

Ephesians 4:17-32 and Righteousness, Holiness, and Victory Over Sin

by Karl Kemp; November, 2013

I'll always quote from the New American Standard Bible, 1995 edition, unless I mention otherwise. Sometimes I'll make comments in the middle of quotations in brackets [] or [[]] to make them more obvious. I borrow heavily in this article from my book, "Holiness and Victory Over Sin: Full Salvation Through the Atoning Death of the Lord Jesus Christ," from my paper on Ephesians chapter 4, and from Articles #s 21 and 22 of my "Twenty-Eight Articles on Holiness and Victory Over Sin." cf. means compare; e.g. means for example

This passage, especially when coupled with Ephesians chapters 5 and 6, is one of the most significant passages in the New Testament teaching and exhorting Christians with the enablement and requirement (which is a great privilege!) to walk in the truth, righteousness, and holiness of God with the victory over all sin, by grace through faith, through salvation in Christ Jesus.

"So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk [[The apostle Paul was addressing these words to Gentiles who had now become Christians (cf. Eph. 1:11-13; 2:11-3:8). The non-Christian Gentiles were, of course, walking (living) in sin.]], **in the futility** [or, "emptiness, vanity"; cf., e.g., Rom. 1:28; 1 Pet. 1:18] **of their mind** [[or, "way of thinking." Many Christians wrongly think that the words "mind" and "thinking" in the Bible are limited to something that people do with the head (the brain). That's a rather serious error. These words typically include something that we do with the heart/inner man/spirit/soul, not just with the head. (See my paper "Some Things We Should Know About the Meaning of the Words "Spirit" and "Soul.") See under Rom. 8:5-7 on pages 118, 119 of my book, "Holiness and Victory Over Sin" (including endnote 32), and see below under Eph. 4:18, 23 (Eph. 4:23 uses the same Greek noun ["nous"] for mind/way of thinking used here in 4:17).]], **(18) being darkened in their understanding** [cf. Rom. 1:21], **excluded from the life of God** [cf. Eph. 2:1] **because of the ignorance that is in them** [cf. Acts 17:30; 1 Pet. 1:14], **because of the hardness of their heart** [[Compare Mark 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:14. These words confirm that people are responsible for their sin. The sin problem originates in the heart (cf. Mark 7:20-23). (In a more general sense the sin problem originated with the fall of Satan; then mankind followed Satan in his rebellion against God.) From the heart we must submit to God in faith; in the heart the priorities, attitudes, and motives are established. What we think about God in our hearts, including our priorities, attitudes, and motives constitute a big part of our important thinking.]]; **(19) and they, having become**

callous [[Their consciences have become insensitive. The NIV has, "having lost all sensitivity." Compare 1 Tim. 4:2.]], **have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness** [[or, "insatiableness, covetousness." Colossians 1:21 speaks of the former (pre Christian) status of Paul's Gentile readers as being "alienated and hostile in mind (Greek "dianoia"), ENGAGED IN EVIL DEEDS [or WORKS; my emphasis]."] If we think wrong in our hearts, we will live wrong.]]. **(20) But you did not learn Christ in this way** [[What they had learned about Christ and salvation through Him, and in Him, put the emphasis on the fact that God sent His Son to solve the sin problem through forgiveness, being born again and redeemed from the kingdom of sin, and righteous and holy living, by grace through faith, in union with Christ, through the indwelling Holy Spirit.]], **(21) if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth** ["the truth" NIV] **is in Jesus** [[Compare John 14:6; Eph. 1:13; and Col. 1:5. Significantly, Eph. 4:24 demonstrates that the TRUTH includes RIGHTEOUSNESS and HOLINESS.]], **(22) that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self** [[or, "lay aside the old man" or, "put off the old man"; I would translate "old man" with the KJV and NKJV. Significantly, the aorist Greek infinitive used here fits the idea of LAYING ASIDE, OR PUTTING OFF, THE OLD MAN ONCE FOR ALL AND COMPLETELY. So too for the aorist infinitive used in verse 24 for PUTTING ON THE NEW MAN. (This double bracket goes on for four more paragraphs.)

