



A BIBLICAL DIAGNOSIS OF SIN AND THE NECESSITY OF GOD'S GRACE

EPHESIANS 4:17-24

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If you've ever faithfully shared the gospel with an unbeliever, you most likely will have encountered one of these responses:

"I was so deeply wounded by the church I grew up in, that I want nothing to do with Jesus."

"I was told that the Bible forbids me from living and sleeping with my boyfriend, so I want nothing to do with a religion that restricts or seeks to govern my sexuality."

"The church I last attended discovered that the pastor was embezzling money and stealing from the offering each week. And nothing was done to him when it was discovered. I don't have any regard for a church or a religion that would so easily gloss over serious sin."

"I can't believe in a God who would create a world with so much evil in it and appear not to care enough to do something about it."

And then there is this response:

"I don't need your gospel. I'm doing fine in life without it. I'm decent, law-abiding, honest, altruistic, generous, kind to others, and I hardly need this thing you call 'grace'."

If you ever encountered this last response to the gospel or had any doubt about the absolute necessity of God's sovereign, saving grace, Paul's words here in Ephesians 4:17-24 are for you. There are people everywhere who would insist that God's grace is *nice but not needed*. Men and women are fully capable of discovering truth and aligning themselves with it.

The biblical portrayal and diagnosis of the human condition is something entirely different. So let me make my point by asking all of you a series of disturbing questions.

- Why do people choose to slaughter the pre-born in the womb? Why would a person choose to torture, dismember, and destroy a pre-born child? Why do so many protest in the streets, angrily arguing for the right to choose to kill their pre-born child?
- Why do so many celebrate sexual perversion, parading in our streets demanding that their perversity be brought into the mainstream of our culture?
- Why are we in the midst of what can only be called a "trans" revolution in which people claim that gender is an issue of personal choice and not biology?
- Why are there so many murders, rapes, instances of child molestation, and theft?
- Why does Vladimir Putin continue to send hundreds of drones over Ukraine thereby killing thousands of innocent victims?
- Why did Joseph Stalin slaughter more than 30 million of his own people?
- Why did Adolph Hitler orchestrate the torture, starvation, and slaughter of more than 6 million Jewish men, women, and children?
- Why do people mock the Lord Jesus Christ? Why do they only mention his name as a curse word?
- Why are so many people you know and love hardened and defiant when it comes to the gospel? Or if they aren't hardened and defiant, they are utterly indifferent.
- Why are so many people so utterly self-absorbed that they refuse to consider the beauty and splendor of Jesus Christ?

I could go on with more related questions, but I think you get my point? If you didn't get it, what I'm saying is this. The paragraph we are looking at today is perhaps *the most graphic portrayal in Scripture of the sinful thinking, feeling, and choosing on the part of unregenerate men and women, and the absolute necessity of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ*.

If you can't figure out the mindset of the unbeliever, this text will make it clear to you. I'm not saying that every non-Christian thinks in precisely the way that Paul describes here, but honestly this is the most brutal and honest account for why people hate God and hate Jesus and resist any expression of biblical morality that we have in Scripture.

If you want to understand why the world is as it is, this passage is for you. But the portrait it paints is an ugly one, at least until we get to v. 20. There is nothing in vv. 17-19 that will make you smile. The fact is, *I don't like preaching on this text.* But we must understand what it says about the unbelieving soul, heart and mind of those around us. We must also take ever so seriously how Paul implores us all to separate ourselves from the lifestyle we once lived before coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

Yet another reason why we need to look closely at this text is because of the exhortations that follow. Paul talks about controlling our anger (v. 26), how to manage our money (v. 28), and then in chapter five he speaks of our sexual conduct (5:3) and how we make use of our time (5:16). If we don't understand where these issues come from when they turn into evil and degenerate into futility, we won't be adequately prepared to deal with them.

As we'll see in a moment, the root problem of every human is our **"hardness of heart"** (v. 18). Unless the Holy Spirit imparts new life into us, we will remain like a lifeless block of granite, insensitive to God's ways and his will. Unless the Spirit gives us new life, we will never be moved or attracted to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let me walk you through Paul's line of thought. He begins in v. 17 with "the futility" of the unbelieving mind. Where does this come from? It is because "they are darkened in their understanding" (v. 18a). This explains why they are "alienated from the life of God" (v. 18b). And why are they alienated from God? It is "because of the ignorance that is in them" (v. 18c). And why are they ignorant? Paul says it is "due to their hardness of heart" (v. 18d). This hardness of heart or callous spirit leads them into "sensuality" (v. 19a), which in turn makes them "greedy to practice every kind of impurity" (v. 19b).

