

# Ephesians 4:19-21

By Joel Wood

**Bible Text:** Ephesians 4:19-21

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We continue on this morning in Ephesians chapter 4. Allow me to read again verses 17 through 24 and know that verses 19, 20, and 21 will be the focus of the sermon text today. As we have twice already, let us listen carefully to God's holy Word. "*[Ephesians 4:17-24] Therefore this I say and testify in the Lord, that from now on you walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their minds, having their understanding darkened, excluded from the life of God through the ignorance that is within them, due to the hardness of their hearts. Being calloused they have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. But you did not learn about Christ in this manner, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off the former way of life in the old nature, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that you put on the new nature, which was created according to God in righteousness and true holiness.*" The grass withers and the flower fades but the Word of our God stands forever.

As we continue walking through this text, the clarity between the inner and outer man is still maintained: our physical, organic selves and our spiritual, inorganic selves. And here, Paul is highlighting entrance into the Gospel. How do we get there? How do we go from being Gentiles walking in the vanity of our minds, with darkened understanding, excluded from the life of God, how do we get from there to learning Christ, to knowing Christ. Even as we read through to verse 24, verses 23 and 24 talking about being renewed in the spirit of your mind, putting on the new nature (and we will get there next week), but how do we get there? How do we understand these things? And what Paul is contrasting from the end of this paragraph of verses 17 through 19 into the next paragraph of 20 and following is this: the difference between the outer person and the inner person and how real spiritual change comes about. We will have two points today. The first is that change from the outside in does not work. Change from the outside in does not work. Secondly, (this one's a little longer) alien truth leads to alien righteousness leads to real lasting internal AND external change in the believer. Alien truth leads to alien righteousness leads to real lasting internal and external change in the believer.

Firstly, change from the outside in does not work. Paul here is highlighting this group of folks who, though they claim the name of Christ, had given themselves over to sensuality and, as he says, "*[Ephesians 4:19] ... the practice of every kind of impurity [or uncleanness] with greediness.*" They were greedy for physical experience. They had become calloused. They had, as we saw last time, moved beyond feeling. Their-- the skin of their heart had toughened up to the things that they were doing outside their bodies and it was destroying them inside. And this highlights this contrast between what we do on the outside and what we are on the inside and how we see both of those things changed. It cannot go from the outside in, that does not work. It must come from the inside out. Charles Hodge

said, "[[A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians, Chapter 4, Section 2](#)] Men in their folly think that morality may be preserved without religion" --in other words, they think that externals can exist without internals really being changed-- "and even that morality is religion; but reason, experience and Scripture all prove that if [people] do not love and fear God they give themselves up to vice in some form, and [frequently] either to uncleanness or avarice. There are two reasons for this; one is the nature of the soul which has no independent source of goodness in itself, so that if it turns from God it sinks into pollution, and the other is the punitive justice of God. He abandons those who abandon him. In Rom. 1, 24 and elsewhere, it says 'God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts;' here it says, they give themselves over. These are only different forms of the same truth. People are restrained from evil by God's hand, if he relaxes his hold they rush spontaneously to destruction. All systems of education, all projects of reform in social or political life, not founded on religion, are, according to the doctrine of this passage and of all Scripture, sure to lead to destruction."

