

A New Way of Life

A dictionary defines “integrity” as uprightness of character, proven virtue or honesty. The Apostle Paul defines



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integrity for all who claim to be God’s people: “Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (5:1). As I follow the current news reports, politicians’ declarations and even the pronouncements of some preachers, integrity is no longer valued in our country. Nobody seems to like that statement, including me, but it is confirmed daily.

Paul was not hesitant to tell the truth. The Jewish leaders didn’t like what he said, nor did the Roman government, and neither did the general population. Compare this Ephesian text with Paul’s powerful words in 2 Corinthians 5:17: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” But in this world the “old” empty way of life remains very popular even among those who claim to be Christ believers.

In today’s text Paul gets specific as he describes those who live “in the futility of their minds,” as “darkened in their understanding,” and are “alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance” (Eph. 4:17-18). Their choice is to live with a blindfold, choosing what they prefer rather than with a clear understanding of life and its pitfalls. It’s much like a teenager told me when I was offering her a better way to live: “It’s none of God’s business how I live ... it’s my life!” We all make choices. God has chosen to love us, but when our mind is darkened by selfishness and pride, the result is darkness.

Non-believers develop “hardness of heart, having lost all sensitivity” (vv. 18-19). The word Paul uses for hardness (*porosis*) is a stone harder than marble. We condition ourselves by the choices we make, until it seems routine or natural to cheat, lie or treat others with disdain. There are plenty of contemporary examples in our world of what happens when love, respect and compassion are trampled underfoot. We

can become deaf to the promptings of God’s Spirit.

Paul uses even stronger language describing those who “have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity” (v. 19). We can see examples of this daily. I learned about this for the first time myself when I was in the sixth grade and a neighbor boy showed me pictures of his naked mother and talked about how much his dad liked sex! My mother carefully explained how degrading that boy’s ideas were for everyone and that the relationship of a good marriage was shaped by kindness, mutual respect and faithfulness.

Paul says that those who profess to believe in and follow Christ, yet live outside his teachings (v. 20), have not learned the way of Christ! In verses 25-32 Paul describes six qualities or evidences of life shaped by God’s love and grace.

“Let all of us speak the truth” (v. 25). This is bedrock for Christian character. 1 John 1:8 warns that “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” When we lie to ourselves, lie to others and lie to God, we are opening wide the doorway to every form of tragedy and suffering.

“Be angry but do not sin” (vv. 26-27). We know that Jesus showed anger in the Temple, overturning the money changers’ tables and condemning those who were using God’s house for personal gain. It is not wrong to be angry against things that are unjust and harmful. We need to be angry about what is wrong, but be equally committed to resolving injustice and things that harm others, including damaging religious ideas.

“Thieves must give up stealing” (v. 28). It is wrong to steal a person’s character by lying about them, and wrong to take property from another. But Paul also adds a positive dimension to this warning: “rather ... labor and work honestly, with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.”

“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths” (v. 29). Falsehood has already been condemned, but now the positive power of words is emphasized: use your words to build up someone and “give

grace to those who hear.” A Christian moves beyond “thou shalt nots” to model the teachings of Jesus in our words and actions” as a compelling witness.

“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (v. 30). When you open your heart to the love and grace of God, his Holy Spirit comes into your life to convict, guide, inspire and empower you to live the Christ life. This is the opposite of the “hardness of heart” mentioned in verse 18. Paul often reminds us that faith in God must go well beyond rule keeping to compassionate consistent living.

“Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrongdoing and slander” (vv. 31-32). Paul is summarizing here, warning us that our faith must not be darkened by any self-righteousness or elitism, but shaped by kindness and concern for others. We do well to remember “there, but by the grace of God go I!”

Then comes a powerful grace image we are to exemplify: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children ... live in love ... Christ has loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (5:1). The traditional sacrifices in the Temple involved the death of a substitute animal, or money, and the offering of incense. Christ gave himself in a brutal death that bore all the marks of a depraved world, the willing death Christ chose because he loves us.

As we face the challenges and rejection of this world we must remember we are God’s beloved children and that is the reason Christ gave himself on the cross. The incomparable love of God in Christ calls us to be a different kind of people who now choose a new kind of living. We are to “imitate God,” his forgiveness, patience, generosity and grace. Not an easy calling! Paul knew how challenging a task it is to live for Christ. But Paul also knew how difficult it is to live under the restrictions and requirements of Jewish law and against the hostility of the Roman world. The driving force in Paul’s life was God’s love through Christ: love that shaped his values, filled his heart with hope and motivated his actions. How has your life been changed by the grace of God?

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.