Leave the Past Behind

Ephesians 4:17-19 (NASB)
So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, 18 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; 19 and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.

Paul has been explaining who we are as people who have been called by God.
• As people who have responded TO God and have been adopted by God into His family.
• Paul has been describing God’s Family—the Kingdom Family of God!

We have been studying the most amazing news about who we are: CHANGED, DIFFERENT
• We are people created BY God to be WITH God.
• Once separated FROM God, we are people God LOVES and PURSUES and SAVES!
• We have received God’s love—so much so that God’s love DEFINES us.
• We are a diverse people—drawn together as we are drawn to God by His love.
• We are a unified (not a uniform) people—Unique individuals drawn together by God’s love.
• We are a changed people who continue to change—we are growing more and more like Jesus.

And now in our passage today Paul shifts gears again and says:
You are now DIFFERENT:

Ephesians 4:17 (NASB)
So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind

We are now different!
• We are not who we once were—we now live differently—we leave the past behind.
• And we don’t live like the rest of the world or like the culture around us.

Last week Dom exposed us to the idea that our unity as God’s Kingdom Family is a lot like a symphony
• Each of us has a part, and God’s symphony requires each one of us in order to sound complete and full and rich.
• Each of us receiving God’s love and joy and approval and expressing that love, joy and approval as we walk out our lives together with Jesus.

And as this symphony plays, each one of us demonstrates the love of God in each of our lives, and we ALL demonstrate the love of God in our life together as the Church.

This life together in Jesus is something that is RADICALLY DIFFERENT from culture.
- The world will notice this new life because we live and love differently.
- Our community: neighbors, friends and coworkers… they will notice our life together.

We will seem like a different culture—a new race of people living out the love of God together. We are a CHANGED PEOPLE—no longer walking in the “futility of our mind”.

Paul points out an ancient truth that life lived apart from God is FUTILE.
• Life on my own terms is utter futility.
But Paul specifically refers to our “futility of MIND”—this is a reference to:
• How we think.
• How we make sense of everything in life.
• What we plan.
• Our moral judgments.
• Our attempts to do good things.

Basically, Paul is saying that how we view and respond to the world was **futile and pointless** when we lived life apart from God.
• And this “futility of mind” is how the rest of the world lives apart from God.

Now let’s be clear about what Paul is saying and NOT saying here.
• Paul is **NOT** saying that non-Christians don’t do good things.
  • Non-Christians can be creative, generous, nice, kind, etc…
• What he is saying that:
  • **A life that is not conformed to the will of God will ultimately prove to be worthless—futile…**
    • Our best efforts at fulfillment are ultimately futile without God.
    • Our successes and wealth are futile…
    • Our great ideas and pursuits all prove to be worthless apart from God.

**A life lived apart from the life of God is ultimately futile.**

Jesus asks in Mark 8:

**Mark 8:36-37 (NLT)**

And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?

We were created **BY** God to live life **WITH** GOD, and our best effort at life apart from God is pointless.

Paul is saying that if we want to live a life of purpose and value and meaning as God **INTENDED** for us to live, then we must cling to our new life that God intended us to have in Jesus.

Just a few weeks ago in Ch 4 when Paul **BEGS** us to live this new life with God, we saw two DISTINCT components of this new life:

**Ephesians 4:1-4 (NLT)**

I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future.

**Living life in God’s Kingdom Family has two main distinctions:**
1. We live in **UNITY** with God and with one another.
2. We live in **PURITY**—our lives are distinct from the secular world.

• Our life together in Jesus is lived by the power of God’s Spirit enabling us to pursue **UNITY** and **PURITY** as we grow to be more like Jesus.

**We have been looking at the UNITY of God’s Kingdom Family for the last several weeks…**

**…and now today we see Paul focus in on the PURITY of God’s people.**

We’ve seen that God loves us, and called us to **UNITY** with Him and unity with others.
• God gives us His love to enjoy AND to share.
And because God loves us, He **also** calls us to **PURITY**.
• God gives us His Spirit which creates in us the desire to be more like Jesus.
This is a **RELATIONSHIP** we are saved into!
God loves us and saves us and adopts us, and as we receive His love and His Spirit, we are made righteousness and grow to obey Him.

God cares about our actions, because it is our actions that define our relationship.
- Sin is a big deal to God because sin separates us from God.
- Apart from God we lived in sin and were disconnected and separated from life with God.

