

Sermon File # 729

Scripture Text: Ephesians 4:17-32

Sermon Title: *Disciples Are Different: Our New Life in Christ*

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At International Baptist Church, Brussels, Belgium

On Sunday morning 14 March 2010

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

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Disciples Are Different: Our New Life in Christ

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to our text as we continue our study of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, this great presentation of our new life in Christ. As we've noted, in the first three chapters Paul explained what God has done for us in Christ, having chosen us and then having saved us by his free grace. Beginning in chapter four, Paul expounds what we must do in response to God's grace. The past two Sundays we have noted the dynamics of life in the church, the people of God, the body of Christ, which enjoys an amazing unity and also has been given a great diversity of gifts to join God in his mission to the world. My prayer is that we will continue to respond to the call to understand how God has gifted every one of us and the role we are to have within the body of Christ.

This morning we will note the kind of life we are called to live as God's chosen, redeemed people. The grace that has chosen and saved us is the grace that enables us to live differently from the world around us, a fallen world that is under the influence of the Evil One and his kingdom of darkness. In our text Paul sets forth the ways our lives as God's people are to be different from the lives of those outside his kingdom.

Follow as I read **Ephesians 4:17-32**.

The more I read and study this passage of Scripture the more the word “different” stands out in my mind. Obviously, Paul is driving home the point that the Christian life is different from the life of an unbeliever. Yet how we as disciples of Jesus are different from those belonging to the world is crucial to understand. We are not to be different for difference’ sake but to be different in the ways Christ makes us different. I think we can all agree that in God’s kingdom some are different in odd and even superficial ways. We are called to be different, but some are clearly more *different* than others, and different in the wrong kind of ways.

During my youth, like most teenagers I wanted to be well liked by everyone, and did manage to make myself popular in school, church and social life, primarily through achievements in sports, music and other activities and opportunities to achieve leadership and make many friends. I earnestly sought to maintain my Christian witness while at the same time achieving a high degree of social acceptance and even popularity. I tried to relate to others while also maintaining a degree of difference in moral and ethical values and behavior. I’m sure, that in my immaturity, I did not always live out my convictions as I should have done, yet my friends respected by standards as a Christian. And I was embarrassed by certain individuals in my home church who seemed to want to be different just for difference’ sake.

One young man, who was a fellow church member as well as a classmate at school, truly succeeded in being different, yet it was for him a matter of being different for difference’ sake. For him, holiness was associated with a certain way of looking, dressing and speaking, and the more he could alienate himself from others and the more people he could offend seemed to add to his assurance that he was being “persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” I was convinced, however, that he was simply being justly punished for obnoxiousness’ sake.

Kirk seemed to think that his “holiness” was enhanced by his sloppy appearance and poor grooming habits. He carried with him a large black Bible and often stood in the hallways of the school delivering orations of judgment against fellow students. Because he was a fellow Christian and church member, I felt obligated to at least tolerate his behavior, but was always embarrassed by my obligatory association with him. Kirk indeed was different, but he was different for difference’ sake and in a way that obfuscated and indeed nullified the kind of difference I think Paul is writing about in our text.

We are called, not to seek to be social misfits who alienate others by our superficial differences, but are called rather to be genuinely different in the ways that truly matter. Recent research in my home country (USA) indicates that those who claim to be born-again Christians show no difference in their moral lifestyle and ethical practices from non-Christians (Barna). Our Scripture passage clearly sets forth the vitally important and essential ways followers of Jesus are to be different from the world around us.

As disciples of Jesus we have first of all...

A different way of looking: the disciple's worldview (verses 17-24)

In the first verses of our text (17-24) Paul is writing about the different perspective or outlook of the disciple, the way of looking that should be radically different from that of the fallen, unbelieving world. Paul first describes...

The former way of living and looking (17-19)

Paul paints in verses 17-19 a dreadful and pathetic portrait of the worldview of those outside of Christ, and reminds the believers that this was their former condition also.

“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” (17).

