

9AM – 13 JUNE 2021

REPENTANT [EPHESIANS 4:17-5:2]

Introduction – Lost Sensitivity

The late Dr Paul Brand was a renowned doctor who spent many years treating and advocating for sufferers of leprosy. One of the devastating features of leprosy is severe nerve damage which leads to a loss of sensation, most notably the inability to detect physical pain. Whilst this initially might sound like a desirable side effect, Dr Brand tells story after story of people who cause themselves irreparable physical damage because their lack of sensitivity has led to living and moving in a damaging way to their bodies.

For example, on one occasion whilst in Papua New Guinea, Dr Brand encountered a man who was running towards him with a big smile and lopsided gait. Upon reaching the man he discovered that his ankle was dislocated so badly, that it was so floppy, that the man was effectively running on his tibia which had punctured the skin and had twigs and stones jammed in it and sticking up into the marrow. Feeling no pain due to leprosy, the man had continued to exacerbate his injury over many years leaving Dr Brand no option but to amputate his leg below the knee. His lack of physical sensation led to a walk or a gait that unwittingly caused great damage to his body.

1. Who We Were (4:17-19)

Tragically, the image of this man in leprosy is an image of humanity in sin, and as Paul writes to the Ephesians, he reminds them (and us) that this is who we once were, this is how we used to live, or more literally, this is how we used to walk – desensitised to God and so walking in a way ultimately damaging to ourselves and others and grievous unto God. Let's read again from verse 17 - **So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live [walk] as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.**

Verses 17 and 18 make clear that in sin humanity have not only shut God out of the picture, but we have lost all sensitivity to Him. In sin, humanity has become darkened in our understanding, alienated from the life of God, or as Ephesians 2:1 reminds us, dead in our transgressions and sins.

Having lost sensitivity to God in sin, we humans have walked ignorant of God and his commands, and so lived injuriously to ourselves and others. As verse 19 goes on to say, **Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.**

This is not to say that people outside of Christ can't live *at all* honourably or without restraint, but that our overriding trajectory and general impulse is not to please God and love others, but to gratify and satisfy our sinful desires, urges and cravings. This is what we were reminded earlier in Ephesians 2:3, **All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.**

Such a way of life is actually celebrated in our society today. We are encouraged to be 'true to ourselves' and must not repress our inner urges or desires so that we can be genuinely authentic. Sadly, we know that in sin, our urges and desires do not reflect our authentic selves made in the image of God.

2. Who We Are (4:20-24)

Yet Paul reminds us that this is no longer who we are. Like the person cured of leprosy with sensitivity returning to their limbs, in Christ our sensitivity to God has been restored.

We thus read from verse 20, **That, however, is not the way of life you learned²¹ when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.**

Though previously our minds were given to futility and our understanding shrouded in darkness, by hearing and responding to the gospel with repentance and faith, our minds have been engaged, they've been switched on, brought back to life, we have gained sensitivity to God. Look at the verbs here – *learned, heard* and *taught*. This is no longer a life characterised by mindless instinct, but rather by mindful knowledge or sensitivity to Christ.

How has this healing of our spiritual leprosy, or de-sensitivity to God, been made possible? How is it that we might have come to new life and gained our sensitivity of God? Remember what Ephesians 1:13 told us, **And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.** Union with Christ - this is one of the great doctrines expounded by the letter to the Ephesians. By grace, through faith we have been joined Jesus such that his death becomes our death and his life becomes our life.

When we heard the gospel, and responded with repentance and faith, our old selves which were being deformed and corrupted by the disease of sin, were put off and nailed to the cross with Jesus. Our spiritual leprosy was done away with. And as we have died with Christ, we have also risen with him to new life in and with Christ. In Christ, we are an entirely new creation, we have been made new, our spiritual leprosy has been healed, our sensitivity to God has been restored. As verse 24 says, we have put on a new self which was **created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.** Or as Ephesians 2:10 says, **For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.** Or as 2 Corinthians 5:17 triumphantly says, **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!**

Good bye spiritual leprosy! We are no longer desensitised to God, but can feel him, know him, love him, trust him and obey him. We are free from the corrupting and destructive disease of sin in our lives. As those whose minds have been awakened to God, we need no longer live as creatures of sinful instinct, but as those awakened to and mindful of Christ. And as such God has now fitted us not to stumble and trip, not to walk like we used to, but to walk in holiness and righteousness.

3. How We Ought to Walk (4:25-5:2)

Indeed, just as one cured of leprosy would no doubt need to learn how to walk again, so too as those healed of our spiritual leprosy, we need to learn how to walk again. Because the old self has been put off on the cross, we need to put away the sinful walk associated with the old self. Because the new self has put on in Christ, we need to begin to walk like Christ, to walk in step with him.

In 4:25-5:2, Paul shows us how to do just that, to put off the old walk and put on the new walk with regards to every area of our lives. Yet because changing habits isn't easily, because it's hard to break free of our old walk or spiritual gait, we are to be those (who in the words of verse 23) have our minds ongoingly renewed or sensitised to God in regards to every area of our lives. And that's just what Paul does in these verses, he shows us how to put off the old, put on the new, and renews or re-sensitises our minds to the truth of God's word in different areas of our lives. Let's have a look.

3.1 – Truthful Speech (4:25)

Firstly, in verses 25, **Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body.**

According to our old walk, as creatures of sinful instinct, the temptation is to speak falsely and deceptively to one another so as to benefit ourselves. We need to *put this off*.

