

# "Basic Requirements for Biblical Body-Building!"

October 23, 2005



## Ephesians 4:17-24

Last week, we looked at God’s blueprint for His Church. In that blueprint, we saw a church not where 20% of the people do 80% of the work—but where *each member* is involved—whether in formal or informal ministry, whether inside the four walls of the building or at a National Coney Island encouraging a brother at an early morning breakfast or cleaning the house of an elderly sister or doing an English as a Second Language class with a first generation immigrant. Whatever the individual members of that blueprint look like, the composite picture reflects an increasing resemblance to the Lord Jesus Christ. And how does this happen? Paul concludes 4:16 with these words: “...as *each one* does its part.”

That, of course, brings up the 100 million dollar question? How can you have a church where *each one actually* does his/her part? Of course that would be wonderful—but the only place that is going to happen is in a pastor’s dreams! How can you *possibly* have a church that takes “church” *that seriously*? Answer: The church that takes church that seriously is the church that Christ *Himself* is building. Remember what Jesus told Peter: “I will build my Church...” It’s not a question of: “*Can* it be done?” It’s more a question of—Are *you* really a part of what Christ the “Church-Builder” is doing as He builds *His* Church? And what do you personally need to be doing to get in step with His eternal purposes *in* and *through* the Church? Or to switch metaphors, how can you cooperate with Him in being a *biblical body-builder*? That is what Paul addresses in this next section of Ephesians 4:17-24. Let’s read it together:

*17 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. 18 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. 19 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. 20 You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. 21 Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 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; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

In this passage, Paul is talking about *body-building*. Not physical body-building where people try to bulk up and impress their friends with their bulging biceps and triceps. I am talking about the building up of the body of Christ into a spiritual entity that looks more and more like its Head, the Lord Jesus. But there is a problem to be reckoned with here. Just as with physical body-building, contemporary fads are plentiful and promising—but ultimately they fail to deliver. Effective bodybuilding requires understanding and sticking with the *basics*. The same is true with *Christ's body*—both as individuals and as members seeking to grow together. So what are Christ's body-building principles? What has our Lord specifically taught us in order to help us to grow and develop into a mature body of believers? There are three principles in this text. The first one is...

I. Biblical bodybuilding requires your *conscious commitment* To God's Word (17a).

In his booklet, Godliness Through Discipline, Jay Adams points out one of the biggest obstacles to spiritual growth in American culture is the expectation that it should just happen automatically and rather quickly. Thanks to one hour TV programs where a problem unfolds and is solved in one hour (minus time for commercials) and the microwave oven where meals can be cooked in just minutes, the modern American consumer has been nurtured into expecting problems to be solved quickly and easily.

And so we have a generation that all too easily settles for quick fixes and easy solutions. Fad diets come and go. There are innumerable pills, powders, and programs offered in magazines and testimonial watched by insomniacs on late night info-mercials. The internet is full of sure fire ways to lose weight or bulk up to have the perfect body. Some ideas may have some merit. But many others are glorified snake oil. I will never forget about a product that everybody was talking about on the radio that you drank at night before you went to bed and it was supposed to burn fat while you slept! The point is that all this hype coupled with our natural aversion to a balanced diet and regular exercise can make the advertisers' claims very appealing and can cause you to waste a lot of time and money instead of focusing on the *basics* of healthy bodybuilding. I think the same thing is happening with *bodybuilding* in the church.

Examples of some personal "bodybuilding" shortcuts:

- A. **Emotionalism:** "We build up the body by keeping people at a high emotional threshold." This approach often relies on means and methodology. Or this approach may use a particular issue to rally people: Such as the KJV vs. any newer translation. Or fighting for prayer in the public school. Those sorts of things may stir up excitement for some people—but ultimately they do not make disciples and they do not build up the body of Christ.
  
- B. **Demons and Deliverance Movement** – "We build up the body by helping individuals to overcome the demonic power that is behind a particular sin in their life."

1. According to this approach, a person struggling with a sin problem is not ultimately *responsible* for this/her behavior; rather there is a demon of gossip, or lust or whatever that must be cast out.
  2. We must not ignore the *existence* of Satan or demons. But we must focus on what God's Word tells us when it comes to dealing with our unseen foe. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, *Paul* has a messenger from Satan, but does not directly confront the devil or a demon. By the way, Satan is never given center stage in the New Testament. The center stage is our struggle with sin—and God's grace and power that comes through the *cross* of Jesus Christ!
- C. **Self-help programs**—"We can take the best that the world has to offer and combine it with the Scriptures in order to build up the body."
1. I am not particularly opposed to self-help programs. Those kinds of programs have helped some people get through a particularly difficult situation. What I am opposed to is the **church** seeking to utilize common grace while ignoring the special grace that comes *only* through the Gospel. I am opposed to helping people deal with a surface problem while ignoring the deeper problem that only the Gospel can effectively address.
  2. There is much more to life than replacing an addiction that happens to cause a lot of negative consequences with another activity or preoccupation that happens to be more benign and socially acceptable. But how are we helping that person find their soul satisfaction in the supremacy of Christ?

