

THE PERIL OF UNGODLY EXAMPLES

Ephesians 4:17-21

Intro: Most of you know that in Ephesians 4 we are in that part of Paul's letter to the Ephesians in which he was dealing with how those who believe in Christ are expected to live. Likewise, most of you know that it was characteristic of the Apostle Paul in his letters to deal with doctrine first, and then, as we are seeing here in Ephesians to deal with the practical effects of the doctrine upon our lives. And we can say that what Paul has written of a practical nature falls into two groups: things that we must do, and things that we must not do.

Chapter 4 began on a positive note, that is, things that we as Christians must do. See Eph. 4:1-3. There is not a negative note in the first 16 verses of this chapter until we get down to verse 14 where by implication he reminds us that as Christians we are in the family of God, born into God's family by the new birth, but we must not remain children in the faith. We need to grow, as he said in verse 15.

All of us have been born into this world as children of our human parents as sinners. This means that we have a strong inclination to do what is wrong in God's sight. We are sinners! This applies to all of us. And because we are sinners we are under the judgment of God. That is why we need to be saved, saved from the wrath of God. When we are born again, we are born into the family of God. We can still sin, and we do sin, but God has put new life into us which wants to please God, and a life which makes it possible for us to please God. But we all need to learn how to live this life.

All of us were made in the image and likeness of God. In our consciences we have a sense of right, and we know what is wrong. And so in all of our growing up years, our parents (if we had parents who are worthy of their name) were always teaching us to do what is right, and not to do what is wrong. But we often found that we did the wrong thing instead of what our consciences, and our parents, told us what was right. Paul expressed it this way in Romans 7:18, "To will is present with me, but how to find that which is good I find not." When we learn that, then we are usually ready to listen to the Gospel which tells us how we can be pleasing to God.

But, when we are saved, we have been born into God's family, and we

have the Holy Spirit in us Who enables us to do what is pleasing to God. We can still sin, and we do sin, but as we grow in the Lord we learn that God has given us commandments in His Word, some positive, some negative, some what we are to do, some what we are not to do. They are expressed as commandments in the Bible, and the Lord told His disciples while He was here on earth that if we truly love Him, and love God, we will keep their commandments.

So we can say that the first sixteen verses of Ephesians 4 are basically positive.

But today we come to verses 17 through 21, and you can see that here the Apostle Paul struck a negative note. He began to tell the Ephesian Christians, and every Christian who has existed from that day to this, that there are many things that God does not want us to do. Let me state it this way:

I. HOW WE AS CHRISTIANS ARE NOT TO LIVE (Eph. 4:17).

Let me point out as I have in many other verses that the word “therefore” is *there for a reason*. It points us back to what Paul had written, telling the miraculous work that God has done in our hearts in saving us, consequently he said “that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk.” “Henceforth” means *from not on as long as they lived*.

Now Paul was not a Jew who did like Gentiles, and so he was telling those Gentile Christians that they should not live like other Gentiles. If Paul had been a Gentile writing to a church that was made up mainly of Jews, he would have said *that they were not to live like other Jews lived*.

You see, the problem was not whether a person is a Jew or a Gentile; the problem is whether a person is a Christian or is not a Christian. If you are not a Christian, you are going to live one way. If you are a Christian, you are going to live in an entirely different way. If you are a Gentile who does not know the Lord, you are going to live in an entirely different from the way you will live if you become a Christian. People in the world live one way. People in Christ as called and enabled to live a different life, a holy life, a life that is pleasing to God, which is also the kind of a life that is most pleasing to us if we know the Lord. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 the Apostle Paul wrote, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” If a person has really trusted Christ as his Savior, his life is going to be

changed. If that person is not changed, and does not live a changed life, he or she is not a Christian regardless of what they may say about themselves.

This is a very strong statement that Paul is making. Notice that he said in verse 17, “This I say,” I, an apostle of Jesus Christ, commissioned to bring this message to you, but then he added, “and testify in the Lord.” So he was saying that this is my message to you, but it is also the message that the Lord has given me to give to you.

Now there are times when a Christian may not act like a Christian. He may say things that he shouldn't say. He may do things that he shouldn't do. He may act like a person who doesn't know the Lord would act. **But the point that Paul was making was that he doesn't live that way! You may see evidence of the old life now and then, but it will grieve him and he will want to confess his sin and be restored to fellowship with the Lord.**

Now some of you may be saying, “Give us some illustrations of what you are talking about.” I will be glad to do that. If you will go with me past my text for today (which is verse 21) Paul gives us plenty of illustrations.

In verse 22 he speaks of “deceitful lusts.” In verse 25 he mentioned “lying.” In verse 26 he mentioned “anger.” In verse 28 he wrote about *stealing*. In verse 29 we see that he mentioned “corrupt communication..” In verse 30 the Ephesian Christians were told, “And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God,” and this we do by committing any of the things that Paul had mentioned. But then in verse 31 we have a whole list of things that characterize people who don't know the Lord: “bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, . . . with all malice.” I will define these more in detail for you as we come to them, but Paul was saying that these things (and many, many other things) used to characterize your lives, and you can still do them, but they won't be descriptive of the way you live.

Go on into chapter 5 and the list of sins which characterize us all before we are saved, will grow longer and longer. Even the person who seeks to do the right thing will often be so proud of himself that it will be impossible for him to admit that he needs a Savior.

But any way that you look at these sins (because that is what they are), it

is not a very pretty picture, is it?

