

Christ-Shaped Lives *and* Spirit-Inspired Speech



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 4:17–32; Col. 3:1–17; Zech. 3:3–5; Zech. 8:16; Isa. 63:10; Rom. 8:16, 26, 27.*

Memory Text: “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (*Ephesians 4:22–24, NIV*).

Jose Antonio lived on the streets of Palma, Spain, as a homeless man for years. With gray, straggly hair and beard, Jose looked older than his 57 years. One day, Salva Garcia, the owner of a hair salon, approached Jose and proposed a complete makeover.

With Jose in the salon chair, a hardworking team cut, dyed, and styled the tangled bundles of hair and beard. Next, Jose then got new stylish clothes. Then came the reveal! As Jose sat in front of a mirror, tears came. “Is this me? I’m so different; no one is going to recognize me!” Later he would add, “It wasn’t just a change of looks. It changed my life.”

In Ephesians 4:17–32, Paul argues that believers have experienced a complete transformation. They have taken off their old selves and have embraced their new identity. Somewhat like Jose’s change, though, this is no mere external transformation. It includes being “renewed in the spirit of your minds” (*Eph. 4:23, ESV*), bringing into the life “true righteousness and holiness” (*Eph. 4:24, ESV*). This is the ultimate makeover.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 19.

The Downward Spiral of Sin

Compare Ephesians 4:17–32 with Colossians 3:1–17. How does Paul advocate for believers to live in a way that encourages the unity of the church?

In the prior section, Ephesians 4:1–16, Paul’s theme was the unity of the church. When we compare Ephesians 4:1 and Ephesians 4:17, we note how similar these two exhortations are about how to *walk* or to live. This resemblance suggests that Paul addresses the same theme—unity and the lifestyle that supports it—but from a new and initially more negative vantage point.

In Ephesians 4:17–24, Paul contrasts Gentile lifestyle, which he regards as undermining unity (*Eph. 4:17–19*), with truly Christian patterns of life that nourish it (*Eph. 4:20–24*). As we read Paul’s sharp critique of the depraved, Gentile lifestyle, we should recall his conviction that Gentiles are redeemed by God through Christ and offered full partnership in the people of God (*Eph. 2:11–22, Eph. 3:1–13*). In Ephesians 4:17–19, then, he is offering a limited and negative description of “Gentiles in the flesh” (*Eph. 2:11*).

Paul is not just concerned about specific sins or behaviors exhibited by Gentiles. He is concerned about a pattern of behavior that they exhibit, a downward trajectory of living in the grip of sin. At the heart of Ephesians 4:17–19 is a portrait of a calloused spirituality: “in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God” (*Eph. 4:17, 18, NKJV*). This calloused spirituality is the source of the darkened understanding highlighted at the beginning of the passage (“because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous,” *Eph. 4:18, 19, ESV*) and the depraved sexual practice underlined at its end (“and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity,” *Eph. 4:19, ESV*). Alienated from God, they don’t know how to live, and separated from His saving grace, they continue in a downward spiral of sin and depravity.

What has been your own experience with the power of sin to continue to drag a person downward into even more sin?

A Dramatic Change of Clothing

In retelling the story of the conversion of his audience, what essential main point is Paul getting across to them? *Eph. 4:20–24*.

Having described their former, Gentile existence (*Eph. 4:17–19*), Paul does not say, “That is not the way you learned about Christ.” Instead, he exclaims, “That is not the way you learned Christ!” (*Eph. 4:20, ESV*). Noting that the addressees “heard Him” [Christ] (*NKJV*), and were taught “in him” (*Eph. 4:21, ESV*) or “by Him” (*NKJV*), Paul further advocates the adoption of a Christ-shaped life with the phrase “as the truth is in Jesus” (*Eph. 4:21*). For Paul, coming to faith centers on a personal connection with Christ, one so vivid and real that it may be described as “learning Christ.” We acknowledge that the risen and exalted Jesus is alive and present with us. We are shaped by His teachings and example and exercise loyalty to Him as our living Lord. We open our lives to His active guidance and direction through Spirit and Word.

