

Can you be Good Without God?

Read Ephesians 4.20-24

LET ME TRY TO SET UP WHERE WE ARE IN THE SCOPE OF EPHESIANS.

In Eph 1-3 Paul gives us this **extended treatment** of the doctrine of salvation. Its about what God has done through Jesus Christ to take enemies, and make them into sons and daughters. **You have not always been a son or daughter of God. You either are an enemy or were an enemy.** That's everybody in the room this morning.

Ok, so Paul celebrates that for 3 chapters. And **then in chapter 4.1**, he says, "ok....in light of that glorious gospel.....let's all determine to walk worthy having been made sons and daughters because of God's kindness to us."

Now, after telling us to walk worthy he is going to spend the **second half of 4 and all of 5 and some of 6 showing us what a worthy life looks like.** But **before doing that**, Paul gives us this detailed treatment of how **life in the local church** is supposed to work. That is 4.3 to 4.16, and we spent about 3 months on that section.

Now, **why** in between the exhortation to walk worthy and the detailed treatment of what that looks like does Paul give so much attention to **life in the local church?**

Its because from the Bible's viewpoint you can't live the Christian life w/o the local church. That's really big. **And I love how this church models that value everyday with every email**, phone call, meal prepared, nursery duty done.....correction given, forgiveness extended, etc. I love it. It is unique. It is an evidence of grace, and I am grateful for it.

Now the next thing, and this was Rod's text last week, **we are going to need to get off of the pagan pathways.** We are going to have quit living like we did in our pre-conversion days. Some of you may need to do that do. **Your testimony is that your are born again, but your manner of life makes it appear as if it was a still birth.**

And then here in our text today, Paul is going to talk about more of the HOW of walking worthy.

AND REALLY THE MAIN QUESTION THAT GETS ANSWERED IN OUR TEXT THIS MORNING, IS CAN YOU BE GOOD WITHOUT GOD?

I mean that in two ways:

1. can a non-religious person; a person who does not claim to know Christ as Savior, can they be good?

2. and then secondly, for Christians, can you be good without God? I know you have believed in Christ, repented of your sin, and have been changed. But as you seek to grow in holiness, you may be seeking to do that apart from God. Can it be done?

Now, this whole question---How can we be good? May sound like a question for a bygone era. **It may sound archaic.**

But don't make that mistake. Humans today, at the core, are what they have always been. They are moral beings. The law of God is written on their hearts—even if they deny God. And they want to be good.

I offer as evidence two series of ads that have run in NYC recently:

***ill.* Poster in NYC Subway Stations**

***ill.* Ad on the Side of NYC buses**

SO, LET'S TAKE UP THE FIRST QUESTION—CAN A PERSON BE GOOD APART FROM RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST?

Notice the text:

Eph 4.20-21, "But that is not the way you learned Christ!— [21] *assuming* that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus."

In other words, **before you begin to walk worthy, you have to hear** the voice of Christ speaking, and you have to respond to that voice in repentant faith.

Ok, let's say you are reading this text, and are **not a Christian, but you respect the ethical teaching of the Bible, and you are thinking, 'okay, what can I learn here....how will this help me.....how can I improve because of what is here...?'**

Paul would want to rush in and catch you before you go down that path, and say....wait, wait.....if you have not heard the voice of Jesus calling to you, and if you have not responded to that voice in repentance and faith, than all of this walk worthy stuff is of no help to you. **First, first, lay down your rebellion, your attempts to be good on your own, and trust in Jesus....."**

If you are here, and want to be a “good person” apart from knowing Christ as your own, you are pursuing **self-salvation**. And it’s **impossible**.

One of the most **offensives things about the gospel** is that it says you cannot be good apart from Christ.

And yet, this is exactly what many unbelievers think. They believe that they don’t need the gospel of Christ.....they don’t need Christ’s bloody sacrifice for their sins, because they are pretty good without him.

ill. I was talking to a good friend recently. He is not a Christian, and we were talking about the gospel, and he just said straight out—religion is one option for how to train people to be moral citizens. But I don’t need it; I’m good without it.

Now, if that’s you this morning, hear me closely for the next 3 minutes or so.

I think the **main thing to say is that Jesus did not come mainly to teach you how to be good (though he is a teacher)**. Jesus came because you need to be saved. He is first Savior, and second teacher. That’s because what you need is saving.

Jesus said in **Luke 5.31-32**, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. [32] I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

He did **not come to give some life coaching** to people who were already on their way. He came to save **sick people who were going to die**.

You may be **good by some standard**. The Bible says that people become a law unto themselves. Everybody has some sense of what is right and wrong. And **typically we pick the standard** that we are able to measure up well against.

ill. ever hear some creepy Hollywood person at the press conference after they posted bail? “I really am a good person.”

