

Jason Upchurch - Ephesians 4:17-18 - Don't Walk Like the Gentiles - Part 1

This morning we are entering one of the most practical sections of the book of Ephesians.

And really, it's practical because it deals with the doctrine of sin. How sin affects unbelievers, how Christians should think about sin, and maybe best of all how to overcome sin. We're going to be looking at sin and overcoming sin for a few weeks, so permit a little longer introduction as we think about this issue.

It sounds silly to say it this way, but sin is reason that we're not all still naked in the Garden of Eden eating delicious fruit and working in a paradise that has no weeds.

Sin is the reason child rearing is hard and for women there is an incredible amount of pain.

Sin is the reason there is death and hell and decay. All your doctor appointments are the result of sin, most of our prayer requests.

Basically every bad thing you can name is a result of a sinful act or the effects of living in a fallen, sinful world. Every problem we have, every tragedy and difficulty we can trace back to sin.

Sin is bad news for which Jesus is the good news. Sin leads to death and hell. But Jesus came to earth to destroy the works of the devil and save us from death and damnation. And once we're saved I think we all have this compulsion to get sin out of our lives. The work of the Holy Spirit in a believer is conviction of sin and the desire to stop doing it.

When I became a Christian I was immediately aware of my sin. I knew instantly that swearing was bad, porn was bad, stealing was bad, pride was bad. I knew those things were bad before I was saved, but especially after I was saved I wanted to get them out of my life.

So here Paul begins a theology of sin. And let me say that it's helpful to know how the Bible talks about sin. A lot of people - even Christians - aren't totally on board with how the Bible talks about sin. They don't like it, don't like the implications and want to tweak the doctrine. They want to soften it or not talk about it at all because it makes people feel guilty or bad. But if we don't have a proper understanding of sin, our outlook on the world is skewed.

When we visited the Creation Museum a few weeks ago one thing we got to see was a 4D movie in their theatre. These weren't the cheesy 3D red and blue paper glasses you might have tried, these things were really expensive battery powered goggles that really made the screen come to life. Things really did jump out at you.

In fact, it was so real I had to take them off to keep from getting sea sick. But when you look at the screen without the glasses it's weird. The things on the screen are fuzzy and distorted. The colors are off, there's parts moving through the screen that don't make sense.

You get some of what's happening, but you don't have the ability to correctly perceive the screen and so you're not sure what's really going on.

That's how it is if we don't understand the doctrine of sin correctly.

If you don't have the lens of biblical truth to understand the world around us then you're never going to understand things for how they really are. You might get close to figuring some things out but you're never going to understand it completely.

This is why psychology fails, even so-called Christian psychology. This is why sociology fails, critical theory fails, political pundits fail, politicians fail. They do get some things correct, but often they miss the boat. Why?

Because without Christ and the grid of biblical reality to understand how sin really affects the world they will always miss the target. Sometimes catastrophically so.

Think about all the big news events over the last couple months: Charlie Kirk assassinated, government shutdown, 42 million people on food stamps, war, everything.

And if you watch on TV they're asking all these professionals: psychiatrists and therapists and specialists what the problem is.

And if you've every watched these segments they all miss the issue. Because they don't have the lens of biblical truth to help them see what's really going on. You know what the problem with the world is? One word, three letters: SIN.

This problem began in Genesis 3 when Adam ate the fruit and it is now part of our nature. All people are sinful by nature and by choice.

Sin literally means to miss the mark. To violate a standard that God has created. God has a standard of conduct and attitude and we fail it all the time. It's rebellion against God. That's part of our fallen nature.

Jesus says we are slaves to that which we do. Before we're believers we're slaves of sin. Sin is our master, sin dictates our lives. It defines us, we rejoice in sin, we brag about our sin. One of the dead giveaways of whether someone is truly a believer is how do they talk about their present sin and past sin. Do they laugh about it, rejoice in it, play it off as no big deal? Or are they sorrowful for their sin? Hate their sin?

