

# ***“The Truth That Is in Jesus”***

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***New superhighways of Jesus' truth are possible by grace.***

***Ephesians 4:17-32***

***June 6, 2021***

(Available in print form at [corinthtoday.org/sermons](http://corinthtoday.org/sermons) or by audio at 828.328.6196.)

## ***Reframing***

It seems to me there are two common first reactions to Ephesians 4:17-32. The first sounds like this: Paul's so right. Our society is driven by sensuality and greed. There's no respect for truth. Lying is accepted. The world is bad and getting worse.

A second reaction might sound more like this: This list of do's and don'ts is what turns people off from church and Christians. Nobody can live up to that. I don't belong in a church because I don't meet their standards for "righteousness and holiness."

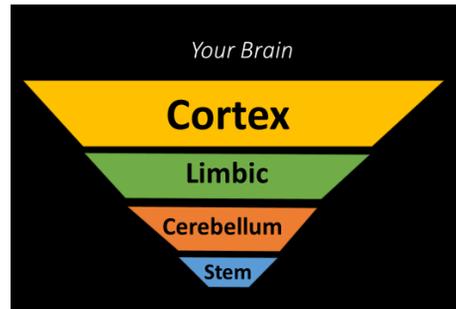
I'm not sure that the Apostle Paul intended us to read this letter either way.

What helped me reframe this passage was listening to an audiobook last weekend while Linda and I were traveling to and from Pennsylvania for her mother's Celebration of Life service. It helped both Linda and me reflect on our own stories, on our parents, and on our children.

Our daughter, Cara, recommended *What Happened to You?* which was coauthored by child psychiatrist Dr. Bruce Perry. Cara's working on her Ph.D. at the University of South Carolina, with a focus on helping parents, teachers, and other caregivers understand how early trauma affects children. Her work in family therapy has brought her into contact with children who have been traumatized in every way imaginable.

Here's an oversimplified summary of the book, which itself is a simplified summary of a highly technical scientific field. When children act out in school or at home, we tend to ask, "What's wrong with you?" By "act out" I mean everything from disrespect to violence to creating chaos to hyperactivity to withdrawal to depression and self-harm. The book suggests the better question is "What happened to you?"

Dr. Perry presents an upside down triangle to illustrate the structure of the human brain. The top part, the cortex, is uniquely human and also the conscious part of our brain. (I would say this is where the "image of God" lives in us.) We assume all behavior lives there – where we reason and choose. In reality, so many of our feelings, reactions, and behaviors are governed by the lower, subconscious parts of our brain.



Early childhood experiences, and especially traumatic or highly stressful experiences, create pathways in our brains that serve as templates for how we view and interpret the world and people around us. For example, a baby who isn't loved and nurtured in the first few months of life is hardwired to believe that the world is a hostile place. A child who develops in an abusive, unpredictable, or otherwise unsafe home may feel defensive or frequently looking for the next bad thing because of how the brain and nervous system has adapted to respond to perceived threats.

When the question is not "What's wrong with you?" but "What happened to you?" the healing strategy is to create new neural pathways in the brain. What's there is akin to a two-lane dirt road with deep ruts. It takes a lot of awareness and work and patience to create an alternative, a superhighway of love, stability, and health.

### ***Construction zone***

I'm not at all suggesting that Paul understood neurobiology. Rather, the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to frame his Gospel and his writings in a way far ahead of his time.

As he writes to a relatively young church, a small but growing minority in a thoroughly secularized and pagan world, Paul understands that the starting point can't be "Why do you act that way?" In his letter he will address a range of behaviors from sexual impurity to laziness to greed to drunkenness to slander. What happened to them? Hold on.

Paul spends the first half of this letter affirming how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. He's addressing people who knew they were a mess – his language is "dead in your trespasses and sins." He assures them with long run-on sentences, redundant words, even newly coined words, that God has lavished his grace

on them. Those who were far away from God's family have been brought near – without any merit or effort. They have already been seated in the heavenly realms with Christ Jesus. God's power raised Jesus from the dead and is at work changing them.

