

Picture a young family driving to the beach, when a great hue and cry issues from the children in the backseat. Mom delicately inquires, “What’s going on?” “She kicked me.” “He took my Leapster.” “It’s not your Leapster. It’s my Leapster, and you didn’t ask if you could use it.” “You weren’t using it. You just didn’t want me to use it.” At that point they prepare to pull off the highway and administer whatever justice stops short of felony charges.

Sound familiar? It should. It is childhood’s version of the Blame Game, which we see played out on TV, in courtrooms, boardrooms, and bedrooms. It has many variations. One of them tries to take the high moral ground. “I’m not saying I’m perfect. I’m not. But that guy was such a jerk.” The person who says that is so close to real wisdom. He should have stopped in mid-sentence – “I’m not perfect.” – and then retired to have a long, hard look at his imperfections. That would be a first and worthy step to wanting and trying to be a better human being. Who does that?

The Bible has captured the Blame Game attitude to a T. Listen to these words: **“I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.”** To which Christ responds: **But you do not realize that you wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.** Never be satisfied with exactly who you are. Always be willing to stop the Blame Game by having a long and thoughtful look at your own imperfections.

In the Context of Baptism

Pope Francis exemplified the spirit in which to do this. Most of us saw TV coverage of his interview with a fellow Jesuit priest. American news covered what he said about abortion, same-sex marriage, and the ordination of women. It’s their agenda to persuade the Catholic Church to change its teaching. I think the media missed the best part of the interview.

Antonio “Spadaro asks Pope Francis point-blank, ‘Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?’” The pope’s answer is shocking: ‘I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. ... I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ.’” (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/september-web-only/what-you-should-know-about-popes-new-interview.html?paging=off>, accessed 9/21/2013)

That’s the spirit in which I come to worship with you each Sunday. I need the infinite mercy and patience of our Savior. I want to hear that mercy celebrated in music, read in Scripture, praised in prayer, lifted up in sermons, and reinforced by you, my fellow believers in Jesus. I want to learn how to respond in love to His infinite mercy and patience. That’s why I love Ephesians. It teaches us that we have a calling. We are the flesh in which God lives in this world and makes Himself known to the world, and we are to live lives that are worthy of that calling. That’s the message of Ephesians, and the apostle focused a life worthy of our calling around three governing ideas: 1) the unity of the Church, 2) the new attitude and lifestyle of the Church, and 3) the spiritual warfare of the Church. We have looked at the first idea: We are to **maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.** (Ephesians 4:3) The second governing idea will occupy us for several weeks, and it very much has to do with wanting and trying to be better human beings.

It is providential that we take up this second idea on a baptism Sunday. Baptism is all about the new attitude and lifestyle of the Church. The meaning of Christian baptism cuts with two edges. First, being baptized means that your old way of life has come to an end. Living your life without asking what Jesus would do is no longer acceptable. It’s over, and the behavior that dishonors Christ has to go. Second, a new way of life with Christ has begun. From now on you want to know His will and learn to live in ways that honor Him.

We practice immersion, because it pictures this meaning of baptism. Going beneath the water symbolizes death to the old attitude and lifestyle that ignored Christ. Rising out of the water symbolizes that the new way of life with Christ has begun.

There is no symbolic, civic act comparable to Christian baptism, which calls citizens to the virtues necessary for a thriving democracy. In fact, many people dismiss the idea that virtue is even necessary to citizenship. What is necessary are rights and the freedom to do whatever you think is necessary for realizing your potential.

Baptism calls us and commits us to a greater good than personal rights and personal fulfillment. Because it does that, it may create tension in us. But as we embody the new attitude and lifestyle that we learn from Christ, we will create tension in the people around us. We will become a sign to them of the living God, whose purpose is for people to be holy as He is holy.

The Way of the World

Ephesians 4:17-24 summarizes the meaning of baptism, and it presents us with the grand pattern of the new attitude and lifestyle that is worthy of our calling. Let's start with verses 17-19. **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. 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. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.**

That is not a flattering picture of human nature. But Paul never wrote like that to discharge disgust at human evil or to make himself feel good about himself or better than other people. He was diagnosing alienation from God, and he included himself in the diagnosis. You can see better what he was doing, if we link these verses back to the main theme of Ephesians 1-3. Before He created the world God made the decision to create within the world a community He could call "My people." It is the Church. However, God had to create His beloved community out of people who were **dead in transgressions and sins**. **Dead** is the crucial word, and verses 18-19 analyze what that spiritual death looks like in practice.

