

**THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND**  
**THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:**  
**A STUDY OF EPHESIANS**

**(LESSON FIFTY-EIGHT)**

**“DO NOT LIVE AS YOU USED TO LIVE”**

**EPHESIANS 4:17-24 (KING JAMES VERSION)**

*17 This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind,*

*18 Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart:*

*19 Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.*

*20 But ye have not so learned Christ;*

*21 If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus:*

*22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;*

*23 And be renewed in the spirit of your mind;*

*24 And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.*

**EPHESIANS 4:17-24 (NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)**

*17 So I say this, and insist in the Lord, that you no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.*

*18 They are darkened in their understanding, being alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their hearts.*

*19 Because they are callous, they have given themselves over to indecency for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.*

*20 But you did not learn about Christ like this,*

*21 if indeed you heard about him and were taught in him, just as the truth is in Jesus.*

*22 You were taught with reference to your former way of life to lay aside the old man who is being corrupted in accordance with deceitful desires,*

*23 to be renewed in the spirit of your mind,*

*24 and to put on the new man who has been created in God's image — in righteousness and holiness that comes from truth.*

In the first 16 verses of **Ephesians** chapter 4, the Apostle Paul dealt with the nature of the Church — the Body of Christ, and the role of each believer in its growth and development. But now, beginning with verse 17, he deals with how believers are to relate with the unbelieving world in which they live. Though these words were written almost two thousand years ago, it is impossible to read them thoughtfully without appreciating that the world today is similar to what it was in Paul's day, and that the believer's relationship with the world must be exactly the same as Paul outlines it in this section of his letter.

In this section, Paul is saying in effect to the believers in Ephesus, “Stop living in the manner that you used to live before you were saved.” Brothers and sisters, the life-style of a believer is to be **radically** different from that of the unconverted. To be **in** Christ and not to grow up **into** Christ makes a mockery of Christianity. The **revelation** of Christ in truth must result in the **realization** of Christ in life. If we have indeed heard and accepted the truth of the Gospel, we must think, speak and act according to the truth of the Gospel. There should be no compromising alliances, no divided interests and no courting of sin. This is Paul’s forceful challenge to all believers to become what we are, and it leads very naturally into his call to put off the old and to put on the new.

In verse **17** he writes, *“This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind.”* Paul uses the word *“therefore,”* as a sign post to capture and compel our attention. Based upon what he had just explained about the importance of unity and diversity in the Body of Christ, he now gives his readers a charge which further explains what it means to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which they have been called (verse **1**). It is important for us to understand that there is the negative side of the believer’s life. Certainly, there is a liberty in Christ, but that liberty is not a license to sin.

The word *“testify,”* is the translation of a Greek word which means, “To cite a witness, bring forward a witness, call to witness.” It has the idea of making an affirmation by appealing to God, or of declaring solemnly by invoking God’s name. What follows is of vital importance for the Gentile believers in Ephesus and the surrounding regions, for they were still living in the midst of a pagan environment with all the many temptations that were, and still are, a part of such an environment.

It is important for us to note the force of Paul’s exhortation. The apostle says, *“This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord.”* The phrase, *“in the Lord,”* identifies Paul with Christ and indicates that he is giving the exhortation on behalf of Christ. What Paul is going to write to the believers will not merely be his own apostolic advice. He is not simply stating his own personal conviction regarding the standard for their Christian life. Paul says in effect, “What I am writing to you is what I have received from the Lord. It is His instruction.” This, then, is not mere human advice; it is not a suggestion. Paul wants his readers to understand that it is the living God who is speaking through him. And so he speaks insistently, earnestly and emphatically saying in essence “I, and the Lord in me, are speaking solemnly to you, so pay very close attention to what we are about to tell you.”

Paul is emphasizing the vital importance of what he is about to say. He obviously feels a tremendous burden upon his heart to impress deeply upon those to whom he writes the imperative necessity of a revolutionary change in their whole manner of living. He wants them to understand that Christianity is radically different from the way the world lives.

What is the exhortation that comes to them from the Lord through Paul? *“That ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind,”* or as the **New English Translation** has it, *“that you no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.”*

Why did the believers in Ephesus need this exhortation in their day, and why do we need it now? The problem that all believers, in every era of the Church’s existence have had to contend with, and will always have to contend with, is what the New Testament writers refer to as the *“flesh.”* The term, *“flesh,”* refers to the sinful nature or disposition that every human being has inherited from Adam. The *“flesh”* reflects what remains of the “old man” and which still exists even after a person is saved. We have evidence of this in **1 Peter 2:11**. The Apostle Peter writes, *“Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.”* Peter is addressing believers in this verse, urging them as *“foreigners and exiles to keep away from fleshly desires that do battle against the soul”* (**New English Translation**).

