

Ephesians 4.17-5.2

How People *Really* Change

The Mystery of Christ #6

Introduction

Serve Charlotte – The mission statement of Mercy Charlotte is to make disciples who **love God, love each other, and love our world**. Loving our world is the natural outworking of the gospel. God loved us, He sacrificed for us, He brought life to us. Then He turned around and said take that love to the world. We believe that means the best thing for a local community is a healthy, gospel loving church. So our mission strategy is to plant those kinds of churches around north America and the world. And it is to BE that kind of church here in Charlotte. In a couple of weeks we are going to take yet another step in loving Charlotte by spending a day serving the city together. When the Israelites were in exiles God said to them in Jeremiah 29.7 **But seek the welfare of the city where I sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.** The new testament talks about us as exiles. Citizens of heaven living as tenants of earth. And while we are here, we are to love and seek the good of our city. As I said last week we are already doing that in pockets. Next month we are going to take a step together.

On Sunday November 15 we are holding our first ServeTheCity day. On that Sunday, we'll all gather here like we normally do, maybe a little earlier, and we will spend the morning serving the needs of our city together. More info on the specifics will follow in the next two weeks or so. We've got partner organizations in the city who are excited to have us join alongside them and serve with them that day. So, we'll come on Sunday like you were already planning. We will worship together, just through serving instead of through preaching & singing. Excited to serve together!! (Should I put this at the end?)

Today we are in Ephesians chapter 4. When we started our time in Ephesians I told you to read it everyday for 6 weeks. I hope it has been as rewarding for you as it has been for me! I asked you to give us 6 weeks to check out our church and I'm grateful for you who've done that. I told you we'd get close to the end of Ephesians in 6 weeks and it looks like we have 2, maybe 3 more sermons to finish the series. So lets jump in. Today we are in Ephesians 4 starting in verse 17.

Transition

Today Paul is going to walk us through how people really change. Which immediately puts people into different groups. Some think people never really change. True lasting change is just a myth to you. People are who they are. First off, that's sad and so are you. Sorry man. But listen, I'm not really talking to you today. Because the reality is, people can change. And you want to believe that. I want you hear the word of God talk

to another group of people. Some of you are so desperate for real, lasting change and today is for you. You've tried to change and it hasn't stuck. Change in your life has been a series of temporary fixes like my workout habits. I'll do 30 days of extreme paleo then 30 days of extreme oreo. I'll do kettle bells for a month then back to kettle chips. T-25 goes from a workout title to how many minutes left in my nap. I love healthy living! But at the end of the day I haven't found a good diet & exercise routine that embraces my lazy, sugar loving lifestyle. So nothing sticks. I want to change into someone better but I just can't seem to do it.

This is the way so many people approach religion. They will try all kinds of religious activities hoping that, like a workout routine, one of them will eventually stick and make their life better. And so they follow the precepts, the rules, of a particular belief system...for a while. Then that fades because they get tired of trying to be somebody they are not.

And for many of you, that has been your experience with christianity up to today. Do these set of behaviors, don't do those things, and God will be happy with you. Becoming a Christian just meant subscribing to another "do" list. Give, Serve, Forgive, Work Hard, Do, Do, Do. Your religion, maybe for years, has been nothing but do-do. Which is why it hasn't stuck. It's just stunk. Because do-do religion stinks. Ok I'm done with that wordplay. For the moment.

Lets jump into our passage and as we do, I'm going to point out to you the process of how people *really* change. I'm going to show you five principles that all together lead to real lasting change, and then we'll see what that change looks.

Five Principles for real, lasting change (vv.17-24)

[17] Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. [18] They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. [19] They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

1. Real, lasting change begins by remembering why you were so far from God.

- v.17 – “no longer” – He’s invoking an idea he’s used repeatedly in the letter. You “used to” live like a gentile because you were a gentile. For those of you new with us today, Gentile just represents someone far from God. In OT a gentile was anyone other than God’s people, the Israelites. Paul now uses this label to talk about anyone who hasn’t met Jesus. Living their own life their own way. Not a Christian. And he says walk ‘no longer’ this way because you

know you used to walk this way. And the culture around you still walks this way. This is who you, and indeed who ALL of us were, before Jesus. But something happened that changes how you walk.