On the old man, which speaks of what we were before we became born-again Christians (but shouldn't be any more), see Rom. 6:6; Col. 3:9 (both of these verses specifically mention the "old man"); Gal. 5:24; and Col. 2:11, 12. In Rom. 6:6 the apostle Paul spoke of OUR OLD MAN HAVING BEEN CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST; in Col. 3:9 he said, "SINCE YOU HAVE LAID ASIDE [OR, PUT OFF] THE OLD SELF [THE OLD MAN] WITH ITS EVIL PRACTICES" [my emphasis]. In Col. 2:11 Paul spoke of "THE REMOVAL OF THE BODY OF THE FLESH ["the flesh" is comparable in meaning with the old man here, and often] BY THE CIRCUMCISION OF CHRIST" [my emphasis]. In Col. 2:12 he said WE HAVE BEEN BURIED WITH CHRIST IN BAPTISM (which, as Rom. 6:3, 4 show, goes with the old man dying with Christ). Galatians 5:24 speaks of the same end result from a little different point of view, "NOW THOSE WHO BELONG TO CHRIST HAVE CRUCIFIED THE FLESH [which is comparable with crucifying the old man] WITH ITS [SINFUL] PASSIONS AND DESIRES" [my emphasis]. (We have to cooperate with the powerful, sanctifying grace of God in Christ on a continuous basis through faith.) Ephesians 4:22 communicates the same end result but from a different perspective. Paul writes from the point of view that anything that remains of the old man (which, in the ideal case would have already been dealt with) must now once for all be laid aside (or put to death).

It must be understood that in each of the verses I mentioned in the last paragraph (Rom. 6:6; Col. 2:11, 12; 3:9; Gal. 5:24; and Eph. 4:22) the apostle Paul was directly or indirectly exhorting his readers (including us) with our need to make it a top priority to make sure the old man isn't permitted to manifest itself

in sin. He and his readers understood that the old man does not cease to exist (it is not annihilated (cf., e.g., Gal. 5:17) and, given the opportunity, it is always eager to manifest itself in sin (with the eager assistance of the world and the demons). The victory over all sin is far from being automatic, or always easy, when we become born-again Christians.

Many verses in the New Testament confirm that it is not uncommon for Christians to still have sinful things, things that are part of the old man, that need to be put off. The old man will continue to live (and the result will be sin for the Christian) to the extent the Christian doesn't walk after the Spirit (e.g., Gal. 5:16) and in accordance with the Word of God, by grace through faith, on a continuous basis, thereby keeping the old man from manifesting itself in sin. And it is true, of course, that Christians can't have faith to walk above sin unless they know for sure that this is what they are called to in the New Testament. **THIS WIDESPREAD LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AND FAITH IS A BIG PART OF THE PROBLEM IN OUR DAY.**

Ephesians 4:25, which uses the same Greek verb as 4:22, is an important cross-reference. There the apostle Paul exhorts his readers to LAY ASIDE/PUT OFF falsehood once for all and to speak the truth. (The KJV, NKJV have "putting away lying." See Rev. 21:8; 22:15.) Laying aside/putting off falsehood/lying is just part of what it means to lay aside/put off the old man. It should be obvious that Paul means TO PUT OFF FALSEHOOD/LYING ONCE FOR ALL AND COMPLETELY, and the aorist Greek participle used in verse 25 fits that viewpoint. Also, as Paul continues with Eph. 4:25-31, he lists some of the other sinful things that must be once for all laid aside by all Christians. THE APOSTLE CERTAINLY DIDN'T EXHORT HIS READERS TO GRADUALLY TAPER OFF FALSEHOOD/LYING, OR ANY OTHER SIN. Note "put away from you" (using a different Greek verb) in 4:31. Compare, for example, Col. 3:8; Heb. 12:1; James 1:21; and 1 Pet. 2:1.], **which is being corrupted** [[I prefer the translation of the KJV, "which is corrupt." I'm not denying the fact that, in some ways, the world is becoming more corrupt all the time, but I don't believe that Paul incorporated that idea here.]] **in accordance with the lusts of deceit** [[There is a strong contrast in these verses between the TRUTH of God and the LIES/DECEIT/DECEPTION of the devil and the world. The KJV and NKJV have "according to the deceitful lusts"; the NIV has "by its deceitful desires." Note that the words "truth" and "lies/deceit/deception" all relate to the mind/way of thinking. The mind/way of thinking of the Spirit (walking by the Spirit [e.g., Gal. 5:16] includes thinking by the Spirit) always lines up with the TRUTH of God, which as Eph. 4:24 shows, includes RIGHTEOUSNESS and HOLINESS. When people lust after/desire wrong (sinful) things it is because they have been deceived and led astray by sin and Satan (this started with Eve); they have been led away from God and His truth, righteousness, and holiness. This doesn't mean, of course, that people have an excuse for their sin. Hebrews 3:13 exhorts Christians "to encourage one another day after day...so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."], **(23) and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind** [[This verse

