

Ephesians: *The Road Less Traveled*
Ephesians 4:17-21

In August of 1915, the American poet, Robert Frost, published his short poem entitled, *The Road Not Taken*. In the poem he writes of walking in the woods in autumn and coming to a point where the path forks to the right and the left, requiring the walker to choose one path or the other. Considering his choices, Frost concludes: “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.”

The poem suggests that choosing to walk a road other than the popular path makes all the difference, which, of course, is not an original thought at all. 1900 years earlier Jesus of Nazareth said something to the same effect, although with a bit more conviction. In Matthew 7:13 Jesus said, “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”

Both Jesus and Robert Frost agree; as human beings on planet Earth, we have some very serious decisions to make that have significant consequences. Our lives will often come to a fork in the road...as in all day, every day, forever! We are all constantly faced with decisions about how we are going to spend our time; how we are going to invest our money; how we are going to respond to people; how we are going to go about our business; how we are going to respond to our appetites; and so on. Over time we discover that there are two opposing paths: there is the easy way, and then there is the RIGHT way! Jesus makes it clear: the easy way, the popular path, is the path to destruction. So, He commands His disciples to take the road less traveled--to follow Him along the narrow path...to enter through the narrow gate...even though it is hard.

Paul’s teaching to the church here in Ephesians 4 has a similar message as he instructs the early church on how to walk as believers. Please stand and let us read Ephesians 4:17-21:
17 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. 18 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. 19 They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. 20 But that is not the way you learned Christ!— 21 assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus,

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Tension; 2) Wide Road Travelers; and 3) The Truth.

I. The Tension

According to the Apostle Paul, there are two ways to walk in the world: we can walk as the unredeemed Gentiles do, or we can walk in a manner that is worthy of the calling to which we have been called. These are divergent paths that lead to different destinations. We can’t walk both paths...we have to choose one over the other. That’s the tension created in our text, and it’s a tension we find all throughout the Bible. By the way, Jesus created this kind of tension of dichotomy often, and particularly in Matthew 7 when He taught about the wide gate and the

narrow gate, right? The truth is that Jesus, more than any other voice in the Bible, constantly separates the world into two groups of people. You might recall Matthew 25 when Jesus teaches that amongst all the nations there will be only two groups of people at the end of the age...the sheep and the goats...those on His right and those on His left...the redeemed and the damned. In Matthew 13 Jesus predicts that at the end of the age the angels will come to separate the “wheat” from the “weeds”—and those are the only two possibilities according to Jesus. The “wheat” represents the sons of the kingdom; the “weeds” represent sons of Satan! That’s it. If we are going to follow Jesus and adhere to His teaching, we must take to heart the way He divides the world.

Now dividing the world into two groups of people creates tension, and that might bother some people who think God should be a bit more inclusive of people who disagree with Him. Let me speak to that for a moment.

First, we must remember that God sent Jesus into the world to rescue spiritually dead people from the power of sin and death through His sacrificial death on a cross. If there were not a real threat posed by the power of sin, if there were just various shades of gray regarding human morality and no real concern regarding God’s coming judgment of human souls, the cross would make no sense whatsoever.

Secondly, we must acknowledge that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the MOST INCLUSIVE invitation ever! All people everywhere, regardless of race, gender, age, income, intelligence...regardless of how good or how evil they have been...all people are invited to repent and call upon the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life. It doesn’t get more loving and inclusive than Jesus Christ crucified...He came to save us all.

Finally, let us remember that Truth is always exclusive and distinct from falsehood. That is the nature of truth. So, when Jesus said, “I am the Truth” in John 14:6, He separated Himself from all forms of falsehood, and that is precisely what Paul is charging the church to do as well here in Ephesians 4.

One last thing: in a world full of gray, I firmly believe that our children are desperate to know if anything is actually true. When those who claim to be Jesus-followers fail to live according to their biblical worldview...a worldview that calls us to be set apart...when our lifestyles are no different from our unbelieving neighbors...we reinforce the false conclusion that our faith is our opinion that leads to little if any real distinction. If we desire to see our own children and grandchildren follow Jesus, we must live out our faith in front of them in such a way that they SEE the distinction in terms of righteousness and holiness. This is precisely what Paul is teaching the Church in Ephesians 4...and it’s not optional. According to Paul, a set apart life should be inevitable for those who are in Christ!

