

How Have You Changed?

Ephesians 4:17-21

Numerous polls over the years have shown that anywhere from thirty to forty percent of Americans claim to be born again Christians. But before we celebrate, we should also note that the same polls indicate that there is little appreciable difference between the way that many professing born again Christians live and how the rest of the culture lives.

According to the Barna Group, which researches and reports on trends among professing Christians nationwide, those who claim to be born again Christians are just as likely to divorce as are non-Christians. In evaluating 15 moral behaviors, born again Christians are statistically indistinguishable from non-born again adults on many of the behaviors studied. We are less likely to view sexually explicit movies and magazines, to use profanity in public, and to buy a lottery ticket. However, even in these cases, the gap between born-again and the norm is not wide - roughly one-third of the non-born again audience say they had engaged in the three activities compared to one-quarter of born again Christians. Source: The Barna Group reports on divorce (March 31, 2008), online at <http://www.barna.org/>; (Feb. 5, 2007), online at <http://www.barna.org/>

In light of these alarming conditions, Paul's words scream at us (4:17, my translation): **"This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk"** *This* refers to what he is about to say. *Therefore* goes back to what Paul has been teaching in the rest of the letter. In chapters 1-3 Paul showed us who we are in Christ. Now, starting in chapter 4 he has begun to show us how we are to live because of who God has made us to be in Christ. As you study the epistles of Paul you find that he talks about a new will, a new mind, a new heart, a new power, a new knowledge, a new wisdom, a new perception, a new understanding, a new life, a new inheritance, a new relationship, a new righteousness, a new love, a new desire, a new citizenship etc. In fact summing it all up the Bible says it is newness of life.

When you received Jesus Christ, when you were born again, when you enter into God's kingdom a tremendous change takes place in your basic nature. You are a totally different individual. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, **"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."** And we already studied Ephesians 2:10 where Paul says, **"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."**

Who we are in Christ should affect the way we live. Remember Paul started chapter 4 with his exhortation(4:1) to **"walk worthy of the calling with which you were called."** We saw that God's calling for us is really for us to become like Christ, to grow up into His fullness. And we saw that the church, living and serving together through the gifting of the Holy Spirit, is God's agent for this worthy walk.

In our passage today, Paul paints a graphic picture of how unbelievers live, which is how the Ephesians had lived before they met Christ. It is a shorter

version of a similar picture in Romans 1:18-32. Paul is showing that when you become a Christian, there must be a distinct break from the past. People should be able to see clearly the difference in your life, so that they wonder, "What happened?" His message is quite simple: Believers must not live as unbelievers live.

I. We must not live as unbelievers live (vv.17-19).

Look at verse 17 again. Paul says **"This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind."**

The basic application of this verse is: *because you are saved, you should not live like someone who is not saved.* Jesus should make a difference in your life. 1 Pet.4:3 says, **"For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles; when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries."**

Verses 17-19 describe for us the old way of life, the life of an unbeliever, the life from which God has saved us through Christ. Paul specifically spells out how unbelievers live. He describes here as in 2:1-3 the "way we were." God did not save us so we could return our sinful lifestyles as if nothing happened.

The Old Way of Life (vv.17b-19).

1. INTELLECTUAL FUTILITY (v.17b).

Paul says unbelievers **"walk in the futility of their mind."** The **"mind"** of course refers to the way we think. Believers act differently from unbelievers because they think differently.

Criminals come from all walks of life: rich, poor, black, white, educated, uneducated. Background makes little difference. However the common link between them all is a thinking pattern. Committing a crime always starts with thinking about doing it.

Obviously all unbelievers are not criminals but all have minds of **"futility."** The word means *"that which never succeeds."* It was used as a synonym for emptiness. Because a lost person thinks on futile things it is no wonder that his life is empty, vain and void of meaning.