is extremely important but (in my opinion) typically not well translated, or well understood. I refer the reader to what I said above under Eph. 4:17, 18, including the references to my book, "Holiness and Victory Over Sin." I would translate Eph. 4:23 "and be renewed by the Spirit in your mind [or, way of thinking]." This verse explains, in large part, HOW Christians are once for all to be transformed from their former sinful state (Eph. 4:17-19, 22). Significantly, in Eph. 4:17 the apostle said: "This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, THAT YOU WALK NO LONGER JUST AS THE GENTILES ALSO WALK, IN THE FUTILITY OF THEIR MIND [or WAY OF THINKING; my emphasis]." The NIV has, "in the futility of their THINKING" [my emphasis]. The Greek noun "nous," which is translated "mind" by the NASB in Eph. 4:17, is also used here in Eph. 4:23.

This way of understanding Eph. 4:23 isn't the majority view, but many agree with this viewpoint. Andrew T. Lincoln ("Ephesians," "Word Biblical Commentary," Vol. 42 [Word, 1990], pages 286, 287) doesn't agree with this viewpoint, but he acknowledges that "The majority of recent commentators [and he lists quite a few] opt for a reference to the divine Spirit [here]...." Lincoln quoted J. L. Houlden ("Paul's Letters from Prison" [Penguin, 1970], who translated the words, "Be renewed by the Spirit in your mind."

As far as I can remember, I came to this understanding of these words on my own (by the Spirit of God, and after I learned Greek) before I first saw this viewpoint in print (about 1972) in the commentary on Ephesians by Ralph P. Martin in the "New Bible Commentary: Revised" [Eerdmans, 1971], pages 1117, 1118. I'll quote what Martin said under Eph. 4:23. "The summons to put off the old nature as a suit of clothes is shed may sound like a counsel of despair, for fallen man is in helpless plight. But Paul's appeal is to Christians who have known the renewal of the Spirit which, begun decisively at conversion, is a process to be continued. Hence the present tense ["present tense" of the infinitive translated "be renewed" in the Greek] of his admonition which calls upon his readers to *be renewed* in their minds (answering the need stated in vv. 17, 18) by the action of the Holy Spirit."

I agree with what Martin said here except for his speaking of a "process" of renewal of the mind/thinking by the Spirit. I agree, of course, that Christians will continue to grow (which is a process) in their thinking, but I believe the apostle Paul was speaking here (in an ideal sense) of a once-for-all renewal, a renewal that goes with the once for all putting off the old man (Eph. 4:22) and putting on of the new man (Eph. 4:24). I believe that the "present tense" Martin mentioned conveys the idea of Christians continuing to abide in a renewed state of thinking right by the Spirit (and in accordance with the Word of God), not of their being in a process of renewal. Otherwise they couldn't once for all put off (or crucify) the old man or put on the new man. We are called to walk in an abiding state of righteousness and holiness. This is good news! What God calls us to do, He enables us to do! This is supernatural!

Paul demonstrates this same once-for-all viewpoint in Rom. 8:5-7; 12:1, 2 (we will discuss these verses as we continue with our discussion of Eph. 4:23) and often in his writings. It seems clear to me that it isn't nearly good enough to exhort Christians to gradually begin to think right and to gradually put off sins with the understanding that they will necessarily continue to sin throughout their lives on earth, as it is very often taught in our day.

