

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Walk in Purity Ephesians 4:17-20

Intro: Today's text (17) constitutes the beginning of a new section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the final section. The theme of these 4 verses will now carry through to the end of the Book. As we have stated before, most of Paul's letters follow a pattern of teaching doctrine 1st and then following it with applications. This pattern is also repeated within the practical sections, as he brings in doctrine and applies it over and over. We should also understand that the 2nd half also falls into 2 parts: 1-16 and 4:17-6:24. The doctrinal section in the first half taught that God has called Christians from all nations and all walks of life to be one people who must strive for unity. That's what 4:1-16 is all about. Still, the doctrinal section also taught that Christians are God's holy people who must strive for purity. That's the focus and burden of this final section. Christians aren't just to walk in unity; they're to walk in purity also.

This is an extremely important point. Christians are to live holy lives, not just because morality is good in itself (though it is) or because it promotes happiness or success or anything else (though it does), but because of what God has done. Because of what we believe about God's actions toward us through Jesus Christ we should live as God desires and requires us to live. Our conduct as Christians should always be related to and guided by what we believe. Purity for the Christian is not so much a standard to be attained as it is an inevitable result of our faith. If purity is not inevitable to me, if I am always fighting against it and struggling and trying to get out of it, and wondering why it is so hard and narrow, if I find myself rather envying the people who are still back in the world, there's something radically wrong with my Christian life.

Therefore, if I am failing in the Christian life, what should trouble me most is not that I am failing or that I have a problem but that I've failed God and His important purposes for me.

17-18 – therefore: The Bible wasn't written to just be studied, it was written to be obeyed! That's why the word therefore is repeated so often (8Xs) in the second half of Ephesians. Used here, the word makes the connection,

not only with the glorious spiritual privileges laid out in the doctrinal section of ch1-3 but also with the high call of a unified, mature body of believers as has been described in 4:1-16. Because of our great spiritual privileges and because of our high calling in Christ, we should live (walk) in a different way than the world around us does. It's as if Paul is saying, "Here is what Christ has done for you. Now, in light of this, here is what we ought to do for Christ."

We are to be doers of the Word and not hearers only (Jam 1:22). The fact that we have been called in Christ (1:18) should motivate us to walk in unity. The fact that we have been raised from spiritual death (2:1-10) should motivate us to walk in purity or, as Paul told the Romans, walk in newness of life (Rom 6:4). There is a constant tendency for Christians to try to convince the world that we really aren't so different from them after all. What's the old saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." There is always, within the heart of most people, the desire to conform, to fit in and be accepted, to not stand out. This is usually a misguided effort to gain the world's respect or approval. This desire must be resisted by the believer at all costs because the goal in and of itself is undesirable and unachievable. It's the birthright of every Christian to be God's own peculiar people (1 Ptr 2:9), not weird but a special people, separated by God's grace for God's glory and as such, by definition, we are different from the rest of the world.

Now, having said all that, in the spirit of full disclosure, some scholars are not pleased with the translated wording of Paul's statement in this verse. Most English translations include the imperative should but that imperative isn't found in the original language. The inclusion of the word should makes it seem as though Paul is instructing the Ephesian Christians that they should straighten up their act and stop living like the Gentiles do. If you think about it, this would be an odd directive to a group of believers who sat under Paul's direct teaching for several years. He's only now telling them this! Not likely.

In the original text Paul is simply saying, "I testify in the Lord that you no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk."

Paul here is not issuing an instruction that his Ephesian readers should no longer walk as the Gentiles, he's testifying that they *already* no longer walk this way. His entire purpose is to contrast the manner of life of the Gentiles from that of a born-again believer and what it must look like. The Ephesians

were Gentiles and *had* lived like other Gentiles in the past. But now their lives had become completely different. They had been called to discipleship and holiness in Christ and they were living just as He lived. So, ease your minds, the Ephesians weren't running hog wild! They were still in the world, just as we are in the world, but they were no longer part of the world's system, just as we should be.

We might think that at this point, having laid his doctrinal foundation in ch1-3, Paul would now pass on quickly to some positive instructions in morality: Live a holy life, speak the truth, be kind and loving. He does that eventually. But before he does, he reminds the Ephesians of some very important truths, namely: the true nature of the world system they've been delivered from and the reasons it got to be that way.

Paul describes the nature of this present world system in 3 ways: 1) the futility of their mind (thinking), 2) having their understanding darkened, and 3) alienated from the life of God. We know Paul's going to talk about conduct, urging the Ephesian believers to pursue a different and higher standard of behavior than their pagan neighbors. What's so striking about this first description of the world system is its emphasis on the intellectual aspect of the non-believers' life. We're sometimes given the impression that what a person thinks is not important, so long as he acts properly, or that a person can mess up on a practical level and still have his life together intellectually. That's not the way things actually are, not according to Paul. People act as they think, and the reason they're constantly messing up is that they're vain in their thinking and darkened in their understanding as a direct result of being separated from God.