Most of the Ephesian believers were Gentiles and before God's grace rescued them, they were also under the influence of the former way of living and looking. They had a godless worldview, which was necessarily futile, hopeless and unenlightened by God's truth. Because this is God's universe and creation, life cannot be clearly and rightly understood apart from the understanding that depends on his revelation. The pathetic picture of mankind apart from God's revelation and understanding is one of a darkened understanding, separation from God's life due to ignorance of his truth, and a hardening of hearts against him. As a result of this willful ignorance through rejecting God's truth, there comes the subsequent life of self-indulgent sensuality which never achieves true satisfaction (18-19).

This pathetic downward spiral is described also in Paul's letter to the Romans, where he describes the working of God's wrath against those who reject his revelation of truth and his gift of understanding through the insight of faith. When God's truth is rejected, there is the resultant wrath of God, which is simply his letting the rebellious continue in a downward spiral, taking them further away from truth and deeper into moral decadence and self-destruction (Romans 1:18-32).

It's interesting to note the contrast between how Paul would view today's so-called sophisticated agnostics and atheists and how they view themselves as having achieved a scientific worldview that no longer needs the “prop” of outmoded religion and beliefs based on the Bible. Paul sees such self-proclaimed “achievers” as pathetically blind and self-deceived ignoramuses (18), who are stumbling along toward their inevitable meeting of God's judgment, and even now are experiencing his wrath through deeper immersion into moral and spiritual darkness and disappointing, self and socially-destructive depravity (17-19; Romans 1:18-32). A godless worldview results in a hardness of heart and loss of spiritual and moral sensitivity.

Certain medical conditions destroy nerves, such as leprosy, spinal cord injury, and diabetes, and are difficult to treat because of the loss of a sense of touch or pain. The body is incapable of warning of danger. "People can also develop a kind of moral insensitivity, silencing their consciences and hardening their hearts. That condition can prove (spiritually) fatal" (Yancey, 1025).

Paul had noted earlier how that, before we came to faith in Jesus, who reveals to us the truth about God and his holy love for us, we were dead in our transgressions and sins, were objects of God's wrath and were without hope and without God in the world (2:1,3,12). Again, this is a pathetic picture, which puts the unbelieving world in a different light than they naturally can see themselves. Spiritual blindness is self-deceptive and grace alone can enable the blind to see. Jesus said that the only hope for the spiritually blind is for them to admit their blindness and come to him for the sight he alone can give (John 9:35-41).

We have, by God's mercy and grace, experienced...

The transforming power of Christ (20 & 21)

There's another important adversative conjunction in verse 20, telling us that an importance contrast, difference and distinction is at hand. Paul says "You, *however*," have become different people, with a different way of looking, because of the transforming power of Christ. We have come to know Christ through a personal, living faith, which has given us a totally different outlook. In verses 20 and 21 Paul speaks of our coming to know Christ in a personal, life-changing experience. Even an unbeliever, with a heart hardened against God, can know about Christ and can be good at quoting Scripture and be regarded as a good churchman or woman. But only by the invading, creative power of the Holy Spirit we can come to know God through the risen Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

When Paul speaks of the truth that is in Jesus (21) he is doubtless thinking about Jesus' self-identification as the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6, Mohrlang, 2004). Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, reveals to us the truth about God, being his exact representation (Hebrews 1:3). He also is the one who reveals to us the truth about our sinfulness and our spiritual blindness and need for his mercy and gracious forgiveness. And when we are transformed by the Holy Spirit into God's children, we have the gift of spiritual insight into the truth of his Word and are eager and able to grow into the likeness of his character (1 Corinthians 2:6-16).

Knowing Christ as an ongoing process of knowing him better, something Paul aspired for himself (Philippians 3:10) and a process that Peter admonished (2 Peter 3:18). The gifted body of Christ, which we considered the previous two Sundays, is equipped and responsible for teaching one another the truth as it is in Jesus, a truth that can never be exhausted (Hoehner, 594).

As followers of Jesus we have been touched by his transforming power, which enabled us to know him personally and experience his truth, which is the key to all spiritual understanding of God's truth. And knowing Christ personally has made the difference of...