Paul tells us that the adoption of a Christ-shaped life requires three processes, which he expresses through clothing imagery: (1) to “put off” or turn away from the old way of life (*Eph. 4:22*); (2) to experience inner renewal (*Eph. 4:23*); and (3) to “put on” the new, Godlike pattern of life (*Eph. 4:24*). Paul’s metaphor reflects the use of clothing in the Old Testament as a symbol for both sinfulness (e.g., *Ps. 73:6; Zech. 3:3, 4; Mal. 2:16*) and salvation (e.g., *Isa. 61:10; Ezek. 16:8; Zech. 3:4, 5*).

In ancient times, men wore a knee-length tunic as an undergarment and a cloak or mantle to offer protection from the sun. Similarly, women wore a tunic and a robe. The cultures reflected in the Bible were subsistence ones. Garments were precious and expensive and were kept for a long time. It would have been unusual to own more than one set of clothing. The quality and style of those garments signaled identity and status markers about the wearer. To change one’s clothes, exchanging one set of clothes for another, was an unusual and important event (rather than the trifling occurrence it is in many cultures today). Paul imagines the change in life to be as noticeable as exchanging one set of clothing for another would have been in this first-century context.

What is the difference, the *crucial* difference, between learning about Christ and learning to know Christ?

Unity-Building, Grace-Filled Speech

Which of Paul’s words of counsel with regard to the use of speech among believers is the most important to you just now? Why? *Eph. 4:25–29.*

Paul repeatedly uses an interesting structure in Ephesians 4:25–32, which is illustrated by Ephesians 4:25 (*NKJV*): a negative command (“putting away lying”); a positive command next (“‘let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor’ ”); and then a rationale (“for we are members of one another,” which seems to mean “because we are members of one body and so related to one another as parts of that one body”). Paul’s exhortation to “speak truth” is not an invitation to confront other church members with a tactless recitation of facts. Paul alludes to Zechariah 8:16, which exhorts speaking the truth as a way of fostering peace.

Since in Ephesians 4:31 Paul banishes anger and angry speech, his words in Ephesians 4:26 provide no permission to exercise anger within the congregation. Rather, Paul concedes the possibility of anger, while limiting its expression with the sense, “Should you become angry, do not allow it to bear fruit in full blown sin.”

Paul appears to interrupt his theme of speech with a negative command about thieves: “Let the thief no longer steal” (*Eph. 4:28, ESV*). Positively, the thief is to “labor, doing honest work with his own hands” (*Eph. 4:28, ESV; see also 1 Cor. 4:12, 1 Thess. 4:11*) based on the rationale, “so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (*Eph. 4:28, ESV*). Perhaps Paul includes this word about thieves here because of the connection between theft and deceptive speech as illustrated by the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1–11. Paul’s faith in Christ’s transforming power is so strong that he envisions thieves becoming benefactors!

Paul then commands, “Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth” (*Eph. 4:29, NKJV*), which describes a destructive word making its seemingly unstoppable way toward the lips to do its damaging work. Positively, Paul imagines any negative expression not being just stopped, but replaced by a statement that exhibits three criteria: It (1) “is good for building up,” (2) “fits the occasion,” and (3) gives “grace to those who hear” (*Eph. 4:29, ESV*). If only all our words could be like that!

The Holy Spirit in the Believer's Life

In discussing sins of speech within the Christian community, what exhortation does Paul share about the presence of the Holy Spirit with believers? *Eph. 4:30.*

Paul simultaneously offers a daunting warning and a heartwarming promise. Our sins against one another in the church are not minor misdeeds with little consequence: what grieves the Holy Spirit is our misuse of God's gift of speech to tear down others (*Eph. 4:25–27, 29, 31, 32*). That Paul echoes Isaiah 63:10 underlines the serious warning: “But they [Israel] rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them” (*ESV*).