Ok, they have a sense of right and wrong. They have a standard in their mind, and even though they got drunk, punched their girlfriend, and then crashed their car into a family of 4, they still have the audacity to say, “but I really am a good person.” Really? What standard are you using?

But we do the same thing. We **create a standard of our own**. A standard tailor-made to give us a passing grade. It’s called grading on a curve.

But the only standard ultimately that matters is the law of God. And he’s pretty clear about this. It’s an absolutely perfect standard. **If you have not loved God with all your heart**, soul, mind and strength, and loved your **neighbor as much as** you love yourself, than you have egregiously broken the two most important commands in God’s law. That makes you guilty.

And so, the Bible is coming in here and saying, **“please don’t just try to be moral**. That is self-salvation, and it does not save. Instead, lay all of that down. **Embrace the gospel message of Jesus, crucified, risen and ruling**. And there will be an inward change in you, brought about by God, that will fundamentally alter who you are forever.

NOW, AFTER BEING SURE THAT’S HE’S CLEAR WITH ANYONE THERE IN EPHESUS WHO MAY NOT BE A CHRISTIAN, HE IS READY TO ADDRESS THE CHRISTIANS AGAIN, BEGINNING IN VERSE 22.

And so, he’s saying....**if you have heard the voice of Jesus, and if you’ve entered his school.....than there is changing to be done**....there is work to be done. He’s saying, you need to be sure that your manner of life is worthy of the salvation that has been wrought in you by Christ.

And he’s **going to tell us how to be good**. And there is **so much hope here** for struggling sinners, because God gives us so much help in our pursuit of having lives that are Christ-like.

So, let’s look at this. Here’s what is happening in these 3 verses, 22-24. Paul is **summarizing the chase after holiness as a matter of taking off and putting on**.

Do you see that in the text:

22—put off

24—put on

In the **next weeks** its going to get **really specific, down on the street practical**—lying, anger, forgiveness, our words....all sorts of issues of holiness will be discussed; ways to walk worthy.

But today, in these 3 little verses.....he’s speaking very broadly: and here’s the metaphor that he’s going to use: **get those old raggedy clothes off**. Put on the new clothes, created in the likeness of God.

So, let’s ask: **What do these two garments refer to?** What is it exactly that we are putting off and putting on. Clearly, we are not talking about literal, actual clothing.

Verse 25 gives a helpful clue. The same word is used for "put off" both here and in verse 22, as though Paul meant to illustrate now what he intends by putting off the old person. He says, "Therefore putting off falsehood, speak truth." So it seems like **one example of putting off the old person is to put off bad practices that belong to the old way of life—like lying.**

Another good clue to the meaning of "the old person" is **Col 3.8-9, "But now you must put them all away** (same Greek word as in Eph 4.22): anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. [9] Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self *with its practices.*"

So putting off the old person is **more than putting off old practices**, because verse 9 says we put it off WITH its practices.

And verse 8 mentions things that are beneath and behind the practices—things like **anger and wrath.**

So the old self is the **whole package of attitudes and emotions and practices** that I used to be. It's who I was before I heard the voice of Jesus, and trusted him as Savior.

Col 3.12 similarly helps us understand what Paul is talking about in verse 25, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."

So the new person is the whole package of attitudes and emotions and practices that should mark the Christian life.

So, Christian, I want to ask you: what clothes are you wearing? Are you wearing the clothes of the old self? **Oh maybe you've tucked those in;** maybe you've buttoned the top button, and shined the shoes up.....but they are still really the old clothes. You **may gloss over your greed, or your prejudices, or your additions,** but if we are honest.....and before God, what's the point of lying.....you are wearing old clothes.....your truest emotions and attitudes and practices are old clothes.

I would just remind you that Hebrews 12 says there is a holiness WITHOUT WHICH no one will see the Lord.

So, if you are always wearing the old clothes, and just trying trick the rest of us by tucking in that old dirty shirt.....one day you'll stand before God. And he knows.

And then, in the here and now, the people that know you best.....they probably know. And you do harm to the cause of Christ with your hypocritical living.

Lay that down today. Repent. Jesus has new clothes for you. He's the best of all tailors.

Now, **in the way that all of us come to think about moral improvement**, we come to this text, and think, "ok, I need to make myself some new clothes, and then I need to put them on." **Yes, I get angry with my kids—stop that Corey.** Do better. Ok, tomorrow morning, I wake up with a little mental stickie note, "do better with the boys this morning. Be nice."

- I need to witness more....come on, witness!
- I need to read my Bible more, come on, read!