Perhaps the most important statement by Paul is at the close of v. 18 - "The ignorance that is in them, due to their **hardness of heart.**" The unbeliever's ignorance of spiritual things" is not innocent. It is evil. It is blameworthy, because it comes not from lack of truth or evidence, but from a deep hardness in [one's] heart against God. This ignorance is what blinds a person to the beauty of Christ and leads him/her to seek gratification in illicit sex or alcohol or drugs or a relentless pursuit of money and more and more stuff.

This is the context for Paul's appeal in v. 17 that we "must no longer walk as the Gentiles do."

The *Command*: don't live as the Gentiles do – 4:17-19

The ESV translation of v. 17 fails to communicate the urgency and gravity of what Paul is about to say. The first word, "now," misses entirely the force of Paul's appeal. It should be rendered, *"therefore"* and picks up where he left off in 4:1-3. In the latter text he encouraged his readers to "walk" worthily of their calling. That was the positive side of his exhortation. Beginning with v. 17 he describes a particular kind of "walk" that they must studiously and strenuously avoid. This is the negative side of his appeal. They simply cannot continue in a lifestyle characteristic of their past as if none of the things mentioned in Ephesians 1-3 ever happened.

Also, the word "testify" fails to capture the force of Paul's urgent plea. It should be rendered, "I *insist* (or "implore") in the Lord."

The use of the word "Gentiles" (*ethnē*, from which we derive our word "ethnic") must be explained. Paul earlier called his readers "you Gentiles" (3:1), an ethically neutral term pointing to their ethnic heritage as non-Jews. In 2:11 he referred to them as "you Gentiles in the flesh" but only in order to say that if they believe in Christ such an ethnic distinction is spiritually irrelevant. Here in 4:17 "the Gentiles" stands for all non-Jewish outsiders to the Christian community. It is a synonym for **unbeliever**. Thus, Gentiles are urged not to live like Gentiles, or Gentile Christians are urged not to live like Gentile non-Christians.

Do you see the force of what Paul is saying to us? **Stop imitating the world!** Your life is to be decidedly different from theirs. Don't follow their lead. Don't let them craft you according to their image. Don't embrace their values. Don't waste your time trying to win their approval. Your life as a believer in Jesus must be noticeably different from the non-Christian world. Don't look at society at large and seek to be accepted by them or live in the same way they do.

The portrait Paul paints of their life outside of Christ is grim indeed:

(1) They walk **"in the futility of their minds"** (v. 17b). The word "futility" means empty, characterized by folly and pointlessness (cf. Rom. 1:21; 1 Pet. 1:18). This is the word that is used in the LXX to translate *hebel* in Ecclesiastes!

Life is vain and without purpose unless how we think and live is centered in God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ. Such behavior yields no lasting satisfaction. Says Hendriksen: "All those endeavors which the Gentiles put forth in order to attain happiness end in disappointment. Their life is one long series of *mocked expectations*" (209).

(2) They are also **"darkened in their understanding"** (v. 18a). The verb translated "darkened" is used in the NT only elsewhere in Rev. 9:2; 16:10. The point is that what unbelievers consider to be illumination and insight into the meaning of life is in actual fact utter, absolute, impenetrable darkness. This is a stunning statement, given the universal belief among non-Christians that they are intellectually superior and discerning and insightful into the meaning of life and its values! Paul said much the same thing in Romans 1:21 where he describes the unbeliever as those whose "foolish hearts were darkened."

The apostle isn't saying that unbelievers are dumb. This has nothing to do with intellectual limitations. Many unbelievers are incredibly smart. Their IQ far transcends that of most Christians. Unbelieving scientists and astronomers and physicians and musicians and college professors are quite intelligent. Paul is talking about their perspective on ultimate truth and morality.

This is an important reminder to us that *if unbelievers are to be brought into belief there must be a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit that overcomes their darkened understanding and sheds abroad in their hearts and minds the light of the knowledge of Jesus Christ*. There is a limit to what you and I can do in our interaction with unbelievers. We can give them information about Christianity. We can explain the gospel in clear terms. We can answer all their objections. But if the Spirit doesn't regenerate them and illumine their minds, they will always remain in darkness.

There are several ways in which this intellectual and mental darkness expresses itself. For example, they continue to insist that it is possible to be moral while rejecting the existence of God. When they contend that it is immoral to kill an innocent person, what they ultimately mean is: I dislike murder. Ethics becomes an expression of personal preference and taste. If there is no transcendent creator by whom truth and falsity and good and evil are determined, so-called "right and wrong" reduces to personal likes and dislikes.