The Holy Spirit enables Christians to be renewed in their minds/in the way they think. (See under Rom. 8:5-7 on pages 118, 119 of my book, "Holiness and Victory Over Sin.") He enables us to have right priorities, attitudes, and motives, and to think (and live) in line with the righteousness and holiness of the truth of God. This is all part of having a renewed mind. (The mind/way of thinking is not at all limited to the head. Our most important thinking takes place in the heart/spirit/inner man.) For us to be renewed in our minds/in the way we think, we must submit (in faith) to the Word of God (where we learn the truth of God; especially the truth of the gospel of salvation in Christ Jesus [cf. Eph. 4:20, 21]), and we must walk by the Spirit of God on a continuous basis. It takes the Word of God plus the Spirit of God for us to have a renewed mind. And we have to think right in our hearts before we can live right. Faith is of the heart.

Romans 12:2 says: "AND DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD, BUT BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWING [RENEWAL; Greek "anakainosis"] OF YOUR MIND [Greek "nous"; my capitalization for emphasis].... The Greek noun "nous," which is used in Eph. 4:17 and 23, is also used in Rom. 12:2. The Greek noun "anakainosis" is only used in the New Testament in Rom. 12:2 and Titus 3:5. It would be better to translate "the renewal," with the BAGD Greek Lexicon, than "the renewing." The word "renewal" fits better with the once-for-all renewal pictured in Eph. 4:17-32 and 12:1, 2. (Romans 12:1-8 are discussed in some detail in my "A Paper on Faith." Romans 12:3 is a very important verse on faith.)

I'm not denying that Christians should continue to grow throughout their lives in Christ (that growth is necessary), but in the ideal case there will not be a continual growing out of sin because we will be living in an abiding state of holiness with the victory over all sin. Note the once-for-all nature of the teaching and exhortations of Eph. 4:17-6:20; Rom. 6:1-23; 8:1-14; 12:1, 2; Gal. 5:24; and many similar passages.

Throughout our Christian lives we should (we have the privilege to) be holy (to live in a state of holiness), and we should be growing (growing in knowledge and wisdom, growing more like the Lord Jesus Christ, growing in the fruit of the Spirit, etc.) If we rightly respond to God's Word (with humble faith) it will bring transformation, not condemnation. And if we should slip into sin, God (who knows our hearts) knows if we are making Him and His Word top priority. I'm sure that He finds it rather easy to forgive and to sanctify those who are making Him and His Word top priority, and who are quick to repent.], **(24) and put on the new self** ["new man." We can't stop with PUTTING OFF the old man once

for all; we must also PUT ON the new man once for all (cf., e.g., Col. 3:10, which specifically mentions putting on the new man); Rom. 6:4; 7:6; 12:2; 13:14 ("But put on the Lord Jesus Christ [cf. Gal. 3:27], and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts"); and 2 Cor. 5:17.]], **which in *the likeness of*** [The words "the likeness of" are in italics in the NASB.] **God** [[I could live with the translation of the NASB here, but the Greek more literally reads, "in accordance with (or, "according to [NKJV]) God," which probably includes other ideas in addition to the new man's being *in the likeness of God*. Instead of being in accordance with sin and the lies/deceit/deception of the devil, the new man in Christ is in accordance with God. Taken in their fullest sense these words could include all the following ideas: The new man has been created by God (cf. Eph. 2:10); it is in the likeness of God; and it is in accordance with the will of God and His truth, which includes His righteousness and holiness.

When we think of man's being in the likeness of God, we think of Gen. 1:26; 5:1; and 9:6, but it must be understood that God's new creation in Christ takes man to a much higher place than what Adam had before the fall (cf., e.g., 1 Cor. 15:44-50). Most of the glory of what it means to be a son of God in union with Christ Jesus, the Unique Son, is reserved for the (near) future, but we have already entered into the preliminary phase of that glory. When Christians are thinking right and living right through salvation in union with Christ Jesus (being indwelt by the Holy Spirit), which is what Christians are enabled and required to do, they are living in accordance with God - they certainly aren't sinning, and God is glorified.

