

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...

In the first verse of this chapter, Paul said, “I urge you **therefore**... to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.” Paul’s “*therefore*,” in verse one, is a reminder of the first three chapters of Ephesians, and of how we are to be constantly living in the light of all those wonderful Gospel truths that he’s unpacked for us there—all those Gospel truths that together reveal our “calling.” We’ve been chosen (1:4), adopted (1:5), redeemed (1:7), forgiven (1:7), made an inheritance (1:11), predestined (1:11), sealed (1:13), given an inheritance (1:14, 18), made alive (2:5), raised up and seated with Christ (2:6), created in Christ Jesus for good works (2:10), brought near (2:13), granted access in one Spirit to the Father (2:18), made to be members of God’s household (2:19), and made to be fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (3:6). Here in verse 17, Paul’s “therefore” is reaching back again to those first three chapters and to all these glorious Gospel truths via his “therefore” in verse one. What is your “therefore”? Are you clear about what it is? Are you “owning it” daily?

Paul began in verse one: “I urge you therefore... **to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.**” This “walking worthy” is described as walking “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:2-3). In fact, the entire first half of chapter four is all about the “unity of the faith” and the body of Christ building itself up in love (4:1-16). But now, in verse 17, Paul considers the same theme of the Christian’s “walk” from the other side of the coin, as it were. “This **therefore** I say and testify in the Lord **that you no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk.**” What we see here is that there’s to be a basic, fundamental difference between how we go about living life, and how the unbeliever goes about living life.

If Paul “urged” and “entreated” us in verse one, here in verse 17 he solemnly declares and testifies 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 utmost importance. How casual we can often 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.”

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,

As Paul often does, he piles up phrases in order to drive home his point. The reason the Gentiles *live* the way they do is because their *thinking* has been twisted and distorted by sin. They are unable to truly think God’s thoughts after Him. God’s thoughts and God’s ways—as the foundational and guiding principle for all of life—are as foreign 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, it should also fill us with awe and amazement at the miracle of grace that God has worked in our hearts, and that He is still working in the hearts of all those that He is calling to Himself. Paul says in other places:

- 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 have been twisted and distorted by sin that we are unable to accept or comprehend God’s ways. Even as Christians, God’s ways may sometimes feel *wrong* to us – especially in those moments when we feel the greatest need to justify and prove our own thoughts and our own ways. We may give lip service to the “fact” that His ways are right, but in our minds and hearts we’re not truly comprehending how they are. And isn’t there a sense in which we show this to be true every time that we *choose* our own way rather than God’s? Because of the sin that remains within us, our thoughts and reasonings can still be twisted and distorted and turned inside out and upside down – so that now God’s thoughts and ways are the ones that seem to us to be inside out and upside down (like loving my enemy and praying for those who persecute me; or like being subject to authority; or even simply denying myself and taking up a cross; or not slandering/gossiping). In our Christian lives, we need to realize that our struggle is not just against sinful actions and words, but against the effects of sin on our thinking and reasoning, on our ability to see straight and think clearly in the first place. Our struggle is against the effects of sin on our ability to discern the truth and the beauty and the goodness of God’s thoughts and God’s ways.

It’s because their thought processes have been twisted and distorted by sin—it’s because they are unable to think God’s thoughts after Him that 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 an “extreme” picture. It’s so extreme as to seem even exaggerated and unreal. But if we’ve really taken verse 18 seriously (futile thinking, darkened understanding, alienation from the life of God, ignorance and hardness of heart), then doesn’t this only make sense? It’s true that due to God’s common grace, most unbelievers (Gentiles) are not living as sinfully as they could be, but this is the end of the path that every unbeliever is on—even those who are the most moral and self-reforming. In the end, all of our attempts at a self-made morality are futile and empty. In the end, the unbeliever always abandons himself to the callous and tormented and hopeless pursuit of his own pleasure. Indeed, here is a truly terrifying picture of hell. This is what Paul means when he speaks of “unrestrained degeneracy for the working of every impurity in greediness.”

These words have definite 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 pursuit of pleasure and satisfaction—of whatever it is that feels right and good to me in the moment—irrespective of God’s holy law. All sin (of whatever kind it may be) involves making myself “God,” and then offering to myself the “gifts” and “sacrifices” of that which feels good and right to me in the moment. In verse 22, Paul will speak of the “cravings of deceit” – the cravings for every false promise of satisfaction and pleasure and fulfillment. Once again, there are sexual connotations here, and once again, this is only meant to show us the true 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].”