Those who had been without God and without hope were chosen "in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (1:3). Paul is doing what Dr. Perry and Cara do – "Let's start here. You don't have to do anything for me to treat you as worthy and loved."

From there Paul will explain what a life transformed by that kind of love looks like. How does one walk worthily of that kind of love? Even with the new superhighway of unconditional love, however, there's a critical intermediate step. Human beings don't alter patterns of thinking and behaving in isolation. We need connection. We need others who will reinforce right thoughts and keep us from returning to the ruts. We need to surround ourselves with those who are patient and kind, spiritual caregivers who guide us and love us.

That was last week's text in Ephesians 4:1-16. Keep the unity of the faith in the one God and Father of all is not just an exhortation. It's a construction zone for this new super-highway. Only in a community where it doesn't matter if you're a Gentile or a Jew, white or black, old or young, mature or infantile in your understanding and practice of the faith – only where people are accepted where they are on this journey of wholeness – can change happen.

This totally reframes Ephesians 4:17-32 for me. It's not about "do's and don'ts that pagans ignore but thank God I'm not them!" Nor is it about a list of impossible demands that make me feel unworthy. Then what's it about?

### ***The truth in Jesus***

Paul says in verses 22-24 to "put off" the old self and "put on" the new. I've spent much of the last week stripping some old wallpaper from a half-bath. We've lived in this house for 20 years and this is the last room that we have renovated. The reason is that we knew what we were in for. Anyone who's removed wallpaper that is "paper" knows what we're talking about. It's a mess. It's tedious, chaotic, and frustrating putting off the old and putting on the new. It's also worth it.

Paul prefigures some of Dr. Perry's research and wisdom with a distinctively Christian approach. I want you to notice something you may have overlooked in your first reading of this passage. Paul repeatedly uses words that describe *how you think* before he gets to *how you speak and act*. Notice the phrases in bold.

*<sup>17</sup> So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in **the futility of their thinking**. <sup>18</sup> 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.* <sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> That, however, is not **the way of life you learned** <sup>21</sup> when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with **the truth that is in Jesus.** <sup>22</sup> 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;** <sup>23</sup> to be made new in **the attitude of your minds;** <sup>24</sup> and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Paul speaks in absolute terms about the way of the Gentiles and the way of Christ. We struggle today with this sharp dichotomy for two reasons.

First, our society is more Christianized than that of first century Ephesus and the entire Greco-Roman world. I know we have issues, but we value democracy, free speech, religious freedom, healthcare, education, and a social safety net. We don't sport large pagan shrines on hilltops which are essentially houses of prostitution. We don't have half the population living as slaves. Christianity has shaped our culture in positive ways.

Second, however, much of the pagan worldview has also infiltrated the church. So-called sexual freedom and greed and all forms of self-interest are rationalized and normalized – and not just by you. I see it in myself as well. Christians often don't seem that different from non-Christians.

Paul knows that what we need most is “the truth that is in Jesus.” This new way of life is based on being loved unconditionally by God in Christ and therefore life must not be about what I can get out of it for me. I must do the work of creating a super-highway of reclaiming a life that is “like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

### ***Examples of the new life***

Paul hopes your question is, “So what does a God-like life look like?” What character traits should I develop in keeping with the truth that is in Jesus? What are the blind spots I'm overlooking?

*Authenticity* (25). Stop trying to hide your secret sins, your addictions, your flaws. Speak truthfully because you feel safe as members of this one body.

*Anger* (26). This is actually a pair of commands – “Be angry and don't be sinning.” Be like God and get angry. Some of us are too passive and never get angry enough about racism and domestic violence and all forms of our own sins. Express your anger and act on it appropriately. Don't carry it on day after day, night after night.