And this description in vv 17-19 progresses from what is happening inside them to their external visible behavior. Which reinforces a universal truth I'm going to say a lot today. Look, **What you "do" is ALWAYS a product of what you believe.** Just look how he describes us before knowing Jesus. Verse 18 tells us there are two big reasons everyone is far from God. And before you can experience real change, you gotta figure out what your real problem is.

- [18] They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.
 - You are far from God because you separated yourself from the life of God.
 - This word alienated is critical because it hints that you are not who you are supposed to be. Someone who is alienated once was close and then was set apart from their home for some reason. The "life of God" is the life we were meant for. The life of God is one where we are close to him, and his presence creates the soul-fulfilling love and security we all crave. When we reject God, like gentiles do, we lose that

fulfilling relationship with God we are designed for... and so we start craving. We are out in the dark and we are trying anything we can get our hands on to replace him. To feel secure and loved again.

- In the bible when adam & eve rejected God it says they realized they were naked and it brought shame & insecurity. They tried to clothe themselves. Like them we are insecure apart from God. And we try to clothe ourselves with anything we can. Gonna see that in a second. But the REASON we do it is because we are alienated from God and that creates insecurity, loneliness, fear.

- Deeper Problem: The reason we are alienated from God,
Deeper Problem: We have hardened our hearts to God.
- Alienation from God is actually a product of a hard heart. It's not that God can't be seen or found. He's made himself very easy to find. It's that our hearts are hard. He says in verse 19 they are calloused. – A callous is what I used to get on my feet from playing soccer 5 days a week & twice on Saturdays. What musicians get from picking a string over and over again. Build up tough skin so you can't feel

anything. This is what he's saying has happened to our hearts in v.19.

We've built a wall around our hearts so we can't perceive him. And **this** is our deepest problem. This is why two different people can see & hear the same message, same evidence, and come out with two totally different perspectives. I had a college professor who was really smart, who taught New Testament Criticism and knew a lot about the bible. More than me. He knew there had to be a God but when it came down to it he refused to believe the Christian God was plausible. Yet I know BRILLIANT scholars who find it to be the ONLY plausible explanation of the universe. How can these two smart people come to such differing conclusions? Because "whether or not we truly see God has nothing to do with the quality of the evidence but with the state of our hearts." And you will never experience real, lasting change until your heart is softened by God.

- Once our hearts are hardened to God, what happens? Our actions follow. What we do is always a product of what we believe. So a hard heart alienated from God produces Verse 19...
- [19] They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

- See that word 'greedy.' It communicates the drive, the need to satisfy your desires. And these impurities are called impurities because they are imposters of the real thing. You want satisfaction but the only pure, perfect thing that can provide it is God. Hardened against him, you now turn your cravings onto impure things and you give yourself to them.
 - Most common one men and women in our culture give themselves to is porn. I watch it wreck marriages and harden individuals to the voice of God. And many of you want to stop but cannot. Why? Because you crave satisfaction. And you believe porn will give it to you. And it gives you a version of satisfaction for a minute. Then you have to go back and get more. And more. You crave it. Because you have given yourself to it. And be warned, your heart is hardening more and more to God.
 - People who turn to drugs and alcohol for escape. You need to deal with realities of life and you **believe** that even if only for a night, its worth it to escape there. You give yourself to a pursuit you know is empty because you believe there isn't any better way. You've given yourself to those things because you believe they will satisfy. That's

why you crave them because though you don't see it you are now their slave.

