

# You Are Not Everybody Else

## Ephesians 4:17-24

I don't know how it happened. They have only lived in three towns, but somehow, while I was otherwise engaged, my kids met every other person on the planet. I know this, because whenever I would say, "No" to a request, challenge a viewpoint, question a choice of hair color or scold an action, each could authoritatively cite every other person on earth. I would hear, "Everybody else has one!" "Everybody else thinks so!" "Everybody else does it!" It's very awkward to be out of sync with the entire human race. That's a lot of pressure on a parent – to fly in the face of everybody else.

I figured out eventually that it was a bluff. My kids, in fact, had not met "everybody else". What was really at play was an attempt to justify a desire or a point of view based on the peer pressure at work in one very small corner of the world. Like most parents, I have said things like, "If everybody else jumped off a bridge, would you do it too? Or perhaps, you have said, "It doesn't matter what everybody else thinks! You are not everybody else! I'm not responsible for everybody else!"

There are times when a similar exchange takes place in the family of God, when we have to be reminded that as God's children, we are not everybody else. In the opening verse of chapter four, Paul "urges" believers to live worthy of their calling. In verse 17, he "insists." His forcefulness is based on right and reason, and not just on his authority. Consider the ground Paul has already covered in the letter. "God loves us. He has saved us by His grace. He has rooted and established us in His love. He has empowered us to minister in this world and to build up the Body of Christ.

We are not everybody else. We are the blood-bought children of God. Pursuing righteousness and living the lives of servants are not beyond us. They are why we have been created anew in Christ.

### I. The Character of Gentile Darkness (17-19)

<sup>17</sup>So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. <sup>18</sup>They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. <sup>19</sup>Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

#### A. Everybody Else to the Ephesians Were the Gentiles

"Gentiles" is *ethnos*, meaning "peoples or nations". In the Gospels and in *Acts*, a Gentile was anyone not born Jewish, but in *Ephesians*, Paul is addressing non-Jews, or Gentiles. How are Gentiles by birth supposed to cease living as Gentiles? In *Ephesians*, Paul considers believers to be neither Jew nor Gentile, regardless of bloodline. They are one new race: "His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup>and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility" (*Ephesians* 2: 15b, 16).

The church is a new people, "called-out" from the world. We are no longer to live and think like worldly people. Here, Gentiles are the rank and file of humanity who do not know Christ as Lord. Paul insists that we no longer live by the old standards that governed us when we were not Christians and that still govern the rank and file. As a new people, we live according to new standards.

Believers have always struggled against the values of the world around them, but today, the relationship between the world and many Christians cannot be described as a struggle. All out surrender is more apt. Just open your ears to the dreams of many Christians. They are steeped in terms of success, money and self-fulfillment. Seldom do we overhear a yearning for new ways to sacrifice or to live simply. Today's believer can hunger for revenge as readily as he can pray for the grace to forgive. He can be so anxious about tomorrow that those around them would never conclude that he is waiting in certain hope on heaven. Paul was crying out to an ancient church, "Living like the rank and file of humanity does not become you! The Holy Spirit is still crying out to us today.

## **B. Everybody Else Suffers from Futile Thinking**

"Futility" in verse 17 refers to an emptiness of result or outcome. Simply put, all of a natural man's thinking, truth-seeking, dreaming and imagining take him nowhere that ultimately matters. With his energy and razor-sharp mind, he might set all sorts of goals touching on personal achievements or the acquisition of power and possessions and achieve them all. He may be a success in regard to those things on which he has set his sights, but in terms of eternity, Jesus worded it best, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?" (Luke 9:25).

Another man may be more frivolous in the eyes of the world, living for short-sighted pleasure and the next thrill. Is he any worse off than the man who has it all? From a "creature comfort" vantage point, perhaps so, but from an eternal vantage point, he and that glaring success are equally frivolous characters if they are not rich towards God. W. G. Blake, a contributor to the century-old *Pulpit Commentary*, gives an interesting take on the phrase, "in the futility of their thinking":

"The allusion is to their frivolous, empty aims in life, and their unmixed and unsettled impulses. The Gentiles were chasing shadows, blowing bubbles, doing anything to make time pass agreeably; not considering or knowing either what they were, or whence they came, or whither they were going."

We all respect drive and motivation, but the most driven professional and the most frivolous bubble-chaser are kindred spirits if, in their futile thinking, they do not soberly contemplate matters eternal.

