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HOW NOT TO LIVE

Ephesians 4:17-19

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Ephesians Lesson 30

How Not to Live
Ephesians 4:17-19

Numerous polls over the years have shown that anywhere from one-third to almost one-half of Americans claim to be born again Christians. But before we celebrate, we should also note that the same polls indicate that there is no appreciable difference between the way that professing born again Christians live and how the rest of the culture lives.

Christians, including Christian leaders, have an atrocious rate of sexual immorality, whether viewing pornography on the Internet or actually engaging in sexual sin (see *Leadership* [Winter, 1988], pp. 12, 24). Evangelical Christians actually have a slightly higher divorce rate than the rest of the American population! We watch the same amount and the same content of filthy TV shows and movies as the population at large.

One researcher found that half of baby boomers claiming to be born again say that religions other than Christianity are equally good and true. One-third of that group believes in reincarnation and astrology. Nearly half support abortion rights (Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, reported in "The Watchman Expositor," vol. 18, # 1, 2001, p. 22). A 2001 survey indicated that two-thirds of adults who attend conservative, Protestant churches question whether absolute moral truth exists (cited by John MacArthur, *The Truth Wars* [Thomas Nelson], p. 216, from the barna.org web site)!

In light of these alarming conditions, Paul's words scream at us (4:17, my translation): "This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk...." *This* refers to what he is about to say. *Therefore* goes back to his exhortation (4:1) to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called." From 4:4-16, he developed how the worthy walk pertains to church unity and maturity.

Now, he turns to how the worthy walk affects personal holiness. *Affirm* means to testify as in court, when you summon a wit-

ness. It shows that Paul isn't giving some helpful hints that you may want to try if you feel like it. He is giving the Lord's commandments for how His people must live. *Together with the Lord* should be translated, *in the Lord*. It points to Paul's source of authority—the Lord Himself—and to the sphere in which both he and his readers now live. By God's mercy, they have been rescued from this present evil age and now live as new creatures in Christ.

Paul paints this graphic portrait of how unbelievers live, which is how the Ephesians had lived before they met Christ. It is a shorter version of a similar picture in Romans 1:18-32. Paul is showing that when you become a Christian, there must be a distinct break from the past. People should be able to see clearly the difference in your life, so that they wonder, "What happened?" His message is quite simple:

Believers must not live as unbelievers live.

In verse 17 Paul makes a general statement about how unbelievers live, "in the futility of their mind." In verse 18, he shows why they live this way. It is not easy to chart the relationship of the four clauses in verse 18 (commentators differ). But the idea seems to be that the reason unbelievers live in the futility of their mind is that they are darkened in their understanding and alienated from the life of God. The reason they are alienated from the life of God is that deep within them, they are ignorant of God. They do not know Him. The reason for this ignorance is that their hearts are hardened due to sin. Then in verse 19, he shows where this kind of futile lifestyle inevitably leads, namely, into giving themselves over to unbridled and insatiable sensuality and impurity.

Romans 1:21 parallels our text, "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened." He goes on to describe their plunge into moral degradation.

Our text reveals five ways that unbelievers live, that we must not follow. Paul describes them with the word *walk*. A walk is a way of life. A true Christian may fall into these behaviors on occasion, but they should not be characteristic of his lifestyle.

1. Don't live as unbelievers, who walk in the futility of their minds.

Futility is the same word that is used 36 times in Ecclesiastes (LXX) translated, *vanity*. “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher, ‘Vanity of vanities!’ All is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2). It comes from a Hebrew word meaning *breath* or *vapor*. It refers to anything transitory, frail, or lacking in substance. Solomon had tried to find satisfaction through knowledge, through wealth and all that it affords, and through the pleasures of music and art and women. He had houses and lands with beautiful gardens and ponds. But none of it brought fulfillment. He observed that even if you have all of these things, you live a few years and then die. It is all futility, striving after the wind (Eccl. 2:17).

We could picture a child chasing soap bubbles. He grabs one, but it bursts in his hand, leaving him with nothing. One early Christian writer gives examples of building houses of sand by the seashore, chasing the wind, shooting at the stars, or pursuing one's shadow (Gregory of Nyssa, cited by R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], p. 181). None of these activities results in anything of lasting value or significance.

Many unbelievers live for a purpose, even for noble purposes. Some aim to use their money for benevolent causes. Some want to find a cure for cancer or help others who are victims of disease. Some want to go into politics so that they can help our country be a better place. Some want to teach children so that they can have a better life. These are all good purposes that benefit society.

But, if they do not take God and eternity into consideration, what is gained? You live a few years and help a few people and then you die. Those who are helped may benefit for a few years before they die, or they may discard all that you have labored to get for them. Or, someone else may come along and undo everything that you have accomplished. It's all vanity or emptiness, unless it is done in light of God and eternity (1 Cor. 15:58).

Paul says that the futility of those without God exists in the *mind*. He is referring to their entire inner being, personality, or soul (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Darkness and Light* [Baker], p. 33). Paul emphasizes the mind in these verses: mind (4:17, 23); understanding, ignorance (4:18); learn (4:20); taught (4:21).