What happens when God saves us is that the Son sets us free from the power of sin. We're no longer enslaved to sin. We're slaves, but now were slaves to Jesus and righteousness.

The problem in the Christian life is that we're often tempted to go back to our old master. Just like the Israelites who longed for the slavery in Egypt, we often want the slavery of sin back.

I'm sure you feel that sometimes. The pull to go back to your old life. The pull to go back to your old sinful ways.

Here's the big picture for this morning. It's the one command in our 3 verses: Do not walk like the Gentiles. Don't live like the pagans live. **Read 17**

Don't live like the pagans. This is forceful command: you must no longer do this. Whatever it takes.

When you heard the gospel that Jesus would forgive your sin and give you eternal life, you heard that you have to forsake sin. You have to repent and give up your old ways. Put down your idols, put down your sin take up your cross and follow Jesus.

Paul knows we struggle which is why he has to give the command. Maybe you've got a couple things in life you're still hanging on to that you know you shouldn't. You've surrendered 97% of your life to Jesus but you're still doing some stuff you shouldn't be. And you know it. Maybe you make excuses for it. You're tired, you're on the spectrum, life is hard, people are sinning against you, blah, blah, blah.

You must no longer walk as the Gentiles.

Or maybe you killed some sin years ago but it's creeping back up. Don't go back. Don't live like a pagan in any area of your life. Don't live like pagans live.

And notice how serious this command is. **Read 17**

This is the main command that controls the whole paragraph: no longer walk like the Gentiles.

Who are the Gentiles? The gentiles are unbelievers. Remember, for those in Christ, we've become the children of Abraham, the one new man bringing Jew and Gentile together into the one covenant people of God. Christians are true spiritual Israel. Everyone else is a Gentile, a pagan, unbelievers. Don't walk like them.

And this command is serious. He says I testify in the Lord. NIV says insist in the Lord. What Paul is saying is that if Jesus, the Son of God in all his blazing divine glory were here right now, this is exactly what he would say in all earnestness. Paul is being as emphatic as he possibly: do not live like an unbeliever.

That's what it means to walk or live: it means to take part in, to go along with.

In fact, the form of the original is emphatic: you must not do this. Stop it. It is forbidden by Jesus for Christians to act and live like pagans.

And this is important: If you are a Christian you do not have to sin. You don't. I've had people tell me "I just can't help what I do, I can't control myself. I can't stop sinning." That's only true if you're a pagan.

But believers can. Because we're filled with the Holy Spirit and part of the fruit of the Spirit is self control. We are actually able to not sin. We are able to obey.

The reason we often don't obey is because we don't want to. We could stop swearing if someone gave us a million dollars to not swear every day. We just don't want to.

Maybe you're constantly late to things - you're lazy or don't consider others more important than yourself. You could show up early if someone offered you a bunch of money.

I'll give you a million bucks to not look at porn for a year.

I'll give you a million bucks to stop being glutton and lose some weight and exercise the Temple of God which is your body.

I'll give you a million bucks to not gossip anymore.

I'll give you a million bucks if you stop complaining about things.

I'll give you a million bucks to not covet your neighbors house or job or income.

What's interesting is that when there's a financial incentive we'd do a lot of things joyfully. What if the incentive is simply: Jesus says don't do it? Are we joyful then?

Sure you can. You could stop the sin. But the motivation seems less.

In a couple weeks we're going to talk about how we put off sin. This section is an amazing section - super practical - for helping us understand how we get sin out of our lives. It's called putting off and putting on. Like taking off clothes and putting on new clothes, Christians put off sinful behavior and put on righteous behavior. There's a little more to it than that but I think you'll find it extremely practical.

But before Paul gets there, he says don't walk like the Gentiles. Don't walk like the pagans. And then he describes the reality of unbelievers. And this is the gold of this section.

A lot of times I think we have a tweaked view of unbelievers and their spiritual situation. It's a spiritual situation that we were in too, but we need to understand their situation correctly in order to know how to escape sin.