Or consider the claim by many unbelievers when they declare: "There is no such thing as ultimate truth." In response to which, I ask: "Is that true? Is what you just said about there being no such thing as ultimate truth, true?" If it isn't, there's no reason for me to believe or trust anything you say about it. If you contend that it is true, then there is at least one ultimate truth, and that is that there are no ultimate truths. Your position is self-defeating!

Or consider the on-going debate in our world over gender identity. According to the darkened understanding of our world, gender is whatever you want it to be. It is not tied in any way to your biology or your DNA. It is altogether determined by your preference. You are the lord of your life, not God. You prefer to identify as a female, although you are biologically male, is perfectly permissible. And vice versa. It all reduces to how you feel and how you perceive yourself. Objective rules and biological truth have no bearing on who you are. Be whoever you wish, and then dress accordingly and submit to whatever biological surgeries are necessary to make you appear to be the gender you prefer.

(3) They **"are alienated from the life of God"** (v. 18b). This cannot be a reference to God's own life or to physical life but rather that eternal, spiritual life that God alone can bestow. This is one reason why Paul earlier referred to unbelievers as "dead" in trespasses and sins (2:1). No matter how vital, healthy, active, happy, productive, and inventive people may be, if they do not know Jesus, they are severed from the only life that is truly and eternally life. Paul "is not thinking of some kind of alienation which psychiatrists could cure. What is required is not psychological treatment but something wholly new, a new being (v. 24)" (Best, 420). Paul then proceeds to give **two reasons** for this condition.

(4) It is **"because of the ignorance that is in them"** (v. 18c). Ignorance is no excuse for unbelief. These Gentiles are morally culpable for their ignorance. They aren't ignorant of God because there isn't sufficient evidence to convince them. They cannot blame their ignorance on anyone other than themselves, for this ignorance has its roots in their own minds (it is "in" or "within them").

You may recall how Paul addressed this issue in Romans 1:19-21 –

"For what can be known about God is **plain to them**, because **God has shown it to them**. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been **clearly perceived**, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So **they are without excuse** [in other words, they can't

appeal to ignorance or the lack of evidence to excuse or justify their unbelief]. 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."

(5) This ignorance is *"due to their hardness of heart"* (v. 18d). Says Lincoln, "at the center of their thinking, feeling, and volition, they have hardened themselves to God and to the knowledge of him that was available to them" (278). This word "hardness" is often used in the NT to describe the condition of the unbelieving heart (see Mark 3:5; 6:52; 8:17; John 12:40; cf. also Rom. 11:7,25; 2 Cor. 3:14). He has in view an insensitivity, an obtuseness, a stubborn, willful resistance to the truth of the gospel. Apart from God's grace they will remain spiritually impervious to the truth.

To put it bluntly, they simply don't want God. They don't desire a relationship with him. They refuse to acknowledge the truth of the gospel because of the demands that it would place on their lives. They know that if they were to embrace the truth of the gospel, they would instantly be accountable to God. They would instantly be confronted with the need for repentance from their sins. They enjoy the life they have crafted for themselves and would describe their "hardness" of heart as an openness to what the culture advocates and what their own internal desires may dictate. They think their "hardness" of heart is really freedom and intellectual honesty.

[This word translated "hardness" (*pōrōsis*) was used in the ancient world by medical authors to describe a callous or ossification which serves as a mortar to unite the portions of a fractured bone. Consider the English word "osteoporosis" which refers to the hardening of one's bones.]

(6) If that were not enough, they have become *"callous"* (v. 19a). The word translated by the ESV as "callous" means to cease to feel pain and thus in this context to lack moral sensitivity, an inability to feel shame, an inability to blush, a loss of emotional or spiritual capacity to feel embarrassed for one's conduct. "Their consciences are so atrophied that sin registers no stab of pain" (EBC, 61). The consequences of this rigidity of soul are then described.

(7) Note first that they are portrayed as fully and freely responsible for this condition. They *"have given themselves up"* (v. 19) to the behavior described. The moral evil of their souls is not something that has overtaken them contrary to their consent but is the product of their own selfish and sinful volition. Persistence in this chosen course of action may well lead to "God giving them over" (cf. Rom. 1:24-32) to a yet deeper and now well-deserved cultivation and aggravation of their sin.