Brothers and sisters—**Here is the bottom line:** There is no substitute for our Lord's instructions on building His Church. No one can come up with a better, quicker or easier way. Thus Paul, with all the solemnity he can muster as one of God's Apostles says: "*So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord...!*"

These instructions apply to the building up of the *whole* body—but it has to start at the level of *each individual member*. In other words, this is something that *each* of us must do—but we must intentionally do so *together*. So what is it that God calls His people to do?

- II. Biblical bodybuilding requires your conscious *repudiation* of the world's approach to life (17b-20).

Paul goes on in the rest of verse 17 and through verse 20 to expose the misery of life without the saving grace of God. All of the world's body enhancing drugs ultimately fail and furthermore have an appalling number of negative side effects. Here is why we can't try to integrate the Bible with the best that man's wisdom has to offer. Man's wisdom has been *ruined* and *corrupted* by sin! Our thinking—apart from God's gracious intervention is all messed up. Therefore it ultimately *does* not work. It *will* not work. It *cannot* work. Paul goes on and lists for us the

characteristics of the *lost world's* approach to life. As we look at Paul's description, imagine a picture of a tree with fruit and leaves and branches coming off a trunk that emerges from the ground and is supported by and nourished by its roots.

Underneath the picture is a caption that captures the essence of this tree. That caption simply describes the tree with one word: "futility."

- A. The lost world's life is a life of **futility**. Now you have to be careful here. A life of futility often leads to an overtly wicked life—but not necessarily. You can have kids who grow up and never do drugs or get pregnant outside of marriage—and yet who live a life of futility. This word is very close to the concept of vanity or meaningless that Solomon talks about in Ecclesiastes. What exactly *is* futility? Pastor John Piper describes it this way:

*"Nothing of any eternal significance is accomplished. Life is one big ash heap of wasted weeks and years. There is no service to the King of Ages, and so it is all meaningless in the end—like a man who works hard planting trees and landscaped flower gardens in a new housing project and then watches them get bulldozed because he was just doing his own thing and never consulted the master plan for where they belonged. There is only futility in the end without relating **all** you do to God."*

But what is going on in this tree that causes it to be so futile?

- B. This futile way of life is brought on by a **darkened** understanding...

That is just another way of describing spiritual blindness. Lost people do not have eyes to see and comprehend spiritual truth. They live in futility because they cannot see beyond what is in front of them. Spiritual blindness accompanies an even worse problem...

- C. And **alienation** from the life of God.

They are not only alienated from God—but from life the way God intended it to be. They are alive physically—but cut off from all that gives ultimate meaning to life. To use Paul's words earlier words—they are dead in transgressions and sins.

- D. This darkness and alienation occurs because of man's **ignorance** of God's ways.

This ignorance isn't due to a lack of information. It is not a passive or accidental ignorance like "I didn't see the sign indicating the speed limit." It is a deliberate *ignoring* of God and His ways. This is precisely what is taking place in the debate on earth's origins. In spite of the massive evidence to the contrary and in spite of the growing popularity of the Intelligent Design movement (even beyond Scientific Creationism), many evolutionists still reject it as a plausible explanation for how the earth

came into being. This is nothing more than hiding under the blanket of a quasi-scientific theory. Furthermore...

- E. This ignorance is a direct result of the *hardening* of their hearts.

Here is the *root* of the problem in our tree—the disease of the soul that affects everything else. The lost world’s rejection and suppression of the truth is rooted in a *hardened heart*. Hearts that will not submit to the glory of God become blinded to God by the things they *worship instead of God*. *Are you beginning to see why the short-cuts, far from building Christ’s body actually can wind up promoting the very thing that Christ died to save us from—our sinful selfishness?*

- F. This hardening leads to an increasing de-sensitivity to sin and consequently opens the door to the *unrestrained pursuit* of self-destructive behavior.

*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 last part of Paul’s description is so self-evident that it hardly needs further elaboration. Suffice it to say that when sin callouses and calcifies our conscience, it leads us seek satisfaction at all costs—even if it means self-destruction. Like salt water, it not only fails to satisfy, but it induces self-destructing behavior in a futile effort to quench the desires.