And if you want further confirmation, just look at the way people live today. But get your knowledge of sin from the Bible. There are many things that are legal today in the United States which are utterly abominable in God's sight. It might look like people are getting away with whatever they want to do, but nobody gets away with anything with God! Don't forget these words which are found in Galatians 6:7-10:

7 Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

8 For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.

9 And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.

But let us move on in our text. Next we will see Paul's answer to what may be in his reader's mind because nobody can honestly question the fact that most people live the way he went on to describe. But the question is,

II. WHY DO PEOPLE LIVE THE WAY THEY LIVE? (Eph. 4:17b-18).

Or to state it another way, Why did we live the way we lived before we turned to Christ to save us from the penalty of our sins? How did Paul answer these questions? He gives us several answers.

A. "In the vanity of their mind" (v. 17b).

Sin has affected the way we think about things. Sin has caused man to think under the illusion that what is in reality bad for him, is actually good for him. This is what happened to Eve. That which the Lord warned her would lead to death, she thought would be good for her. Sin has clouded man's mind concerning what will be gain for him, and what will make him happy. We will only think clearly about right and wrong when our minds are renewed by the Gospel.

B. "Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them" (v. 18a).

To have the understanding darkened means that sin has rendered man unable to think a matter through as far as the truth of God is concerned. It is the situation where feeling becomes so strong that it overrules reason. Man will look for pleasure and satisfaction where it cannot possibly be. This is like the Apostle told the church at Corinth:

7 But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory:

8 Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

9 But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.

10 But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.

11 For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.

12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.

13 Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

14 But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:7-14).

It is only by the Holy Spirit that we can understand the truth of God, and so see things clearly. And Paul told the Corinthians, what we read above in verse 12. The truth of the Bible is foolishness to the natural man. And so to very intelligent people in other way, evolution makes more sense to them than creation because their understanding is darkened because they are alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance. And they will not even turn to the Word of God which can give them understanding if it is in the purpose of God to give them the light of divine truth. Education will not give them the truth of God. It is only received by revelation from God.

But not only is their understanding darkened, but

C. Their hearts are blinded (Eph. 4:18b).

Probably hardening is a better translation of the Greek word which Paul used here. Spiritual blindness which is upon the hearts of unbelievers has anesthetized the hearts of the unbeliever so that they are insensitive to the truth. And the primary cause of this is sin. It will be helpful for us to think of the hardening of men's hearts when we compare it with the effect that an anesthetic has upon an individual just before surgery. Unbelievers are anesthetized to the reality of their condition as well as to the remedy for their sinful condition which is in Christ. It is only by the work of the Holy Spirit Who convicts sinners of sin, righteousness, and judgment that the sinner can hear and understand and believe.

But at this point the Apostle enables us to see

IV. The end result, apart from the grace of God (v. 19).

Living in sin people eventually get over the pain which sin brings to them, give themselves over to lasciviousness, the best definition of which is unrestrained sin of all kinds with greed, which Bishop Moule describes in these words:

The pursuit of evil becomes in time a business, a trade ("to work all uncleanness with greediness") followed up with all the keen and unscrupulous pertinacity of the selfish hunter after gold (p. 212).

In John 8:34 we have the Lord's words that "whosoever committeth sin is the bondservant of sin." But then He added in verse 36, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed."

But the picture that the Scriptures give us here of "the other Gentiles," those who are content to continue in their sin, is not only sad, but alarming. It likens these sinners to those in Romans 1 who knowing that there is a God did not recognize and submit themselves to God, but became vain in their imaginations, or reasonings, professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and change the glory of the incorruptible God into various created images, and became idolaters. As Charles Hodge says, "Conscience ceases to upbraid or to restrain them. They, therefore, give themselves up to practice all kinds of uncleanness insatiably. They can't be satisfied with their sin, and so they go deeper and deeper in sin, and sins of the most corrupting kind. What a solemn thing it is when God gives men over to do what they are intent on doing. The inevitable consequence of turning from God is sin, more sin, and sin of the grossest kind. God normally restrains all men from sin. But if they throw off His

restraint, their sin will ultimately lead them to eternal destruction, and yet on the way increase its grip upon their lives. See Romans 1:18-32.

But this is not where most of you are this morning, and so we move to more pleasant ground in verses 20 and 21. Let me call this:

V. THE GLORIOUS ALTERNATIVE (Eph. 4:20-21).

How thankful those Ephesians could be that verses 17, 18, and 19 were no longer descriptive of them. God in His grace had brought Paul to Ephesus,. He had preached the Gospel to them, and the Lord had granted them faith in Jesus Christ. They had “learned Christ.” He had spoken to them through the Gospel. He had taught them, and saved them, and they were learning not to walk as they used to walk, but to walk to please Him in holiness of life. Notice how Paul spoke of their salvation. It was Jesus Himself Who had spoken to them and taught them, and this is why they had learned and were saved.

Concl: There are only two ways to live: like most Gentiles walk even today in the vanity of their minds, with their understanding darkened, alienated from God through their own ignorance, with hardened hearts. Some of these are persisting in sin even to the present hour greedily seeking for sin and more sin, all kinds of sin, not knowing that they are on their way to an endless hell.

Others of us have heard the Lord, not audibly, but in the depths of our hearts. He has taught us, and has given us the grace to hear and believe. Now it is our joy to turn away from sin and to devote our lives to walk with Him and in those ways that not only please Him, but make Him dearer and dearer to our ow souls.

Where are you? Today if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts. If God is speaking to you, you will know it. Answer like Samuel answered the Lord in his day, “Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.”