Their evil orientation is characterized by two sins in particular: *"sensuality"* (*aselgeia*) and *"impurity"* (*akatharsias*; v. 19). These terms often appear together in catalogues of vices and refer to debauchery, licentiousness, lewdness, and unrestrained sexual behavior. Such people flaunt their sin and have no regard for the feelings of others or public decency.

Note that Paul says they engage in *"every kind"* of impurity, i.e., more than merely sexual impurity. He then characterizes their sensuality and impurity as having been pursued greedily (*pleonexia*; cf. Mark 7:22; 1 Cor. 5:10,11; Rom. 1:29; Col. 3:5; 2 Pt. 2:3). The idea here seems to be that they never get enough sensual and impure activity; their hunger for sin is a bottomless pit; they are never satisfied, always aching and desperate and lusting for more. They are insatiably greedy for sin, compelled by their own wickedness to find new perversions to replace the old.

Charles Hodge summarizes Paul's thought in vv. 17-19:

"Here as in Rom. 1:24, immorality is connected with impiety [i.e., idolatry] as its inevitable consequence. Men in their folly think that morality may be preserved without religion, and even that morality is religion; but reason, experience and Scripture all prove that if men do not love and fear God, they give themselves up to vice in some form, and commonly either to uncleanness or avarice. There is a two-fold reason for this; one is the nature of the soul which has no independent source of goodness in itself, so that if it turns from God it sinks into pollution, and the other is the punitive justice of God. He abandons those who abandon him" (251).

Paul, it seems, has described for us the downward spiral of evil. It begins with an obstinate rejection of God's truth due to the hardness of heart. It leads to futile thinking and darkened understanding, the result of which is being alienated from the life of God. Eventually their hardness is calcified and callous, leading to all manner of wicked and perverse living. Stott puts it this way:

The *Contrast*: rather, live as new creatures in Christ – 4:20-24

The life to which Paul calls his readers (and us) is one that is commensurate with and reflective of our experience of Christ, described by Paul with three phrases.

First, ***"that is not the way you learned Christ"*** (v. 20). The particular phraseology, "to learn a person", appears nowhere else in the NT (after all, *subjects* are learned, not *people*). Here the name "Christ" stands for the truth, the tradition, the substance about Christ, i.e., the essence of the Christian gospel (cf. Col. 2:6-7). But "learning" Christ refers to more than mere intellectual indoctrination about him. Paul has in view ***being shaped and fashioned by a personal relationship with him***. It also undoubtedly entails a deep desire and affection for him.

Second, they have ***"heard him"*** (v. 21a). The words rendered "assuming that" (*ei ge*) imply confident assumption, not doubt or uncertainty (see the same words in 3:2). Some have argued that Paul means to say that we heard Christ himself in the voice of those who proclaimed him or taught him to us. In view of the next phrase, Paul probably is referring here to our initial reception of the gospel message (cf. Rom. 10:14; 15:21; Col. 1:6,23).

Third, they have been ***"taught in him"*** (v. 21b). This refers to our on-going instruction in the Christian faith, particularly our knowledge of Jesus (see 4:12-16, esp. v. 13).

What is the meaning of the phrase, ***"as the truth is in Jesus"*** (v. 21c)? It is interesting that this is the only place in Ephesians where Paul uses the name "Jesus" alone (he referred to "the Lord Jesus" in 1:15; Paul elsewhere uses the simple name "Jesus" in 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:14; Gal. 6:17; 1 Cor. 12:3; 2 Cor. 4:5,10,11,14; 11:4; Rom. 3:26; 8:11; Phil. 2:10). This has led a few to contend that Paul is refuting the Gnostics who made a sharp division between the earthly Jesus and the heavenly Christ (but Gnosticism was at best incipient at this early stage).

Others argue that Paul does in fact draw attention to the earthly Jesus rather than the risen Christ "but that the point being made is that the truth of the tradition, and particularly its ethical aspects, is not just determined by the idea of Christ but has its roots in the life and death of the historical Jesus or contains teaching from the historical Jesus" (Lincoln, 282). Lincoln himself insists that the shift from "Christ" or "Christ Jesus" to "Jesus" is merely stylistic. Regardless of the reason for the use of this name, Paul's point is that ***truth can only be found in Jesus, in the knowledge and experience of, and in relationship to, him***.

