

“Walking Well”

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Eighth in a series on Ephesians

Ephesians 4.17-5.2

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Therefore this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. 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. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

But that is not the way you trained in the Messiah!(Assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus) You learned to put off your old human, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in your minds by the Spirit, and to put on the new human, created after the likeness of God in righteousness and holiness of truth.

Therefore, having put away the lie, let each one of you speak the truth with your neighbour, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on that which provokes you to anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let thieves no longer steal, but rather let them labour, doing honest work with their own hands, so that they may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no rotten 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. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and fierceness and anger and screaming and slander be put away from you, along with all other evil. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in the Messiah forgave you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as the Messiah loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 4.17-5.2

English Standard Version, adapted by GSY

Why walk well?

Let's use walking to talk about our living. So it is not about our actual legs. If “walking” means living, we are all walkers. Like walking, living is dynamic, it is active. We are all walking in some direction, our lives moving in some way. Some skip along, some stroll, some sprint, some trudge, some crawl. Still, walking well is not just a matter of how well we move. A track star can sprint down the track, but if he is going the wrong way. . . . Someone else can be moving with aching slowness, but if she's going the right way. . . .

God's love for us does not depend on how well we are living. Our steps might be stumbling, our stride eccentric. We might be desperately lost. We fill our days with bad choices, unkind actions, destructive behaviours, sin aplenty . . . and God still loves us.

The great news of Jesus, God the Son, is that it was while we were walking badly, while we were tripping and falling, while we were kicking and trampling others, while we were scrambling away from God . . . Jesus raced to us like a father running to a long-lost child. Jesus lived for us, died for us, rose to resurrection life for us, ascended to rule all creation for us. He did all this while we were walking wrong. He didn't wait for us to get to the gym. He didn't order us to run extra laps. He didn't say, "get moving, then I'll give you the time of day." When we were dead in our tracks, he gave us everything. By grace – God's gift – you have been saved!

Then comes the question: why walk well? If we did not have to be already walking well for Jesus to make us well, why walk well now? If Jesus saved you and me while we were not living right, what does it matter how we live now?

II

Paul urged, "*Do not walk as the Gentiles do.*" Most of those Jesus-followers in Ephesus were Gentile. They were non-Jews, and had not needed to become Jews to belong to Jesus. By grace Jesus brought them in. By grace he made them part of the community of God's people. Religious, ethnic, and spiritual divisions, Jesus had torn down. All by grace.

If they had passports, theirs would have still said "Gentile." They looked the same as before, sounded the same, dressed the same. Yet, Paul says, do not walk in the old Gentile-ways you used to. What you did before did not matter. Jesus brought you in. What you do now, matters.

My passport says, "Canadian." I look, sound, dress and shovel Canadian. "*You must no longer walk – live – as Canadians do.*" Wow! Doesn't that puts a sharper edge on it! What we do now, matters. Many habits, practices, expectations, behaviours, ways of thinking and understanding we all take for granted need to change. We were running in the wrong direction. Paul calls this the "old human." Many of us run with style! However, the only way to make progress if you're going the wrong way, is to turn around and learn a new way.

Jesus does not wait for us to get it right. We never would! He makes us right. Jesus' grace changes us. His salvation transforms us. He makes us new. So we can, finally, walk well.

III

It is about learning Jesus. In the reading, I translated it as “training in the Messiah.”¹ Because this is not just about getting the facts about Jesus or knowing the stories of Jesus. I can have a complete and accurate knowledge of Jesus, and still have not learned him.

It is about being a disciple. An apprentice. An apprentice learns the craft from the master. Yes, by studying . . . we have things to get into our noggin! Yet maybe more vital, the apprentice learns by being with the master. By watching. By imitating. By being alongside.

So much of what we need to “learn Jesus” are not simply facts and procedures. They are practices, which we absorb. Habits, we drink in. Who we are is changed. We are formed, by being with the Master. He also un-forms us. Gathered into his New Humanity, means unlearning the Old Humanity – its practices, habits, outlooks, assumptions, understandings, ourselves.

We never do this alone. We can only learn Jesus alongside one another. The New Humanity is not solitary. It is collective, a community of love.

This never stops. We are all beginners, always. We are always learning Jesus: unlearning the Old Humanity, and being formed into the New.²

IV

Paul gives some examples of this unlearning and learning. They are not terribly complicated.³ Unlearn lying and learn truth. Unlearn stealing and learn generosity. Unlearn trash-talking and learn speaking that builds up others.

Let me linger over one: anger.

Paul says, “*Let all bitterness and fierceness and anger and screaming and slander be put away from you. . . .*” But earlier he says, “*Be angry!*” Just don’t sin. Don’t end the day without dealing with whatever provoked you. Otherwise, you’re building a room for evil to

¹ The Greek verb is μαθηάω, which is the root for the noun μαθητής, which means “disciple.”

² Eugene H. Peterson, Practice Resurrection: a conversation on growing up in Christ (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 191. He cites Karl Barth about our perpetual status as beginners.

³ Eugene Peterson observes, “*None of Paul’s negatives required anything heroic. Modest self-restraint, minimum effort: put away falsehood, don’t let the sun go down on your anger, no stealing, no evil talk, don’t grieve the Holy Spirit, no wrangling, no slander, no malice, no fornication. These negatives name actions or attitudes that were accepted as commonplace, some even sanctioned, in the Gentile culture of the Ephesians. Also in the Gentile culture of Americans. Things haven’t change all that much.*” Peterson, 196. The reference to fornication comes later in Ephesians 5.

move in.⁴

Some things, we should be angry about. Those Old Human things that tear people up, lead them to danger, destroy who they are. Be angry at injustice. Be angry at cruelty. Be angry at lazy indifference. Be angry at violence. Be angry at arrogance. Be angry at addiction. Be angry . . . and be careful.

Anger is a blazing torch. It is necessary in the darkness. Start spreading the fire around, though, and it so quickly flashes out of control. It burns you. It burns how you are with others: bitter, fierce, screaming, slanderous. Uncontrolled anger consumes love, and Jesus commands us to love, even those we are angry at.

So confront it. Confront the person. With love. Someone has called this “care-fronting.”⁵ That demands lots of prayer. It is one of those practices that grow when we are “learning Jesus.” We learn how to be angry from Jesus. And to “*be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in the Messiah forgave you.*”

V

If you're like me, you don't like to talk too much about the negatives of following Jesus. I'm happier emphasizing the things I need to do, instead of the things I need to stop doing. I guess I'm cautious of being moralistic. I've experienced too much religion that stifles joy.

That's why I need to hear the cautions here about the “Old Human.” Things in me need changing. I have habits and practices, attitudes and understandings I need to unlearn. I will never graduate from being the Master Jesus' apprentice.

Eugene Peterson says that dealing with the negatives “*leave room for the main action, God's action.*”⁶ We are like gardens. For new things to grow, old weeds need uprooting. When I let the Holy Spirit work on my bitterness, space opens for the Spirit to grow kindness in me. When I let the Spirit work on my dishonesty and greed, space opens for God's generosity for the poor to grow in me. Cleaning up my talking creates room for the Spirit to teach me how to bless and build others up with my words.

Why walk well? Because we will experience, more and more, the wonders of what God is doing. God, who is making all things new. God, who is making humanity new. God, who is making you new. Praise be to God! Amen.

⁴ My paraphrase of verse 26. For a discussion of the translation of this verse, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians* (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 2002), 211-213.

⁵ *Ibid*, 225. Quoting David Augsburger.

⁶ Peterson, 196.