3-31-19

Ephesians 4:17-24 (2)

We began our study of this passage last week covering verses 17-19. In these verses, Paul speaks of the general life style of the pagan Gentiles in Ephesus of the day. He really goes deep into how the human mind is functioning. What he describes can be applied to mankind throughout the world and even applied to today. Nothing has changed in the last 2000 years in the condition of the human lifestyle.

As then, people continue to function in the futility of their minds. This is a world-wide state of affairs and is the reason that the basic issues of civilization have never been solved. Paul looked into where this futility comes from. Our understanding is darkened; darkened by the overshadowing of evil; the evil that blocks every attempt man makes at improvement. No good program, teaching, economic base, governmental form or anything else will work because the human heart is evil and people will bend things to their own desires.

The understanding is darkened; hearts have been turned hard. People willfully remain ignorant of what is right. This willfulness leads to a callousness. A true hardening of heart and mind that will focus only on selfish desires; the result of godlessness, of turning away from God. We see people all along this spectrum of depravity: from those who we think are pretty good to those we believe are pure evil. But even the “good” have a selfish streak, and it will show up if you watch for it.

We see an even more basic cause for all this in Scripture. Paul mentions it in verse 2:5.

[God]; even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ

That word “dead” is terribly important. It takes us back to the words of Jesus to Nicodemus in John 3:3, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” To be dead indicates a separation. When a person’s spirit or soul leaves their body, that person is dead. When a person’s spirit is separated from God, that spirit is dead. When we sin, our spirit is separated from God and we are spiritually dead. This is what happened in the Garden of Eden. God told Adam and Eve that if they ate of the fruit, in the day they ate of it, they would die. We know they ate, but we also know that they lived for many years thereafter. What happened was that their spirits died, they were separated from God.

So, all human-beings, apart from Christ, are spiritually dead. That is why the understanding is darkened, hearts are hard, selfishness rules. For us as Christians, it is important to keep that in mind. We see things happening and just can’t believe it, how could someone do such an awful thing, how could someone believe certain ideas will work? Foolish ideas are followed and awful things are done because those people are dead; they can’t do otherwise.

It is against this backdrop that Paul breaks out with a wonderful proclamation. “But you did not learn Christ this way.” We see here that the Christian is taken out of all this futility of mind and hardness of heart. The Christian is indeed born again; the spirit of the Christian is alive and well and firmly held in the palm of God’s hand, never to die again. Notice how he says “learn Christ”, not “learn about Christ”. This indicates a deep intimacy with the Lord Christ. By the Holy Spirit, we know Him. I can read a book and learn about George Washington, but that is completely different from how I learn my wife. This is being “in” Christ. He becomes our source of life, we actually become part of Him, as the church is the body of Christ.

Here again, Paul is speaking about holiness. We never read about Jesus doing anything evil and He always encouraged avoiding sin. Remember that He preached repentance. This is the thing about learning Christ; it leaves no room for living a worldly life. Paul said back in verse 17, “walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk”. When we become a Christian, we are a new creation, we act differently. The world still calls to us, the world still tempts us with its promises of riches and pleasure; but the Holy Spirit warns us to not look back. As Jesus once reminded His listeners, “Remember Lot’s wife.” She had been saved from destruction, she had received God’s mercy in full through Lot; yet she didn’t shun the old life, she looked back with longing, and she was ensnared by it.

We as Christians have been saved from destruction and we have received God’s mercy in full through Jesus Christ; but if we look back to our old way of life, we will be ensnared by it and suffer the consequences.

In verse 21, Paul talks about how the Ephesian Christians have learned Christ. He says it is because they have “heard Him”. Again, notice the odd wording here, he does not say “heard about Him”. Paul means that they themselves heard Christ. When they heard the apostles speak, they heard Christ who was speaking through them, when they read the letters sent by the apostles, they were receiving the words of Christ. Jesus is also speaking to their hearts by the Holy Spirit. We, too, hear Christ. When we read the words of Scripture, we are reading His words and because we are sealed by the Holy Spirit, He makes these words alive to us and we hear them in our spirit.

Not only do we learn Him and hear Him, we are “taught in Him”. Another odd construction; we are not taught about Him but “in Him”. As a Christian, we are part of Christ, we are in Him. He is what contains our life and so when we are taught Christ, it is in His atmosphere, it is as a part of Him. We can capture this by what Paul said in Acts 17:28, “In Him we live and move and have our being”.

This verse concludes with “just as truth is in Jesus”. We are taught Him, we hear Him, we learn Him; in all this we are exposed to pure truth. Notice how Paul began in verse 20 using “Christ” and here he uses “Jesus”. This is the only place where Paul simply uses “Jesus”. There is a reason he moves from the divine to the human. Paul is bringing up the importance of the historical Jesus; of the man Himself. It is the work of the man on the cross that has brought us salvation, and the Bible is very clear that He Himself is truth; He must be truth if He is the Word of God.

We read about this truth in John 14:6 “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Here He declares Himself to be truth. Not only can we believe Him, we can believe **in** Him; believe in Him to salvation.

This comes up again in John 18:37-38 when Jesus is being interrogated by Pilate.

Therefore Pilate said to Him, “So You are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice.” Pilate said to Him, “What is truth?”

