

October 22, 2023

THE REQUIREMENT OF HOLY LIVING

Ephesians 4:17-24

(8 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)

Imagine you were a citizen of Ephesus in the first century. You probably would have thought you were quite blessed to live in this city, a city that would have felt magical in several senses. First, it was a beautiful city that served as a port on the west coast of Asia. It boasted a magnificent theater that could seat 20,000 people. And that wasn't even the most magnificent structure in the city. Ephesus was home to one of the seven ancient wonders of the world—the temple of Artemis—which was a temple dedicated to the goddess Artemis (or Diana). And worship of this goddess was simply part and parcel of the city. If someone mentioned that a god made by human hands was no god at all, it would be met with cries from the street, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (Acts 19:28).

And yet it wasn't just the temple itself. There was also large stone that added to the attractiveness of the city. The people referred to it was "a sacred stone that fell from the sky" (Acts 19:35). It was probably a meteorite and quite likely resided in the temple as well. But you can see why this place felt all the more magical because of it. Merchants littered the streets, selling products that revolved around worship of Artemis, people like Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of the goddess and brought great profit to the area (Acts 19:24). And this magical sense of the city led to the obvious obsession from the people with magic and the occult so that many of them practiced magic arts and had magic books they could consult for handling any issue that arose (Acts 19:19).

Then, imagine that as you were walking the streets one day, perhaps thinking you might visit some of the merchants and pick up one of those silver statues, or go down to the temple and offer your public worship, or consult one of your magic books on how to have better health, or strike up a conversation with a leader of the occult to see if you might gather a bit of what your future might hold, here comes the apostle Paul, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He tells you that there's only one God, the God who has made himself known in Jesus Christ. He tells you of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. And you repent and believe. You feel thrilled at what's happening and the reality of the forgiveness of your sins and the eternal life that awaits you as you await the coming of your Lord. Amidst all of the excitement, you run and get your magic books and throw them into a fire that some other believers have started as they too have professed faith in Christ (Acts 19:19).

Paul goes on to tell you that you're now a new creation in Christ. God is your Father, as he purposed to adopt you as his holy, blameless child, even before the world was created. He forgave you of your sins, opened your eyes to the glory of Christ, and gave you his Holy Spirit, guaranteeing that he would one day take you to be with him forever. Not only that, but Paul tells you that you need to see yourself as one who has been captured by Christ, who then

lavished grace on you in the multitude of ways, only then to give you back to his people—the church—so that you might be an integral part of the growth of other believers, even as they will be an integral part of your growth as well.

Again, the excitement is overwhelming, at first. But then some days pass, and everyone in the city seems to be really having a great time. The guys practicing magic seem to be really stumbling into some impressive things. The feast at the temple last Friday night, you once again chose not to attend, but, man, they seemed to be having a good time. You remember well what it was like to be part of that—the good food, the celebration, even the sexual immorality that would follow. It feels to you like they're getting out of life its sweetest rewards, and you wonder if you could somehow get all the eternal benefits that come with Christ but also go back and enjoy that way of life that you once knew. And with each day, the temptation only grows.

This is why Paul wrote the text we're going to look at this morning—Ephesians 4:17-24. It's a section of this letter where he reminds the Ephesian believers of the importance (and necessity) of holy living as a follower of Jesus Christ. He knew that these believers would feel the pull of the world, perhaps even more strongly once Paul left the area. And if we're honest, we need reminders like this as well because we too can feel the pull of the world. How many times have we felt the Spirit pulling us toward one action while our flesh pulls us toward another? And while this battle is waging within us, the message the flesh keeps reminding us is that so many others around us are doing this very thing that we're fighting against. As much as we might joke about the sentiment expressed in the phrase, "Everybody's doing it," the pull of that can be stronger than we'd like to admit. The culture around us can ever increasingly "make sin look normal and righteousness look strange"¹ and so the pressure against holy living continually mounts. And so, with those realities in our lives, I want to turn our attention this morning to Ephesians 4:17-24 where we'll see the requirement of holy living and how we're to go about pursuing it. So, let me start this morning with an obvious point, but one were Paul starts as well—once converted, we can no longer live like the world.

Once converted, we can no longer live like the world (vv. 17-19)

This is the note on which Paul begins our text, writing, "Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds" (v. 17). One element that might sound odd to us here is Paul's reference to "Gentiles." After all, surely a great majority of the Ephesian believers weren't Jewish but were Gentiles. But Paul isn't saying that they have to cease being Gentiles and take on the Jewish customs of circumcision and the like and for all intents and purposes become Jewish. Rather, he's using "Gentiles" to refer to those in their community who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, he's using "Gentiles" the same way we might use the term "unbelievers" or "unbelieving world." But Paul's point is clear—you can no longer live like they live. The moment you repent and believe, professing Christ as your Lord, you can no longer take your cues for how you live from the world. You must

¹ Kevin DeYoung recently used this phrase in his "Clearly Reformed" podcast on October 18, 2023.

take your cues from Christ, and he demands that we live much differently than the unbelieving world around us lives.