OK, let’s turn to my second subheading:

II. Wide Road Travelers

Paul begins this part of his letter with an urgent plea. He charges the young believers to get off the “wide road” because they are no longer wide-road-travelers. Beginning in vs. 17 he

writes, “Now this I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do...”

Before we go any further, let’s take a few things into account. Remember that Paul planted the Ephesian congregation, and he knows that the vast majority of believers in the church are those who were formerly pagan Gentiles. Paul is no doubt concerned, and rightfully so, that the new believers in Ephesus are going to fall back into old patterns of believing and behavior.

Now, we must also take into account how challenging it was to be a Christian in the first century! The early believers were quite often disowned by their families, shunned from the marketplace, and increasingly persecuted by both the Romans and the Jews. The temptation to fly under the radar and not stick out was not only powerful, but to some extent, reasonable given how costly it was to be associated with Jesus. Even so, Paul writes, “Now this I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do...”

Two quick things to note here. First of all, the Greek word *marturomai* does typically mean “witness or testify”, but given the context the better translation would be “I insist” or “I implore”...and particularly when followed with the words “in the Lord.” Paul is imploring, insisting by the authority of Christ, that the believers walk in a way that is differentiated from the Greek and Roman Gentiles. What does Paul mean when he says “walk?” The word “walk” here characterizes the features of our daily lifestyle. The way we “walk” includes our thinking, our attitudes, our language, our choices, and our behavior.

As those who belong to Christ, our walk matters...and it should stand out as qualitatively different than the walk of the unbelievers. How so?

Paul writes: “...no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.” NT scholar Clinton Arnold writes:

Here the word ‘mind’ refers to the capacity to think, plan, and make moral judgments and lifestyle choices. This could also be described as the set of worldview assumptions that guide non-Christian Gentiles in their thoughts about life and how they live in light of those convictions. Paul’s problem is that their orientation and lifestyles were not ordered around the revealed will of the one true God. Life apart from the one God and his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, is ultimately meaningless.¹

The underlying, wholistic issue with the Gentiles is the *mataistais* of their minds. The ESV translates *mataistais* as “futility,” but the word often means “meaninglessness.” Either English term gets to the point: the unbelieving Gentiles have no fear of God—their worldview is void of God’s existence, God’s law, God’s judgement, God’s mercy, God’s Son, and God’s people; and as a result, they are walking blindly into futility. Does that seem a bit harsh? Well, let’s think about that for a minute.

Consider the worldview of an unbeliever for just a moment. An honest atheist would have to admit that he has no idea why he has life or why the universe exists. He has no sense of purpose, no answer for the meaning of life, no basis for discerning why or IF anything is actually good or evil, nor does he have any understanding or hope for the life to come. In the absence of

¹ Clinton Arnold: *Exegetical Commentary on the NT-Ephesians*, 281.

answers for those key questions, an atheist will inevitably create his own narrative so as to construct some meaning for his life, but in the end his self-constructed meaning leads nowhere. This is what Paul is describing as “futility of the mind.” If we don’t order our lives and our worldview around the reality of the triune God, we have ordered our lives and worldview around futility.

Now, many Gentile unbelievers in the ancient world, and many unbelievers in the 21st century would no doubt be offended by Paul’s remarks here in Ephesians 4. Many atheists, including my own brother, claim to live robust lives filled with meaning such as contending for justice, loving their families, being loyal to their friends, preserving the environment, and enjoying the arts. As such, they would insist that they are doing just fine without God. To which we would have to reply, “Then give God the credit when you borrow His stuff!” Meaningful constructs such as justice, love, loyalty, beauty and friendship are not compatible with a naturalistic worldview.² These things cannot be measured or observed, nor can a naturalist give an account for why any of those things should matter.

Listen: we all know “gentiles” (unbelievers) who are very fine people. Many of our unbelieving friends and family members are hard-working, honest, good neighbors and good citizens. Most often these are unbelievers who have “borrowed God’s stuff.” They wisely apply the fruit of Christian morality and respond to their God-given conscience, all the while denying the source from which their meaning is found and their conscience is oriented. That is like eating apples that you bought from the store while all the while denying that apple trees exist. Even though their lives appear admirable, and their contributions are significant, the road they walk is ultimately futile because they are not aligned with ultimate reality.³

Imagine if you will that you are trying to find your way through Chicago before the advent of the internet. You reach into the glovebox and there you find a map of New York. How well is the map of New York going to help you navigate Chicago? You see, that’s the problem. If our map is wrong, no matter how good of a driver we are, we’re lost, right?