The man Jesus came into the world to testify to the truth. He testified about Himself; and His testimony was good, corroborated by the Father and the Holy Spirit. Jesus testified about Himself, the truth. He said that everyone who is of the truth hears His voice. We who are of Jesus hear His voice. We who are of Jesus are of the truth; we know our shepherds voice. The irony of Pilate’s question was that he had truth standing right in front of him.

In the remaining verses, Paul talks about laying aside the old self, putting on the new self, and having the spirit of our minds renewed. In place of “self” we can use the word “man”; the old man and the new man. I like this better because it has a breadth to it that “self” lacks. Let’s keep in our minds that all this comes about by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have our work to do, but that work is inspired by Him and we are given the strength to do the work by Him. We see this in verse 23, “that you be renewed”; that wording shows that it is something that is done to us, not by us.

Paul speaks here of the “old man” as our former way of life; the life we lead while spiritually dead and under darkened understanding. This life chases after the valuable things of the world and it leads to decay. Paul uses the word “corrupted” as the result of this life. A worldly life leads to a continual darkening of understanding, a continual hardening of the heart, a continual separation from God. It just gets worse and worse.

We see that this corruption comes due to “the lusts of deceit”. Now the word “lust” means to have a strong or overwhelming desire for something. Originally, that could be either good or bad. But in our language, it has come to refer only to bad. This is natural because our evil hearts lead our desires in a bad direction. There are many desires we have that God gave us and are for good: hunger, sex, work, self-preservation. None of these things are bad in and of themselves; But our lust, our uncontrolled desires for these things, is what is evil. And what is that lust based in?

Deceit. We are deceived into thinking that more and more of these things are going to bring us happiness and security. Again, we look to what God created instead of God Himself. Satan pushes this thinking, the world calls to us in these things promising a good life if we ignore God and go after these things. Because of darkened understanding, many choose this way. They find that when they allow their desires to go uncontrolled, they are controlled by them. In other words, they become slaves to sin. This is the state of affairs for the non-Christian. They are deceived into thinking that they are in control, when in fact, they have become slaves.

Paul calls us to take off this old man. In fact, we read in Romans 6:6, “our old man was crucified with [Christ]”. That is a done deal; when we accept Jesus as Saviour, our old man is dead. It can be a little confusing to look at this along with what Paul tells us in Ephesians, to take off the old man. We are told that he is crucified, but we are also told to take him off. These go together because what we have is parts of a dead man clinging to us. It is repulsive to think that we have something dead hanging off us; and it should be. Sin is repulsive; it is having death itself stuck to us, with all of its decay and stench. That’s why we want to get rid of it.

Being rid of that we have something new to put on; the new man. Our new man is a new creation and it is in the likeness of God. Remember that originally, we were created in the image of God, but sin distorted that image. Now in Christ, that image and likeness are restored. We are now righteous; entirely by Christ’s righteousness which has been imparted to us. By these things we are led to holiness; holiness becomes our desire and leads to true freedom in Christ.

We have fullness in Christ, our minds are not darkened, our hearts are not hard, we are not ignorant, we no longer head ultimately to corruption. Paul reminds us to not turn our backs on all this newness and look back longingly at the oldness. This goes deeper.

2 Corinthians 15:21-22

For since by a man *came* death, by a man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.

Adam was the original man and because of his sin, we all face separation from God in our own sin. Adam is the old man. We are to put off the effects of what Adam has brought upon us. Christ Jesus is the new man. We are to put Him on, we are to be in Christ.

Crucifying the old man and putting on Christ are instantaneous when we believe on Jesus. At that moment we are in Christ, sealed by the Holy Spirit, true children of the Father. Still, being renewed in the spirit of our mind is an ongoing process. We work at pulling the remains of the dead man off us, we work at resisting the temptations the world and satan have to offer. This is a life long undertaking so that our own spirit may be conformed to Jesus.

What we see here is the difference between justification and sanctification. Justification is immediate upon our accepting Jesus. In God’s court, He has swung the gavel and pronounced the verdict: Not Guilty! It is a final determination that cannot be changed. But our bodies and spirits are not immediately changed into perfection and this is the process of sanctification. Sanctification is what we go through to become more like our Saviour, more like Jesus. It involves learning, it involves suffering; it is the renewing of the spirit of our mind.

If we have accepted Jesus, then we are called to holiness, we are called to be separate from the world. It should be noticeable to everyone that we are different. And we are also called to be ready to give a reason for that difference, in hopes of bringing others to salvation in Jesus.

Prayer

LORD God, we come before You grateful that Your justice has been fulfilled on our behalf by Jesus. In Your great mercy, You have allowed Him to stand in our place to receive judgement. By Your grace, You have offered this relief to us; we who do not deserve such lovingkindness. May it all be for Your glory.

By the work of the Holy Spirit, our eyes have been opened to the hardness of our heart, to our own willfulness, to our rebellion against You; You who have nothing but love and caring for us. We confess and repent of our sin, we depend entirely upon Jesus for forgiveness.

Take us Lord, make us into Your likeness. Restore that image of You that was distorted in the fall. Holy Spirit, keep us from the deceit of sin, give us discernment regarding the calling of the world, shield us from that roaring lion who would devour us.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus who has provided all these things for us.

Amen