

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	95		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE WAY WE WERE: THE OLD WAY OF LIFE

“When a person dies we know from bitter experience that the bond which united that person to life and activity in this world has been severed. He is no longer active in the sphere, realm, or relationship in reference to which he has died; he is no longer *en rapport* with life here. The Scripture graphically portrays this obvious fact. *But he passed away, and, lo, he was not; yea, I sought him, but he could not be found* (Psalm 37:36). *As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more* (Psalm 103:15, 16). It is this analogy that must be applied to death to sin. The person who has died to sin no longer lives and acts in the sphere or realm of sin. In the moral and spiritual realm there is a translation as real and decisive as in the realm of the psychic-physical on the event of ordinary death. Those who still live in the realm of sin and whose life is constituted by sin may say with reference to the person translated from it, *he passed away, and, lo, he was not; yea, I sought him, but he could not be found. The place that knew him knows him no more.*”¹ The apostle Peter (1 Pet. 4:4), in a text that parallels Eph. 4:17-24, declares that the difference is so great that people will think you “strange” (Gk. *xenizō*, lit. to astonish, surprise, amazed at the turn of events; the word includes the idea of offense or resentment along with astonishment) if you do not join them in their way of life. The trouble is when people notice no change of habit and behavior in those who profess to be Christian. The Apostle Paul absolutely insisted on just such a change. Chapter 4 begins what is called the “practical” portion of the epistle. The Apostle admonishes believers to walk worthy of the calling (as set forth in chaps. 1-3) they have received and to strive to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. A description of this unity is given, and how it is to be achieved – Maturity, Paul declares, is the ground of unity, and maturity, or “perfection,” is the word the Head of the Church has provided for in giving “grace-gifts” to the members of His Body. Verse 17 begins with a very strong injunction – Paul in effect “demands” something of his readers; they are to be different. They have been elected in eternity past by Sovereign Grace. They have been justified by the redemption which was procured by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Justification is the basis for sanctification. By virtue of their relationship to the risen Lord, believers are in union with Jesus Christ Himself. They died and rose again with Him, and it is this relationship that constitutes the reason (and power) for the believer’s new way of life. The late James Boice made this comment, “There is a saying of the ancient classical world that goes, *When in Rome, do as the Romans do*. It is an encouragement to conform. If you are among sophisticated people, act sophisticated. If you are among earthy, common types, act earthy and common. If you are among pagans, act like one. Above all, do not stand out – at least not if you want to get on and be successful in the world. That is foolish advice in most contexts, because it is usually those who stand out who are successful. But what bothers me most about the saying is its wickedness. It is opposed to the way of Christ. In human terms I suppose there is some wisdom in conforming to the ways of others; it gets one liked, it opens doors. But in spiritual terms conformity to the world’s ways is fatal. That is why Paul tells us in the next section of Ephesians: *You must no longer live as the Gentiles do* (Eph. 4:17). The Ephesians were Gentiles and had lived as other Gentiles did in the past. But now things had become completely different. They had been called to discipleship and

holiness by Christ, and they were to live as he lived. They were to be in the world – as we are in the world – but not of it.”²

- I. **THE PATTERN OF THE OLD MAN** (as demonstrated by the Gentile World). The Apostle has already described the condition of the “natural man” in 2:1-3. Men are, outside of Christ, dead in sin, subject to Satan, controlled by evil desires, and under the wrath of a Holy God. Listen again to John Murray: “The old man is the unregenerate man; the new man is the regenerate man created in Christ Jesus unto good works. It is no more feasible to call the believer a new man and an old man, than it is to call him a regenerate man and an unregenerate. And neither is it warranted to speak of the believer as having in him the old man and the new man. This kind of terminology is without warrant and it is but another method of doing prejudice to the doctrine which Paul was so jealous to establish when he said, *Our old man has been crucified.*”³ What brought about this great change? – The gospel. “The gospel changes what we believe, and it transforms who we are. The doctrine of the gospel, if we believe and cherish it, should lead to permanent and *continual* change. Once born by the Spirit, we begin to bear the fruit of the Spirit, things like love, joy, peace, faithfulness, and self-control (Galatians 5:23). We suffer, work, celebrate, eat, and live differently. Why? Because the gospel does not give us mere doctrines to be believed, but introduces us to three Persons to be cherished. And the more we cherish them, the more they rub off on us.”⁴ Having described some of the characteristics of the “worthy walk” (4:1-3), Paul now directs his attention to characteristics of the Gentile world – how they walk is not to be, nor can it be, the “walk” of the believer.

NOTE: The word “walk” – *peripateō*, also appears in 2:2, 10 and 4:1. Altogether the word is used *eight* times in Ephesians (cf. also 4:17 used twice; 5:2, 8, 15). The word describes a pattern of life, a manner of course of living. It therefore stresses that which characterizes a person’s conduct in the main.