Listen Church: meaning is not something we can contrive...it’s given to us. God has given us the map that accurately describes who we are and where we are. God created the heavens and the earth. Men and women are fearfully and wonderfully made as those who bear God’s image. We were all made to bring glory to God and to live in a loving relationship with our Creator and with His creation. Sin has corrupted our hearts, our minds, our relationships, even the earth...but

² There are a myriad of resources that speak to this point. I might recommend C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* as a place to begin. Nancy Pearcey’s *Total Truth* as well as her work with Chuck Colson on *How Now Shall We Live* are excellent sources. I also found *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists* by R. Zacharias to be helpful.

³ On the other hand, we all know “believers” who are rude, selfish, and live a more hedonistic lifestyle than our moral unbelieving neighbors. This is always the tension that surfaces when we talk about the “two groups of people in the world.” We all know really wonderful, moral, kind unbelievers; and we all know hedonistic, selfish, generally irritating believers! By the way, this is exactly the challenge Paul is trying to address. Those who belong to Christ should live in a way that is set apart...not just as fine moral people who are good citizens—even unbelievers can be moral and nice—but as believers our walk should demonstrate the very nature, thinking, and behavior of Jesus.

Jesus conquered the power of sin and death on the cross and has reconciled us to God and made reconciliation possible with those we love and even those we consider enemies. As those who are redeemed, we exist to bring glory to the Father and the Son as we serve as ambassadors of God's reconciling work in the world. Then, as we approach the end of our lives, we know that this painful life is not all there is. Death doesn't win. There is a life to come where there will be no more tears and no more death...when we will be with our Father and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. That's an accurate map of reality. A life constructed around God has meaning, direction, purpose, and hope...it is a map that accurately tells us who we are, where we are, and where we are going. However, any other God-less map is futile...it is a map that does not correspond with reality, and we are lost, no matter how well we drive.

This is what Paul means when he writes in vs. 18, 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.

You might recall that in Ephesians 2:1, Paul described those without Christ as those who are "dead in their trespasses". That is because our sin separates us from the life of God, and when we are alienated from God, we walk around in ignorance of His existence, His blessings, and His Word. Our souls shrivel and die. Without God, we lack light, so our understanding is darkened...and all of this is due to what Paul describes as "hardness of heart."

Now, I know some of us have issues with this phrase because we remember that God "hardened Pharaoh's heart" in Exodus 7, so some are inclined to believe that God hardens people's hearts so that they cannot believe in Him. We don't have time to get into a long discussion about God's sovereignty and human responsibility, but I'm pretty sure Paul associates the hardened hearts of the Gentiles as a result of their own doing.

Remember that in the parallel description of the unbelievers in Romans 1-2, Paul writes that God's attributes have been clearly perceived in the things that have been made so that they are without excuse. He then writes, "...they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools...they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator. For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions...God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done." Romans 1:21, 22, 25, 26, 28

God gave rebellious souls over to a debased mind because of their choices. Whenever God gives you up to the deceitful desires of your heart, your heart gets hardened. But that's on us...our decision to exchange the truth for a lie is what leads to our hardened hearts.

NT Scholar William Barclay writes:

The word which Paul uses for the petrifying of their hearts is grim and terrible. It is *porosis*, which comes from *poros*, which originally meant a stone that was harder than marble. It came to have certain medical uses. It was used for the chalk stone which can form in the joints and completely paralyze action. It was used of the callus that forms where a bone has been broken and re-set, a callus which is harder than the bone itself. Finally, the word came to

mean the loss of all power of sensation; it described something which had become so hardened, so petrified that it had no power to feel at all.⁴

With that in mind, consider what Paul writes next in Ephesians 4:19: They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

Church, we all know this is true. When we first sin, our conscience condemns us. But if we keep sinning, over time, we lose all feeling of remorse...we become callous...and eventually we lose our conscience. Once our conscience is dead, we have given ourselves up to sin with an insatiable appetite for more. One need look no further than the Nazis who operated the death camp at Auschwitz to see what hardened hearts are capable of. Hundreds of thousands of lives were systematically destroyed day after day. The Nazi officers and guards made games out of killing people like people play darts. The appetite for evil, once fed, grows exponentially and is ultimately inexhaustible.