Earlier we discussed how many people try to be good without God. Really, everyone outside of Christ, is trying to do this. At least almost everyone.

But here's a **sneaky thing about that self-salvation mindset.** It does not easily go away when we become Christians.

A lot of you are hearing me this morning talk of changing clothes, and you are like, "ok, right, I **should stop doing this**.....I need to **start doing that**....."

And while that is true.....that is **not how the process happens.** Christianity is not like any other means of changing. Is it unique among all religions in this way. It is **not a system for moral self improvement.** You don't just sign up and work hard to change yourself. That's self-salvation; not the gospel.

Through Christ, **change comes in a totally different way**, by grace through faith, so that He gets all the glory and not us.

LOOK at what verse 24 says about these new clothes: **THEY ARE CREATED!!**

God creates the new person that we must put on.

Now remember what **this new person is! It is the whole package of attitudes and emotions and practices that make up the new** me. That is what verse 24 says God creates. **He creates the new me.** The whole package of attitudes and emotions and practices are created after his own likeness in righteousness and holiness.

This is totally unlike any other means of change that exists in all the world.

In the world, its take **medicine;** or 'gosh-darnit' **just stop it;** or its **think positive** thoughts; or its **create boundaries.**

But in the Bible; **in the gospel-centered life, I am commanded to become holy; but then I am told that God creates my holiness.** Wow, that is different. And it is better.

It's not simply a matter of DO BETTER. We'd get all the credit for that.

Can you be good without God? *No.* But God intends to make his people good....or better said—Christlike.

See this in **Ephesians 2.10**, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

This **does not fit into our performance driven categories.** I am God's workmanship, God's creation. And not only that, the works that I am assigned to do—he has already prepared those, too!

So, Paul does not just come in and say, "OK, you're a Christian now, **get rid of your bad habits and get some good ones.**" That is the Christian version of self-salvation; its **Christians trying to be good without God.**

We are building toward something really essential here.

For most of you in the room this morning, I believe that you've heard the voice of Jesus. You've repented of your sin; you've taken Christ by the hand, and you have been born again.

And you want to follow the Lord. You want to live for his glory.

And now you are hearing him say that you to continually be putting on new clothes that he has created.

Ok, well, how? I mean, please, tell me. Help me. What in the world am I supposed to do? How do I put on this package of new attitudes, emotions and practices?

I think **John Piper** sets this up in a very helpful way with a **series of questions:**

- How do you think in such a way that God will be the creator of your thoughts?
- How do you feel in such a way that God will be the creator of your feelings?
- How do you act in such a way that God will be the creator of your actions?
- How do you put on a new person created by God?

I believe the **answer is found in verse 23:** "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind." This is the **connection between** the laying off of the old in verse 22 and the putting on of the new in verse 24.

Look at this with me. There is **help for struggling people here.** In verse 22 the **corruption of the old self is due to deceitful desires.** In other words its **lies in the mind that fuel** a sinful manner of living.

But then notice in verse 24 that it is **truth that underlies the creation of the new self.** Right attitudes and emotions and actions are born from true views of spiritual reality.

***ill.* On one side of the canyon** is corrupt living born of deceitful desires. On the other side of the canyon is truth leading to holiness and righteousness.

The problem is that many **Christian are constantly trying to jump across that Canyon on their own.** Maybe they take a **running start of guilt**, and jump across. Maybe they take the **running start of peer pressure** (Christians want to fit into church life the same way that teenagers want to fit into high school life). Maybe they take the **running start of fear.**

But we are talking about the bridge between the natural Corey Shepherd, and Christlikeness. **This is a canyon; not a crack.**

So, what is the bridge?

It is the renewing of the spirit of the mind in verse 23.

If you're a Christian here, and **you are sick of your sin**, and you are hungering and thirsting after righteousness than this is very, very important. "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind," the Bible says.

The key to putting on the new self....the key to your manner of life becoming holy and righteous, is that spiritual reality infiltrate your mind.

If your attitudes and emotions and practices come from the spirit of a renewed mind, **they will be yours in one sense**, but in a deeper sense they will be the creation of God.

And then you will be able to say with Paul, **"I worked harder than any of them, nevertheless, it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me," 1 Corinthians 15.10.**

I put on the new self, but truly, God created it in and through me.

Now, there is more. Stay with me here. This is just layer after layer of vital truth for us this morning.

Here's the next key question: **How do you become renewed in the spirit of your mind?**

This truth is just absolutely all over the the NT. **We miss it because we are legalists by nature**....we miss it because we are **averse to the supernatural**, and just want to say, **"come on change!"**

The way that you become renewed in the spirit of your mind is by filling it continually with spiritual, eternal, reality.