Now, I'm just going to give you a heads up: this is not a pretty picture of unbelievers. If you were to just go read this passage to your unbelieving neighbor or family they would probably be offended. You'd be labeled some kind of radical or something.

But can I tell you something? It is an accurate picture of unbelievers.

This is who they are now, and before we get too proud we need to remember that this is who we were before God saved us purely in his mercy.

But we need to keep this in mind not only when we're talking to them, but when we're called to stop doing what they're doing. We've got the first 4 descriptions this morning, then we'll see the rest next week.

1) Unbelievers walk in their sin. **Read 17**

What's the different between a believer and an unbeliever when it comes to sin? We both sin, we both miss the mark. Paul even says he's the chief of what? Sinners. John says if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

So we do sin, and unbelievers sin. What's the difference? Unbelievers walk in their sin. They live in their sin, they revel in their sin, and they have no desire to get of their sin.

Believers still sin, but we hate it. We long for glory and heaven not only to see Jesus but to be rid of our sin.

The trajectory of a believer should be holiness. We should always be growing in godliness and forsaking more and more sin. That doesn't happen overnight. Sometimes it's like the stock market. The 3 month or 6 month or ever 12 month snapshot might not be amazing. But if you back it out to 2 or 5 years or 10 years or 20 years, you'll notice dramatic change brought about by God. If there's not dramatic change over the long haul you really need to examine whether you are in the faith.

An unbeliever's life will never change. Some are worse than others. Some are in prison, some are really nice people, very wealthy and very moral. Occasionally an unbeliever will make a dramatic change in their life for the better. But morally speaking there is very little change. They walk in their sin. And they're okay with that.

2) Their Minds are futile. Read 17

What does that mean? It means that sin has infected their minds. Their brains, their logical ability, their understanding of the world around them. In scholarly circles it's called the Noetic effect of sin. Sin affects your intellect and your thinking processes.

Maybe put it a different way: sin is never logical. In order to sin you have to turn your brain off or short circuit logic and intellect.

Take any sin. Stealing. You have to actually turn your brain off to what you are doing, the consequences, how it affects other people, the potential ramifications to do it.

No one says, "Stealing! Wonderful idea - great logic." No one. Everyone says, "What an fool."

No one says, "Man, that wife who ran off with some other man - great thinking." No one says that.

No to justify sin you have to set your brain aside and you are guided by your basest passions. Your thinking becomes futile. You ever caught your kid doing something you told them not to and you asked them why? How's that go for you?

They have no idea. Or they try to excuse the obvious. Or deflect. But often they just say 3 magic words: I don't know. Because they - just like us when we sin - have zero clue why they decided to do what they did.

Sin affects our minds. And it becomes futile in every area. **Turn to Rom. 1.**

People reject a creator. Not because they are actually convinced, but because their mind is warped. Their thinking is futile. **Read 1:18-23**

God has given so much evidence of his existence, power, provision that there is literally no one who is without excuse. Why do they reject? Because they have become futile in their thinking. **Read 21-22**

I mean you can literally take someone outside and show them birds and frogs and the sun and moon and stars and go "Who made all that?" And they'll go "It came from nothing over the course of billions of years."

Everything came from nothing, life came from non-life, complexity came from simplicity, somehow we evolved from animals that eat each other to a society that has morals. Beloved that is the most ridiculous notion ever.

You know why there's all this sexual immorality and homosexual immorality and people still applauding people who can't figure out what bathroom to go into? It's the effect of sin on their mind. **Read 24-32**

The mind of unbelievers is futile. It's warped and tainted. Logic is completely twisted on every level.

Christians are called to use our minds. **Romans 12:1** says we need to be transformed by the renewing of our mind.

The greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with our heart and soul and what? Mind.

The fruit of the Spirit is sober mindedness. Not crazy, not illogical. Sober.

Let me ask you, have you ever justified sin and you knew you were doing it? But in the moment you're trying to convince yourself and maybe you're convince others. It's like you found the golden loophole. And then later you look back and think, that was so dumb.