Ephesians 4:22-24, and especially 4:24, demonstrate how the apostle can exhort Christians to "be imitators of God, as beloved children" in Eph. 5:1. That's quite a challenge (and it certainly includes victory over all sin, doesn't it). Along this same line, compare, for example, Matt. 5:48; 1 Cor. 11:1; 1 John 2:5, 6; and 3:1-10. Ephesians 5:1 undoubtedly builds on Eph. 4:32 (and the preceding verses); that is, when Christians do the things spoken of in 4:32, they are imitating God (by His enabling grace).]] **has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth** [[It is very important to know that God's TRUTH includes His RIGHTEOUSNESS and HOLINESS. (We typically don't use the word "truth" this way in English.) Walking in God's truth includes walking in His righteousness and holiness.]]. **(25) Therefore, laying aside falsehood** [See under Eph. 4:22.], **SPEAK TRUTH** [which is the opposite of "falsehood"] **EACH ONE OF YOU WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another.** [[The fact that we are members of one another in the body of Christ makes it all the more imperative for us to speak truth to one another. The NIV has, "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body."]] **(26) BE ANGRY, AND YET DO NOT SIN** [Psalm 4:4]; **do not let the sun go down on your anger** [[Most agree that Paul is *not* exhorting his readers to be angry here, but cautioning them to make sure that anger doesn't lead to sin. As James 1:19 cautions, we must be "slow to anger." It is possible for Christians to be angry without sinning (cf. Mark 3:5), but anger can

be sinful, and it can lead to great sin (cf. James 1:20; Eph. 4:31). That's why the apostle cautions believers to quickly deal with the cause of the anger and to not let the sun go down on their anger. Sometimes we can get issues quickly resolved, before the sun goes down. On those occasions where the issues can't be resolved quickly, or resolved at all (for one thing, we can't act for the other person(s) who may be involved), we can take our concern to (cast our care upon) the Lord and leave it there (Phil. 4:6, 7; 1 Pet. 5:7). He'll take care of the details; they'll be in good hands; we can stay in peace and rest. See Rom. 12:17-21. What a privilege!], **(27) and do not give the devil an opportunity** [[literally, "a place." Compare John 14:30; James 4:7. We don't have to, and we must not, give the devil any place in us. We would give him a place in us, for example, by allowing anger to abide in our hearts. We give the devil a place in us when we allow things that aren't true (including false doctrine), or any sin (including stealing [Eph. 4:28], speaking unwholesome words [Eph. 4:29], etc.) to have a place in us/our lives.]]. **(28) He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good** [cf. 1 Thess. 4:11; 2 Thess. 3:6-15], **so that he will have something to share with one who has need** [cf. Luke 3:11; Titus 3:8, 14]. **(29) Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth** [cf. Eph. 5:4; Col. 3:8], **but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment so that it will give grace to those who hear** [[cf. Eccl. 10:12; Rom. 14:19; and Col. 4:6. The NIV has, "that it may benefit those who listen."]]. **(30) Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God** [[Compare Isa. 63:10. All sin (including accepting false doctrine) grieves the Holy Spirit. We must make God and His truth, righteousness, and holiness top priority, and if we should slip into false doctrine or any other sin, we must be quick to repent.]], **by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.** [[The Holy Spirit sealed us when He came to dwell in us. (See under Eph. 1:13 in my verse-by-verse study of Ephesians chapter 1 on my internet site, or in my "Ephesians Chapter 1, Part 2" on this Christian article site.) The "day of redemption" will begin when Christ returns (cf. Rom. 8:23). At that time all true Christians will be glorified; we will be caught up into the fullness of eternal life; we will begin to reign with Christ.]] **(31) Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice** [cf. 1 Pet. 2:1]. [[This is part of the once for all laying aside/putting off of the old man mentioned in Eph. 4:22.]] **(32) Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.** [[This is part of the once for all putting on of the new man mentioned in Eph. 4:24. The Bible strongly warns Christians that we must forgive if we expect to be forgiven and to maintain our forgiven status before God (cf. Matt. 6:12, 14, 15; 18:21-35). It is also true that there are many situations where something more than forgiveness (e.g., repentance, restoration) is required (e.g., Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; and 2 Thess. 3:6-15).]]

Ephesians chapters 5 and 6 continue with the strong exhortation for Christians to walk as they are called, enabled, and required to walk in truth, righteousness, holiness, humility, etc. In Eph. 5:1 the apostle Paul said, "Therefore be imitators

of God, as beloved children." He certainly exhorted his readers to walk with the victory over all sin.

May God's will be fully accomplished through this paper! Father, we ask that you won't let us be satisfied with anything in our lives that is displeasing to You, including our interpretation of Your Word! In Jesus' name!

Karl Kemp; November, 2013

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