And then he outlines why we must live differently than the unbelieving world around us by reminding of us who they are, the nature of their lives, and why they live as they do. He writes, “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity” (vv. 18-19).

As you hear that description of the unbeliever, you may recognize that this sounds a lot like Paul’s description of the unbeliever in Romans 1:18-32. This helps us recognize that he’s not saying that the unbelievers in Ephesus had an exceptional case of depravity. He’s describing the state of unbelievers everywhere. All unbelievers are dead in their sins—alienated from the life that God gives to those who believe. But as Paul describes them, he begins by focusing on their minds. He speaks in verse 17 of the “futility of their minds.” Then he begins verse 18 saying they are “darkened in their understanding” before adding a note about their ignorance.

In other words, the unbelieving world—apart from the saving grace of God—doesn’t think clearly. Their reasoning is corrupt. This is why we can find ourselves puzzled at why in our culture, for example, there is such a strong push toward abortion. Even logic itself would show that an increasing birth rate is good for society, that women suffer during and after having an abortion, and on the on. But this movement in society isn’t driven by solid logic but by darkened understanding. We saw the same thing recently when trans activists celebrated Hamas’s brutal and violent attack of civilians in Israel. If you watch those videos, you want to comment, “But don’t you realize that the very group you’re celebrating would execute you if you lived among them?” But again, this isn’t logical. As Aaron noted to Tom and me the other day, the only thing that ties all of these illogical responses from the world together is hatred for Christ.

And Paul notes the same thing. He speaks of their ignorance, which would include their ignorance of God. In other words, they don’t believe in the God who created the world and don’t see him as their judge to whom they’re responsible. But Paul also makes clear that their ignorance of God isn’t rooted in a lack of knowledge—like how I’m ignorant of the price of groceries in Taiwan or something like that. They’re ignorant, Paul says, is “due to their hardness of heart” (v. 18).

As Paul reminded us in Romans 1, all unbelievers know God exists because God has made himself known in the created order. He imprinted creation with evidence of his power and attributes. And every person looks at the creation and knows the God who created this exists. But they don’t *want* to acknowledge him, and so they suppress what they know to be true in their unrighteousness until they convince themselves that the lie they tell themselves is true. That’s why Paul says the ignorance in them is “due to their hardness of heart.”

But this rebellious heart has more ramifications for them. They become callous to things that should prick their consciences such that they’re no longer bothered. And this sets the stage for

them to pursue more and more sin. So they give themselves over to all kinds of sensuality and only grow hungrier to practice more, as sin is never static, always drawing you in to pursue more and go further until you're involved in more and more impurity.

This is how Paul describes the unbelieving world. But why? Why is it necessary or helpful to have this reminder? Is it just so that we might mock them or feel superior to them? No, Paul reminds the Ephesians believers (and us) of who the unbelieving world is because we need to have an honest assessment of who they are. Here's why. When you find yourself thinking, "I know that watching this show or dressing this way or messing around with the person I'm dating isn't something that the Bible holds up as righteous, but everybody around me is doing it. In fact, if I don't do this, I'm going to be such a social outcast," then Paul says to us, "Yes, the world around you is doing this, but remember who they are. The people you're trying to imitate or fit in with are people who are rebelling against their creator, hardening their hearts, darkening their minds, and pursuing every kind of impurity as they pursue hell." That's why we need to remember who they are because that realization should put a stop to the pull we feel to be like them. Why would we want to pattern our lives after those who fit the description Paul gives in these verses?

So that's where Paul starts—once converted, we can no longer live like the world. But what then do we do? Paul answers that in verses 20-24, showing us that we must obey all that we've learned from Christ.

We must obey all that we've learned from Christ (vv. 20-24)

In contrast to how the unbeliever thinks and lives, Paul writes, "But that is not the way you learned Christ!" (v. 20). Now, that is a bit of an odd way to write. We don't usually speak of learning a person, but I think Paul writes it this way because we not only obey what Christ commands but continue to walk in relationship with him as the one who lives and reigns. So, Paul says that this pagan way of living doesn't accord with who Jesus is and how he tells us to live. Unbelievers may be ignorant, but we've learned Christ. We know who he is and what he commands.

And when Paul adds "assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus" (v. 21), he's not wondering whether or not they heard about Jesus. He's saying that he's aware that they were instructed about Christ and his commands. In other words, he's assuming they know Christ and his commands. And so he goes over what Christ commands of them in three steps, the first of which is "to put off your old self which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires" (v. 22).