In other words, our problems go back to the mind. It is here and no where else that the unsaved person has his chief flaw. He doesn't know God; so he cannot think properly. Everything is out of place, and his disordered and sinful conduct reflects his disordered, sinful mind. This is not to say that man, in his rebellion against God, is not capable of mighty intellectual achievements. Instead, it's saying that all such achievements fall short of true wisdom. Paul's not questioning Gentile intellectual capacity, he's critiquing Gentile intellectual disposition. The words mind and understanding both point to a settled mental disposition. Paul also implies a contrast between light and darkness. Light symbolizes illumination and clarity; darkness symbolizes the lack of both. A darkened understanding means the

unsaved are not able to perceive reality clearly or accurately.

This must've been a novel idea to many of Paul's readers. They were Greeks, and the central principle of the Greek world view was that the best, noblest, and ultimately most worthwhile part of the human being is the intellect. In fact, the Greek made a sharp division between reason (spiritual) and flesh (physical). By their way of thinking, the mind is the divine element within the human being. It links us to God and draws us upward. Our flesh is of the earth. It draws us down. For the ancient Greek thinkers salvation consisted mainly in being delivered from the powers of the flesh by human reason. Philosophy was the savior.

Clearly, philosophy didn't save the ancients any more than it saves people today, and Paul wanted to impress that upon his readers. Their ability to think was flawed. They thought mind was the solution to their problems, but it was actually the chief cause of their failures. It is true that the Greek could pursue a proper logical analysis. He could create trigonometry and solve complex problems. He could master philosophical concepts. But the Greek did not know God. So at some point, though great, all his reasoning and especially his moral conclusions were distorted.

The Greeks were the greatest thinkers of the ancient world; the Romans learned from them. Nevertheless, most of the ancients were either polytheists (believed in many gods), pantheists (believed that god was in everything) or atheists (believed in no god at all). What foolishness! It's been said that during the Roman period that followed and built upon the age of Greek intellect, philosophers regarded all religions as equally false, the common people regarded them as equally true, and the rulers regarded them as equally useful. It's no different today. We live in an age which prides itself on intellectual attainments, just as the Greeks did, but it lacks true spiritual understanding. People almost always reject this conclusion. But this is the way the world is, as God sees it.

18b – The 2nd important truth Paul reveals in this passage is the reason the gentile world system has become as it has. It's because of the blindness [or hardening] of their hearts. Here's another difficulty in translation which modern version help us more than the older KJV text. In the Greek, the word the KJV translates as blindness (hardening in NIV) is *pomrosismos*. It's derived from the noun *pomros*, meaning stone. It usually refers to a certain

kind of marble.

The word was also used medically. Pormion was a callus. The verb pomroom meant to petrify or harden. If it was applied to the joints, it referred to their stiffening (arthritis?). If it was applied to a fracture, it referred to the process by which the broken pieces were healed by the growth of new bone. Applied to the eyes, it meant blindness. This is what the older translators picked up for the KJV. And, it's not wrong. A blind heart can't see God. Still, the problem with blindness is that it implies an inescapable and thus a morally blameless inability, and this is not the idea at all.

Paul's saying the unsaved world is actually very much to blame. People have willfully hardened themselves against God, and as a result they've become warped in their spiritual understanding.

We see this same line of thought developed by Paul in [Romans 1](#).

Beginning with [18](#), Paul explains how the wrath of God is revealed against ungodly people, not because they're innocently ignorant of Him but because they've willfully closed their eyes to the revelation that God has given to the world. In [Rom 1:18-23](#) there are 4 main points, which follow a dreadful sequence:

1) God has revealed Himself to people in nature so that no one is without blame for failing to seek Him out and worship Him ([19](#)). This doesn't mean that the revelation of God in nature is a complete or saving revelation, it's not. There is more to God than what's revealed in nature and that includes everything related to the work of redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ. The revelation of God in nature is very limited. Paul refers to it as the revelation of God's invisible attributes: His eternal power and Godhead [divine nature] ([20](#)). But although limited, it's still a real revelation and is sufficient in itself to lead a person to worship God properly—if that person didn't have reasons for refusing to do so. It's this revelation of God that makes the failure of a person to know God a blameworthy offense.

2) In spite of God's revelation of Himself in nature, people have rejected or suppressed the revelation. Paul says, they suppress the truth in unrighteousness [by their wickedness] ([18](#)). That is, they try to hide it and deny it. They sense rightly that if they acknowledged the truth about the existence and nature of God, they would have to change their thinking and living. Rather than change, they repress the revelation.

3) Because their ignorance of God is willful and blameworthy and not a natural failure, God's wrath is upon them (18). Meaning, He's not favorable toward them but instead, judges them for their sins.