*Generosity* (28). The purpose of work is not to accumulate; it's to provide for your family and share with others. It's not up to you to determine whether they're worthy. The truth in Jesus is that you were loved and graced when you didn't deserve it.

*Encouragement* (29). Words have power. Don't use them to confirm in others that the world is a hateful, hostile place. Build them up, don't tear them down.

*Discernment* (27, 30). Paul will say more about this in chapter 6, but there's an evil power at work in the world. The self-focused life gives the devil leverage. There's also a Holy Spirit at work in you. Don't make him sad.

*Empathy* (31-32a). Paul knows people tick you off. Don't ask, "What's wrong with you?" That will prompt anger, bitterness, rage, and malice. Ask, "What happened to you?" Not necessarily out loud – but in a way that seeks to understand.

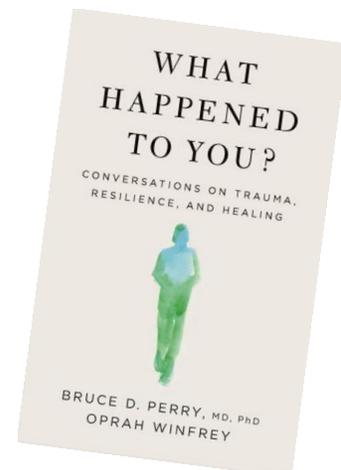
*Forgiveness* (32b). I love how Paul ends this section. If forgiveness is required in the body of Christ, it necessarily means that it's needed. Earlier Paul said that this new attitude in our minds is "being renewed." It's a process. A long, lifelong process. All around us we see lying and laziness and stinginess and unwholesome talk and bitterness. Awful stuff, you know. How do we respond if we are like God?

We remember that Christ forgave us. Before I ever sinned the first time, before I was even born, he knew me and chose me and forgave me. As Jesus went to the cross, he said, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." He was talking about you and me. Can we forgive as we have been forgiven?

### ***It is Well***

I said earlier that Dr. Perry was coauthor of the book, *What Happened to You?* I didn't mention the other author: Oprah Winfrey. I thought her name might distract you. I admit to having had a bias against a book with her name on it. Unfairly, it turns out.

Oprah's part of the book is much more reflective of Ephesians than I expected. It's not a distinctively Christian book, but Oprah shares her own experience in the church – both negatively and positively. She writes of her loneliness as a child – a father who didn't want her, a mother too busy for her, and a grandmother who, in keeping with her own time and culture, "whipped" her regularly. She tells the story of a Sunday morning when she played with her hands in the drinking water. She was lashed so soundly on a Sunday morning before church that she bled into her white dress. She was then chastised for ruining the dress and sent to Sunday School.



It was the end of the book that moved me to tears. Oprah writes of going to see her dying mother in 2018, conflicted about their relationship to the end. She sat at her mother's bedside for days. A woman who had engaged 50,000 people on her shows and could find no meaningful words to say to her dying mother.

It was her Christian roots that allowed her to forgive in those final moments. Her close friend, Wintley Phipps, whom she describes as "a preacher and Gospel artist," sang "Precious Lord, take my hand," to Oprah's dying mother over FaceTime. Oprah then said to her mother, "I want to thank you for keeping that baby. I know that many times you didn't know what to do. You did the best you knew how to do – and that's ok with me. So you can leave now, knowing it is well with my soul."

I'm not endorsing everything Oprah has said or written or endorsed. In this book she and Dr. Perry affirm what Paul wrote 2,000 years ago. Human minds are hardwired in ways our conscious brains don't understand. New highways are essential – and possible.

Oprah says she was able to see her mother not through the lens of what she did, but through the lens of what happened to her. "Forgiveness," she writes, "is giving up the hope that the past could have been any different."

All I would add to the ending of her book is that this is Gospel truth. You who are in Christ, you know what it's like to be loved as you are and forgiven by grace alone. Forgive as God has forgiven you. Amen.