

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON SIXTY)

“AN X RATED DESCRIPTION OF HUMAN DEPRAVITY”

EPHESIANS 4:17-24

17 This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind,

18 Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart:

19 Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

20 But ye have not so learned Christ;

21 If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus:

22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;

23 And be renewed in the spirit of your mind;

24 And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

In previous Lessons we have stated that in the first **16** verses of **Ephesians** chapter **4**, the Apostle Paul dealt with the nature of the Church, and the role of each believer in its growth and development. In verse **17**, he begins to expound on how believers should relate with the unbelieving world in which they live. He writes, *“This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind.”*

Paul exhorts the believers in Ephesus to stop thinking in the way that unsaved people do. He urges them not to adopt the world’s philosophy of living, or to embrace the world’s value system, because the people of the world live in vanity, futility and emptiness of mind. All their thoughts, words, and deeds are enveloped in an atmosphere of sin and vanity. All that they try to achieve is ultimately futile in giving them complete satisfaction.

Believers are not to imitate the lifestyle of unsaved persons because unsaved persons are *“dead in trespasses and sins,”* according to **Ephesians 2:1**. Believers, on the other hand, have been raised from the dead and have been given eternal life in Jesus Christ. In light of their having experienced the miracle of being raised from the dead, believers are to think and operate differently from unsaved people.

In verse **18**, Paul moves on to analyze more closely the problem of the faulty thinking of unsaved persons. He explains why human thinking is so pointless and without ultimate significance. He writes, *“Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.”*

The understanding of unsaved persons is darkened. The Greek word translated *“darkened,”* literally means to be, or to become dark, to cover with darkness. Figuratively, the word means to darken or blind the mind. It means to become unable to perceive and thus unable to understand. The word is in the **perfect tense** which speaks of a process completed in the past, but which has present results. Paul uses the perfect tense here to show the finished and permanent result of the blinding of the mind by

the “sin virus” which all of Adam’s descendants have inherited. The believers in Ephesus had all been in this enduring state of darkness and blindness before they were regenerated by the Gospel of grace.

Paul proceeds to give us a further description and explanation of the vain and futile “*walk*” of the Gentiles. He informs us that their lifestyle is what it is, because of the condition of moral darkness into which they were born, and in which they have continued to live and operate. He writes, “*Being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.*” The words “*being alienated*” are the translation of a Greek word which means, “To alienate, exclude, estrange.” It means, “To be shut out from one’s fellowship and intimacy.”

The word is in the **perfect tense** in the Greek which indicates a past completed action with ongoing effect or results. Because of Adam’s transgression all of his offspring are naturally born sinners, alienated from the womb, from the life of God. This alienation persists all our life unless God intervenes and saves us by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Unsaved persons are alienated, excluded, estranged from “*The life of God.*” The word “*life,*” is a translation of the Greek word **ζόέ: (dzo-ay’)**, which in the New Testament is used of the absolute fullness of life, both essential and ethical, which belongs to God. The life of God is the life that God has in Himself and that which He imparts to the believing sinner. It is the eternal life conferred by God to men and women who are otherwise dead in their trespasses and sins. Unsaved persons have no concept of **ζόέ**, the life that God possesses, the life of which He approves and the life whereby He lives in believers and they in Him.

Paul goes on to tell us that unsaved persons are alienated or excluded from the life of God through, or because of, “*the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.*” The fact that lost humanity is excluded from the life of God is because of their ignorance of God, and their ignorance of God is in turn, due to the hardening of

their hearts, or their insensitivity to God and His ways. The word “*ignorance*,” is the translation of a Greek word which refers to a lack of knowledge, especially of divine things. It is ignorance which is inexcusable and involves moral blindness.