We understand verse 19: **they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more**. Child abuse, human trafficking, pornography, drug abuse, binge drinking, and impulse buying bombard us daily. But don't miss the first four words of verse 19. They take you behind the scenes in the human heart: **Having lost all sensitivity**.

Paul was sure that the newly converted Gentiles in the Ephesian church would get what he was talking about. It had not been very long ago that his words in verses 17-19 described them. So, his first advice to them in verse 17 is simple and blunt: **So, I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do**. Don't go with the flow! Don't listen to the voices beckoning you to go with the flow. I say the same to you, and I say it for the same reason Paul did.

The Pattern

Verse 20 is the reason Paul gave: **You did not come to know Christ that way**. Christ has given us a vision of something better. I wonder if people give up wanting or trying to be better human beings, because they don't have a vision of something better. Christ has given us a vision of something better. A definite pattern pervades that vision of something better.

The pattern begins in verse 22: **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**. Christ's vision

of a better life involves renunciations. Are you willing to renounce the evil that tempts and deceives you? I don't want to go into details now about the evil we are to renounce. The apostle will be specific about them, and I'd rather let him speak for himself. For now we just need to be aware that there are remnants of our former way of life that cling to us. We have tolerated them, excused them, and tried to ignore them. Be prepared for shafts of light to pierce your personal darkness. Be willing to look at yourself, and be willing to renounce what is unworthy of our calling and has no place in the kingdom of God.

The pattern continues in verse 23: **You were taught, with regard to your former way of life . . . to be made new in the attitude of your minds.** The real renovation that makes us better people takes place in our attitude. We learn from Christ to look at life through different eyes.

The key is our motivation for change. The motivation for giving up old behavior and learning new habits is going to catch you by surprise. Could we stop here a minute and mark something we will see throughout Ephesians and the whole New Testament? Paul never says: "Don't live like the Gentiles, or you might get AIDS. Don't live like the Gentiles, or you will put your children at risk of drug abuse, not going to college, and psychological troubles. Don't live like the Gentiles, or you will end up desperately unhappy." Any and all of those consequences may be inherent in the ways of the world.

But Paul never talked like that. He said, "Don't live like the Gentiles, because **you did not come to know Christ that way.** Christ has given us a vision of something better and better reasons to go for it. The new motives bring about the new attitude of our minds. The motives for behaving the way we do are largely hidden from us. We don't think much about why we do what we do. The new motives Paul introduces will force us to examine our old motives and to change them. A new attitude comes from new motives.

The last part of the pattern that pervades the vision of something better comes in verse 24. **You were taught, with regard to your former way of life . . . to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.** People who are looking for the coming Kingdom of God and the coming King in these changing, dangerous times don't just say no to something that pushes them away from Christ and His Church. They **put on the armor of light**, and they **clothe themselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.** They **put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.** They break the spell that bewitches us into thinking that the worries of life, the love of money, or the yen for forbidden pleasures are supreme.

The actions we will read about together over the next few weeks are disarmingly simple. Taken together, they will make you a better human being. Taken together and taken seriously by the whole Church, they will define who we are and make us a force to be reckoned with.

Take Aways

It is a wise move. It can also be a move toward holiness, if we remember that we are charged to live lives that are worthy of our calling. C. S. Lewis may help us here. In one of his great passages he put the following words into the mouth of Christ. "Make no mistake. If you let me, I will make you perfect. The moment you put yourself in my hands, that is what you are in for . . . You have free will, and if you choose, you can push Me away. But if you do not push me away, understand that I am going to see this job through. Whatever suffering it may cost you . . . whatever it costs Me, I will never rest, nor let you rest, until . . . my Father can say without reservation that He is well pleased with you, as He said He was well pleased with me. This I can do and will do. But I will not do anything less'" (*Mere Christianity*, 171).