Paul now explains in detail precisely what they (and we) have been taught. There are three phrases in vv. 22-24 (each an infinitive in Greek: to lay aside or to put off, to be renewed, and to put on), the nature of which has been much debated. Are they simple ***imperatives*** (commands; cf. Rom. 12:15; Phil. 3:16 where infinitives function as imperatives)? Do they indicate ***purpose***: the readers were taught *in order that* they might put off the old and put on the new? Do they indicate ***result***: the readers were taught *with the result that they have, in fact*, put off the old and put on the new? Or do these phrases explain or further define the content of the teaching mentioned in v. 21 (an exegetical function)? The latter is most likely, but with an implied imperatival force. In other words, ***what they have been taught in Christ is that they are to put off the old man and put on the new***.

First, they have been taught to ***"put off your old self"*** or to ***"put off the old man"*** (v. 22). Who or what is the "old self/man" (v. 22) and the "new self/man" (v. 24)?

The ***old self/man*** includes you women as well! This has nothing to do with one's age in life. It is a moral designation that refers to "the whole personality of a person when he is ruled by sin" (O'Brien, 328). Or again, "the old person is the person living under the dominion of the present evil age and its powers, and this previous identity has to be dealt with decisively" (Lincoln, 285). I like the way Clint Arnold describes it. He says the old self "is a way of referring to believers in terms of their solidarity with Adam in his sin" (287).

Whereas in Col. 3:9 and Rom. 6:6 the break with the old is portrayed as having already occurred in the past, most likely at the moment of conversion, here Paul calls on his readers "to continue to live out its significance by giving up on that old person that they no longer are. *They are new people who must become in practice what God has already made them*, and that involves the resolve to put off the old way of life as it attempts to impinge" (285-86). Here again we see the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" in Paul's theology. We have "already" put off the old self/man but we have "not yet" grown into a life of consistency with that new identity.

It is senseless to continue in their former ways because that "old self" has no future: it is even now "corrupt" (v. 22), or as O'Brien has put it, is "earmarked for demolition" (328). As opposed to the new person, who is in a process of renewal [cf. v. 23], the old person is in a process of moral corruption, rottenness and decay which will end in the final

destruction of death. This is due to the operation of ***"deceitful desires"*** (v. 22b). In other words, the cause of this progressive decay is the wicked desires that flow from deceit. Says Lincoln, "a false perspective on reality generates a confusion of desires which can never be satisfied because they have lost touch with what is true. Such desires serve the power of deceit, and so are themselves ultimately illusory and contribute to the ruin of the old person" (286). Simply put, these are ***sinful desires that lie to you!***

Second, they have been taught to be "renewed in the spirit of your minds" (v. 23; cf. Rom. 12:2). What is the meaning of "spirit" here?

- spirit = the human spirit as the sphere in which the renewal takes place (although nowhere else in Ephesians does *pneuma* refer to the human spirit).
- spirit = mind, hence, "the spirit which is your mind."

The most likely view is that . . .

- spirit = *the Holy Spirit who renews the mind by dwelling within it* (for this idea, see Titus 3:5; see also Eph. 1:17; 3:16; 4:3; 5:18; 6:18). Thus, the Holy Spirit is the agent of renewal and the mind is the object or focus of his renewing work. See especially Romans 12:2.

Third, they have been taught to ***"put on the new self"*** (v. 24). Paul earlier used this terminology in a corporate sense of the "one new man" which = the church, believing Jews and Gentiles now co-equal in one body. But here he uses it in an individual sense to refer to the person who is under the dominion of the new creation and its life. "On the basis of what God has accomplished in Christ, this new identity must be appropriated – 'put on' – in such a way that its ethical dimensions become apparent" (Lincoln, 287). Note three additional things:

(1) God is not only the author of this work of (re)creation, he is also its pattern or model. We are being renewed, lit., ***"after the likeness of God"*** (v. 24).

(2) To be like God is to live in ***"righteousness and holiness"*** (features of God's character in Ps. 144:17; Deut. 32:4).

(3) This righteousness and holiness do not emerge or exist in a vacuum: they are, literally, "of the truth," i.e., they are the fruit and product of the truth which we have already heard and are in the process of learning. In other words, righteousness and holiness cannot exist apart from an on-going indoctrination in the substantive truths and theological principles of the Word of God.

I often hear Christians say something to the effect that they are seeking to form a new identity, a new sense of self. No! When you, by the power of the Spirit, put your faith in Jesus, that is when you became a new self with a new identity. You are already a new person, in Christ. Therefore, you must think in accordance with that new identity, which in turn necessitates a change in how you live and act and speak.

So, I ask you once again in closing: just how necessary is God's saving grace? I think the answer by now should be: absolutely, unequivocally, eternally necessary!



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