By "old self" here, Paul is referring to who were once were when we were ruled by sin, and he's telling us that we need to make a decisive break with that "self."² Now, obviously we did that

² Peter O'Brien, *Ephesians*, PNCT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 328.

when we came to Christ, but this needs to be an ongoing reality in our lives as well. This is where holy living begins. We must reject the lifestyle of the unbeliever. We must reject the sinful patterns we once practiced and are tempted to imitate now as we see them in the world around us.

Our pursuit of holiness requires that we reject the pursuit of sin. That's what Paul means by "put off." In other places, I have referred to this as "fasting." So, if you want to pursue sexual purity, you first start by saying no to looking at pornography, practicing sexual immorality with the person you're dating, or reading or listening to sexual immoral things. There's simply no successful pursuit of sexual purity that doesn't include rejecting these things. Just as you can't pursue cleanliness while carrying around a bag of dirt that you continually douse yourself with, so you can't pursue holiness without rejecting sin. So, holiness first requires that you say "no" to those things your flesh desires.

Second, you renew your mind. Paul writes in verse 23, "And to be renewed in the spirit of your minds." This is very similar to what Paul wrote to the Romans in 12:2, as he wrote, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." The voices of the unbelieving culture are going to be constant, and these are the waters that we swim in daily. So, if we're going to pursue holiness, we not only need to reject our sinful desires, but to remind ourselves of what is good, right, true, beautiful, and God-honoring. We need to remind ourselves of what Christ commands. This will require an active renewal of our minds. We're going to have to call to our minds what Christ demands and is good. We cannot passively drift into thinking rightly. If we're passive, we'll be caught up in the tide of the world, and that pull can be a strong one.

Let's apply this to anxiety. Giving into anxiety is an interesting sin because it doesn't cause ripples across the church, does it? You confess to gossiping about others, and we rightly say, "You should stop that." You confess to stealing, and the response will be that you must stop that immediately. But if we confess to constantly giving in to anxiety about everything in our lives, and you'll likely hear a response like, "Oh, I'm so sorry." And so anxiety can easily feel like something that is normal, fine, acceptable, and perhaps unavoidable. But then we need to renew our minds to the truths of Scripture. Jesus tells us not to be anxious about what we'll eat or wear or where we'll live. In fact, he specifically says that these are things that the Gentiles (i.e. unbelieving world) are anxious about. Rather, we're to remember that our Father loves us, knows what we need, provides these things for creatures and things as insignificant as birds and flowers, and, therefore, will certainly provide for us as we seek his kingdom. We should simply pray. And so we combat the world telling us anxiety is a fine and normal path down with to go by renewing our mind to what the Bible says, and as we do so it shines light on the fact that giving in to anxiety is an act of not trusting my good and loving and powerful Heavenly Father. So, we reject sin, then we renew our minds. And we can apply this to any sin, not just the ones I've noted. Finally, we pursue righteousness.

Just as Paul spoke of rejecting sin as "putting off your old self," so he speaks of pursuing righteousness as putting on the new self. He tells us "to put on the new self, created after the

likeness of God and in true righteousness and holiness” (v. 24). This is a reminder to us that we are new creations in Christ. We’ve been born again. The Lord has made you something new, something that you once were not. You have a new heart, a new spirit, and a new mind. Your deepest desires have been altered. His Spirit indwells you. So begin to pursue those things that are in accord with the Spirit’s desires. Pursue righteousness and holiness.

If this pursuit of righteousness begins with rejecting or fasting from sin, it culminates in us pursuing or feasting on righteousness. The Christian life, in other words, isn’t simply saying, “No,” to bad things, but saying, “Yes” to what is God-honoring. This is why Paul tells Timothy, “Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace” (2 Timothy 2:22). Notice both elements—flee and pursue. We fast and we feast. We reject and pursue. Or, better (and more catchy), we might include the middle step saying, we reject, renew, and pursue. This is the path toward holiness.

Brothers and sisters, we have been called out of this world in its rebellion to Christ, but we still live in it. And the pull of this Christ-hating culture is strong. The voices that continually declare to us that it is good and right to pursue sin are constant. Sin looks good and righteousness can feel silly to us the longer we live in this culture. There’s no doubt about it. But when Christ called us to himself, he called us to pursue holiness. We must no longer walk as the Gentiles walk. We must pursue what our Lord commands. And we do this by rejecting our old desires, renewing our minds to what Scripture commands, and pursuing obedience to those commands in our lives.

And as this gets hard, remember who the unbelieving world is, and remember who your Lord is. They’re corrupt, ignorant of God, with an axe to grind against their creator. Yet, he’s the one who loves us to the point that he lived, died, and was raised for us. And he’s coming to get us. So fight the fight of faith until that day, and until then, let us remember and give thanks to our Savior even as we come to the table. Amen.