## **C. Everybody Else Suffers from Darkened Understanding**

"Understanding" in verse 18 refers to a "thinking through". A man may be a sharp thinker, but his conclusions are faulty if he thinks his thoughts outside of God's revealed light. God revealed Himself through His creation. Many moderns study the creation but deny the Creator. Jesus revealed God even more completely. Thinking through the filter of He Who said, "I am the Truth" is the only path to truthful conclusions. As a sinner, man's capacity to find spiritual truth by himself is inadequate.

In his book *Everyday Discipleship for Ordinary People*, Stuart Briscoe tells of a young minister who was officiating at the funeral of a veteran. Military friends of the deceased wished to have a part in the service at the Funeral Home. They requested that the pastor lead them to the casket, stand with them for a solemn moment of remembrance, and then lead them out a side door. Unfortunately the effect was marred when the preacher picked the wrong door and led them, with military precision, into a broom closet, in full view of the mourners, who watched as the veterans beat a hasty retreat. No one can find truth unless the one who leads him is reliable.

Our conclusions are only as good as our frame of reference. When we think of a turtle, we think of something slow, but what does a snail say when he rides on the back of a turtle? He says, “Wheee!” The little guy thinks he’s at Disneyland! Many acknowledge God as they wish Him to be, a mere idol fashioned by imagination. They protest against biblical principles saying, “I don’t believe God cares about this” or “My God would never do that!” Is that not the language of an idolater – one who simply fashions his own beliefs about god? Many disregard God altogether. But, whenever God as He has revealed Himself, is eliminated from human thought, only bad conclusions can result.

#### **D. Everybody Else Is Separated from the Life of God**

Could I have chosen more politically incorrect words? Still, if we believe the Bible, we must believe that those outside of Jesus are outside of the life that God brings to men. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). There is no wiggle room here. Man’s only hope for salvation is to trust that Christ’s death removed the barrier that kept us from God.

The rank and file of Paul’s day did not know God. They were steeped in the errors of man-made philosophies and religions. They were ignorant even of what could be seen of God in His creation because of “the hardening of their hearts” (verse 18). “Hardening” was an unpleasant word. Doctors used it to describe the thickening of a bone around a break. It came to mean “petrified”. People were so self-absorbed and hedonistic that their hearts were impenetrable to any light from God. Paul adds that they had “lost all sensitivity” (verse 19). They could no longer feel pain, remorse or tenderness for the consequences of their selfish choices. Their consciences were seared.

Paul’s words were a poignant social commentary on his day, but today, do we not live amongst similarly hardened hearts and insensitive consciences? He continued: “... they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.”

Our nation is coping with several specific evidences of spiritual darkness. How else can we account for a culture where so many so angrily defend the slaughter of the unborn as a right? No doubt the Ammonites were exercising their rights when they sacrificed their young to Molech. If sensitivity is not dead altogether, it is severely battered. The mainstreaming of homosexuality, first through media and more recently, through the push for gay marriage is evidence not of a tolerant culture, but of one that has lost its footing in divine absolutes and is continually lusting for even more moral non-restraint. The late Francis Scheaffer rightly noted that we are in a “Post-Christian Era”.

Political power is not a weapon of spiritual warfare. Holiness, unity and prayer are our best tools. After all, we’re not battling flesh and blood. We are engaged in a war of values. Lost people are not the enemy but the casualties. That’s a tough perspective for me to maintain when I get a load of some of the characters out there marching for their right to do as they please, no matter how violent or debased – all to protect their darkened notions about “freedom”. They are blind to the fact that they are only demanding the right to be totally shackled by that which will ultimately destroy them.

We have been set free. The thought of a believer yielding to renewed bondage by the chains Christ had broken horrified Paul. Nevertheless, that is precisely what Christians do if they continue to pursue meaning as the world defines meaning. God has called us out from the world to live holy lives before the eyes of the world. That means we must come out of Gentile futility and into Divine light.

## II. The Character of Godly Light (20-24)

### A. Consider Paul's Audience verses 20, 21

<sup>20</sup>You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. <sup>21</sup>Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.

Paul was not evangelizing pagans. He was reminding believers to walk with Christ. He was not addressing the rank and file, but the church. Is it possible that some of these chose to be re-shackled to the world's lies? Apparently, it was so, for Paul's appeal was that believers live in Christ the way they were taught to live in Him, righteously, under His lordship, and according to godly truth.