The ongoing transformation (22-24)

As God's children we have a different way of looking at God, the world and ourselves. We realize that we are to do away with our former way of life and put off the old, sin-prone attitudes and actions, so we can be made new in the attitude of our minds. As we take off the old way of life, like an old, worn-out garment, we simultaneously put on the new self, "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (22-24).

Paul pictures conversion to Christ as an ongoing process that never ends, whereby we discard the old ways of looking at life in favor of a totally new way of thinking, a new attitude of mind and outlook on life and the world.

The picture that Paul likely has in mind is that of someone wearing the grave cloths that were wrapped around a dead corpse to prepare for burial. Jesus' friend Lazarus had been dead and his body, wrapped tightly in strips of linen cloth, had lain in a tomb for three days. When Jesus came to his tomb, in response to the entreaty of Lazarus' sisters, he called out to Lazarus, who came back to life and struggled to the entrance of the tomb, "his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face." Jesus then said, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go" (John 11:43f).

Paul seems to have this image in mind to represent our ongoing transformation, which is the process of taking off our grave clothes in order to put on the new clothes of the new mindset of true righteousness and holiness. "Take off the grave clothes!" is what Paul seems to be saying to us (Wiersbe, 107ff). Our difference from the fallen, failing world around us begins with a mind that's transformed by the Holy Spirit. Paul speaks about this new mind which is set on what the Spirit desires, which gives life and peace (Romans 8:5ff). And he urges us to not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, that we might be able to test and approve the good, perfect and pleasing will of God (Romans 12:2).

(At this point I think how my wife is regularly urging me to "put away" a favorite shirt, jacket or other item of clothing, which to me seems quite natural and adequate, but to her better taste would be better recycled and remade).

Our difference from the world takes place in the mind, giving us a new outlook on life and a different perspective of this world as fallen and yet as not hopeless. As we have been and are being transformed in our minds, so we believe God is at work in this world, and through Christ is leading this world toward its final rescue and redemption (Romans 8:18ff). The Holy Spirit has given us a new mind, and new outlook and the ability to see reality from God's point of view, with a kingdom perspective. And we see that God has begun,

with the changing of our minds, to create us anew in true righteousness and holiness (24). As disciples of Jesus we now can have...

A different way of living: the disciple's conduct (verses 25-32)

Wouldn't it be much easier to be a disciple of Jesus if all we had to do was agree in our minds with these magnificent, irrefutable truths of the gospel and of our new life in Christ? What make the life of a disciple so challenging are these invasive, pesky, practical teachings that demand changes in our behavior! In this second section of our text, Paul doesn't give us an exhaustive list of our new and different behavior in Christ, but one that's well representative of our life together in the body of Christ and also the life that others outside of Christ can see.

We are called to live...

With integrity and transparency (25)

Paul says that the disciple of Jesus is different from the world in his or her integrity of speech. The people of God are people of integrity, with our speech and conduct being integrated and consistent with our profession of faith as the children of God. We depend on true speech, needing to teach and instruct one another in the faith, so that we all grow in spiritual maturity.

Here Paul may well be thinking of "the old lifestyle of deception," which is always harmful to relationships. The lack of trust created by deceptive speech and conduct is a threat to the marriage relationship but also to the church body and fellowship. I've seen how that a congregation can be divided and its leadership rendered ineffective if people no longer can trust those who have been charged to be men and women of integrity.

Perhaps Paul is referring particularly to integrity as opposed to hypocrisy. Nothing can destroy trusting relationships as much as hypocrisy in the church. And we all know how that hypocrisy, especially among church leaders, has damaged the witness of the church to the unbelieving, ever more cynical world. Hypocrisy is not the failure to achieve perfection, but is rather the intentional deception of trying to make people think you're someone or something you're not. Hypocrisy is basically living and presenting a lie.

As your pastor, for example, I will never achieve sinless perfection in this life, and will admit readily what you already abundantly know as a fact! But I am called to seek after holiness and to grow in grace and godliness and to live before you with transparency and honesty, confessing my weakness and asking for your patience and understanding. And this transparency we must offer to one another, and be honest in our admission of failure and need for forgiveness and prayer.