**God has gone to GREAT LENGTHS to deal with our sin bring us back to Him.**
- When we choose to sin, we choose to live and make decisions APART from God.

So because God loves us and wants us to be with Him, God cares about HOW we live.
- If God wasn’t loving He wouldn’t care about sin.
- If God didn’t want us to live in His peace and His presence and for His purposes He wouldn’t help direct our lives AWAY from sin and TOWARD Jesus.

**But God DOES love us and DOES want us to live life in Him!**
- And so Paul creates a contrast today by describing the futility of a life lived in sin apart from God.
- He describes this condition apart from God like this:

Ephesians 4:18-19 (NASB)

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; 19 and they, having become callous…

This condition apart from God is described as being marked by:
- “ignorance”, by a “hardness of their heart”, and by “callousness”

When Paul refers to “ignorance” he isn’t talking about the cute ignorance of a a child or naive person…
- My 4 year-old might do something wrong because he is ignorant, and that isn’t what Paul is saying here.
- He uses this same word in Romans to describe the hearts and actions of people who are aware of God but do not act according to their convictions about Him.

This is why “ignorance” is followed by “hardness of heart” and “callousness”:
- the three expressions all describe the same condition—a heart that is turned away from the life of God and pursuing sin.
- And in a lifestyle in pursuit of sin, we are far from God.

Paul describes this state as “DARK”—look at vs 18:

Ephesians 4:18 (NASB)

being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God…

Sin cuts us oFF from life with God—in our sin we are EXCLUDED from life with God!

**Sin isn’t about breaking God’s rules—it is MUCH more serious than that!**
- Sin is about us separating ourselves from a life with God.
- Sin is about missing out on the love and purpose joy and direction that we were created for.

There is a real horror in persistent sin…
- A life of persistent sin draws us out of the life-giving love and peace that is intimacy with Jesus.
- Sin separates us from our ONLY source of true love and purpose.

**The persistent absence of God’s love and peace and purpose leads us to become “hard-hearted” and “callous”…**
Callous is a great expression because we can all relate to it. I drove and worked on old VWs for many years.

- You don’t drive old VWs for many years and not work on them—it’s sort of a whole lifestyle.
- And this lifestyle gave me calloused hands.

  • I have gotten under a HOT VW bus at a rest area in the middle of nowhere and adjusted the valves SO MANY times...
  • You can’t do that if your hands aren’t calloused!

**Those hand callouses were a benefit to me...**

- They were a buffer between hot, sharp, rough things and the rest of my body.
- My callouses kept me from burns and cuts...

**But the callousness Paul describes is NOT beneficial—it is something that hardens our hearts to life with God.**

- Where my callouses kept me from pain, THESE callouses keep us from God’s PRESENCE!

Paul says this calloused condition creates a darkened understanding & exclusion from life with God.

**Sin creates callouses, and these callouses make us unable to sense the heart of God.**

- So as we continue to sin, we continue to grow hardened to God—we grow NUMB to God’s voice.
- This calloused, numb & hardened heart can become a barrier that eventually might repel the Holy Spirit’s conviction.

**It is possible to get to a point where we have persistently allowed sin in our life and have grown so calloused to life with God that we don’t even hear what God is saying.**

And in vs 19 Paul describes what happens at this point:

**Ephesians 4:19**

and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.

- This is a tragic place—this is a hopeless, loveless, Godless place...
- This is a desperate place of no restraint.

And without any restraint, we then act with unrestrained freedom in whatever manner the futile, Godless mind might direct.

**Paul continues and says when we live like we USED to, we become GREEDY—UNSATISFIED—DISCONTENT...**

He describes a place where in our sin we can become:

- calloused toward God and we
- abandon all restraint and
- act on our impulses and
- obey the direction of our minds and
- we dive HEAD FIRST into impurity...

And it is in THIS place where we discover the deep, dark horror of sin and separation from God...

There are two main ways sin devastate us:

1. **Sin separates us from God.**

The horror of separation from God is that our unrestrained pursuit of satisfaction, pleasure and contentment is NEVER satisfying or EVER enough...