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 in light of the sin that still remains in us; the sin that still prevents us from fully thinking God’s thoughts after Him; the sin that justifies and rationalizes what feels good and right to me. And remember, this can be sexual lust *or* anger, *or* bitterness and resentment, or greed, or covetousness, dishonesty, gossiping, slandering, disobedience to authority, etc. We are experts at rationalizing and explaining away the thoughts of God in order to justify and prove and support our own.

In the end (if not sooner, then definitely later), the thinking and reasoning of every unbeliever will always lead to a callous abandonment to unrestrained degeneracy for the working of every impurity in greediness. This is a terrible future. Indeed, the pleasure of sin is itself ultimately a torment. It is its own punishment (this is not to deny the punishment of God in a more active and judicial sense). But as terrible as this future is, God’s judgment is just as this is simply His

abandoning (His “giving over”) of sinners to their own self-idolizing thoughts and desires (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, “you” is emphatic. “But **YOU**...” By the sovereign, regenerating, saving grace of God, *we*—unworthy and undesirable as we were—have not been given over to the lusts, and passions, and cravings of deceit. Paul warns and cautions and exhorts with all seriousness. But at the end of the day, he doesn’t try to guilt us and scare us into walking no longer just as the Gentiles also walk. Instead, Paul contrasts the ultimate torment of self-idolizing pleasure-seeking with the wonderful beauty of Christ Himself in the Gospel.

“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” Christ—a person; our Savior. We’ve “heard” not just empty words – we’ve “heard” Him and been taught in Him. We have union with the one who is not only our perfect righteousness, but who now leads us in the way of that perfect, living example that He has left us. Only here in Ephesians does Paul refer simply to “Jesus.” This is the Jesus, then, who lived and died as one of us – as a true human being – to give us the gift of His perfect example, and then call us to walk even as He walked. Jesus showed us what it is to find our pleasure in that which is the good pleasure of God.

➤ John 4:34 — Jesus said... “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* our self-idolizing lusts and live for the true and lasting joys of God’s blessing and favor.

➤ John 5:19-20 — “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 didn’t only give us a “law.” He gave us His life, 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. And this is what we need in 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 full of a wonderful kind of “tension.” First of all, Paul “assumes” that we’ve *already* learned Christ. 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” (the man in Adam) 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. But in Christ (the second/last Adam) we’ve put off that “old man.” That’s not who we are anymore.

If we’ve already learned Christ, then we’ve already been 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 have been replaced with hearts of flesh. The darkness of our understanding has been replaced with light. Our ignorance has been 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.

Finally, 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—in Christ. We’re not half old and half new. We don’t go back and forth between being the new man (in Christ) one day, and being the old man (in Adam) the next day.

- 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.” And we can’t ever forget this “already” because it guards us against despair and fills us with a blessed, unquenchable hope. Because, after all, there’s still the “not yet”—there’s still our daily struggle against sin. This is a mystery. This is why Paul can still exhort us with these words: “This therefore I say and testify in the Lord that you no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk.” The person that I used to be in Adam was enslaved to sin and to the cravings of deceit – to the self-idolizing pleasuring and satisfying of “me.” The person that I am now in Christ is no longer enslaved to these things (Rom. 6:6-8). The person that you are now (in Christ) 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 promise of pleasure and satisfaction—a pleasure that’s ultimately a torment? 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 these questions, the “new man” that we “already” are guards us against despair. This “new man” that we already are in Christ strengthens us to keep on pursuing the renewing of our *minds* by continuing to *learn Christ*—by submitting ourselves to the teaching of the Spirit of Christ in and through the word of Christ as that word comes to dwell within us richly (cf. Col. 3:16). Paul says in Romans, and then in Colossians:

- Romans 6:12–13 — Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.
- 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 tension between the “already” and the “not yet.” Here we see that this is a tension that actually lives within us. While we long for the day when this tension is no more, nevertheless, we rejoice that this tension is ours today. We rejoice that we who were once alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that was in us have now learned Christ—that we have now heard Him and been taught in Him as the truth is in Jesus. It’s precisely this reality that gives rise to the tension, and it’s precisely this tension that keeps us always striving and longing for heaven. Rather than driving us to despair, we’re strengthened and encouraged to be always *confessing* our sin (1 John 1:9) and to be always striving after that all-satisfying holiness which is *Christ in us*, the hope of glory (cf. Col. 1:27).

- 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.

Have you learned Christ? Have you heard Him and been taught in Him as the truth is in Jesus? Then let us daily put off with respect to our former manner of life the old man, the one being corrupted according to the cravings of deceit, and be renewed in the spirit of our mind, and put on the new man, the one created according to God in righteousness and holiness of the truth.”