The fallen world is rampant with deception and is obsessed with projecting an image of success, even if substance is missing. We're all aware of the moral failings of athletes, who have disappointed young admirers by their moral failure and who have often cheated with performance enhancing drugs. But the people of God are to be different, admitting our weaknesses and asking for forgiveness, love and prayer support of one another in the midst of our struggles and failings.

We have a different way of living...

With controlled and momentary anger (26 & 27)

The world is filled with angry people, who lash out against one another, often not knowing the reasons for anger, expressed against even those they love the most, and often in road rage against those they don't even know. Paul says we are to be different because our anger will be controlled and momentary and not a part of our emotional life.

Verses 26 and 27 are an interesting study. Paul assumes that there are times when we will be angry. These verses do not prohibit anger but rather seem to recognize that at times we will be angry and even ought to be angry for the right reasons. Scripture speaks of God's anger and wrath, which is always justified and under control, and there were times when Jesus was angry, particularly when he saw the destructive work of ungodliness that kept people away from God's mercy, love and grace. Jesus was angry with the works of the devil, such as the legalistic attitude that placed rules and taboos above the needs of human beings. When Jesus healed a man with a deformed hand his critics condemned him for healing on the Sabbath. And the Scripture tells us that, as he prepared to heal the man in defiance of their criticism, "He looked around at them angrily and was deeply saddened by their hard hearts" (Mark 3:5, NLT).

There are times when we will be angry with people for their self-destructive actions or their words and actions that have hurt others. Notice, I said "others." Often what we excuse as our "righteous indignation" is nothing but our own hurt feelings and wounded pride. This is self-centered anger which we can hardly excuse as righteous. We are right to be angry when others are hurt or led into sin, and we should confront the sinner, i.e. the offending party before the sun goes down (26). That is, we are to resolve our angry feelings by acting redemptively with firm and loving action and not allow our angry feelings to stew and boil over in our emotions and to continue to harbor grudges and ill feelings which lead to bitterness.

John Piper preached a sermon on this text called "Satan Seeks a Gap Called Grudges," making the point that the holding of unresolved anger and unexpressed feelings can result in a growing gap in our relationships and also a deepening grudge against someone. We are right to be angry for the right reason. And our anger should not be to get our 'pound of flesh," or to exact revenge, but rather to lovingly correct someone who is in error. Our anger, if truly righteous, "will be mingled with grief" (Piper, 5). As we read about with

Jesus' anger, he looked at them angrily and was "deeply saddened by their hard hearts" (Mark 3:5, NLT).

In contrast, when our anger is self-centered, uncontrolled and is long-lasting, budding into resentment and bitterness, the devil certainly has a foothold in our lives. He can do some real damage in our own spirit and also in our relationships with our fellow believers. Unresolved anger, resentment, bitterness and alienation are characteristic of the fallen world. But we are to be different from the world, and also...

With industry and generosity (28)

This next verse may seem irrelevant to most of us, but it has an application to all of us. Certainly in the first century in Palestine, those who were unemployed were basically reduced to either begging or stealing in order to survive or to provide food for their families. There was no social support system for the needy. And for many of these jobless people who became Christians, this injunction against theft was a challenging one. This meant they needed to urgently find employment. It also meant the church needed to help supply the needs of the unemployed until they could find work.

Our temptations today might be to become idle if support can be received from the state or some welfare system. But for most of us, our theft temptation might come in the way of cheating a bit on our taxes or not giving our employers an honest day's work for our pay, or in petty theft by overcharging for expenses from a business trip. Whether our theft is "white collar" and more respectable, or if it's simple theft, it's wrong.

The new and different way is the way of honesty, even when it hurts us financially. And we as a church need to face up to our responsibility to provide for those among us in real need. In fact, Paul makes it clear that we are to work if at all possible if we want to eat (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15). And we are to work diligently, not to indulge our wants and appetites, but to be able to share what we have with the needy (verse 28 of our text; 2 Corinthians 8 & 9). Such an attitude and value system is in stark contrast with the world, which seeks wealth for personal security and self-indulgence.

With pure and encouraging speech (29)

Paul uses a word in verse 29 that's politely translated "unwholesome talk" in the NIV but more accurately in another version for the kind of speech heard in the fallen world: "foul or abusive language" (NLT). Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse,

"Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift."