Here's a handful of examples where God is communicating this process to us: **2 Corinthians 4:16-18** Paul says, "We do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our *inner nature is being renewed every day.*"

How?

"Because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

Paul was **renewed in the spirit of his mind by filling his mind with the unseen truths of eternity**, so that the lies in the world; the destructive poison of the world was drowned out and washed out.

Colossians 3:2-3, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God."

Ephesians 3:18-19 Paul prayed for us, "that we may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that we might be filled with all the fullness of God."

Why?

Because **when your mind is filled with the love of Christ and with all the fullness of God, then the spirit** of your mind is renewed and freed from the deceit of the world.

And **out of that renewed mind come new attitudes and emotions and practices**....a new manner of life, and you are progressively being created after the likeness of Christ in righteousness and holiness.

And **God is getting all the glory** for that.

Now just by way of **personal testimony**, I would say unequivocally, that the leaps forward in my Christian life have NOT come as I determined, "today I will not be a wimp with my friends for christ....no more...."

How many times **in my teens did I make a "decision" to be bold for Christ.** How many times did I covenant to never do this or that again?

And yet, I batted about .1000 at returning to those same sin patterns once again. Get mired down in them.

ill. praying with **Branden** at camp about being bold, and then being scared to death at the **Mobile gas station.**

But I look at my life now, and there are sin patterns that dominated me 10 years ago, that I would say I have a great degree of freedom from now.

Now, do I ever get jelly-legged and chicken out in some situation? Yes. But my life is not marked by certain things like it used to be. There are **areas of obedience that I derive great joy from now, that once the mere thought of paralyzed me with fear.** How? A big emotional moment? Some great "decision"?

NO, STEADY **SOWING OF TRUTH** SO THAT MY MIND WAS RENEWED. A STEADY, RENEWAL OF THE MIND BY TRUTH.

That is how almost all growth has happened in my life.

And how did that happen? God created it. And he gets the glory for it.

Does that mean that decisive action is not necessary? If progress in holiness comes about as the mind is steadily renewed by the gospel, does that mean that sudden acts of obedience, or sudden changes are not a part of the Christian life.

NO!

Jesus said that if your **hand causes you to sin**, cut it off. If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out.

Now, is that literal action he is calling for? No, but the metaphor is intended to communicate radical steps. Sudden action. Not just steady sowing of truth.

However, Jesus knows that if you cut off one hand, and still have a mind that is not renewed.....**that other hand.....**

And if you cut off that hand, and yet still have a mind deceived by lies.....**your feet are going to find a way.....**

So accompanying the radical action, **there has to be the steady sowing of truth, so that a renewed mind results.**

You can get someone to **obey for a little** while because **they had a spiritual high at the church retreat**; or you **guilt them into it with strong words**. But people that cross the finish line of their lives as radical for Jesus; people who **obey in the same direction for a long time**, are people whose minds are being constantly renewed by gospel truth about Christ.

What we are saying here is that **the main task in pursuing holiness; in growing in godliness is to press into Christ**; to know him; to have minds transformed by the beauty of the truth about him. To set the mind on eternal, spiritual reality. And then **watch that work its way out into our emotions, and motives and actions.**

The main task is **not to be told what to do**. The main task is to be reminded about what Jesus has already done.

This is why its so important to be **in the Word of God**; to study the **gospel of Christ**; to have the **songs of the faith humming** along in our hearts.

And its why we must **guard the front gate of our minds as well**. Please don't overestimate your sinful hearts ability to weed about good from bad, and be unaffected by the bad.

Listen, from **Rock Music to Fox News, to Sports Talk Radio** we need to be careful about how much of the world gets into this mind. We need to be careful about how much of the info of our media age dominates the limited capacity of our minds.

I'm **not trying to make up legalistic rules about video games, and TV, and certain music.....**though I have concerns about all of those things for both young people and adults.

What I'm saying is **that the front line of the battle to live a God gloryifying life; to put on the new self; to live worthy of our calling....the front line is your mind.**

An old preacher once said that **what you sow in the garden of your mind today**, you will reap in the harvest field of your life tomorrow.

***ill.* GARDEN**

we sowed, and the harvest was truly amazing.

We did not have anything to do with the roots, the fruit, the taste, the cell division, the atom structure, the quarks.....we just sowed. God's processes took over. And God's gets the glory for that.

So, will you join me in pressing into knowing Christ....to praying, and studying and reading and singing and talking to brothers and sisters about the beauty of the truth of this gospel....this Christ.....**so that our minds are renewed....so that the new self is created in the likeness of Christ. Glory be God's.**