Why? Why is it, why do time and again we see those who claim to be the conservative moral voice in education or in politics or even in the church, why do we time and time again see man after man and woman after woman being exposed as a fraud? Why? Why is it that all of these plans, all of these policies, all of these hopes, all of these dreams, why is it that again and again and again they utterly fail and in their failing drag more down to the pit with them? Because the heart goes unaddressed. Because we think, "if I do this and that and the other on the outside then it makes my inside okay." But in the end we're left trying to fix the same broken internal appliances with the same broken tools. And through external secular therapies we might be less angry or even less violent about it, we might be more communicative about it, we might be more holistic about it or more connected to our family in it but the heart, the stinking, nasty heart of sin, goes on without change. The body is wasting away AND the soul still isn't being renewed. I might borrow from Paul's imagery in other places. It's all going downhill and we are left completely unable to declare with Paul in Romans 8 verse 2, "[[Romans 8:2](#)] *For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ has set me free from the law of sin and death.*" Change from the outside in does not work, ultimately. The heart MUST change. How does this happen? What remedy does Paul give? Well, Paul in verse 20 and on goes on to point out that something outside of ourselves has to invade us and change us. And this is that fundamental change that happens so that we might be able to do the very things that he goes on to talk about in this chapter. If we seek to put off sin and put on righteousness and our heart has not fundamentally been changed we will just go on in a Pharisaism and a hypocrisy that will end up worse than it was before. Knowing, counseling, and working with one another we know as believers sometimes we have to tell someone, "well, you need to just obey and do what you know you should be doing and the emotions, the feelings, will follow." We're not talking about the feelings, per se. We're not talking about WANTING to wash the dishes, we're talking about the fundamental ability to CARE about that. We're talking about the fundamental ability to even desire the relationship to be healed, the marriage to be restored, the friendship to be made new. It has to come from outside of ourselves. If we try to fix it with what we and we only have we will be left again worse off.

So this brings us to verse 20 and what Paul is talking about here. "[[Ephesians 4:20-21](#)] *But you did not learn about Christ in this manner, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus.*" "But you did not learn about Christ in this manner." What is he-- what is he contrasting here? He's contrasting those who are layering on themselves these physical, external experiences. They become completely desensitized, they become completely calloused, they become completely unfeeling, and they just are seeking more and more and more so that they might FEEL. And they practice every kind of impurity and every kind of greediness and, in some corners of the world at this point, they are doing so being justified by the idea that "no, we're still Christians but we're allowed to do this." And Paul says, "No! This is not Jesus. This is not how you have learned him." And so we

see this alien truth, this external truth that must invade us, that leads to then an alien, a foreign, righteousness invading us, that leads to real, lasting internal and external change in the believer. We won't just say that we're a believer and still be doing all these things externally which bring dishonor to Christ and we won't just externally be living this righteous, seemingly sanctified, life while our heart is full of rot and stink and nastiness. We will truly become whole, we will become internally and externally righteous.

And how does this happen? Well, Paul hints in verse 21 in these words: "[\[Ephesians 4:21\]](#) if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him..." The "heard Him" is in this form ἠκούσατε. It's developed over time that the word acoustics (the study of sound), it's speaking of that external auditory hearing. "Have been taught:" didactics. And so he draws a distinction here between this external hearing and this internal teaching. In chapter 1 verse 13 we read, "[\[Ephesians 1:13\]](#) In Him you also, after hearing the word of truth,--" that's again that external hearing "-- the gospel of your salvation, and after believing in Him,--" that internal change wrought by the Spirit "-- were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit." Paul seems to be delineating out this external hearing of the word preached and the internal experience of the word applied by the Holy Spirit in what we call our effectual calling. "[\[WCF 10:1\]](#) All those whom God hath predestinated,--" our Confession of Faith summarizes the teaching of Scripture, "--whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased in His appointed and accepted time effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ." We are being preached to we are being called to. Hebrews 12 reminds us: "[\[Hebrews 12:25\]](#) See that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused Him who spoke on earth, much less shall we escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven." Why is it so important how we see and understand Christ, how we learn Him in this process, why is it so important that we do not seek to muster up changing quote unquote godly living from within ourselves? Because Jesus Christ is the very thing by which we are saved in our effectual calling. We learn Christ, we learn the person, and we learn the teachings, the doctrines, of Him. It is spoken to us from outside. It is alien truth to us. This is that grand distinction between general revelation and special revelation. What is general revelation? General revelation is that exposing of God of Himself in the natural order around us. We see order, we see cycle, we see process, we see intricacies in nature that we know could only be there if there was someone designing it and making it. We see His power, we see His glory, our sin is exposed. But general revelation can only take us so far and humanity, in general, has a responsibility to live in light of the revelation that they have received. But we rebellion even against that and so we are in desperate need of special revelation. The quintessential example of this is that Adam and Eve, even in their sinless estate, even in that walking-and-talking relationship they had with God Almighty, still needed His instruction and still needed His commands in the garden of what they should do. He didn't say, "Well, you're- you're perfect. You've never sinned, you'll figure out what to do. It'll be obvious." No, God knows, as obvious as it is, it's never obvious to us. We need the clear, the crystal clear word of God to tell us how we ought to live.