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes gives us a good picture of this. *Futility* is the same word that is used 36 times in Ecclesiastes (LXX) translated, vanity. **"'Vanity of vanities,' says the Preacher,**

'Vanity of vanities!' All is vanity" (Eccl. 1:2). Solomon went on a "quest for the best" using his wealth and power to pursue every pleasure that came to mind. Solomon had tried to find satisfaction through knowledge, through wealth and all that it affords, and through the pleasures of music and art and women. He had houses and lands with beautiful gardens and ponds. But none of it brought fulfillment. He observed that even if you have all of these things, you live a few years and then die. He concluded that such a life is **"vanity and grasping for the wind"** (Eccl. 2:26).

Many unbelievers live for a purpose, even for noble purposes. Some aim to use their money for benevolent causes. Some want to find a cure for cancer or help others who are victims of disease. Some want to go into politics so that they can help our country be a better place. Some want to teach children so that they can have a better life. These are all good purposes that benefit society.

But, if they do not take God and eternity into consideration, what is gained? You live a few years and help a few people and then you die. Those who are helped may benefit for a few years before they die, or they may discard all that you have labored to get for them. Or, someone else may come along and undo everything that you have accomplished. It's all vanity or emptiness, unless it is done in light of God and eternity (1 Cor. 15:58).

Many people, even after coming to Christ return to that same trap of thinking like the world, lusting for more and more and becoming more and more disheartened and disappointed. Philosophers speculate about this and that, but they don't have solid answers for life's problems in light of death and eternity. Paul is saying, "Don't live that way!" Don't live as if God did not exist. Don't live as if Christ had not died for your sins. Don't live as if there were no judgment or no heaven or no hell. Don't live in the futility of your mind.

God wants to change the way we think. This is why the Bible says, **"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God"** (Rom.12:2).

2. DARKENED UNDERSTANDING

Verse 18, **"having their understanding darkened."** This idea is similar to that of living in the futility of their mind, but it goes further in explaining why they live that way: their understanding is darkened.

They are not able to understand spiritual truth (John 8:43-47). As Paul wrote about unbelievers in (2 Cor. 4:4), **whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.** Again in 1 Cor. 2:14, Paul writes, **"But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."** Or, as Rom. 1:21 says, **"because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened."** When sin came into this world, the lights went out spiritually.

Not only are unbelievers darkened in their understanding, but also they love it! Jesus said (John 3:19-20), **"And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."**

For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed." So the biblical picture is not that sinners are crying out, "O, if only I could see!" No, they're content to be in the dark and don't want the light to expose their sin.

Paul says, "Don't live that way! Don't walk around with a darkened understanding!" To put it positively (1 John 1:7), **"walk in the Light, as He Himself is in the Light."**

3. *ALIENATION FROM THE LIFE OF GOD (v.18).*

Verse 18 explains where this futility of mind and darkness of understanding stem from. It comes from **"being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them."**

Today more people are better educated than at any other time. Yet, more people are ignorant and blind to the most important truths of eternity than at any other time.

Paul says they are **"alienated from the life of God"** because of the **"ignorance that is in them."** They do not know God personally. They are ignorant of who God is and what He has done and what He will do. They lack new life from God.

Becoming a Christian is not a matter of eliminating sinful behavior and replacing it with moral behavior, although that will follow. Becoming a Christian is a matter of receiving new life from God. As Jesus said (John 3:16), whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Ignorance translates the Greek word from which we get our word, agnostic. It means to be without knowledge. It is ironic that agnostics often boast of their great knowledge, as if it were their knowledge that led them to their "enlightened" state of not knowing if there is a God! But, Paul traces their spiritual ignorance to something else, namely, to "the hardness of their heart."

4. *HARDNESS OF HEART (v.18).*

The word for **"blindness"** is *porosis*, which means "hardness." Most unbelievers have a rock hard determination to ignore God, hardheaded and hardhearted.

This means that people are not agnostics because they have intellectual problems with the Bible. Rather, they are agnostics because of moral rebellion against God. They want to live as they please, not as God commands. In order to justify and excuse their sinful lifestyle, they have to get rid of God because they do not want to submit to Him as Lord.

Paul says, "Don't live that way!" As a believer, be seeking daily to know the living God in a more intimate way. Submit every area of

your life to Him. Don't let sin harden your heart and produce doubts and spiritual ignorance.

Believer, are you living like an unbeliever? Are you growing in your knowledge of God or are you content to remain in ignorance? Are you eager to study the Word? Are you content to be fed by the world?