In a reassuring promise, Paul affirms that the Holy Spirit seals believers from the day they accepted Christ (*Eph. 1:13, 14*) until “the day of redemption” (*Eph. 4:30*). The Spirit's relationship with the believer is not fragile but durable. When believers disregard the indwelling presence of the Spirit by weaponizing God's gift of speech, the Spirit is not said to leave but to grieve. The Spirit intends to remain present with believers, marking them as owned and protected by God, until Christ's return.

Paul underlines the full divinity of the Spirit as “the Holy Spirit of God” and highlights the *personhood* of the Spirit by portraying the Holy Spirit as *grieving*. (See also *Rom. 8:16, 26, 27; 1 Cor. 2:10, 13; 1 Cor. 12:11; Gal. 5:17, 18.*)

We must tread with care in discussing the mystery of the Godhead. The Spirit is both One with and distinct from the Father and the Son. “The Spirit has His own will and chooses accordingly. He can be grieved and blasphemed against. Such expressions are not fit for a mere power or influence but are characteristics of a person. Is the Spirit then a person just like you and me? No, we use limited human terminology to describe the divine, and the Spirit is what human beings can never be.”—Paul Petersen, *God in 3 Persons—In the New Testament* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015), p. 20.

It is “the Holy Spirit of God” who lives in such intimate contact with us that our actions are said to affect Him. We share life with a member of the Godhead committed to us in a durable relationship that seals us until the end of time. What should be our faith response to this amazing truth?

Kindness (Not Bitterness)

By referring to “the day of redemption” (*Eph. 4:30*), Paul has just invited his readers to consider their uses of speech in the context of Christ’s second coming. Ephesians 4:31, 32, then, may be understood as addressing the use of speech as we approach that grand event.

In the light of Christ’s return, what attitudes and behaviors, related to speech, should be discarded? What attitudes and behaviors should be embraced? *Eph. 4:31, 32.*

In the final exhortation of Ephesians 4:17–32, Paul again provides a negative command, this one identifying six vices that are to “be put away from you” (*Eph. 4:31*); a positive command to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving (*Eph. 4:32*), and a rationale. Believers are to forgive one another “even as God in Christ forgave you” (*Eph. 4:32, NKJV*). The list of six vices begins and ends with general, all-encompassing terms, “all bitterness” and “all malice.” In between come four additional terms: “wrath,” “anger,” “clamor,” and “slander” (*Eph. 4:31, ESV*).

The last of these translates the Greek word *blasphemia*, which English has borrowed as a technical term for demeaning speech against God. However, the Greek term identifies speech that defames either God or other humans as “slander” or “evil speaking.” In the list, attitudes (bitterness, wrath, anger) seem to boil over into angry speech (clamor, slander). In essence, Paul demilitarizes Christian speech. The attitudes that drive angry speech and the rhetorical strategies that employ it are to be removed from the Christian’s arsenal. Christian community will flourish and unity of the church be fostered (*compare Eph. 4:1–16*) only where these things are laid aside.

Evil speech, though, is not so much to be suppressed as replaced. Our conversations and actions among the family of Christ—and beyond it, as well—are not to grow out of anger but are to be motivated by kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness based on the highest standard of all, the forgiveness that God has extended to us in Christ (*Eph. 4:32*). Paul presents “vertical forgiveness” (offered by God to us) as the model for “horizontal forgiveness” (that which we offer to each other; *compare Col. 3:13; Matt. 6:12, 14, 15*).

Think about the power of your words. How can you use them to be uplifting, encouraging, and faith-building?

Further Thought: “Let your conversation be of such a nature that you will have no need of repentance. ‘Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.’ . . . If you have love in your heart, you will seek to establish and build up your brother in the most holy faith. If a word is dropped that is detrimental to the character of your friend or brother, do not encourage this evil-speaking. It is the work of the enemy. Kindly remind the speaker that the word of God forbids that kind of conversation.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 5, 1888.