Again, Barclay says it well:

The terror of sin is its petrifying effect. No man becomes a great sinner all at once. At first he regards sin with horror. When he sins, there enters into his heart remorse and regret. But if he continues to sin there comes a time when he loses all sensation and can do the most shameful things without any feeling at all. His conscience is petrified.⁵

A petrified conscience leads to *aselgeia*. Our English translation reads, “they...have given themselves up to sensuality”...but that translation fails to reflect the nature of this Greek word. The Greek scholar Basil defined *aselgeia* as “a disposition of the soul incapable of bearing the pain of discipline.” Plato referred to *aselgeia* as “impudence.”⁶

Think of it this way: an average person of poor character tries to hide his sin; but a person given over to *aselgeia* does not care what anyone thinks. He doesn't care about any consequence as long as he can gratify his desires. I suspect we can all think of many people who meet this description.

Church, we must be careful how we walk. When we walk as the unbelievers do, we willfully set aside our God-given map and forge ahead into the darkness of sin and falsehood. Even though we have been forgiven in Christ, we are all susceptible to the hardening of the heart should we go on sinning and living the lifestyle of an unbeliever. And let us remember our role: we are ambassadors of Christ. We are witnesses to the power of His resurrection. We are to be the light of Christ in a hurting culture. Such is why Paul is adamant: as those who belong to Christ, we must no longer walk as the unbelievers do.

Walking the wide road is not what we learned from Jesus. Jesus called us to the road less traveled...and that's what Paul going to say next. Let's turn now to my final subheading:

⁴ William Barclay: The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians: 152.

⁵ Ibid., 152-153.

⁶ Ibid., 153.

III. The Truth

Having rebuked the early church, forbidding them to walk as the Gentiles do and explaining the futility of the Gentile path, Paul then writes in vs. 20, “But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus...”

Paul the Teacher is reminding his students of the lessons he taught them. The Ephesians believers were taught Jesus! They were not simply instructed to heed the teachings of Jesus; they were not simply informed about what Jesus did and said; they were taught Jesus as the sole subject, example, source, and person that they must follow and rely upon.

Church, this is the problem for many of us. We still think of Christianity as a religion. We still feel encumbered by things we are supposed to do and not do. But remember who you are: you are chosen, you were predestined to be adopted as children of God, and you have been saved by grace. And remember who Jesus is: He is your brother, the firstborn of all Creation, and He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! He is our Lord, our King, our Savior, our Friend, our Teacher, and He is with us...always, even to the end of the age. No matter the temptation, no matter the deceitful desire that pulls at our hearts, Jesus is stronger. As Paul writes, “The truth is in Jesus.”

That is to say, we discover the truth, we live in the truth, we are informed by the truth, we are delivered to freedom by the truth when and only when we are IN Jesus, and Jesus is IN us. Once again, there is simply no substitute for abiding in Christ. As Jesus promised in John 15, Abide in me, and I will abide in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

Church, that’s how we walk as believers. We walk in Christ...even if no one else is willing to walk the road with us...we walk in Christ. We do not walk the wide road. We have been saved for and called to the narrow road...and we walk in Christ, so we do not walk alone. We walk in Christ, so we do not walk in darkness. We walk in Christ, so we walk in the Truth. We walk in Christ, so our map is perfectly accurate...we know where we’ve been, and we know where we’re going. This is how we learned Christ, amen?

Church, do not walk as the unbelievers do...let us not give ourselves over to the deceitful desires that would once again hold us in bondage to sin and harden our hearts to the tender mercies of our Father. Let us walk in Christ...for our good, for the good of our families, for the witness of our church, for the glory of God, and for the good of the world. We’ll pick up here next week as Paul gives specific directions regarding what we are to put off and what we are to put on.

Until then, I pray that we will all recommit ourselves to abiding in Christ so that we might walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called. We also need to evaluate if we have been attempting to have a foot on both paths. Church, you know...we all do...that you

must at some point choose which road you will take. You can't walk both...it's the wide road or the narrow road. We all must choose. As for me, I have chosen my road...the road less traveled... "and it has made all the difference!" Will you pray with me?