So what happens in this effectual calling? Well, we are called by the Word and Spirit out of our state of sin and death (which is our natural state after the fall) "[\[WCF 10:1\]](#) ... to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace." Is there any more perfect corollary in this than this from Ezekiel 36, as Paul is talking about those who've grown calloused in their sin, calloused in their sensuality, calloused in their uncleanness, calloused in their greediness for more and more external stimuli in their lives, "[\[Ezekiel 36:27\]](#) I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in

*My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.*" As He says, He will remove that heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh. Paul's being nice when he talks about calluses. Our hearts are rock hard against God without this work of the gospel falling on our outer ear, the Spirit dragging it down into our inner ear, in our hearts, in our inner man, to change us, to enlighten our minds so we might understand the things of God, etc., etc. The Confession goes on and explains: "[\[WCF 10:2\]](#) This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enable to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it." Again, we do not learn Christ, we do not know Christ by mustering up, by doing, and by accomplishing externally. There's nothing that makes God say, "Oh, you've got my arm behind my back." That's an awfully large arm behind an awfully large back (both of them being spiritual). It doesn't work that way. There's nothing that MAKES God save us. It is all and only of His volition, of His will. THAT is how we learn Christ. That is how we hear Him and have been taught by Him and that we know the truth is in Jesus. That is the starting point. That is the beginning. Those are the blocks from which we sprint in this work of putting off sin and putting on righteousness, that fundamental change of heart without which everything else becomes hopeless and hypocritical.

But isn't it beautiful, isn't it glorious that God does choose --wasn't that wonderful? That's just the soundtrack to the sermon there. It's wonderfully orchestrated-- Isn't it glorious that God chooses to do this? He chooses to do this. Have you ever had someone in your heart or life that has grown cold and callous to you? And you think, "It's too late, it's too far gone, it's- how can we do this?" We are cold and callous to God, our hearts are stones to Him and yet He chooses to performed that open heart surgery and take that heart out and put one of flesh that loves Him and beats for Him alone. Number of verses here: Second Timothy 1:9, "[\[2 Timothy 1:9\]](#) who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not by our works," --again, not by our external doings-- "but by His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began." Titus 3:4 and 5, "[\[Titus 3:4-5\]](#) But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of rebirth and the renewal of the Holy Spirit." What a glorious word to describe this: the kindness and love of God. Earlier in Ephesians 2: "[\[Ephesians 2:4-5\]](#) But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)." Then later in that chapter: "[\[Ephesians 2:8-9\]](#) For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one should boast." See, is it important that the gospel make its way out from our heart out to our extremities? Absolutely. But it can never work the other way. First Corinthians 2:14, "[\[1 Corinthians 2:14\]](#) But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Romans 8:7, "[\[Romans 8:7\]](#) For the carnal mind is hostile toward God, for is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can it be." Brothers and sisters, our hearts run rampant in death and destruction and calloused sensuality and uncleanness and greediness; wanting more and more of that, our hearts- our hearts run away in that. But as Paul speaks to the heart here he says that is not how you learned Christ. You have heard Him and you have been taught by Him, the truth is in Him. And brothers and sisters, as that alien truth invades our hearts and that alien righteousness invades our lives it leads to the real, lasting, internal and external change that Paul goes on to describe in this chapter. But it must begin in the heart. I'm going to close with the words of Jesus from John 5:25 which should give us such massive hope in Christ, should give us such massive hope for that loved one for whom we are praying. We say their heart is too hard, their minds are too dead to the gospel, it can never work, it can never happen. Listen to the words of Jesus. "[\[John 5:25\]](#) Truly, truly I say to you, the hour is coming and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live." Brothers and sisters, friends, if you desire the life of Jesus Christ, it begins in the

heart in hearing the Son of God. Do not deny Him, do not refuse Him who is speaking. You will not escape. Hear Him, believe in Him, see that alien truth come in and change you, giving you that alien righteousness, seeing real and lasting internal AND external change as you believe.

Stand with me as we pray.