

Ephesians 4:17-24

Introduction

“This therefore I say and testify in the Lord, that you no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart, who, having become callous have given themselves over to unrestrained degeneracy for the working of every impurity in greediness.”

“But you did not learn Christ in this way—assuming that you have heard Him and were taught in Him as the truth is in Jesus, to put off with respect to your former manner of life the old man, the one being corrupted according to the cravings of deceit, but to be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and to put on the new man, the one created according to God in righteousness and holiness of the truth.”

I. Ephesians 4:17a — This therefore I say and testify in the Lord that you no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk...

This verse brings us right back to verse one of this chapter where Paul says: “***I urge*** you ***therefore***... to ***walk worthy*** of the calling with which you were called” In verse one, Paul’s “***therefore***” was a reminder of the first three chapters, and how we’re to be constantly living in the light of those wonderful Gospel truths. So here in verse seventeen, Paul’s “therefore” reaches back again to those first three chapters through his “therefore” in verse one. It’s as though he started in verse one, “I urge you ***therefore***... to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.” And now he starts again in verse seventeen. “Take 2” – “This ***therefore*** I say and testify in the Lord that you no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk.” The “therefore” is the ***why*** and the ***motivation*** for all that we do. What is our “therefore”? Are we clear about what it is? Have we owned it completely and joyfully and with all our hearts?

If Paul urged and entreated us in verse one, here in verse seventeen he solemnly declares and testifies in the Lord. He doesn’t just write: “This therefore *I say*...” He doesn’t just write: “This therefore *I say and testify*...” He writes: “This therefore *I say and testify in the Lord*...” As the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is Paul’s witness and authority, he now declares and testifies to us on a matter of the absolute and utmost importance. We can be convicted already at how lightly we take what Paul takes so seriously. How careless we can be in the matter of personal holiness when our Lord calls us to the utmost carefulness and soberness. “This therefore *I say and testify in the Lord* that you no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk.”

If, as Paul says in verse one, we are to walk worthy of the calling with which we have been called, then we must *no longer walk* just as the Gentiles also walk. In other words, there’s to be a basic, fundamental difference between how we go about living life, and how the unbeliever goes about living life. So what should this difference look like? What is it in our outward way of life that should be constantly distinguishing us, and setting us apart from the rest of the world? “This *therefore I say and testify in the Lord* that you *no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk*...”

II. Ephesians 4:17b-18 — ...in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart...

Once again, Paul piles up phrases in order to drive home his point. The reason the Gentiles live the way they do is because they're unable to think rightly. That doesn't mean they're not intelligent. It's just that their thought processes have been distorted by sin. They may project their own thoughts and reasonings onto God, but they can't possibly think God's thoughts after Him. God's thoughts and ways are as foreign and "alien" to the unregenerate as a foreign language that sounds to us like non-sense. This is what Paul means when he talks about the futility of their *mind*, being darkened in their *understanding*, *alienated* from the life of God because of the *ignorance* that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart." Not only does this give us insight into the world around us, but also awe and amazement for the miracle of grace that God has worked in our own hearts, and that He is still working in our hearts. Paul says in another place:

- 2 Corinthians 4:4 — In their case the god of this world has *blinded the minds* of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing [comprehending] the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.
- Romans 1:21 — For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became *futile in their thinking*, and their *foolish hearts were darkened*.

It's because the thought processes of our minds and hearts in our natural flesh have been warped and perverted by sin that we are unable to accept or comprehend God's ways. We still give lip service to the "fact" that His ways are right, but in our minds and hearts we can't accept that they are. And we show this to be true every single time we choose our own way rather than God's. So in some sense, this futility of the mind, this darkening of the understanding and ignorance that Paul speaks of is still our constant enemy. Because of the sin that remains within us, our thinking and reasoning can still be so easily turned inside out and upside down – so that now God's thoughts and ways are the ones that seem inside out and upside down. What we really need to understand is that our struggle is not just against sinful actions and words, but against the effects of sin on our thinking and reasoning – blinding us to the truth and the beauty and the "rightness" of God's thoughts and God's ways.

It's because their thought processes have been twisted by sin—it's because they are unable to *think* God's thoughts after Him that explains why the Gentiles *live* the way they do.

III. Ephesians 4:19 — ...who, having become callous have given themselves over to unrestrained degeneracy for the working of every impurity in greediness.

