3-24-19

Ephesians 4:17-24 (1)

We are beginning another subsection of Paul’s letter to the Ephesian Christians. Again, it is amazing to see how what he wrote under the direction of the Holy Spirit 2000 years ago, is so very relevant today. The letter to the Ephesians is basically divided into two main parts: Chapters 1 through 3 are primarily doctrine; a presentation of the Gospel and foundational beliefs of the Christian church. Chapters 4 through 6 are more application of these doctrines. Certainly, there is a mixing of the two throughout, but these are good general divisions.

We have already looked at verses 1- 16 here in chapter 4. These verses focus on the doctrine of the church as the body of Christ, and therefore, how important it is for the church to be a unity. This is a unity comprised of the truth in love. Truth and love must be balanced with each other and are equally important in having unity in the invisible church that exists throughout the world. This unity is entirely by the power of the Holy Spirit; but we as Christians are by no means excused from working toward it. The advancement of unity in the church is part of our task as citizens of the Kingdom of Christ.

Now here in our reading today, Paul begins to discuss the way that Christians should live their lives. He speaks somewhat generally here, but it really covers a lot of information. After verse 24 he moves into some specific examples. What it boils down to is holiness. We as Christians are called to live holy lives. Our lives are to be set apart; our lives are to be different from the lives of non-believers. We need to understand that this is different from “being good” or from simply following a list of things to do and things to not do. Our holiness needs to spring from our belief in Jesus Christ and the working of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Societies based on simple morality don’t work, as we have seen; morality must be tied to godliness, it must be based on Christ in order for it to work.

Paul spends the first three verses reviewing pagan ways and pagan thought. Again, he was writing about the first century Gentile population but we see the same ways of thinking in our secular society today. Things have not changed, except possibly to have gotten worse.

Paul begins with a strong statement: “So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord.” This statement should get our attention. What he is about to say is endorsed by Jesus Christ Himself through the Holy Spirit. The wording here is different, depending on your translation, but they all mean the same thing. Paul is invoking his apostolic authority; He is speaking as directly from Jesus. He began this letter in a similar way: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” He brings this back up to remind us that even though he has moved away from doctrine teaching, what he says is still just as important. We must read these words, not as if they were Paul’s, but as if they were Jesus’; which actually, they are.

This is an important reminder for us when we read the Bible in general. It is a divinely written book. The Holy Spirit was responsible for what was recorded by the human-beings that wrote these things down. All of it is important and we don’t get to pick and choose what we follow or go along with. It is an act of our submission to God, it is an act of worship, to believe what we read and accept it as His word.

So, with this forceful beginning, Paul tells the Ephesians Christians, and us, to “walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk”. “Walk”, of course, refers to the way of life. It is the manner in which we live, each and every day. It is how we conduct ourselves, whether on Sunday or on a weekday; it is the default mode for how we deal with everyday situations.

Remember that Paul is writing to Gentiles; here he tells them to live differently form the other Gentiles. He also says “no longer”; the implication is that the Christians used to live their lives in the same way. And this is true of us: Before accepting Christ, we were worldly, following the ways of the world. These ways are evil because of the fall; because Adam and Eve sinned against God and we have followed in their example. We, as Christians, must be different. As we are told in verse 2:10 “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works”. This is important; Christians have actually been recreated; we are a new creation, not just the old person that has been cleaned up a little. If we are new, then we oughtn’t be acting the same.

There is a common teaching that a person can be a carnal Christian; that is, that one can believe in Christ with a saving faith and still live the way of the world. I am not going to argue with that teaching because, ultimately, to do so would be to judge someone’s salvation, which we are not to do. But I can make some observations. Notice that part of the reason we have been recreated is to do good works, but the Bible teaches that no good work can be preformed outside of Christ. Without faith, it is impossible to please God. A person living carnally is not doing things that are pleasing to God.

Additionally, James makes it clear that good works are evidence of faith. To claim belief without performing good works is to make a proclamation without evidence. Also, to become a Christian is to become a new creation. We therefore have to be fundamentally different from what we were. Our heart has changed. All of us need to look back to the day we accepted Jesus as Saviour. Has our life changed? Do we look at things fundamentally differently now? Do the ways of the would cause us to wonder at what people can possibly be thinking? Have we developed a disgust for what the world believes to be good? Have we developed a desire to see the worldly turn to Jesus?

If there has been no change in our lives along these lines, it is time to turn to God in earnest prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts; ask for guidance that we do not hinder Him; ask for the evidence of being made new. To live life as a “carnal Christian” is dangerous. It is, at best, a poor way to serve our beloved Jesus; at worst, it is a false salvation.

But coming back to verse 17, Paul refers to the Gentiles walking “in the futility of their mind”. Some translations say “in the vanity of their mind”. This reminds us of the book of Ecclesiastes. Chapter 1, verse 2: “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” Solomon then goes on to examine how everything in life is futile unless it is directly tied together with God. We see this today. Our politicians speak of taking action that will bring about peace. Many speak of us simply getting along, of letting peace have its chance. I think a lot of us were caught up in this manner of thinking in the sixties and seventies. Today, there is a lot of talk about how to make the would get along. This is nothing new, it has been going on since the beginning of civilization. If we step back for a moment, we are forced to ask “How is that going?”

I don’t mean to be cynical but human-beings are operating in the futility of their minds. And until the light of Jesus Christ shines in, we can’t grasp that. The problem isn’t with ideas, it’s with the human heart. It is evil and selfish. No matter how good a plan someone has, there will be those who try to exploit it for their own selfish ends. Additionally, consider the ideas that are brought up time and again with each generation. Each time we think it will work even though it didn’t before.