Paul tells us that this ignorance that is in them is caused by “*the blindness of their heart*.” The word “*blindness*,” is a translation of the Greek word **pórosis**: (**po’-ro-sis**), which literally describes a **callus**—the bony healing tissue which forms around the ends of broken bone, or the hard formation of tissue formed over a wound. In this verse Paul is using **pórosis** figuratively to describe the moral or ethical hardness, callousness, blindness or insensitivity of the hearts of the Ephesians in their former unregenerate state. He is of course, describing the heart condition of every human being in his or her natural, unregenerate state. **Pórosis** refers to the deadness that inevitably occurs when the heart is no longer sensitive to the urgings of the conscience.

In verse **19**, Paul describes the next, inevitable downward step in the sinner’s awful and tragic descent into depravity: “*Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.*”

The Amplified Bible, Classic Edition, translates verse **19** as follows:

“In their spiritual apathy they have become callous and past feeling and reckless and have abandoned themselves [a prey] to unbridled sensuality, eager and greedy to indulge in every form of impurity [that their depraved desires may suggest and demand].”

The phrase, “*being past feeling*,” is the translation of the Greek word **apalgeó**: (**ap-alg-eh’-o**), which means, “to cease to feel pain or grief, to become callous, insensible to pain, apathetic.” **apalgeó** is the word from which the English “analgesic” is derived. An analgesic is a “pain-killing” drug. Paul uses the word metaphorically here to refer to the loss of ability to feel shame or embarrassment. It describes an individual who has become so accustomed to thinking and acting in an undesirable

manner, that he or she is no longer bothered by the implications of what he or she is thinking or doing.

The Greek word **απαλεό**, expresses the condition of moral insensibility. It describes the deadness that results when the heart has ceased to respond to the urging of the conscience. Persons who are in the state of “*being past feeling*,” can no longer respond to any moral stimuli. Their consciences have become so shriveled that sin registers no stab of pain. The lack of moral feeling and discernment renders them incapable of exercising proper restraint in moral and ethical matters. Once again, Paul uses the **perfect tense** to describe the permanence of the individual’s condition.

Brothers and sisters, the ability to experience pain is vitally important to our physical bodies. In fact, we are in great danger if our physical bodies lose their ability to experience pain. Undoubtedly pain is an uncomfortable sensation, but it serves the vital function of indicating that something is wrong. A person who is unable to experience pain might accidentally put his or her hand into fire and not know it until the hand is badly burned. Many of the wounds that people suffering from leprosy receive, are the result of the insensitivity to pain which is caused by their disease. Human beings, in their natural state, are spiritual lepers! It is a tragic condition, inflicting far greater damage than the physical effects of leprosy. Paul is saying in effect to the believers in Ephesus, “Do not go back to your spiritually leprous condition!”

Brothers and sisters, we must never forget that this picture of “spiritual” leprosy describes our condition prior to salvation. We must never forget who and what we were before we were saved by the grace of God. In **1 Corinthians 6:9-11**, Paul writes the following:

9 Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,

10 Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

*11 **And such were some of you:** but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.*

The **New English Translation** renders the passage as follows:

9 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, passive homosexual partners, practicing homosexuals,

10 thieves, the greedy, drunkards, the verbally abusive, and swindlers will not inherit the kingdom of God.

*11 **Some of you once lived this way.** But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

Brothers and sisters, we should never forget what God has saved us **from** and what He has saved us **for**. We need to continually remember where we came from, so that we maintain a high view of His miracle working gift of “so great salvation” and what it has accomplished for us.

In **Colossians 1:12-14**, Paul writes the following:

12 Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light:

13 Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son:

14 In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.

As **Charles H. Gabriel** wrote,

*“In loving-kindness Jesus came,
My soul in mercy to reclaim,
And from the depths of sin and shame
Through grace He lifted me.*

*From sinking sand He lifted me,
With tender hand He lifted me;
From shades of night to plains of light,
Oh, praise His Name, He lifted me!”*

Brothers and sisters, God saved us from the guttermost to the uttermost!

