

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (9-6-1996 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Ephesians 4:17-21

The plight and state of the ungodly

Introduction

Paul now moves on to write about Christian living. He dwells on general principles before he comes later to details of family and marriage and facing powers of darkness which beset our path. This passage emphasises that as Christians we have to be different from others. Once we were like every one else, in that we thought and acted and behaved like them. Now we belong to the Lord and therefore are very different from the people we were and the people around – in home, in the street, and in the workplace. New standards, new outlook, new power. If we want to make any impact, we have to be different. Not suggesting we need to be odd or eccentric, but we are new creatures, and old things have passed away.

Foolish to think we can be good influence on the world by being as like the world as possible. The world will only laugh behind our backs. The world expects us to be different. So does God. No one is likely to say, “He has something I haven’t got” unless we are different. The importance of being different and separate is clear when we realize that the Christian life and the pagan life are fundamentally opposed and totally different.

Paul feels this very strongly. He summons all his apostolic authority, **So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do** (Ephesians 4:17). Then goes on to describe the godless person, the non-Christian. Psychological dissection of the unbeliever, speaking about (i) their condition, (ii) the cause of their condition, and (iii) the consequences of their condition. This is the most profound analysis of unregenerate man that we will come across. Paul ends by saying you will be totally different if you have learned Christ and have grasped the truth as it is in Jesus. Although Paul is describing ancient pagan world of the first century, it is perfect picture of twentieth century modern world.

Condition of the Unbeliever

The Gentiles **live in the futility of their thinking** (Ephesians 4:17). *vous* means more than just intellect, but mind, will and emotions too – their whole personality. Their entire outlook on life, whole way of living life, is vanity, futility, emptiness, pointless, aimless, lacking direction, no goal, leading nowhere, never giving satisfaction. Summed up in Ecclesiastes 1:1 **Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless**. Peter speaks of **the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers** (1 Peter 1:18). This way ends in death, what’s the point, what’s beyond death?

John Bunyan’s portrayal of “Vanity Fair”, in *Pilgrim’s Progress* is very apt here. Vanity Fair – full of merchandise, honours, titles, pleasures, precious stones, games, plays, thefts, murders, adulteries. Pilgrim causes a great stir because he is clothed differently, speaks differently, and because he is disinterested in the goods on sale – his sights were set on making his way to the Celestial City.

Our experiences today bear this out. The things the people of this world regard as important, compared with the glorious eternal and divine truths which control and motivate the Christian's life. The "achievements" of some people in the world – power, money, position, status, publicity – but many testify to being unhappy despite all this. Many still in quest for "inner peace". This is why so many suicides. This is why so many bitter and cynical old people. For all the world's intelligence, big show, sophistication, boasting, noise, glitter and brilliance, life is empty, a bubble, make-believe, full of air. Life promises so much – but ends in nothing. Like the "Gentiles" in this verse, walking in futility of mind.

Amazing that some Christians enjoy the world, long for it, wonder if they are taking the Christian life too seriously. Rather, they should be profoundly sorrowful for the people who have not had their blind eyes opened to see the emptiness and pointlessness of it all.

The cause of the condition of unbelievers

Four things explain the condition of man without God and without Christ and which lead to aimless, unsatisfying and empty lives. Darkened by understanding, also separated from life of God. And why? Because of ignorance in them due to hard hearts.

(a) Mental darkness – **darkened in their understanding**, veil over heart and mind, unable to see, something between them and the truth. **The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ** (2 Corinthians 4:4). The Fall of man into sin means they are mentally in darkness.

Bible calls ungodly man a fool – lacking understanding, blundering around without thinking. **The fool says in his heart 'There is no God'** (Psalm 14:1). "Darkness" is constantly used in the Bible to describe the ungodly. **The people living in darkness** (Matthew 4:16), **Men loved darkness instead of light** (John 3:19). Africa was known as the "Dark Continent" because of its paganism and ignorance. But William Booth coined the expression "Darkest England" – with good reason. All man's philosophy and knowledge will never get him to God. Because of the darkness he is in, he scoffs at the Gospel and at Christ. His understanding is darkened. **The man without the spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them** (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Only the Holy Spirit can remove that darkness. We can preach, argue, illustrate and explain, but unless the Holy Spirit shines into the heart and dispels darkness, we labour in vain. No point in losing temper or wanting to shake them – what we need to do is ask God to shine into them, ask God to open blind eyes.