A. **The Description** (17-19).

1. **The Condition:** “vanity of their mind” – The word for vanity is *mataiotēs*, lit. worthlessness, futility. The word implies aimlessness, without purpose. The word for mind is *nous*, lit. the faculty of thinking, reasoning capacity. “They are darkened in their understanding, *eskotomenoi*, perfect passive participle, lit. blacked out. When a Greek used the perfect tense, the focus was on the completion of the action with certain definite results. The perfect always refers to time present to the writer and to existing results of a past action. Thus a lit. trans. would be something like, “They have been darkened in their understanding (and this continues and is obvious).” The absolute certainty of the existing fact is emphasized. The word for “understanding” is *dianoiai*, lit. thinking through, intelligence, the mind or the organ of thinking; the word also encompasses the emotions and feelings. This is the opposite of having the “eyes of your understanding enlightened” (cf. 1:18). Charles Hodge makes this helpful observation, “They walk *in the vanity of their mind*. The language of the New Testament being the language of Jews, is more or less modified by Hebrew usage. And the usage of Hebrew words is of course modified by the philosophy and theology of the people who employed them. There are two principles which have had an obvious influence on the meaning of a large class of Hebrew words, and therefore on the meaning of the Greek terms which answer to them. The one is the unity of the soul which forbids any such marked distinction between its cognitive and emotional faculties, i.e., between the understanding and the heart, as is assumed in our philosophy, and therefore is impressed on our language. In Hebrew the same word designates what we commonly distinguish as separate faculties. The Scriptures speak of an “understanding heart,” and of “the desires of the understanding,” as well as of “the thoughts of the heart.” They recognize that there is an element of feeling in our cognitions and an element of intelligence in our feelings. The idea that the heart may be depraved and the intellect unaffected is, according to the anthropology of the Bible, as

incongruous, as that one part of the soul should be happy and another miserable, one faculty saved and another lost. Another principle nearly allied to the former is the moral and spiritual excellence of truth. Truth is not merely speculative, the object of cognition. It has moral beauty. In scriptural language, therefore, knowledge includes love; wisdom includes goodness; folly includes sin; the wise are holy, fools are wicked. Truth and holiness are united as light and heat in the same ray. There cannot be the one without the other. To know God is eternal life; to be without the knowledge of God is to be utterly depraved. Saints are the children of light; the wicked are the children of darkness. To be enlightened is to be renewed; to be blinded is to be reprobated. Such is the constant representation of Scripture.”⁵

2. *The Cause*: they are “alienated from the life of God.” *Appēllotriōmenoi* – perfect passive participle, lit. to estrange, to alienate. Paul has already used this word in 2:12, cf. also Col. 1:21. “Life of God” does not mean godly life; “the life of God is that life which answers to the nature of God and which He communicates to His children. This had become wholly foreign to their nature. Their spiritual darkness corresponded with a moral alienation from God.”⁶
3. *The Reason*: “. . . through the ignorance that is in them because of the blindness of their heart.” *Agnoian*, lit. not to know, ignorance, lack of knowledge. The word refers to the inability to comprehend and see the light; this is inexcusable, cf. Rom. 1:17ff. *Pōrōsin* – not “blindness” but hardening, a callous hardening. The result, not the process, is meant. “They have no life, because they have no knowledge: and, again, no knowledge because their heart is incapable of perception.”⁷
4. *The Result*: “. . . who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness to work all uncleanness with greediness.” As is always the case, when men divorce God from their thinking, their actions become vile and corrupt (comp. Rom. 1:21ff). Having rejected the knowledge of God and with it the fear of God, they become insensitive, *apēlgēkotes*, perfect active participle, to cease to feel pain or grief, not sensible to stimuli. With those goes the absence of shame, because they themselves (so the Gk. text) have actively given themselves over to “lasciviousness,” *aselgeiai*, unbridled lust, debauchery. This primarily refers to sensuality (cf. 2 Cor. 12:21); Gal. 5:19), sexual obscenity. The word refers to wantonness in the sense of lewdness and violence. “A man may be *akathartos* (involved in uncleanness, impurity, filthiness) and hide his sin; he does not become *aselgis* until he shocks public decency.”⁸ All of this is said to be done “energetically,” *ergasian*, work at, practice, apply effort, “with greediness” or, better, in an atmosphere controlled by greed. The word is *pleonektēs*, always wanting more, usually in regards to money or sexual indulgence with complete disregard to the rights of others. It means more than covetousness; it includes the idea of “to defraud,” as in adultery, cf. 1 Thess. 4:6. John Stott concludes, “If we put Paul’s expressions together, noting carefully their logical connections (especially *because of* and *due to*, both translating *dia*), he seems to be depicting the terrible downward path of evil, which begins with an obstinate rejection of God’s known truth. First comes *their hardness of heart*, then *their ignorance*, being *darkened in their understanding*, next and consequently they are *alienated from the life of God*, since he turns away from them, until finally *they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness*. NEB has *They stop at nothing to satisfy their foul desire*. Thus hardness of heart leads first to darkness of mind, then to deadness of soul under the judgment of God, and finally to recklessness of life. Having lost all sensitivity, people lose all self-control. It is exactly the sequence which Paul elaborates in the latter part of Romans 1. Comparative tables may help to demonstrate this:

Romans 1:18-32**Stage 1: Obstinacy**

- 18 *Men . . . by their wickedness, suppress the truth*
 21 *Although they knew God they did not honour him as God*
 28 *They did not see fit to acknowledge God*

Stage 2: Darkness

- 21 *They became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened*
 22 *They became fools*
 28 *A base mind*

Stage 3: Death or Judgment

- 24 *Therefore God gave them up*
 26 *For this reason God gave them up*
 28 *God gave them up*

Stage 4: Recklessness

- God gave them up to –
 24 *Impurity*
 26 *Dishonourable passions*
 27 *Shameless acts*
 28 *Improper conduct*
 29-31 *All manner of wickedness*

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- 18 *Due to their hardness (pōrōsis) of heart*

- 17 *The futility of their minds*
 18a *They are darkened in their understanding*
 18b *The ignorance that is in them*

- 18 *They are . . . alienated from the life of God*

- 19 *They have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness (aselgeia, meaning public indecency of a shameless kind), greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness*

CONCLUSION: Calvin perceptively remarked: “Considering how corrupt we are by nature, it is not enough for us to have the good shown to us, unless the vices that are rooted in us be corrected, just as it would profit very little to sow in a ground already overgrown with nettles, noxious weeds, rushes and thorns. And therefore in spite of the fact that St. Paul has so far shown the true rule of godly life, yet he adds (as need requires) that it is necessary for each man to take serious thought to change fully, and to be renewed, because until God has cleansed us both in mind and heart, and in all parts of our souls, there will never be anything but corruption.”⁹ He closes this sermon on this text by saying: “Therefore let us quake at such threatenings, fearing lest God execute them upon us, when we cannot bear to be rebuked for our vices. And on the other hand, let us practice the teaching of Solomon, where he says, *Happy is the man whose heart pricks him and urges him on by night and day* [Prov. 28:14]. Let us learn then to urge ourselves on and to afflict ourselves for our vices, and when we enter into them let us be inwardly ashamed, that we may abase and condemn ourselves until God has relieved us in his mercy. After that manner we must put this teaching of St. Paul’s into practice, in order that when God has once joined us to him through our Lord Jesus Christ, and given us life, we may take good heed that that life be not obscured and quenched in us through our own malice and ingratitude. Again, as we intend to continue in this doctrine, let us learn first of all to humble ourselves, for it is certain that humility will cause us to resort to God; and secondly, let our humility be joined with carefulness, so that we are not so indifferent as to flatter ourselves; for through the same carefulness we must strive to the utmost to fight against our vices and lusts, waiting upon our Lord until he rids us completely of them; and in the meanwhile let us always be gaining some victory, be it very little indeed, so that it may continually appear that our Lord Jesus Christ is working in us and making his grace prevail, by causing us always to make progress in goodness, that we may (I say) be so much in love with it that we may grow more and more until God has taken us out of this world. Now let us fall down before the majesty of our good God, with acknowledgement of our sins, praying him so powerfully to convict us that

it may move us to true repentance, to continue in it all the time of our life, that being utterly abased and made nothing in ourselves, we may learn to seek all our welfare in him. And may he, in turn, lead us closely by the hand of our Lord Jesus Christ so that we may come to him to seek it. And let us profit more and more in the professing of his gospel, in order also to be replenished with his gracious gifts, which are the true fruits of that root. That it may please him to grant this grace, not only to us, but also to all people and nations. . . .”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Eerdmans, 1957), p. 204.

² J. M. Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Baker Books, 1988), p. 152.

³ Murray, op. cit., p. 218.

⁴ J. K. Dodson, *The Unbelievable Gospel: Say Something Worth Believing* (Zondervan, 2014), p. 116.

⁵ C. Hodge, *Commentary On The Epistle To The Ephesians* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1950), p. 249.

⁶ B. F. Westcott, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (Macmillan, 1906), p. 191.

⁷ J. A. Robinson, *Commentary On Ephesians: Exposition of the Greek Text* (rpt. Kregel, 1979), p. 189.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *John Calvin's Sermon on Ephesians* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 405.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 419.