4) The last point of this sequence is about how God judges those who willfully ignore Him. Paul's not thinking so much of the final judgment here, though there will be one, but rather that God judges people by an inevitable working out of sin. Saint Augustine once said, "The punishment of sin is sin." That's what Paul has in mind. Thus, having spoken of the revelation of the wrath of God against men and women for their rejection of the truth, Paul goes on to describe the resulting consequences: the darkening of their intellects and their moral lives: "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity . . . to shameful lusts . . . [and] to a depraved mind." The pantheon of gods the ancients believed in were themselves utterly immoral so why would the ancients be any different?

We find an identical sequence of thought in our text, though it uses different words and is shorter. What was wrong with the world of the Ephesians (and all Christians) is that it's hardened itself against God. The very One who is the Christian's joy and glory is the world's enemy. So we're not on the same team as the world. We don't have the same goals, priorities or loyalties. If we want to have a vigorous Christian life in this world, we need to see that.

19 – The hardness of Gentile's hearts leads to a loss of sensitivity, which in turn, enables them to give themselves over to impure indulgences. Past feeling has the idea of one's skin becoming callous and no longer sensitive to pain.

Loss of sensitivity means they've become so hard toward sin that they're no longer bothered by the implications of what they're doing – they're callous, dead to feeling. This is clearly a moral insensitivity, involving a searing of the conscience and the degradation of self-accountability. This callousness means the ignorant and hard-hearted will plunge headlong into vices that a more sensitive conscience would avoid.

Lewdness (licentiousness) is associated with sin that flaunts itself, throwing

off all restraint and having no sense of shame or fear. The primary characteristic of the Greek word translated as lewdness is that the sinner usually tries to hide their sin but the person who has lewdness in the soul doesn't care how much they shock public opinion so long as they can gratify their sinful desires. Uncleaness broadly refers to sexual impropriety. The 2 seem to go together along with greed. Paul's not talking about the lust for more money but rather, he's describing the insatiable quality of these 2 sins- the burning desire for more and more. Not only is every kind of impurity pursued, they are pursued relentlessly.

But understand, God hands them over to what they want. This is not a push from God into sin but rather the absence of any divine restraint. Unbelievers are free to give themselves over to whatever they want. Moral insensitivity leads directly to sensuality and a lack of self-restraint which inevitably leads the person to engage in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable – self-abandonment to a destructive life of sin.

19 – Here's the great contrast for believers! The Gentile's thinking was skewed because they didn't know God but the Christian has that knowledge and it must make a difference. The terminology here puts a strong emphasis on learning and education. Of course, our Christian life must go beyond a simple head knowledge but, at the same time, it must absolutely include head knowledge and that knowledge must influence our entire manner of thinking. This is not just in the sense of knowing facts but refers to the ability to set our minds on right things.

Paul says the Ephesians had learned Christ, not just learned about Him because it's possible to learn about Christ and still never be saved. To learn Christ means to have a personal relationship with Christ so that you get to know Him better each day. You can learn about George Washington or Abraham Lincoln because there are countless books and articles written about them but you can never learn them because they're dead. Jesus Christ is alive! So, I can learn Christ through a personal, living fellowship with Him. This living, abiding knowledge of Christ will keep us from the kind of sinful conduct Paul speaks of here. Just knowing about Jesus isn't enough to keep us pure.

What applications can we draw from this study? First, we need to see the world as it really is and not as it likes to think of itself or present itself. We

live in the world and so we tend to adopt the world's self-assessment. The world thinks it's doing fairly well; it thinks it's getting better and will certainly be even better than it is now some day. We need to realize: this is not the case. This is how the world sees itself, but it's not how God sees it, and it's not the way things actually are. In truth, the world is a dreadful place. It has information, but it lacks true knowledge, the only knowledge that ultimately matters, the knowledge of God; and, lacking that knowledge, it becomes increasingly wicked. We are not to envy it.

Second, we must recognize the spiritual blindness with which the world operates. It's a blindness due to a willful hardening of the heart. Finally, though it's true that Christians are not to live like the world, we still live in the world and we meet people everyday who are locked into that hardness, blindness and darkness. So, we must pray for the world. At least we can pray for specific people we know who need to have their eyes opened. There's no guarantee that your friend will accept Christ but the Bible encourages us to pray. It also tells us that we do not have because we do not ask. And consider this; every great movement of the Spirit of God in what we call revival has been preceded by a long period of fervent, burdened prayer for it by God's people.

We need such a movement of God's Spirit today. Do we believe that? Do we believe it enough to pray for it? It's not enough to denounce the world's sins. It's not even enough to come out from the world and be separate. We must also pray for those we know. And we must make the Word of God known to them, seeing that it is the only means by which God habitually turns sinners from darkness to His marvelous light. 😊