How would your congregation change if you and each member were to take and live a pledge consisting of such statements as the following?

1. I wish for my influence within the Seventh-day Adventist Church family and beyond to be positive, uplifting, faith-building, and morale-boosting (*Eph. 4:29*).
2. Recalling Christ’s calls for unity and love, I will expend more energy affirming those doing and saying things I believe to be good than in pointing out the failings of those I believe to be wrong (*John 13:34, 35; John 17:20–23; Eph. 4:1–6; 1 Thess. 5:9–11*).
3. When I do disagree with someone, I will make my respect for my fellow believer clear. I will assume his or her integrity and commitment to Christ. I will offer my differing opinion gently, not stridently (*Eph. 4:31, 32*).
4. I will live joyfully, looking for every opportunity to build up and affirm my fellow church members, as I await the return of Christ (*Eph. 4:29, 30; Gal. 6:2; Heb. 10:24, 25*).

Discussion Questions:

1 Review the 11 times in Ephesians that Paul describes the three members of the Godhead as working closely together for the salvation of humankind. How does this repeated emphasis inform our understanding of the Godhead? *Eph. 1:3–14, Eph. 1:15–23, Eph. 2:11–18, Eph. 2:19–22, Eph. 3:1–13, Eph. 3:14–19, Eph. 4:4–6, Eph. 4:17–24, Eph. 4:25–32, Eph. 5:15–20, Eph. 6:10–20 (where “the Lord,” Eph. 6:10, refers to Christ).*

2 How does Paul’s counsel about Christian speech (*Eph. 4:25–32*) apply in the age of “computer-mediated communication,” which is too often used for cyberbullying and anonymous, online character assassination?

Real Divine Healing: Part 5

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Almira told her parents about her decision to become a Seventh-day Adventist. She also told them about taking the forbidden classes on the supernatural, the appearance of the evil spirit, and the persistent nightmares.

Mother wept. “If the church helps you, go,” she said.

After her baptism, Almira was never bothered by the spirit again.

Today, Almira H. Yalysheva, 46, is a linguistics teacher at Zaoksky Adventist University in Russia. Her husband, Kemil K. Yalyshev, whom she met and married while studying at Zaoksky in the late 1990s, is a pastor and the vice president for student affairs at the university. Before working at the university, the couple served for a decade as missionaries to non-Christian people in Russia’s North Caucasus region, part of the 10/40 window. More recently, the couple earned higher education degrees from the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIAS) in the Philippines.

Almira also is a mother, and she has a rule at home forbidding all children’s cartoons and books that mention magic. After her own experience with evil spirits, she believes that there is no such thing as good or bad magic. All magic opens the door to Satan and his evil forces, she said. Sometimes a parent will ask her, “What will my children talk about with their friends if they don’t watch cartoons?” She tells them that there are more interesting things to watch and discuss, including documentaries about animals and nature, if they choose to have screens in their homes.

Almira’s sister, Faniya, is an Adventist, and their father worshiped with them on Sabbath before passing away. Their mother, now 75, regularly reads the Bible and Ellen White’s writings. She no longer has the headaches that Almira had hoped to cure through the courses on the supernatural. After being baptized, Almira began to bring health magazines home from church. Mother read them, and slowly her lifestyle changed. Once a drinker of only black tea, she replaced the beverage with fresh water and became physically active. The headaches went away. Almira’s desire was fulfilled, but not in the way that she had expected. Mother was healed.

Almira prays to be a healing presence in many lives, saying, “The daring step that I took to give my life to Jesus changed my life. A spoiled, selfish girl has been given the privilege of becoming the hands and feet of Jesus. My biggest desire is to serve Him.”



This mission story illustrates Mission Objective No. 2 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s “I Will Go” strategic plan: “To strengthen and diversify Adventist outreach . . . across the 10/40 Window.”—IWillGo2020.org