When you try to summarize what Paul is describing here—the world’s approach to life is ultimately about living for *self*. It is about dethroning God and making self the functional god of your universe. Isn’t that the essence of what Satan promised in the Garden? Listen to me and you too can become God. Paul simply maps out a roadmap and shows how this approach to life operates—and where it ends up if taken to its logical conclusion. Not everybody goes in this life as far as they can go down this road. But in the end—it’s futile all the same.

So what is Paul saying? You and I live in a world that is dominated by this mind-set. And we still have a flesh that is covertly sympathetic to its agenda. And so we have to regularly confront its attempts at penetrating our thinking and living. Which brings us to our last point...

- III. Biblical bodybuilding requires a constant *recalling of* and *recommitting* to the truth of the *Gospel* applied to your daily life (21-24).

When you were saved, Christ taught you...

- A. To *put off* the old person that you *were* and
- B. To *put on* the new person that you *are*.

I want to treat both of these phrases together because they are inseparable. First, though, let me explain the timing of these phrases. When does this all take place. Is Paul here actually telling us to put off the old man and put on the new? That is how it would seem on the surface. And that is how most of us read this text. But upon closer examination, Paul seems to be reminding them and us of something that already has happened. He is saying that when you came to Christ, you were instructed to discard the garments off the old life and to replace them with Christ's new garments—His new and different way of life. That has *already* happened. Paul's argument is that because you have *already* put off and put on in the past, you need to live in light of that reality in the present. So once again, we have an example of the already/not yet tension of the Christian life. Or to put it another way—*keep on pursuing what you already have become in Christ!*

I know—it sounds confusing and almost contradictory. It's really saying the same thing that Paul talked about in Romans 6. It is saying that salvation gives you a new identity—but the lack of completion of this salvation means that the process is still ongoing. That is why you will sometimes hear us refer to this doctrine as the doctrine of *progressive sanctification*. You are a new person. But God is still working out the details. You still have a sin hangover to contend with. You still have a gap between who you are and how you behave.

So Paul in these three short, but powerful verses is reminding us of Jesus' instruction and pressing the implications of it into our daily lives. (Jesus taught deny self/ take up the cross and follow me! Die to the world's agenda (serve and worship self) so you can become what I created and redeemed you to be (a real person who looks like Jesus Christ) So what does this all mean?

- Change involves recognizing the elements of the old man that remain and must be daily rejected. Focus on *deceitful desires*.

Dave Powlison talks about a common law couple he counseled who had been shooting at each other in their house!!! How do you counsel such people? How when you have never had a gunfight with somebody else. Yet when we look at our lives, God shows us our own sins of anger—no matter how differently we might express it from this gun-slinging couple! Yet, when wife complains to husband on couch, he may not reach for gun, yet he can show his “murderous” heart in other ways. Can judge her words (You are being a nag!). Can make other excuses. Or can repent (Surrender to the Shepherd's Spirit!). Ask for forgiveness—without anything after the “Will you forgive me?” Tons of theological truth can be mined out of such a situation! **Different at the level of behavior. Similar at the level of heat.** The above counselee had similar desires to control his world—which meant rest and relaxation. She wanted the same. Control to get love and affection. “*Gotta haves*”. Both snagged by their desires. Both allowed desires to hijack the sovereignty of God.]

- Change means not only removing the old garments of self-centered thinking and responding—but replacing them with the new garments that Christ has created for us. That means recalling all that Christ did to please the Father in your behalf. His perfect life. His atoning death. It means seeing and savoring Christ more and more and desiring to become more and more like the lover of your soul. How?

C. ***By being renovated*** in your way of thinking.

**Illustration:** We are not merely polishing door knobs, waxing floors and cleaning carpets. We are completely renovating our mission house, ripping up and replacing sub-flooring and stripping dry wall right down to the furring strips. That is what the Holy Spirit is doing with us—as we cooperate with Him.

But how do you and I cooperate with God’s Spirit in this renewing process? The answer is to fill your mind continually with truth about spiritual, eternal, and heavenly reality. In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 Paul says, "We do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day." How? Answer: "Because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." Paul was renewed in the spirit of his mind by filling his mind with the unseen truths of eternity, so that the deceptive hype of this world was pushed out. He says in Colossians 3:2, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” Fill your mind with the truth of heaven.

And here in Ephesians Paul prays for us in 1:18-19 that the eyes of our hearts would be enlightened that we might know what is the hope to which God had called us, and what are the riches of his glorious inheritance, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power. Why does he want us to see these things with the eyes of our hearts? Because ***this is what renews the spirit of the mind—when it is full of the truth of God's power and promises.***