Peter is clearly implying in this verse that the “*flesh*” remains a force with which every believer must earnestly contend every day. It is that unredeemed part of a believer that awaits future redemption at the time of glorification. At that time, we will be completely free, not only of the presence of sin but also from all the other **P’s of sin**: the **power**, **pleasure** and **possibility** of sin. But as long as we inhabit these mortal bodies, we will have to contend with the “*flesh*” and the deceitful lusts or strong desires that it exerts within us, to pull us back to the miry clay of sin from which we were delivered by God when He transferred us from the power of darkness into the kingdom of His beloved Son (**Colossians 1:13**). Their position had been changed.

Brothers and sisters, it is the fact of our new position “*in Christ*,” that Paul uses as a basis for his exhortation to the believers that they no longer live as the Gentiles lived. He knew that a new **practice** can only result from a new **position**. The fact is that they had been delivered from the power of darkness, and had been transferred into the kingdom of Jesus Christ, and so it was entirely logical and reasonable for Paul to call them to an altogether different walk from that of the unsaved Gentiles among whom they still lived.

In verses **1-3** of chapter **2**, Paul reminded the believers in Ephesus of their former manner of walking. He wrote:

*1 And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;*

*2 Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience:*

*3 Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.*

Before they were saved, the believers in Ephesus were all “*dead in trespasses and sins.*” They were dead toward God and alive to Satan’s power, leading them to disobey God and enslaving them to the power of the wicked lusts of their flesh. And they had no power to change! But by the grace of God they had been delivered from that position. **Wayne Barber** paraphrases what Paul is saying as follows: “I have just raised you up to the highest level of understanding that you could possibly get to. Now I am warning you. Don’t you go back and live like you used to live. When you do, sin will take you further than you ever wanted to stray, keep you longer than you ever wanted to stay and cost you more than you ever dreamed you would pay.”

Isn’t it amazing brothers and sisters, how quickly we forget what has caused us so much pain?

**Ruth Paxson**, commenting on the words “*that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk,*” wrote the following: “The Christian has begun a walk on a new road in a new sphere leading to a new goal. Then, he must be prepared at the very beginning with deliberate determination to make a full and final abandonment of the old life in its entirety. But a walk is taken step by step. So, as one goes along the new road and recognizes soft spots in character, backslidings in conduct, danger points in companionships, discrepancies in ethics, departures in morals, and compromises in standard, there must be an immediate putting off of that old remnant of the abandoned life. Paul makes this quite clear in Chapters **four** and **five**, as he mentions definite sins still to be found in the lives of these Ephesian Christians.”

At the very moment the Ephesians believed on Jesus Christ, they had passed from death unto life (**John 5:24**). In that moment of spiritual rebirth, something so tremendously revolutionary had taken place that they who had been sinners had been made into saints and, as a result, life could never be as it was before.

*“This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind.”* The word “walk,” is the translation of a Greek word which literally means, “to walk about.” Eventually, it came to mean, “to make one’s way, to make progress, to make due use of one’s opportunities, to regulate one’s life, to conduct one’s self.” Most of the uses of the word in the New Testament refer to the daily conduct of one’s life, or how one orders his or her behaviour or conducts his or her life. The word is in the present tense, indicating a habitual action. In other words, Paul is saying to the Ephesian believers, “Do not fall back into the **habitual** practices of those who do not know Christ as Lord.”

Before the Ephesians were saved, they had ordered every aspect of their behaviour, and regulated the totality of their lives, within the sphere of trespasses and sins. Now, Paul elaborates on the influencing factor which caused them to do so. He identifies it as *“the vanity of their mind,”* or *“the futility of their thinking.”* The word “vanity,” is the translation of a Greek word which means, “emptiness, vanity, nonsense, nothingness.” It refers to that which is devoid of truth and appropriateness. It describes the inability to reach a goal or achieve a purpose. The American theologian and radio minister, **John Vernon McGee**, commented that the phrase, *“the vanity of their mind,”* meant, “The empty illusion of the life that thinks there is satisfaction in sin.”

In **Romans 1:21**, we see that this *“vanity of mind,”* or *“futility of thinking”* was a consequence of their rejection of the truth about God: *“Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became **vain in their imaginations**, and their foolish heart was darkened.”* The unbelieving Gentiles rejected the truth about God and thus, failed to attain the true purpose of the mind which is to receive God’s revelation, which would in turn, have led them to recognize Him as the creator of the things that they could see.

**Brothers and sisters, the place to start in living as a Christian is in the mind.** We must **think** differently than the people of the world do. Please notice that Paul does not start with actions. He starts with the thought-life, with the mind, and he declares that the world’s thinking is vain or futile. This is the vital appeal that he makes to believers. He exhorts them not to think like unsaved people do; not to adopt the world’s philosophy of living, or follow the world’s value system. Why does he do so? Because the world lives in vanity, futility and emptiness of mind. Not a ray of light from God, nothing of God’s righteousness or goodness, and not a single good thing in the sight of God penetrates the circle of their conduct. All their thoughts, words, and deeds are enveloped in an atmosphere of sin and vanity. Not one of their acts ever get outside the circle of sin or uselessness.