- And apart from any life with God, we have no choice but continue to hopelessly seek satisfaction, pleasure and contentment from the same unsatisfying, unfulfilling things again and again...
- **Sin ultimately destroys us because we were not made to stand alone and apart from God.**
Sin doesn’t just separate us from God, it also:

2. Sin hurts and affects everyone around us.
   - Although we tend to think of sin as a private and personal matter, it is not...
     - Sin is a community-destroyer.
     - It is a marriage-destroyer.
     - It is a relationship/friendship/co-worker-destroying force that sucks everyone around into it’s hopeless vacuum.
   - And the pursuit of sin is no longer something that people hide—it has become an outward goal to rebel against God in our culture!
     - Sex outside of marriage is not only tolerated in our country, it is ENCOURAGED.
       - There are valid reasons for sexually “testing out” a relationship by living together before two people make “such a big commitment…”
       - SERIOUSLY? Do people REALLY expect a partner who is willing to have sex outside of marriage to all of a sudden ONLY EVER have sex within the context of marriage?
         - That reasoning is absurd!
     - Pornography is not considered sin in our culture—not even for married people.
       - I heard last weekend that the porn industry made more money in 2017 than MLB, NBA and NFL COMBINED...
       - Jesus said that if we even LOOK at a woman and lust after her we have committed adultery in our heart.
       - Marriages and families were not designed to bear the weight of sex addiction.

Sin separates us from God, and can draw those around us away from God too.
   - Sin hurts people.
   - Sin destroys families.
   - Sin destroys communities...

Culture is searching for solutions to the problem of sin by using the “Futility of their minds.”
Culture says the answer to the devastation of sin is NOT to stop sinning, but to “TRY HARDER!”
   - “find a better spouse next time…”
   - “work harder to be better”—“Become a better version of your self”
   - “Regulate that industry so government has money to throw at the mess that sin leaves behind…”

But God’s love extends SO DEEP that He addresses the sin that separate us from Him.
   - God is a god of GRACE and He dives right into our mess to rescue us.
   - He loves us so much that He meets us in our pride and addiction and hopelessness and rebellion and he says, “I AM A BETTER WAY—FOLLOW ME!”

Matthew 11:28-30 (NASB)
“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

Giving ourself permission to walk in sin leads to our slavery to sin, but choosing to take Jesus’ yoke leads to freedom!
This is an obedience that leads to rest and freedom...
- THAT is true counter-culture thought!

Our culture wants to define freedom as the absence of ALL constraints...
But this is a HORRIBLE idea.
   - What about laws that constrain people from violence and theft and abuse and rape?
• What about natural constraints demanding us to eat and drink and sleep at regular intervals?
• Want about legal constraints requiring us to drive on just one side of the road?
• Or laws requiring us to pay taxes to maintain roads and water and sewer and fire dept, etc…
• Or the constraints of social norms like personal hygiene, personal space, single-file lines…

**NOBODY wants to live in an unconstrained world!**

**No constraints in life is NOT freedom. No constraints in life is chaos.**

• The question is, **WHAT constraints do we apply to our life?**
  • God has given us appropriate constraints to help us be who and what He created us to be.
  • We were created to obey the God who deeply loves us and wants us to be with Him.

This is the ancient desire of God that He is still working out in us through His love today.
Listen to how Ezekiel recorded the words of God for His people:

**Ezekiel 11:19-20 (NASB)**

And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, 20 that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God.

God's plan for people like me—people who seem to not be able to do ANYTHING right…
• God’s plan for us is to change our hearts—to change our affections.
• He changes our hearts and then points us to the deepest love we have even known.

In his letter to the Ephesian church, Paul has been describing a NEW LIFE in Jesus.
• That God saves us and CHANGES US from the inside out.

This is why in our passage today, Paul is affirming our opposition to sin.
  • In Christ, we are OPPOSED to sin—OPPOSED the way we once lived.
  • Your identity changed when you met Jesus, so leave the PAST BEHIND!

The same grace that saves you is the grace that is available today to lead you to WALK in your new identity—to leave the past behind!
• Today, God is STILL calling us into a new life in Him—WITH Him!
• Today, God is STILL offering us forgiveness for our sin through Jesus.
• God is STILL leading us in NEW LIFE by empowering us from within through His Holy Spirit.

**You might have fallen and feel too ashamed or too far gone to get back up—Listen...**
• Jesus paid the penalty for ALL of your sin—YOU ARE NOT TOO FAR GONE!
• Jesus covers the distance that you may have fallen!

If you don’t know Jesus and you’re still living that life apart from God, God’s love and Grace are for YOU today!
• TURN to Him.
• GIVE Him your drama and mess.
• ASK Him to soften your heart.

Be WITH Him—enjoy Him… be STILL before Him and know that He is God (& we are not).