Perhaps the greatest temptation in this regard is flattery. Psalm 12 laments the prevalence of flattery - we withhold the truth from others and butter them up in order to suit our own self-interest. How prevalent it is in our day of fragile self-esteem. We'll flatter and we'll affirm, because more than we care about the welfare of the other, we don't want to be seen as a 'hater.'

But we are to put this off and in its *put-on* truthful speaking, even when it hurts. We'll be able to do this when our minds are *renewed* in the knowledge, or sensitised to the reality, that we are members of one body in Christ. Because of our union in and with Christ together, to lie and flatter one another will only be to ultimately hurt ourselves and the body of Christ to which we belong.

3.2 – Righteous Anger (4:26-27)

“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold.

According to the old walk, how easy it is to be creatures of sinful instinct with respect to our anger. Paul acknowledges that we will get angry, for there is such a thing as righteous anger - consider Jesus flipping the tables of the money changers in the temple courts. Yet we are to *put off* the sort of anger that is unrighteous - anger that is actually fuelled by bruised-ego, self-centeredness, ungracious double-standards and blocked sinful desires.

Instead, we are *put on* the resolve to be peace seekers and peace makers. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Refuse to let the eruptions of relational tension cool and harden into dried lava flows of jagged and settled bitterness. Make the effort to extend peace, affirm love and keep the communication lines open even if the issue can't be resolved. Apologise for when your anger has indeed been unrighteous.

We'll be able to do this more readily when our minds are *renewed* in the knowledge that the spiritual world is real, and the Satan looks to leverage such conflict to wreak havoc in our lives and in Christ's church. Let us refuse to be an instrument in his wicked schemes. How tragic it is when people think they are on a righteous crusade when in reality they are merely serving as Satan's wrecking ball in their own lives and in the lives of others. Put off unrighteous anger, and put on peace making as you are sensitive to the reality of Satan's divisive schemes and intentions.

3.3 – Faithful Labour (4:28)

Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

Put off the attitude that looks to enjoy the benefits of work without enduring its toil and *put on* a hard-working attitude. Since the fall, God has decreed in Genesis 3:17-19 that our work will produce fruit, but it won't come without toil, exertion and hardship. In sin, we look to defy this decree and enjoy the fruits of labour without its necessary toil. We see this in theft, we see this in the allure of the gambling industry, and to be frank, I think we see it in the hype and rise of crypto currency.

Now I'm not saying that investing in crypto-currency is inherently evil (though I do have concerns about its use to facilitate theft), but we need to assess our motives in investing in it – are we looking for a shortcut which circumvents God's decree, a quick buck with no toil? If so, we should probably reconsider. Is the investment vehicle itself intrinsically something that contributes to toil, productivity and output, or is it predominantly speculative? If so, we should probably reconsider.

We'll be helped in this as our minds are *renewed* with the truth that one of God's primary designs for work is to provide for others, particularly those in need. Notice here that God's design for work is not self-actualisation, nor is it wealth accumulation, God has designed work and income earning so that you might be positioned to give. We'll work hard when sensitised to this truth.

3.4 – Constructive Speech (4:29-30)

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Put off the sinful instinct towards destructive and unwholesome talk and *put on* encouraging and constructive speech that will benefit those who listen. The original here more literally reads, "in order to give grace" to those listening. How can your words be a gift to those around you? This is often what I pray before meetings, before interactions, before get-togethers, "Lord would you help my words be a gift to those listening." How might your words be a gift to others this morning?

To help us put off our instinctive sinful desire to put others down, we are to have our minds *renewed* in the truth, or sensitised to the reality that when we speak and act in such a way that damages the body of Christ, we grieve the person of the Holy Spirit who unites us. When we are mindful that the Holy Spirit is the one who unites us and brings us together we'll conduct our speech in a way that cooperates with the Spirit and pleases him in his unifying work. What an amazing reality to be sensitised to, the Holy Spirit is here working among us to unite us in Christ, how might you cooperate with his work and please Him?

3.5 – Christlike Forgiveness (4:31-32)

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Put off the sinful stride towards ugly aggressiveness and violence and put on grace, compassion and forgiveness. How we need to hear this in our age of victimhood where retaliation is prized over reconciliation. You'll be strengthened to do this as your mind is renewed by the Holy Spirit in the truth that you have been forgiven greatly, indeed much more than any offence that has been committed against you. Let us never become desensitised to this great truth.

In fact, in summary, let us walk like Christ, as we read in 5:1-2, **Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children² and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

We are loved, that is who we are, so let us love others. We have been greatly forgiven so let us forgive others. Jesus has offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins, so securing our forgiveness. But not only so, he has offered himself up as a fragrant offering to God on our behalf. This language draws to mind the Old Testament sacrificial imagery whereby the aroma of a burnt offering would be pleasing to the Lord. In other words, we are covered with the pleasing aroma of Christ's sacrifice. In Christ we are not just tolerable to God, but we are richly loved and a delight to our heavenly Father.

Therefore, because the old has already been put off in Christ and the new has come, let us put off the old walk and start walking like Christ in our truthfulness, in our anger, in our labour, in our speech and in our forgiveness. In every area of our lives we'll be able to do this the Holy Spirit increasingly sensitises or renews our minds with the truth of God's word. Let us pray.