- And you know its really bad when you stop feeling convicted about it. That's when the callous has been built up. Guy in my office: I used to feel bad looking at porn but not anymore. I warned him HUGE DANGER! You have built up enough of a callous around your heart that you cant hear God!! Your new master has you. How can you recover from that? That's what paul is after!
- Maybe you haven't dealt with these two things, but everybody has something they turn to. The word sensuality just stands for the desires of the flesh. It's the cravings you have for what you believe will satisfy you. Parents Approval, money, success of your kids, acceptance by the popular kids, sports, you name it. Whatever it is that you give yourself over to.
- That is who the gentiles were. That is who you...WERE. Someone with a hard, dead heart alienated from God craving things that never truly satisfy you. That's your real problem. What is the solution? There's two. Here's the first:

[20] 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,

2. Real, Lasting Change comes from new knowledge: The Story of Jesus.¹

They had *learned* Christ. Paul is assuming they had learned something new, THE TRUTH in Jesus. In the story of Jesus the **beauty** of God is revealed to us. The thing we've actually been craving, underneath those superficial cravings...we can now see it. And the beauty of God, when we finally see it...changes us. Think about it. How is God revealed to us in the bible? The bible isn't an encyclopedia of the character traits of God. P.100 – God's sovereignty. Nor is it a topical index about how to live. P.45 – How to parent in the chaos. The bible is primarily a STORY. Think about how getting caught up in a great story changes you

- You ever seen a commercial for the armed forces? A boss says to an employee 'think you can handle this?' And then the employee drifts off into a 45 second commercial for the army where he is steering an air craft carrier, coordinating a 50 team tactical assault, and then climbing over a wall. Daydream goes away and employee is like "I got this."
- And the idea is once you've been in the armed forces, you are going to dominate everyday life. Because normal challenges are nothing compared to what you've faced. (But warning the copy machine don't care where you've been. It hates you and will eat your memo anyway.)

¹ Credit to JD Greear for his insight on gospel change from this text.

- The same thing happens when you meet God in the story of Jesus. We call this story the gospel. And it has such power and beauty that you get swept up in it and it changes your life. I heard one pastor say it's the greatest story ever told...and the most amazing thing about it is, its true. It doesn't change you by telling you to fix your behavior, it changes you by showing you the beauty, the love, and glory of God. **And the power for real, lasting change comes from a sense of awe & wonderment at God.** The power to love comes from experiencing his love for you. The power to forgive comes from the story of his death to forgive you. The power to endure suffering comes from the story of his suffering for you. The power to break free from an addiction comes from him breaking free from the grave for you.

He keeps going. This way you learned in Jesus was to... [22] to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, [23] and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, [24] and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Change doesn't *just* come from new knowledge of the gospel. Change comes as this new knowledge goes to work on you. We are about to talk about vv 22 & 24 for the rest of our time. But they are only possible because of verse 23 **be renewed in the spirit of your minds.** 'The spirit of your mind' is another phrase for the core of your being. Your deep internal core needs to be transformed. More specifically it needs to be

made new again. It was new, but then you ran away remember? Before you do anything, your heart needs to be renewed. Because what you do is always a product of what you believe. So what you really need is not a new set of do-do lists. What you need is a new heart. **AND YOU CANT DO IT!** It says 'be renewed.' Which is a Passive tense phrase meaning the action is done to you. So what can we do? Only open our hearts to the spirit of God. And this is when the story of God, the gospel, starts to go to work in our hearts.

3. Real, lasting change comes when The Spirit of God uses the story of God to make the beauty of God come alive in our hearts.

See that? The story of God we've been talking about for 6 weeks is the power for real lasting change in your life! Some of you went straight from vv 22 to 24 and never realized the true power to change was in v.23. All you did was pick up a new do-do list. Because it is only once your heart has changed, that true lasting change will follow. **What you do is always a product of what you believe.** Ok now we are ready to pick up verses 22 & 24.

[22] to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires
When you finally see God for who he is, you must put off your old self. The old self is the you before you encountered Jesus. He or She is entirely corrupt. Some of you are attempting to live half-in Christianity. Where you keep your old way of living

but do some Christian stuff now too. I'm not talking about you who are fighting your way out of addictions, I'm talking about you who consider yourself 'christian' but live no differently than the world around you. You need to know you've created a false religion. You are not a Christian until you put off your whole old life. You must do this if you want to be a Christian. Christianity is not a self-help strategy to make you a little better. It's a death to self strategy to give you a whole new life.