To live in the futility of the mind is to think and live without any regard for God and eternity. It is to live for selfish gratification or fleeting pleasure, without regard to the consequences, whether in this life or in eternity. It is to live according to the world's philosophies that leave God out. Philosophers speculate about this and that, but they don't have solid answers for life's problems in light of death and eternity. Paul is saying, "Don't live that way!" Don't live as if God did not exist. Don't live as if Christ had not died for your sins. Don't live as if there were no judgment or no heaven or no hell. Don't live in the futility of your mind.

Let me be very practical. If you want to avoid living in the futility of your mind, think often about your death. Join Jonathan Edwards, who as a young man resolved, among many other things, "to think much, on all occasions, of my dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 1:xx). You may think that that is morbid, but it is a vital principle for wise living! Then, keeping the shortness of life in view, join Moses in praying (Ps. 90:12), "So teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom." In light of standing before God and in light of what you know of His Word, how do you want to spend the fleeting years that the Lord gives you? When you look back from the end, what do you want to have accomplished in light of eternity?

Then, in light of these godly purposes, prayerfully think through and write down some goals that will move you in that direction this week. These will vary depending on where you're at right now. Maybe establishing a regular time alone with God in the Word and in prayer is where you need to start. If some besetting sin trips you up, devise a practical, biblically based plan to overcome that sin. Review and revise these goals from time to time. Don't just drift through life as unbelievers do, living for the next momentary pleasure. Don't live in the futility of your mind. Live with godly purpose in light of eternity.

2. Don't live as unbelievers, who walk in the darkness of their understanding.

This idea is similar to that of living in the futility of their mind, but it goes further in explaining why they live that way: their understanding is darkened. When man sinned, it plunged the hu-

man race into mental darkness and alienation from God. People's minds were cut off from knowing God. They became incapable of reasoning through things from God's perspective. They were not able to understand spiritual truth (John 8:43-47). As Paul wrote (2 Cor. 4:4), "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Or (1 Cor. 2:14), "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." Or, as we saw (Rom. 1:21), "their foolish hearts were darkened." When sin came into this world, the lights went out spiritually.

Even though we inherited this spiritual darkness from Adam, we are responsible for it. We can't blame Adam! We can't blame God, who decreed that Adam's sin would be imputed to the entire human race. If you say, "That's not fair," you are sinning with incredible arrogance to accuse the Sovereign of the universe of being unfair! And, the fact is, if you had been in the garden instead of Adam, you would have done the same thing that he did. So, each person is responsible for his own spiritual darkness.

Not only are unbelievers darkened in their understanding, but also they love it! Jesus said (John 3:19-20), "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed." So the biblical picture is not that sinners are crying out, "O, if only I could see!" No, they're partying in the dark and don't want the light to expose their sin.

Paul says, "Don't live that way! Don't walk around with a darkened understanding!" To put it positively (1 John 1:7), "walk in the Light, as He Himself is in the Light." Again, Paul is referring to the understanding, to how you think. As a Christian, you need to be renewed and transformed in your mind (Eph. 4:23; Rom. 12:2) through God's Word. Sound doctrine about God, man, sin, salvation, and every area of life is the foundation for spiritual understanding and light. Become a biblical thinker about every issue that you face, whether how to relate to others, how to manage your time and money, or how to act on the job.

3. Don't live as unbelievers, who walk in alienation from the life of God.

Being "excluded from the life of God" further explains why unbelievers walk in the futility of their minds. They are dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1). They lack new life from God. Becoming a Christian is not a matter of eliminating sinful behavior and replacing it with moral behavior, although that will follow. Becoming a Christian is a matter of receiving new life from God. As Jesus said (John 3:16), whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

In the 18th century, John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, along with some others, formed a club at Oxford called "The Holy Club." Through self-denial, discipline, good works, and reading and studying their Greek New Testaments and other books, these young men sought to be holy. But it all stemmed from human effort. None of these young men were born again.

Then, George Whitefield read a little book, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, written in the previous century by a young Scotsman, Henry Scougal. Whitefield said that by that book, "God showed me that I must be born again, or be damned! I learned that a man may go to church, say his prayers, receive the sacrament, and yet not be a Christian. How did my heart rise and shudder, like a poor man that is afraid to look into his account-books, lest he should find himself a bankrupt." (Cited in Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield* [Cornerstone Books], 1:73.) Whitefield thought of throwing that book away, but instead he searched it more and asked God to make him a real Christian. He came to realize that being a true Christian involves "a union of the soul with God, and Christ formed within us" (*ibid.*). It was the first time that he realized that he must become a new creature.

After a lot more effort and agony of soul, he finally came to reject all self-trust and cast himself on the mercy of God through Christ. He said, "God was pleased to remove the heavy load, to enable me to lay hold of His dear Son by a living faith, and by giving me the Spirit of adoption, to seal me even to the day of everlasting redemption" (*ibid.*, p. 77). After that, God used George Whitefield's preaching to bring many from empty religion to new life in Jesus Christ. Paul is saying to us, "Don't live as unbelievers

do, being excluded from the life of God." Make sure that you have eternal life through genuine faith in Jesus Christ!