(b) State of spiritual death, **separated from the life of God**. Spiritual life is in God alone. If someone is spiritually dead, spiritual truth and spiritual outlook and spiritual values mean nothing to them. They do not know God personally, and cannot share and enjoy His life. Their "life" is mere existence, on a level with animals. Although they were made for God, they do not know Him. Hence they are restless, dissatisfied

and troubled. Augustine said “Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee”.

Feel they are made for something bigger. Ever seeking real answer but cannot find it. So they worship substitutes – family, work, money, position, self. But these do not satisfy. They never will be satisfied till they know God.

*“I tried the broken cisterns, Lord,
But, ah, their water failed.”*

Do you know God, and share in His life? Are you spiritually alive? Do you have rest for your soul?

(c) The reason for this separation – **Because of the ignorance that is in them.** They may be great readers, have an encyclopaedic knowledge of the world around, have an answer to all the impossible questions in quizzes – but about the most important things, they are ignorant. Ignorant about God, His character, Truth, purposes, His Son, salvation, grace. Hence they imagine they can save themselves by good works. They do not know they need His power. They are ignorant of the seriousness and solemnity of eternity.

(d) And why the ignorance? **Due to the hardening of their hearts.** πωρωσις Originates in πωρος, which means “marble” – hearts as hard as stone. They deliberately refuse God. They do not feel anything. Their **consciences have been seared as with a hot iron** (1 Timothy 4:2). Lost moral sense, fighting against God, resisting His call and challenge. They argue against conscience and the voice of God.

This is the condition of the world – empty, aimless living of the unbeliever. The reason is their spiritual state. Mental darkness, spiritually dead, state of deep ignorance, hearts as hard as stone. Hopeless plight. We were all like that once and would still be if it were not for the power of God – scattering the darkness, giving us life, revealing truth, and giving new hearts.

Need to pray for others. Yes, we still need to witness to them, but God must shine in their hearts. We may plant and water, but only God can give the increase. Helpless apart from Him.

The consequence of this condition

They have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more (Ephesians 4:19). It is a biblical principle that ungodliness always leads to unrighteousness. And the more that restraints are relaxed, the more unrighteousness abounds. It is also a biblical principle that a point is reached in individual’s lives and in society that God gives men up to their sins. He takes the brakes off and abandons them to the full consequences of their sins. God abandons those who abandon Him.

Giving of men to licentiousness is a gradual and increasing process. Gradually forget all self-control. Then care nothing for public opinion, decency, tradition, or God. Unashamed, open and proud of their unrighteous behaviour. Together with

greediness. Only self matters. Main thing is to gratify lusts. Allow nothing to stand between themselves and their pleasures. Need look no further than the headlines in today's papers.

In America in the 1960's posters listing the 10 Commandments had to be taken down, references to Christian values deleted, and prayers forbidden on school property. By the 1990's discipline and values barely exist. Metal detectors are needed in some inner city schools to stem tide of guns and knives being brought to school.

In summary, Paul's analysis of the unbelieving world is bang up to date. As a result of mental darkness and spiritual death, we see deep ignorance and hard hearts. This increasingly leads in practice to licentiousness and unrestrained selfishness and lust.

Christian response to this situation

You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. You heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus (Ephesians 4:20-21). The truth in Jesus was taught, learned and heard, and has created a miracle in the life. Given worthwhile, meaningful life. His light has driven away darkness. His truth has mastered us. The veil has been removed. We have come to know God personally, set free by His truth, given new heart, eyes opened, loving holiness and His will and His way, hating the things that we once revelled in and enjoyed when living for self. New people in Christ, under His Lordship, indwelt by life-giving power.

Thank God that He has delivered you from the world, separated you from it. Thank God for the miracle He has worked in your life, raising you from the dead. Heed this solemn warning, to remember who you are and what God has done for you. Make sure you don't drift back and live like the world. Be separate, pilgrims and strangers in this world, for your citizenship is in heaven. Belong to the Lord in every area of your life – home, school, street, neighbourhood, workplace, shop. Remember you are His, bought with a price. Do not fail Him or let Him down.

Not a question of having to be good, it is about having a relationship with the Lord. **Declare the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light** (1 Peter 2:9). Henceforth, certain things are unthinkable for us to say and do. Is the difference evident? Are people surprised to hear you are a Christian? Is the demarcation line blurred?

Also need to be faithful in declaring and applying the Gospel. Be clear about the real situation of people living in their sins. Bible teaching here helps us to realize real situation and need. Only hope for individual and society is the power of God. Only God can give light and life. Only God can revive us and send revival, which is only real answer to situation in which we find ourselves. Therefore, seek Him as never before.