The truth is that unsaved persons do not even have the capability to understand God! As Paul explained in **1 Corinthians 2:14**, *“The unbeliever does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him. And he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned”* (**New English Translation**).

Unsaved people walk *“in the vanity of their mind.”* The word “mind,” is the translation of the Greek word **Nous:(nooce)**, which refers to the organ of mental perception and apprehension, of conscious life, of the consciousness preceding actions or recognizing and judging them. **Nous** represents the seat of understanding and intellect, the reasoning capacity or the thinking faculty. According to **1 Corinthians 2:16**, believers have a new mind, *“the mind (nous) of Christ.”* According to **Romans 12:2**, this new mind is renewed as believers intentionally and consistently choose not to be conformed to this world’s way of thinking but to be radically transformed.

**Ray Stedman**, commenting on **Ephesians 4:17**, made the following remarks: "The Christian must choose on which basis he is going to live his life. If he is to follow Christ, he must be willing to have his thinking changed. When you become a Christian this is the first issue you face. You must be willing to have your whole fundamental outlook on life drastically altered. Christianity is not merely a change in outward actions, a bit higher moral or ethical level. Christianity is a revolutionary change of government which results in a radical change in behavior."

In verse **18**, Paul moves on to analyze more closely this problem of faulty thinking. He explains why human thinking is so pointless and without ultimate significance. He writes, "*Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.*"

Again, we quote **Ray Stedman**: "He is tracing a chain of cause and effect here. Beginning with the most immediate effect, he is tracing it back to that which causes it. The first step is that worldlings think futilely because their understanding is darkened. Just as a cloud, passing over the sun, darkens the light of it, so the thinking of man in his fallen state is shadowed, obscured, darkened. Scripture continually uses these terms, light and darkness, as metaphors for truth and ignorance. Truth is light; ignorance is darkness. Paul's figure declares that men's thinking is shadowed with ignorance, it is pointless because it stems from ignorance. That is rather arresting, is it not? We think we know so much, and we do. We know so much, but we never know quite enough. That is what the apostle is saying.

Again this relates to a truth that we find widespread throughout the Scriptures: Man is ignorant because there is a part of his being that does not function. It is his spiritual life. His spirit is blank, darkened, obscured. In that part of his being which was intended to function as the key to his life, there is nothing taking place. As a result, all his knowledge is broken, unrelated, incomplete. That is the picture Paul draws."

The understanding of unsaved persons is darkened. The Greek word translated "*understanding*," refers to the intellect, moral understanding or the way of thinking. It is the faculty of thinking, comprehending, and reasoning. It describes the seat of perception and thinking, the faculty of understanding, feeling, desiring.

The Greek word translated "*darkened*," literally means to be, or to become dark, to cover with darkness. Figuratively, the word means to darken or blind the mind. It means to become unable to perceive and thus, unable to understand. It is in a construction in the Greek which indicates that the effect of darkening comes from outside. The word is also in the perfect tense which speaks of a process completed in past time having present results. Paul uses the perfect tense here to show the finished and permanent result of the blinding of the mind by the "sin virus" which all of Adam's descendants have inherited. The believers in Ephesus were in this enduring state of darkness before they were regenerated by the Gospel of grace.

Brothers and sisters, **only God can open the human understanding to spiritual truth**. Only He can reverse the long-term effects of a darkened understanding. The author of the letter to the **Hebrews** makes this plain in chapter **8**, verses **8-12**:

**8** *For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah:*

**9** Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord.

**10** For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people:

**11** And they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest.

**12** For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

Only an inner transformation of the entire human personality, which is accomplished by a work of God alone, can open the mind and understanding of a person to the Lord. This is why in **Ephesians 1:15-20**, Paul focuses his prayers on the enlightening of the understanding of the Ephesian believers:

**15** Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints,

**16** Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers;

**17** That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, **may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him:**

**18** **The eyes of your understanding being enlightened;** that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints,

**19** And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power,

**20** Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places.

Brothers and sisters, we all know that it is dangerous to walk in the physical darkness without any light. But it is even more dangerous to walk in spiritual darkness, which is what the believers in Ephesus were doing all their lives until the grace of God intervened and enlightened their understanding. Paul speaks of this enlightenment in **2 Corinthians 4:3-6**. The **New English Translation** renders the passage as follows:

**3** But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing,

**4** among whom the god of this age has blinded the minds of those who do not believe so they would not see the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God.

**5** For we do not proclaim ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.

**6** For God, who said "Let light shine out of darkness," is the one who shined in our hearts to give us the light of the glorious knowledge of God in the face of Christ.

Brothers and sisters, the very same is true of all of us who are saved. How foolish are we when we choose to go back into this darkness, even for a moment, now that we have been saved with so great a salvation! Beloved, how do we view our salvation? Do we view it merely as a "fire escape" and a free ride to heaven, or do we view it as a gracious access into a whole new way of walking, supernaturally, and of living in the power, light and love of The Lord Jesus Christ who saved us and washed us in His Blood?