4. Real lasting change can only happen when you surrender your whole life to God.

Only once you've put yourself off can you then be renewed like we talked about in verse 23. Then you do what verse 24 says. **put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.**

The one important thing I'll say here is the new self is created after the likeness of God. When Adam & Eve were first created, they were made in the image of God. That's not really about his physical appearance of course. Its about his character. And now Paul is saying you put on the new self. In the likeness of God. Your new self is a redeemed self. It's the person God intended for you to be all along. And to put on that self is to begin to put on the very character of God himself.

5. Real, lasting change is revealed as your life displays more and more of the character of God.

The more you grow up in the faith, the more you start to resemble your heavenly father. People are like "oh you look just like your dad." When you are a baby you are cute but you pretty much look like a baby. Chubby cheeks and wiggling limbs. But as you grow, people who know your parents start to say things like "you remind me of your dad." Or "That sounds just like your mom talking." And then you get married and you never ever ever say to your wife "you are just like your mother."

The New Self is the child of God. So Ephesians 5.1 is going to say, be imitators of God like little children. You will never do it right, but the joyful life is the one that walks in her father's footsteps because that is where life is.

What real, lasting change looks like

In vv 25-32 Paul describes what Real, Lasting change looks like. He takes those 5 principles and puts them into practice. I want to walk through these one at a time and show you how the same gospel that has created this new self gives you the power to live. You are going to see the process of real, lasting change we've been talking about. And good news. Its as simple as:

Old Self → Jesus → New Self

Let me show you.

[25] Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

Slide Break

V 25: Lies → Jesus → Truth Why do we lie? Because we want the approval of someone or we want some thing and we fear we will not get it with the truth. Old self only found security in man's opinion or in material wealth. But then we meet Jesus. And Jesus says the real security you are looking for is the unrivaled love of God and he has given that to the real you via the gospel. You don't need anyone else's approval anymore because God has placed his love and approval on you through Christ. Now, you put on the new self and it speaks truth. The new self is secure in Jesus and can always speak about things truthfully because I don't need my neighbor's approval to be secure. So I can actually be transparent and real with people. Many community groups suffer from this right here. We are still trying to give off the impression that we have it all together. NOPE. We have JESUS and we are a mess. That's putting off falsehood.

[26] Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,

Slide Break

Selfish Indignation → Jesus → Loving Anger

He doesn't say don't be angry. That'd just be behavior modification.

Any of you Seinfeld fans? If all he said was "don't get angry" I'd need meditation moments every day where I could yell "SERENITY NOW!" Anger is a character trait of God. If you love something you get angry at anything that threatens it.

- I've watched church members get cancer and I hated the cancer because it threatened the life of the people I love.
- I hate porn because I've watched it threaten and sometimes completely destroy marriages of people I love.

The problem isn't anger, its selfish anger. Its when we feel we've been wronged and we get angry because we want to see the other person suffer for the injustice they've committed against us. We want Justice!!! God says no, that is the old self talking. Put it off. The gospel says God absorbed the anger, the wrath, owed to you because of your sin. Justice would have been you dying and spending eternity apart from him. Instead he took the punishment on himself. When your spouse offends you, your boss makes you mad, don't retaliate. Love them, absorb the anger, and forgive them. And the only way you can do that without bottling it up and then one day exploding like a volcano of crazy is to remember who you are! I'm not saying be a doormat to get walked all over. I'm saying anger will corrode your soul and instead let the gospel free you from it.

Litmus test to know if you are lovingly angry: Don't let sun go down. Selfish anger turns into bitterness and stays with you. Loving anger is quick to forgive.

[28] Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

Slide Break

Stealing → Jesus → Generosity

The old self needed stuff and lived by the idea that I must provide security by whatever means necessary. Lest you think this one doesn't apply to your world - In America there is about 2 to 3 billion dollars of employee theft – people that steal from those they report to. People choosing to take from others to create security for themselves.