Paul tells us that the sinner’s downward spiral culminates in behavior that is abominable. He informs us that when persons lose their sensitivity to evil, they easily and wantonly commit the most depraved sins. He says that they *“have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.”* The words *“have given themselves over”* are the translation of a Greek word which literally means, “to give over.” The verb means “to give into the hands of another, to betray, to hand over, to give one’s self up.” When persons arrive at a state of *“being past feeling,”* they voluntarily, of their own free choice, give themselves over to unrestrained living and licentiousness.

In **Romans 1:24**, Paul says that it is **God** who gives them over. He writes, *“Wherefore **God** also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves.”* The words *“gave them over,”* are the translation of the same Greek word which is translated *“have given themselves over”* in **Ephesians 4:19**. In a sense then, the unsaved person’s giving over of himself or herself to lasciviousness, is both his or her own guilty choice as well as a judicial act of God! Brothers and sisters, it is important for us to understand that when persons intentionally and persistently give

themselves over to evil, God eventually gives them over to the power of evil.

The Greek word translated “*lasciviousness*,” originally referred to any excess or lack of restraint and came to be associated primarily with sexual excess. It has been defined as “readiness for any pleasure.” It describes that attitude of the soul which has never borne the pain of discipline and will never bear it. The lascivious person is one who acknowledges no moral restraints and resents all discipline. He or she indulges in unbridled sensuality without any sense of shame or regard for what others think, or for how they are being affected.

John MacArthur, made the following comments regarding lasciviousness: “All people initially recognize at least some standard of right and wrong and have a certain sense of shame when they act against that standard. Consequently, they usually try to hide their wrongdoing. They may continually fall back into it but still recognize it as wrong, as something they should not be doing; and conscience will not let them remain comfortable. But as they continue to overrule conscience and train themselves to do evil and to ignore guilt, they eventually reject those standards and determine to live solely by their own desires, thereby revealing an already seared conscience. Having rejected all divine guidelines and protection, they become depraved in mind and give themselves over to sensuality. Such a person cares nothing about what other people think—not to mention about what God thinks—but only about what gratifies the cravings of his own warped mind.”

What a graphic picture Paul paints in **Romans 1:24-32**, of persons who have given themselves over, and have been given over to lasciviousness! The **New Living Translation** renders the passage as follows:

24 So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies.

25 They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen.

26 That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires. Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other.

27 And the men, instead of having normal sexual relations with women, burned with lust for each other. Men did shameful things with other men, and as a result of this sin, they suffered within themselves the penalty they deserved.

28 Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done.

29 Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip.

30 They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents.

31 They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy.

32 They know God's justice requires that those who do these things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway. Worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too.

Brothers and sisters, Paul is describing here a process that is as old as Adam. It is a process that goes on every day. Unsaved men and women put God to the test for the purpose of approving Him as their God, if He meets the specifications which they have laid down for a God who would be to their liking. When they discover that He does not meet those specifications, they refuse to acknowledge Him as the God to be worshipped and obeyed. Because they reject Him after putting Him on trial, God in turn rejects them and gives them up to a mind which cannot stand trial. The one disapproving answers to the other. The human race pronounces the true God to be disapproved, and want nothing to do with Him, and He in turn gives them up to a disapproved mind; a mindless mind; a mind which is no mind and cannot discharge the functions of a mind regarding spiritual things. God gives them up to a mind in which the divine distinctions of right and wrong are confused and lost, so that God's condemnation cannot help but fall on them at last.

Verse **19** goes on to tell us that when persons become lascivious, they "*work all uncleanness with greediness.*" The Greek word translated "*work,*" means to engage in some type of activity or behaviour with sustained interest and thus describes a pursuit. The word refers to employment, craft, profession, profit or gain. Paul's use of the word here paints a horrible picture of lost humanity actually making a business of every kind of moral uncleanness! Those who are "*past feeling*" work hard at their vileness. They make a career out of "*all uncleanness!*"

The word "*all*" is a translation of the Greek word **Πας** which means all without exception. This is a striking way to describe their uncleanness; it indicates that they traffick in moral uncleanness in the widest sense.