Anyone who uses only clean speech and who avoids filthy language or stories will doubtless stand out in today's world, whether in the workplace or places of leisure and community life. Not only is the believer to avoid off color smut,

double entendre and sexual innuendo, but his and her speech is to be carefully used in speaking God's truth that will help and encourage others in the life of faith and godliness.

I think we can safely include in the meaning of this verse the proper and disciplined use of the Internet and text messaging that avoids the unclean and that uses this technology only in a way that is above reproach. All speech and communication is to be consistent with the Spirit of Jesus and to the end that others will be encouraged and the body of Christ strengthened. Paul reminds us that we are all members of one body, which seems to be a reminder that our speech should be honest and helpful in maintaining the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (verse 3). Our speech must never be used to divide the fellowship of Christ, but only to encourage unity.

Each one of us should leave this church building today asking ourselves, "How has my speech and conversation served to encourage someone and to strengthen the unity of the church body today?"

We are called to live differently from the world...

With freedom from evil behavior (31)

I skip down to verse 31, where Paul seems to group together a list of ungodly, worldly characteristics to say how we as followers of Christ are to live differently with freedom from this ungodly behavior, including the rage and anger that is, unlike righteous anger, out of control. I've seen this rage and anger, expressed in shouting matches, taking place in church business meetings (not here at IBC, thankfully!). Again, the imagery is of taking off the old grave clothes, and doing so with a sense of good riddance and even disgust. "The word "brawling" (NIV) is not confined to physical conflict. Again, a dynamic equivalency translation does better to read "harsh words" (NLT). Harsh words indeed lead to hurt feelings and malice and slander.

When I was a child, when we found ourselves in a shouting match in a ply time that had gone bad, I remember the taunt,

"Sticks and stones may break my bones,
But words can never hurt me."

I never agreed with that. I would usually prefer a swat with a stick or a pelt from a rock to hurtful words that stick in the mind and pierce the heart, sometimes for a lifetime. Remember, Paul is addressing the church and is reminding us that such evil, destructive, devilish behavior, speech and attitudes can and often do take place in the church, the body of Christ, the people for whom Christ died and who are called to love and unity. Our angry, unkind and hurtful words can cause great damage to others and to the church.

Paul doesn't end on the negative note, but with a positive statement, saying that a disciple is called to a different way of living...

With kindness, compassion and forgiveness (32)

The disciple of Jesus is different from the world because of the work of the Spirit within, producing the fruit of the Spirit, which includes these virtues of love, kindness and the grace to forbear with patience and to be forgiving (Galatians 5:22f). In a world that is increasingly harsh, self-serving and unforgiving, how these virtues will stand out! These are expressions of the sacrificial love of Christ, which is to be the distinguishing mark of the disciple and the church (John 13:35; Lincoln, 315).

When I read about the compassion of Jesus, who wept over unconverted, soon to be judged Jerusalem, I am made aware of how lacking I am in Christ-like compassion (Luke 19:41). And what a need there is for our forgiving one another as well as proclaiming Christ's forgiveness to those willing to repent and follow Christ!

Our compassionate love for the lost and needy, the poor, the forgotten and the helpless, is evidence that we have received the saving grace of Christ and thus will "pass" the Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus' "plan of salvation" answer was to tell the Parable of the Good Samaritan, whose different kind of lifestyle gave evidence that he was a child of saving grace. Unlike the busy "church ministers" (priest and Levite), the Good Samaritan exhibited true agape love, which Jesus said was evidence that he had received the grace of eternal life that caused him to love God by loving his neighbor (Luke 10:25-37).

The disciple of Jesus is different in a different kind of living that is...

Pleasing and reflecting God (30, 32)

Back to verse 30, we see that we are to be different from the world by pleasing God instead of grieving him. The Bible tells a long story of how sinful, rebellious humankind saddened the heart of God. Way back in the days of Noah, God expressed his grief that he had made mankind, whose hearts and minds were inclined to "evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5-7). Once again in Ephesians we see the heart and activity of Triune God, and in verse 20 we note that God the Spirit can be grieved. God the Spirit is a person, as is God the Father and God the Son, and our sinful conduct as his children "bring sorrow" (NLT) to the Holy Spirit. And of course, if God the Spirit is saddened by our sin, so is the Father and so is the Son.