For example, let’s take the idea of education. If there is a problem, the people just need to be educated about it. I remember when it was realized how dangerous it was to smoke. The battle cry was that people needed to be educated about the dangers of smoking. Today, no sane person will deny the dangers of smoking. Yet the cigarette companies continue to earn huge profits. Absurdly, they even spend millions of dollars a year to “educate” people about smoking and it has no effect on the number of people who smoke.

Another one is drugs. I remember when the answer was to educate people about the dangers of drugs. Everybody now knows how dangerous drugs are. Yet here we are, with the highest rate of drug overdoses and usage ever. Marijuana has even become legal.

This same idea of education solving problems can go on: alcohol, sexually transmitted diseases, prejudice. It doesn’t work, because the solution is aimed at the mind, and the mind operates in futility. As Paul goes on to talk about, the mind operates in futility because the heart is dark and hard.

Verse 18 speaks of four issues that cause this mental vanity. “Being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart”. Now these are not just a list of four separate issues that cause futility of thought. These four are interconnected and actually have an order. The order is this: First, the understanding is darkened, this leads to an ignorance inside the person, which causes hardness of heart. When the heart is hard, they are excluded from the life of God. Let’s go through them.

Paul is speaking to the Christians about the pagan people they are living among. We can see how things are exactly the same today. People’s understanding is darkened. This is a direct result of the fall, of the human race turning its back on God and resisting His will. When the forbidden fruit was eaten, our eyes were open to the difference between right and wrong. That knowledge hurt us, because we were no longer simply enjoying the presence of God. In the presence of God, we are in light, we can see; but in rejecting Him, we moved into darkness and our ability to think clearly, spiritually, was gone. The seat of understanding is the heart. Knowledge is one thing, that is the realm of the mind; but understanding, wisdom, we think of that as being from the heart; and our hearts have been darkened.

Where understanding is darkened, there is ignorance. Now to be ignorant because you don’t know something is one thing, but look at how Paul words this: ignorance that is ***in*** them. This is ignorance that exists within the being of the person; it is a willful ignorance. It is the type of ignorance we see in the New Testament accounts of the Pharisees rejecting Jesus. In spite of His miracles, in spite of His teaching that could be backed up by Scripture, in spite of how much He fulfilled prophecy, they would not believe Him. This is willful ignorance. They chose not to believe regardless of all the evidence. That is the state of mankind today, that is why you cannot argue someone into believing in Christ: The Holy Spirit must change the heart.

This willful, internal ignorance leads to hardness of the heart. When it becomes hard, the ignorance becomes automatic. It needs no reason to disbelieve. Some versions use blindness instead of hardness. This is true, they become blind to the truth, blind to understanding. But it is a willful blindness and therefore a hardness. The Bible often speaks of the hardness of men’s hearts. Again, this is something God must take care of, but He often chooses to do so through His people sharing the Gospel. God claims that this is His work, in this case for His people Israel, in Ezekiel 36:26.

Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

So, this darkness of understanding leads to willful ignorance which hardens the heart. The end result being “excluded from the life of God”. Another way to put that is “alienated from the life of God”. God certainly gives common grace, He gives and sustains life even to those who reject Him. But in rejecting God, people are kept from sharing in His life. They are kept from having fellowship with Him. They are kept from communion with our Creator. They are kept from everlasting life with Him. Remember that hell is a separation from God and we see what this darkness of understanding brings in the end.

All of these things lead to a life on earth that is described in verse 19. And they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. And here we see the world today. Uncaring people who seek only their own pleasure in carnal ways. This kind of selfishness can only be described as greedy. If you ever wonder why the world seems to be getting worse, Ephesians 4:17-19 gives the short answer. I invite you to read Romans 1:18-32. In these verses, Paul goes through the steps of what happens beginning with ungodliness (which is being unholy) through God finally giving people over to their own desires to the point that their desires become unnatural.

The rest of our reading for today concerns how we as Christians ought to be living and, Lord willing, we will look at those verses next week. But Paul here deeply details the pagan, or worldly, mindset for a couple of reasons. First off, to remind us of how not to act, or how not to think. Secondly, to remind us of why the rest of the world is as it is. If we are to be the light of the world, we must understand that the world is in darkness and that that darkness is in their minds. We must be patient and loving to them because they are incapable of thinking otherwise. We have to understand that reason or “education” alone will not bring someone to the Lord. We must stick to the Gospel; the word of God is powerful and can transform stone into flesh. Our other tactic is prayer. God has chosen to work through our faithful prayers to Him; both in worship, and on behalf of hardened hearts.

Prayer

LORD God, we come before You in gratitude. We understand that it is only by Your gracious work that our own understanding is not darkened, that our hearts are not stone. By Your great mercy, You have reached down to us, and drawn us out of ignorance; not that we may be proud, but that we may glorify You.

Remind us Lord, that lack of understanding is due to the fall; give us therefore mercy that we may care about those who have not yet come to You. Keep Your word in the front of our minds and ever ready on our lips, that we may do the work You sent us to do.

Lord, it is only by the work of Your Holy Spirit that hearts will be turned to You. And because of that and our location, we lift up to You this area of Capon Bridge. Pour out Your Spirit upon this area that true revival would come about, that hearts would be changed and turned to You. Use us in this work to bring You glory.

It is in Jesus’ name we pray

Amen