The word "*uncleanness,*" is a translation of the Greek word, **akatharsia: (ak-ath-ar-see'-ah)**. **Akatharsia** is a broad term referring to moral uncleanness in thought, word, and deed. It refers to uncleanness that is internal as well as external. It describes a state of moral impurity, especially sexual sin. It refers to filth or refuse.

The word **akatharsia** suggests especially that it defiles those who participate in it, making them unsuitable for any sacred purpose. It is used in the **Septuagint**, (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to refer to anything that made a person unfit to go to the temple and appear before God. It was a general term often used of decaying matter, like the contents of a grave. In **Matthew 23:27**, our Lord used the word to describe the rottenness of decaying bodies in a tomb. In short **akatharsia** describes an immoral filthiness on the inside resulting in lawless acts of immorality on the outside.

The phrase “*with greediness*,” describes the condition or frame of mind in which persons, who are unsaved, practice their uncleanness. They are not merely indulging in moral impurity but they are indulging in it with a greedy desire to have more, a graphic picture of the insatiable nature of sinful desire. It describes the insatiable desire of unclean, immoral persons to have more, with no regard for the person or property of others. Such persons get what they want no matter what methods they use, and no matter whom they hurt. They are willing to do almost anything in an attempt to gratify their flesh.

The Greek word translated here as “*greediness*,” is translated as “*covetousness*” 9 times in the **King James Version** of the New Testament. In **Colossians 3:5**, Paul writes, “*Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*” Idolatry is the worship of another, rather than God, and is often associated with fleshly sins.

Persons whose understanding has been darkened, and who are alienated from the life of God, are in a state of being past feeling. As a consequence, they are of such a character that they give themselves willfully over to wanton sensuality, in order that they might practice every kind of uncleanness with an unbridled greedy desire.

Commenting on **Ephesians 4:19**, **Ray Stedman** made the following remarks:

"Why is moral licentiousness so rampant? Why are our standards so constantly deteriorating? It is because men are futile in their thinking; it is because of this shadowed thinking, this incompleteness, this ignorance from which men operate, even the best of them, even the finest of minds, unredeemed, unregenerated.

But the good news of the gospel is that God reaches even these kind of people. He draws and softens and melts. The amazing love of Christ penetrates even the hardness of men's hearts. Therefore, we are not to blame people like this, or to withdraw from them. We are to remember that we, too, had the same mind, the same outlook on life. As Paul says in **Colossians 1:21**, '*...you who once were estranged and hostile in mind,*' that is the way we thought too, until God's love reached us. So we are not to be judgmental, not to be hard and harsh toward these who think this way. This is the basic condition of humanity to which the gospel makes its appeal.

Now the apostle goes on to trace one other thing. The only hope of helping these people is to demonstrate a wholly different pattern of thought, a wholly different set of values. The implication is clear that if we live like the world lives, even though we are Christians, there is not a thing we can do to help them, not a thing!

You remember the story of the boy who thought he would teach some sparrows to sing like a canary, so he put them in a cage with the canary, hoping the canary would teach them to sing. In a few days he found the canary chirping like the sparrows. This is always the case, is it not? If we give ourselves to the attitudes and ways of thinking of those around us, we will inevitably do the same things, there is no avoiding it. The only way to help them is to demonstrate a completely different level of life."

We will conclude this Lesson with **The Message** translation of **Ephesians 4:17-19**: "*And so I insist—and God backs me up on this—*

that there be no going along with the crowd, the empty-headed, mindless crowd. They've refused for so long to deal with God that they've lost touch not only with God but with reality itself. They can't think straight anymore. Feeling no pain, they let themselves go in sexual obsession, addicted to every sort of perversion."