and making dams all day - And if God has given us a beaver's personality, trying to play all day when dams need building will never do either

Remember that Ephesians 4:23-24 exhorts us "to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

That new self we are to put on has an infinite number of variations - As long as we are striving to be like God in true righteousness and holiness - The new self we are putting on will be pleasing to the Lord and fulfilling to us

³ Cook Communications Ministries, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 2005

When we put on our new self we should walk in holiness - Rather than living like the people who do not know God - As believers, we need to live like the new people we are in Christ

Next, in verses 25 through 32 Paul offers five specific examples⁴ to show what it means to walk in holiness

First - Lying is to be replaced by truth-telling - And this includes “little white lies” too - We are not to deliberately hurt others with our words, of course - But keeping silent is a much better option than inventing something that it not true

Second - Sinful anger is to be replaced by briefly held righteous indignation, so that the Devil may not be given any opportunity - And the command “do not let the sun go down on your anger” certainly limits the time that may be devoted to righteous indignation

Third - Theft is to be replaced by honest work, in order that one may have the means to meet the needs of others

Fourth - Foul language is to be replaced by gracious speech, that it may edify others and not grieve the Holy Spirit

And Fifth - Resentment and wrath are to give way to kindness and forgiveness, since God has forgiven us

Ephesians 4:32 “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Here is one of the marks of a true Christian - We are people who are filled with kindness - Even if we are exposing a sin in another’s life - We are doing it with kindness

As followers of Jesus, we are compassionate - Reaching out to others in genuine care and concern - Not because we are looking for something in return - But because we recognize that we are just as undeserving, yet God has reached out to us

⁴ Some of the five specific examples is inspired by an exposition in The King James Study Bible,
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In Matthew 18 Jesus told a parable about a king who forgave a debt his servant had for ten thousand talents, which is a measure of gold - I didn't research exactly how much that is worth - But you may be sure that ten thousand of anything made of gold is worth a fortune

Next, that forgiven servant grabbed someone who owed him one hundred denarii, a Roman silver coin - And even though the king had forgiven the servant of that fortune in gold, he was unwilling to forgive the person who owed him a hundred silver coins

The parable hardly needs any explanation - God has forgiven us of an enormous debt, all the sins we have ever committed - And so we should be willing to forgive others too

In the version of the Lord's Prayer that Luke recorded, Jesus says, "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us."⁵ - That is the attitude we are called to have

I love the King James Bible's translation of Ephesians 4:32 - In that Bible it says, "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."⁶

It is a good reminder that we are not forgiven because of anything we have done - We are only forgiven for Christ's sake - Our Savior Jesus gave His sinless life so we might be forgiven of all our sins

In conclusion, we are to take that gift of forgiveness, that free gift of salvation, and build on it - We are to put off our old self, shedding anything that does not glorify God - And we are to put on our new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness

⁵ from Luke 11:4

⁶ The Holy Bible, King James Version, first published in 1611, © public domain