### B. Godly Truth Demands of Us Self-abandonment verse 22

... <sup>22</sup>You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires;

There are certainly good desires that the Holy Spirit awakens in us, but the deceiver knows our weaknesses and tempts us with "deceitful desires" - desires from the old days. Even apostles were not exempt. In Romans 7, Paul described a battle that raged within him that found good and evil side by side. When he desired to do good, he did evil. When he desired to honor God's law, he found himself breaking it. Peter received a wonderful vision that taught him God's desire that the Gospel should be for all people. He was the first to preach to the Gentiles, but even after those experiences, peer pressure and old prejudices caused him to pull away from Gentiles in social settings.

It is enough of a battle for any man to simply be bound to the flesh without foolishly embracing the old man of sin. It is enough that life involves pulling ourselves away from that old corpse without our lifting him upon our back to tote him around at the expense of strength better used to God's glory.

### C. Godly Truth Demands of Us Attitudinal Renewal verse 23

... <sup>23</sup>to be made new in the attitude of your minds;

In Christ, God gave us a new mind and outlook different from anything that ever existed before. The word used here, however, speaks not of something totally novel to us, but rather, of a renewal of the mind back to an earlier point. Does Christ today seem as powerful, as real and as near as He did at the point you first came to know Him? If not, why not? Did He cease to pay attention to you? Did He become too tired to hold onto you? If anyone's attentiveness to the relationship faded, it was not His.

How attentive have you been to Jesus lately? When you were raised dripping wet from the waters of baptism, He was the champion of your salvation and the only source of power you could ever imagine relying on. Is that passion still intact? The breakdown was not at His end. It was you who flirted with "rank and file" values. John wrote to the church of Ephesus, "You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first" (Revelation 2:4, 5). Repentance, not a good speaker or a great book, is the key to renewal.

## D. Godly Truth Demands of Us Behavioral Newness verse 24

... <sup>24</sup>and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Late one night at the asylum one inmate shouted, "I am Napoleon!" Another one said, "How do you know?" The first inmate said, "God told me!" Just then, a voice from another room shouted, "I did NOT!!!" The new self we have received is not a delusion but a miracle of recreation.

Now, Paul uses a word that does refer to something brand new when he writes of putting on "a new self". We were sinners, but now, in Christ, we are new creations. We are now called to be like our Father in "true righteousness". Paul would not speak of a true righteousness if there was no danger of counterfeits. True righteousness is not self-righteousness. True righteousness is not pretending to be spiritual when we are really hurting and confused. True righteousness is not a body of holy rhetoric coupled with a worldly value system. True righteousness is not any kind of facade or performance on a believer's part. True righteousness is the reflection in your life of the loving Father Who restored you after sin had destroyed you.

This word for holiness is not a form of the usual word for holiness used in scripture, *hagios*, which emphasizes that we have been "set apart" from that which is common. Here, the word *hostiotes* means to be in a "right relationship" with God because there is no contaminate in us. We have no problem thinking of ourselves as "set apart" for God and by God, but the challenge here is to be free of the impurities that estrange us from intimate communion with God. Are you out of step with Him? Is the fellowship encumbered? That is the issue Paul is addressing here, and it happens when a child of God chooses to think and live like the rank and file, who give no thought to God in their actual decision making process.

What does a new man in Christ look like? His affections are changed. His way of expressing himself is changed. He now looks for gracious ways to express himself rather than the coarse ways of the world. Shock value gives way to decorum. Personal modesty in dress and demeanor replaces the desire to draw attention to oneself. In Christ, a man's life becomes bigger, not smaller, because the needs of others become more pressing than his own personal demands and perceived rights.

To the rank and file in this world, what is wrong is often couched as virtuous and enlightened. What is virtuous is couched as naïve, at best, but more often, as narrow. After a steady drumbeat of the world accusing Christianity of intolerance and hatefulness, it is tempting to reassess one's positions. Don't be tempted by this age's claims that truth is relative and that all religions are equal. Don't be misled by its claims that morality is in the eyes of the beholder. When God has spoken, and you have allied yourself with His Word, then, you are right and everybody else is wrong. Don't worry about how grating that sounds to the world. Assume your place as salt and light in this world, for our only power to respond to this world's need is through lives of "true righteousness and holiness."