Paul paints a very graphic and horrible picture. It's so horrible as to almost seem exaggerated and unreal. But if we've taken the last part seriously (the part about futile thinking, darkened understanding, alienation from the life of God, ignorance and hardness of heart), then it only makes sense. Most unbelievers (Gentiles) are not yet living as sinfully as they could be, but that's the end of the path that every unbeliever is on – even those who are the most moral and self-reforming. In the end, all our attempts at a self-made morality lead to despair. And this

despair, in turn, results in abandoning oneself to the callous and tormented pursuit of our own pleasures. That's what Paul means when he talks about "**unrestrained degeneracy** for the working of every **impurity** in **greediness**." People don't end up like this for no reason. They live like this because in the futility of their minds, they've given themselves over to the pursuit of their own pleasure – to the pursuit of all that feels right to us in the moment.

The words that Paul uses (degeneracy, impurity) have sexual connotations. In Romans, the result of futile thinking and darkened hearts is described in terms of "women exchang[ing] natural relations for those that are contrary to nature" and "men... consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error" (Rom. 1:26-27). In the sin of homosexuality, Paul sums up not only every other kind of sexual sin, but also all sin in general as the callous pursuit of pleasure and satisfaction – of whatever it is that feels right and good in the moment irrespective of God's Law. *All* sin (of *whatever* kind it may be) involves making myself "God," and then offering to myself the "gifts" and "sacrifices" of momentary and fleeting pleasures. In verse 22, Paul will speak of the "*cravings of deceit*" – the cravings for every false promise of satisfaction and pleasure. Once again, both "craving" and "deceit" have sexual connotations, but this is only meant to show us the nature of *all* sin. In Romans chapter one (29-31), this self-idolizing pleasure-seeking is the explanation not just for sexual immorality, but for "all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice... envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness... [gossiping, slandering, hating God, insolence, haughtiness, boastful inventing of evil, disobedience to parents, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, ruthlessness]."

We rationalize and explain away the thoughts of God in order to justify and prove and support our own. And we do all of this ultimately in the name of self-seeking, self-idolizing pleasure. Paul has been speaking of the unsaved Gentiles and the path that they are on, but the reason he speaks of *their* condition is to warn *us* and exhort *us*. "This therefore I say and testify in the Lord that you no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk." Paul exhorts us and charges us in light of the sin that still remains *in us* – the sin that still prevents us from fully *thinking* God's thoughts after Him every single day of our lives – the sin that justifies and rationalizes the "pleasuring" of self as the chief end of man. And remember, this "pleasuring" of self can be sexual lust *or* anger, or bitterness and resentment, or greed, or covetousness, dishonesty, gossiping, slandering, disobedience to authorities, etc., etc., etc.

In the end (if not sooner, then definitely later), the thinking and reasoning of every unbeliever will always result in a callous abandonment to unrestrained degeneracy for the working of every impurity in greediness. That's a terrible future! But God's judgment is just as He will simply be giving men and women over to their own lusts and passions (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).

IV. Ephesians 4:20-21 — But you did not learn Christ in this way—assuming that you have heard Him and were taught in Him as the truth is in Jesus...

In the Greek, the "you" is emphatic. "*But YOU...*" By the sovereign, regenerating, saving grace of God, *we*—unworthy and undesirable as we were—*we* have *not* been given over to the lusts, and passions, and cravings of deceit. Instead, we've been made alive with Christ, and raised up with Him, and seated with Him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:5-6). Paul doesn't beat us over the

head or try to guilt us—or even just scare us—into walking no longer as the Gentiles also walk. Paul comes back to the only hope for true righteousness and holiness in our lives.

“***But you*** did not ***learn Christ*** in this way—assuming that you have ***heard Him*** and were ***taught in Him*** as the truth is in Jesus.” We’ve learned not just a set of rules and regulations (a “holiness code”) – we’ve “learned” a *person*. We’ve heard not just empty words – we’ve heard *Him* and we’ve been taught *in Him*. There are those words again. “In Him.” We’ve been united with Christ so that we’re not only clothed positionally in His righteousness, but now we’re empowered to walk and live even as He walked and lived. This is probably what Paul means when he says, “as the truth is in Jesus.” Only here in Ephesians does he refer simply to “Jesus.” This is the Jesus who lived and died as a true human being to give us the gift of His perfect example, and to call us—and enable us—to walk even as He walked. Jesus showed us what it was to find our pleasure in the pleasure of God.

- John 4:34 — Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.”

Jesus showed us what it looks like to *deny* ourselves and live for the true and lasting joys of God’s blessing and favor.

- John 5:19–20 — Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.”
- John 10:17 — For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.