4. Don't live as unbelievers, who walk in spiritual ignorance due to hard hearts.

The phrase, "because of the ignorance that is in them," explains why unbelievers are alienated from the life of God. They do not know God personally. *Ignorance* translates the Greek word from which we get our word, *agnostic*. It means to be without knowledge. It is ironic that agnostics often boast of their great knowledge, as if it were their knowledge that led them to their "enlightened" state of not knowing if there is a God! But, Paul traces their spiritual ignorance to something else, namely, to "the hardness of their heart." (The KJV wrongly translates it, "blindness," but the word means, "hardness," as in a stone.) The person who is hard of heart ignores God and His commands. He refuses to bow before God as the sovereign Lord. Hardness of heart results in not knowing God. That spiritual ignorance due to sin is why unbelievers are cut off from the very life of God.

This means that people are not agnostics because they have intellectual problems with the Bible. Rather, they are agnostics because of moral rebellion against God. They want to live as they please, not as God commands. In order to justify and excuse their sinful lifestyle, they have to get rid of God.

So, they claim that they have intellectual problems with the existence of God. They may use evolution or the problem of evil and suffering in the world, or whatever. But get through the smokescreen and behind it you will find sin. They do not want to acknowledge the existence of God because they know that they are in big trouble if He exists! When you're talking with such a person and he throws at you some intellectual objection to the gospel, ask him, "Are you saying that if I can give you a reasonable answer to that problem, you would follow Jesus Christ as Lord?" Invariably, he will say, "Well, no, there are a lot more problems." But keep pushing him and the real problem will become evident: he does not want to submit to Jesus as Lord. He loves his sin!

Paul says, "Don't live that way!" As a believer, be seeking daily to know the living God in a more intimate way. Submit every area

of your life to Him. Don't let sin harden your heart and produce doubts and spiritual ignorance. Finally,

5. Don't live as unbelievers, who walk in callused sensuality and insatiable moral impurity.

Verse 19 describes the final result of this downward spiral into sin. To become callous means to cease to feel pain; thus, spiritually, it is to "lose the capacity to feel shame or embarrassment" (Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 322). The first time a person commits a sin, he thinks, "I'll just do it this once." But, after he does it, his conscience bothers him. He feels guilty. But, the next time, it's a bit easier. He rationalizes it by thinking, "Well, others do worse!" Each time, it becomes easier to sin as his conscience develops a spiritual callus. Finally, he gives himself over to sin with abandon. He has no shame about it. In fact, he goes on TV talk shows to boast about it!

In Romans 1:24, 26, 28, there is the repeated frightening phrase, "God gave them over." But here, they "have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness." It is describing the same thing from the sinner's perspective. *Sensuality* refers to a person who casts off all restraint and has no regard even for public decency. It is to be openly, shamelessly in violation of God's moral standards. In this context, *impurity with greediness* probably refers to an insatiable appetite for sexual sin. *For the practice of* has the nuance of making an occupation out of impurity! Pursuing sensuality and greed feeds on itself, because what once was new, exciting, and pleasurable soon becomes boring and unfulfilling. So the sinner has to seek new depths of perversion. Like using drugs, giving yourself over to sensuality and impurity becomes enslaving.

Paul says, "Don't live like that!" Jesus said that we must cut off such sin as we would cut off our hand or pluck out our eye (Matt. 5:29-30). Keep your conscience tender towards God! Do not give yourself over to sin. It never satisfies and it always enslaves!

Conclusion

Some of you may be thinking, "Paul is being kind of extreme here. I know many unbelievers who don't fit his dire description in these verses. They are decent, moral people. They are faithful in

their marriages. They love their children. They are responsible to work and pay their bills. They're good neighbors. So, how does what Paul says here apply to them?"

Consider two things. First, in His grace, God restrains people from being as bad as they possibly could be. If God let all sinners go, the human race would have self-destructed centuries ago. The doctrine of "total depravity" does not mean that people are as bad as they can be. Rather, it means that sin has tainted every part of our being. It corrupts our minds, our emotions, our will, and our bodies. But because of His grace, God restrains the evil of the fallen human heart, so that unbelievers may be kind, loving, and responsible people.

Second, God looks not only on the outward behavior, but also on the heart. God's assessment when He looked on the wickedness of the human race just before the flood was (Gen. 6:5), "every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." After the flood, God's assessment did not change. He said (Gen. 8:21), "for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth." As Jeremiah 17:9 puts it, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"

If God were to let any one of us go, indwelling sin would impel us toward all manner of evil and corruption. We should not look on someone who fits the description of verse 19 and say, "How can he do that?" Rather, we should look at verse 19 and say, "There but for the grace of God, am I!" So, even as believers, we must get into the habit of instantly judging our own sin on the heart level. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind through God's Word and you will not live as unbelievers live.

Application Questions

1. How would you counsel a person who claimed to be born again and yet was living as verse 19 describes?
2. How should a believer prioritize which biblical goals to pursue when there are so many?
3. I said that people are not agnostics due to intellectual problems, but due to moral problems. What implications does this have for witnessing?
4. How can a believer keep a tender conscience? Is it possible to have an overly sensitive conscience? Where's the balance?

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