That's what he's talking about back in **Eph 4**. That's futility. Paul says that's what the pagans do. We don't do that. We walk in sobriety and logic and truth.

So pagans walk in sin, their minds are futile.

3) Darkened in understanding. Read 17-18

What does it mean that the Gentiles - pagans, unbelievers - are darkened? What this refers to is a spiritual darkening that clouds their ability to know and love the truth.

Not only is their mind futile but they live in a darkened state.

We actually sing about this from time to time:

Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I'm found. What's the rest?
Was blind but now I see.

Our spiritual condition prior to salvation is one of blindness or darkness. We didn't even know that we were blind. We don't even know that things are dark. That's the hard part about being in that condition: you don't know you're in it.

It's like when you've got dirt all over your face but you don't have a mirror. You need some special way of seeing what is happening.

And just to be clear: this doesn't mean people are stupid or not well studied in theology. They may know a lot about the Bible. The apostle Paul was a brilliant theologian before he was saved. Charles Spurgeon read more of the puritans in his high school years before he was saved than I'll ever read in my life.

But there was darkness. Spiritual numbness, lack of love for the Lord, lack of affection for truth. This is a constant metaphor for those who are unsaved.

And not only that, but salvation is also looked at as a coming into the light. **Look at 1:15-19** This is Paul's description of what happened when the Ephesians believed. **Read**

When someone is saved the eyes of their hearts are enlightened. They are opened. Most of you who came to faith later in childhood or adulthood remember this time. You were walking around in a spiritual fog, spiritual darkness. Then when God saved you he opened your eyes. **Look at 2 Tim. 2:22-26**

This is how we as believers should conduct ourselves with unbelievers. **Read**

Why should we be kind and gentle and patient to unbelievers? Because it's actually God who has to grant them repentance. He has to release them from the snare of the devil, he has to bring them to their senses. They are trapped in sin and darkness and God can release them.

There's a godly pity that we should have toward unbelievers because they are stuck in their situation until God rescues them.

So unbelievers walk in sin, their minds are futile, they are in darkness. What else? Let's look back at **Eph 4:19**.

4) Alienated from God. **Read 18**

We live in a time where a lot of unbelievers claim to be spiritual but not religious. They have some religious beliefs that they claim connects them to God. You're unbelieving neighbors and family probably say stuff like this.

They don't go to church, they don't hold to a formal religion, but they pray and are with God in the mountains or on the lake. It's funny to me that God is never in rush hour traffic or in church. Somehow to unbelievers - especially ones pretending to be Christians - he's more present on vacation.

Others do hold to formal religious beliefs: Jews, Muslims, Jews, Mormons, Catholics. But here's the deal: outside of Christ, unbelievers are alienated from any spiritual life with God.

They have no spiritual life. They are dead in their sins and trespasses. They might sound spiritual, they might sound like they've got insight or whatever, but they are alienated from any true life that comes from God.

And Paul makes it clear in **1 Corinthians** that whatever they may be worshipping is actually demonic. There's only one true and living God, so there's only one way to follow him. It's only Jesus who gives life so if they don't have Jesus they don't have life.

I used to think Mormons had this alternate religiosity. How can they be so good and kind and nice? And the reality is that people are able to muster up a type of goodness and nobility all the while being spiritually dead.

The Romans had virtue and Greeks had piety - neither had truth.

And that's unbelievers. Paul says the reason they have no life in God is actually because they are ignorant.
Read 18

They don't know God. They might think they do, but they don't.

Maybe this morning you think you know God, think you've got things figured out enough. But you've never truly turned to Jesus in faith and repented from your sins.

The Bible says today is the day of salvation. Today is the day to follow Jesus. Every Christian was there once too. In the song Amazing grace that's why we sing:

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear - fear the Lord
And grace my fears relieved.

Part of the experience of coming to Jesus in faith is that we realize how bad we are in our sin. But the blessing is that the Lord doesn't leave us there. Our fears are relieved when we realize that through faith he's made us his children, blessed us, loved us and given us new life.

We'll look at the rest next week.

Pray