5. *MORAL and SPIRITUAL NUMBNESS (v.19a).*

Verse 19 describes the final result of this downward spiral into sin. Catch this phrase in v.19, "**past feeling**." It means to become callous and to cease to feel pain; thus, spiritually, it is to "*lose the capacity to feel shame or embarrassment*." Unbelievers are hardened and callused. They become apathetic and insensitive to morality and spirituality.

1 Tim 4:2 describes those who depart from the faith as "**having their own conscience seared with a hot iron**."

The first time a person commits a sin, he thinks, "I'll just do it this once." But, after he does it, his conscience bothers him. He feels guilty. But, the next time, it's a bit easier. He rationalizes it by thinking, "Well, others do worse!" Each time, it becomes easier to sin as his conscience develops a spiritual callus. Finally, he gives himself over to sin with abandon. He has no shame about it.

That is the trap of all sin. It is an addiction. The more you sin, the more insensitive you become to sin, and the deeper in sin you go. For a drug addict that first hit gives quite a high, but soon the body adapts to that amount and it takes more and more to get that same feeling. The same is true for any sin, the sinner has to seek new depths of perversion to get that same feeling. Giving yourself over to sensuality and impurity becomes enslaving.

Again, Paul is crying out, "Don't live like that!" Jesus said that we must cut off such sin as we would cut off our hand or pluck out our eye (Matt. 5:29-30). Keep your conscience tender towards God! Do not give yourself over to sin. It never satisfies and it always enslaves!

Even when we've been delivered from the darkness and brought into the light of the Lord, it's easy to step back over into the darkness. Why? Because the flesh still loves the darkness. It was trained on the darkness.

II. We Must Live **CENTERED** on Jesus (vv.20-21).

Here's the good news, living a transformed life is possible when we surrender ourselves daily to Jesus. Paul says, "**You have not so learned Christ**." Let me paraphrase, "**Unredeemed humanity lives in darkness, but you don't have to... Why? Because you have Jesus**."

"...learned Christ" refers to salvation. Because Jesus lives in you, you can have victory over the darkness. Because He is your Savior you can **"Walk in the Spirit and... not fulfill the lust of the flesh"** (Gal 5:16).

In her book *Tramp for the Lord*, Corrie Ten Boom wrote about a woman she met after W.W. II in a camp for displaced persons. She had once been a professor of music at the Dresden Conservatory. So Corrie showed her an old piano that had been donated. The woman sat down and her thin weathered fingers immediately began to run over the chipped keys. She played one of Bach's masterpieces on the rickety keyboard. Then she began to sob. She said the music reminded her of all she had lost in the war and had been unable to take one thing with her. Corrie said, **"Oh, no, you are wrong. You took your most prized possession... your music. For that which is in your heart can never be taken from you."** If you have **"learned Christ."** If He lives within you, the world can never take Him from you. You can and will have ultimate victory.

Stand back and look carefully. This morning, get honest and ask yourself, "Does my attitude toward my spouse, my guidance of my children, my behavior on the job, my patience behind the wheel, my faithfulness to God in small things, my willingness to sacrifice, my words to and about others, my involvement in spiritual opportunities with the church reflect what my Savior has done for me? Or have I settled for the drowsy, television-soaked, semi-devotion that the Barna Group describes—where there is little or no real difference between you and the world?

There is no fulfillment in this world, believer. If you haven't realized that, you need to know it now. For you, the only purpose and fulfillment available is in His Spirit, and in joyful, active union with the saints, continuing a spiritual work, your mind set on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

This week I challenge you to meditate on death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Remember that Ephesians 2:6 says, **"And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus."** This week pray and ask the Lord by His enlightening Spirit, to show you the magnificence of this drama that has been played out in the plan of your redemption.

Consider a God who would come down, take on a body forever, pour out His blood to set you free of your evil captor and take you captive unto Himself, and then bodily ascend back to His rightful place to be your King and Intercessor; to be the fulness of all things and the giver of gifts for the carrying out of the work we now have to do. Ask yourself, is Jesus Christ what my life is all about?