Jesus doesn’t just give us a “law.” He gave us Himself, both living and dying, and now He calls us to Himself.

- Matthew 11:28–30 — Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

True holiness and righteousness is not *just* a set of rules and regulations – of “do’s” and “don’ts.” True holiness and righteousness is a life that’s already been lived by the one who calls us to follow after Him and walk in His footsteps.

- 1 John 2:6 — Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

When we fix our eyes on Jesus, who is the author and perfecter of our faith, we can learn to truly think God’s thoughts after Him. This is what we need for our struggle against sin.

“***But you*** did not learn Christ in this way—assuming that you have heard Him and were taught in Him as the truth is in Jesus...”

V. Ephesians 4:22-24 — ...to *put off* with respect to your former manner of life the old man, the one being *corrupted* according to the cravings of deceit, but to be *renewed* in the spirit of your mind, and to *put on* the new man, the one created according to God in righteousness and holiness of the truth.

These words are loaded with a wonderful kind of “tension.” Paul assumes first of all that we’ve *already* learned Christ. And if we’ve already learned Christ, then we’ve *already* been taught to “put off” the old man. When we learned Christ, we learned repentance. We learned that being a Christian means a decisive, once for all break with that person we used to be – with that “old man” that was in a continual process of decay and death because of the cravings of deceit. That’s not who we are anymore. Paul speaks of the “old man” as our “former” manner of life. We’ve put off the “old man.” That’s not who we are anymore!

If we’ve already learned Christ, then we’ve already learned to be renewed in the spirit of our minds. The *futility* of our minds in verse 17 has been replaced with *renewed* minds in verse 23. Our *hard hearts* in verse 18 were replaced with *hearts of flesh*. The *darkness* of our understanding was replaced with *light*. And our *ignorance* was replaced with true *knowledge* of God.

➤ 2 Corinthians 4:6 — For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

If we’ve already learned Christ, then we’ve already “learned” to put on the new man, the one created according to God in *righteousness* and *holiness* of the *truth*. This new man is who we are right now. We’re not half old and half new. We don’t go back and forth between being the new man one day, and being the old man the next day. We’ve put on the new man – we’re no longer the person we used to be.

➤ Ephesians 2:10 — For we *are* his workmanship, *created* in Christ Jesus.

➤ 2 Corinthians 5:17 — Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he *is* a new creation. *The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*

This is the “already.” We can’t ever forget this “already” because it guards us against discouragement and despair and fills us with a blessed, unquenchable hope. Because, after all, there’s still the “*not yet*” – there’s still our struggle against sin. That’s the tension. That’s why Paul can still exhort us so strongly with these words: “This therefore I say and testify in the Lord that you no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk.” That person we used to be was enslaved to sin and to the cravings of deceit. The person we are now is no longer enslaved to these things (Rom. 6:6-8). The person we are now is created in God’s likeness, in righteousness and holiness of the truth. And yet how often do we still say “yes” to sin, and to its false promises of satisfaction? How often do we still allow our thinking and reasoning to fall back into the old ways – justifying what feels right in the moment rather than truly loving what God has said is good and right in His Word? In the midst of the sad answer to this question, the “new man” that we *already* are guards us against despair and strengthens us to strive after the “not yet” with all of God’s power that mightily works within us. The “new man” that we *already* are encourages us

to keep on pursuing the *renewing of our MINDS* by humbly submitting them to the teaching of God's Spirit in and through God's Word.

- Ephesians 2:10 — For we *are* his workmanship, *created* in Christ Jesus *for* good works, which God prepared beforehand, *that we should walk in them*.

Paul says in Colossians:

- Colossians 3:5–10 — Put to death *therefore* what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away... *seeing* that you *have put off the old self* with its practices and *have put on the new self*, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

Conclusion

We've so often talked about the "already" and the "not yet." Now we see that this tension actually lives in us every single day of our lives. This isn't a tension that leads us to despair. It's a tension that motivates us and encourages us to *keep on* confessing our sin (1 John 1:9) and to *keep on* striving after that holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14) – to *keep on* and to never grow weary or give up.

And as we keep on striving with all of God's power that mightily works within us, we can have the full assurance of knowing that one day **GOD will** bring it to pass. One day *He* will perfect us in that very holiness that we've been pursuing and longing for ever since the day we first became a new creation.

- 2 Corinthians 3:18 — And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.
- Romans 8:29 — For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.
- 1 John 3:2 — Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.
- Philippians 1:6 — He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.