The gospel says God has provided for your deepest need, salvation from your sin, and has secured it for you forever.

Your real needs are met. You can Put off the old self because it was lying to you anyway. New self is so secure in fact, not only do you not need to steal, but you can give stuff away. Because you aren't a slave to building wealth and you aren't threatened by letting go of your money.

See what he says is the point of honest wealth building? To give to someone in need. So if you are thinking, that's right I never cheat on my taxes and my money is hard earned!

Question: do you keep it all to yourself? If so, you haven't experienced the gospel yet. Your heart is still hard towards God and you are ascribing to the moral code without the heart. God was generous with you! Have you rested in that yet? When you do the beauty of that generosity will stir new affections and desires for meeting the needs of others in you.

We give not to earn God's approval but in response to his generosity towards us.

[29] - Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

Gossip → Jesus → Encouragement

[31] Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. [32] Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Wrath → Jesus → Forgiveness

We forgive not to earn God's approval but as an act of joyful response to the forgiveness he's given to us!

See what is happening in each one of these scenarios Paul is showing us? It's that, at the core,

Real, lasting change is a response to grace and not an attempt to earn God's favor.

I hope some of you are seeing today how people can really be changed by God. For some of you, it's a wake up call. You call yourself a Christian but you are angry, stingy, and deceitful. Maybe you've tried not to be but nothing is sticking. You need to stop trying to fix yourself. Put off your old self, let God recreate your heart like only he can do.

CLOSING

In C.S. Lewis' story *voyage of the dawntreader* Eustace, a rather annoying young boy, gets turned into a dragon. He is

stuck with a bracelet around his leg causing him pain and he wants to get rid of it. He sees a pool with pristine water and he thinks if I can just get in there that would sooth my pain. Then all of the sudden, before he goes to the water, the lion appears. The story picks up there “the lion told me I must undress first. (meaning take off his scales)....So I started scratching myself and my scales began coming off all over the place. I scratched a little deeper and my whole skin started peeling off beautifully, as if I was a banana. I stepped out of it and I could see it lying there beside me looking rather nasty. It was a most lovely feeling...

“But just as I was going to put my feet in the water I looked and saw that they were all hard and rough and scaly just as they had been before. So I scratched and tore this underskin and left it beside the other one...well exactly the same thing happened again. Then the lion said “You will have to let me undress you.” I was afraid of his claws but I was pretty near desperate now. So I just lay flat on my back and let him do it.” The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone into my heart. And when HE began pulling skin off it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off...

Well he peeled the stuff right off – just as I thought I’d done it myself the other three times – only they hadn’t hurt. And there it was lying on the grass, only ever so much darker and thicker and more knobby looking than the others had been. Then he grabbed me and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became

perfectly delicious and as soon as I started splashing and swimming I realized all the pain had gone from my arm. Then I saw why...I had turned into a boy again.

After that, the lion took me back out and dressed me in these clothes. You must think I’m crazy and to be honest, I’m starting to wonder if it was all just a dream.

No said Edmund, it wasn’t a dream.

For one, you are wearing these new clothes. And well you’ve been un-dragoned for another.²

Real, lasting change only comes when you come to a point where you are willing to let God peel away the old self. And yes, it may hurt. But until you surrender your whole life to God and let him renew your heart, you will continue to experience superficial short term adjustments. It’s time to stop pretending to change and let God go to work on you.

Nobody here believes real lasting change will be a quick and easy process. In fact in the end of the story C.S. Lewis says ‘It would be nice and fairly true to say Eustace is a different boy. To be strictly accurate he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. But the cure had begun.’”

Believers and unbelievers are called to the same thing today. Some of you Christians need to finally repent of that sin that

² Lewis, C.S. *The Voyage of the Dawnreader in The Chronicles of Narnia* (Harper Collins, NY 2001) 474-475.

has entangled you. You've been living in the old self. Time to put it to rest.

CLOSE IN PRAYER.