These words to not grieve or sadden the Holy Spirit are set in the middle of these injunctions against our worldliness of sinful, unclean speech, and acts of bitterness and unkindness toward one another. The Holy Spirit is made sad by the way we treat one another as dearly loved children of God, who are called to love and encourage one another in being different from a world that is often hostile and aggressive against the disciples of Christ.

I think I grieve and sadden God the father, Son and Holy Spirit with my angry and bitter thoughts, feelings and words, even when no one but God can hear me. I fail to realize the holy presence of Christ in me, the blessed Holy Spirit. He sees my every action, but also hears my words and knows even my secret thoughts (Psalm 139). I know I must make him sad countless times, and cannot even imagine his kindness, patience and forbearance with me.

And so Paul closes by saying we are to be kind, compassionate and forgiving toward one another, reflecting his love, grace, kindness, compassion and forgiveness toward us in Christ Jesus. We are to remember that the love, kindness and forgiveness we are to express to others is nothing compared to the degree of his mercy, grace and forgiveness proffered to us (See Matthew 18:21-35).

This is how the world will see our difference from them—by our love for one another (John 13:35). We are to be different from the world by the way we are “just like God” by our kindness, compassion and forgiveness to one another. The Greek word for kindness is “chrestos” and “Christians from the beginning saw its peculiar appropriateness...because of the obvious assonance with the name of Christ (Christos)....” (Stott,190). When people see genuine kindness they are likely to see Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:

Disciples are different—not different in an odd, artificial or superficial sort of way, as in our appearance or our mannerisms, and certainly not in an obnoxious sort of way. Our difference should be attractive to those in the unbelieving world, whom Christ is drawing to faith in him.

Here’s where I think of the magnetism of Jesus, who drew sinners of doubtful and dark reputation to himself. Although Jesus was the sinless Son of God, he also was perfect love and compassion. And it was his unconditional love that attracted notorious sinners and the “untouchable” classes to himself. He was the best kind of friend of sinners (Matthew 11:19; Luke 15:2). Our love for one another also ought to be attractive to many in the world who are looking for love with a difference from what the world can offer.

We should never forget that apart from God’s intervening mercy and grace we too would be hopelessly lost and blind to the truth and under God’s wrath. But we have been rescued. And we should also recognize that no one, regardless how blind and seemingly hopelessly lost, is beyond the reach of God’s mercy, love and grace.

We are called to be different, even “fools for Christ’s sake” (1 Corinthians 4:10). If you have found yourself too much like the fallen world to be considered different from it, then perhaps you’ve never experienced God’s saving grace. Maybe it’s for you that Jesus warned about the world liking us too much (Luke 6:26).

I pray that you and I will dare to be different, not different in an outward sort of way. That's too easy and too ineffectual. In fact, a superficial difference can be detrimental to the cause of Christ and undermine the credibility of the gospel and further mar the name and witness of the church of Christ to the unbelieving world. Let's dare to be different like Jesus was different. In that way we will make an eternal difference for the sake of the kingdom and the glory of God.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What are some wrong ways that Christians try to be different from the world?
2. How does Paul describe the worldview of the unbelieving world? What are the normal consequences of this worldview according to Paul?
3. What does Paul mean by knowing Christ (20) and how is that different from knowing about Christ?
4. Verses 22-24 speak of our responsibility to be rid of the old way of life and put on a new life in Christ. What is God's part and what is the disciple's part in this transformation?
5. When is anger justified and even appropriate? What are the conditions Paul places upon the disciple's anger?
6. What are some more "respectable" forms of theft in our society (verse 28)? What is to be the disciple's motivation for earning a wage?
7. What are some ways one can engage in foul and abusive language besides in personal conversation (verse 29)? In what ways should our speaking benefit and encourage our fellow believers?
8. Think and then pray about ways your life should give stronger evidence of an important difference from the unbelieving society around you.

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