

Probing the Passage II: Handling Paul's Applicational Writing

The second half of the book of Ephesians sees a shift in focus, as the “calling” passages of the opening three chapters give way to the “conduct” passages of chapter 4 to 6. What is the connection between these two broad sections of the book? How do we interpret the conduct passage of Ephesians 4:17-32 in the correct context of its preceding argument? This session will look to establish transferable principles for understanding and teaching all such “conduct” passages.

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Ephesians 4:17–32 (ESV)

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.

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, 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.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. 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.

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. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 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.

I. **Walking as the gentiles**

A. 'Outward' Behaviour

B. 'Inward' Motivation

II. **Putting on the new self**

A. 'Outward' Behaviour

B. 'Inward' Motivation

Profound Application

Profound preaching is not dense, complex or over peoples' heads. Neither is it merely historical, lacking any hint of relevance and application. The person shaking your hand at the door may tell you "*that was deep!*" but really mean "*that was over my head and apparently irrelevant!*" That is not our goal. True biblical preaching should be profound in the right sense of the word – deep, weighty, serious, life-changing. Some thoughts on application:

1. Instructing conduct is probably not profound, motivating it biblically probably is. I say probably because if your motivation method is to guilt trip listeners as you twist their arms to force them into external conformity, then that is not profound. It is poor. The Bible stirs life change and so should our preaching (by God's grace, of course). We tend to hit truth in explanation and conduct in application, but the Bible goes deeper than a behavioural model of motivating humans:

2. Application should go deeper than a to-do list, probing into thinking patterns and beliefs.

There is a place for practical to-do suggestions, but if that is the staple application of a preaching ministry, the long-term fruit will be flimsy. Christianity isn't about conforming behaviour to external standards, but about response to the truth of who God is and what He has said to us. But again, the Bible goes deeper than cognitive approaches to life change:

3. Application needs to target the affections, because the Bible does. Discourse moves us, narratives engage us, poetry stirs us – the Bible reaches to the heart of the listener. Sadly too many preachers assume their role is merely to pressure behavioural change, or educate for cognitive adjustment, but these approaches don't fully present the message and method of the biblical passages. We must wisely, honestly, carefully and prayerfully engage the hearts of our listeners with the biblical text.

4. While relevance should be a given, transformational application is rare, so pursue it. For instance, how easy it is to preach “*don't be anxious*” from the Sermon on the Mount and end up imploring people to try harder not to fret! But the passage points listeners to how much God cares for them. Let's not promote a pseudo-relevance by simply being strongly against something, but rather offer the text's bigger alternative that attracts and woos. To think of a common Old Testament example, by all means let's smash idols, but not because we are just anti-idol, rather because God is so much better.