

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

(LESSON SIXTY-ONE)

“HAVE WE TRULY LEARNED CHRIST?”

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 **Lesson 37**, when we commenced our examination of chapter **4**, we made the following opening remarks:

"With chapter 4, we come to an important dividing point in this letter. The first three chapters contain **doctrinal instruction**, the last three chapters contain **exhortation**. This is always the proper order, for it is in doctrine that believers are informed about their exalted position in Christ, which alone makes the exhortation to live holy lives a reasonable one. It is in doctrine that believers become aware of all the resources of grace that they possess, which alone can enable them to obey the exhortation...Persons must first know who they are **in Christ** before they are told how they ought to live **for Christ**. Paul was acutely aware of this. All of his letters contain a beautiful balance between doctrine and duty, and Ephesians is the perfect example.

Accordingly, in the first half of the letter (chapters 1-3), Paul informs the Ephesian Christians about what God has accomplished for them in Christ, and as a result, all that they have become in Christ, as well as the resources that He has placed at their disposal to help them to live victorious Christian lives.

In the second half of the letter (chapters 4-6), he exhorts the saints living in Ephesus, to conduct their lives in a manner which would demonstrate that they understood and appreciated all that God had done for them in Christ, all that they had become in Christ, and all the spiritual resources that were now at their disposal.

In effect, God says to us in chapters 1-3, "I have made you a saint." In chapters 4-6, He says, "Now, since that is the case, live a saintly life."

In chapters 1-3 of the epistle, Paul highlights the wonder of what it means for an individual to be "**in Christ Jesus**." In chapters 4-6, he highlights what it means for an individual to be "**in Christ Jesus**" in **Ephesus**."

The Table set out hereunder will assist us to better appreciate the harmony and balance of this precious letter.

In EPHESIANS 1-3, Paul emphasizes:	In EPHESIANS 4-6, He emphasizes:
Doctrine	Duty
The Finished Work of Christ	The Faithful Walk of the Believer
The Position of the Believer	The Practice of the Believer
Our Spiritual Wealth	Our Spiritual Walk
The Believer's Privileges	The Believer's Responsibilities
How God Sees Us in Christ	How the World Sees Christ in Us
Our Heavenly Standing	Our Earthly Walk
The Believer's Identity	The Believer's Obligation
The Work of Christ For Us And In Us	The Work of God Through Us

In our recent Lessons, we have made the point 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. We have also noted that, beginning with verse **17**, he deals with the matter of the believer's relationship with the unbelieving world in which he or she lives. In verse **17** 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.

In verse **18**, he 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."*

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."*

In these verses, Paul paints a graphic picture of the wretched and hopeless condition of lost humanity!

On Sunday September 7, 1986, the American theologian and Pastor, **John Piper**, Preached a sermon at **Bethlehem Baptist Church** in Minneapolis, Minnesota, entitled *"Escape from Futility."* His text was taken from **Ephesians 4:17-21**, the very passage we have been looking at recently. In his sermon, Pastor Piper made the following comments:

"It [the passage] begins with a very penetrating analysis of the hardness and darkness and ignorance and corruption and futility of the human heart. Why does he [Paul] do this? Because it's so important that the root of our problem be recognized. There is no point in going on in this text and telling people how to manage their anger (**4:26**) and their money (**4:28**) and their sexuality (**5:3**) and their time (**5:16**) and their tongue (**4:29**) if you don't help them to know and heal the disease that turns all these things into futility.

If we want to escape from futility in the practical affairs and relationships of our daily lives, we have to first of all become deep people—people who look deeply within ourselves for the cause of our futility, and who don't settle for quick fixes and superficial, upbeat attitude changes. We don't want the surgeon to keep back anything! Tell us everything you found, God! We want to be healed. We want to be free from the very root of futility.

So in **4:17-19** we get the surgeon's report on the human heart. *'Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live [literally: walk] as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; they*

are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart; they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness.'

This is what God sees when he looks into the human heart. Until we see this clearly and agree that this is what we are by nature, we probably will be healed very lightly and very superficially, and the disease will break out more easily, and we will wonder why our external cleanup operations so consistently fail. We haven't seen the real disease and haven't severed the root of our futility."

Brothers and sisters, the truth is that apart from Jesus Christ, we are all dead in trespasses and sin, and are unable to save ourselves. If we are to be delivered from this state of condemnation, our Creator must resurrect our souls by His grace, thereby allowing us to lay hold, by faith, on the righteousness of Christ, which alone can give us a right standing before God.

It is important for us to understand that Paul's exhortation to "*walk not as other Gentiles walk,*" is not a mandate to avoid unsaved persons or to reject everything they enjoy. Rather, it is an exhortation to fulfill God's original mandate to Israel to avoid the sins of the unbelieving nations among whom they lived. Whenever we commit sin, we violate God's moral law. When we live like unsaved persons do, we deny the law of God written on our hearts and foolishly choose darkness over light.

Sin affects our entire being, including our ability to love, our capacity to reason, and our physical bodies. The longer we persist in sin, the more difficult it is for us to see and do the will of God, so we must endeavour never to yield to temptation. Growth in the grace of Christ makes us increasingly willing to stand firm against ungodliness, but we make ourselves more susceptible to the influence of sin the longer we indulge it.

People should be able to see a difference between a believer and an unbeliever because of the way the believer lives. Paul told the Ephesians to leave behind the old life of sin, since they were now followers of Christ. Living the Christian life is a process. Although as believers we have a new nature, we do not automatically think only pure thoughts nor do we always express the right attitudes. But if we keep listening to God and yielding to His Spirit, we will gradually be changed. Although change may be slow, it will come as we trust God to change us.

In verse **17-19**, Paul presents the “**old man.**” He shows to us the persons we were before we were saved. In verses **20-32**, he will present the “**new man,**” the persons that we are to be, in light of the fact that we have experienced the saving power of God. It is to this “**new man**” that we now turn our attention.

In verse **20** Paul writes, “*But ye have not so learned Christ.*” Paul is here making an emphatic contrast between the saved Gentiles in Ephesus, and the unsaved Gentiles who were still living in paganism. Let us recall his statement in verse **17**: “*So I say this, and insist in the Lord, **that you no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking***” (**New English Translation**). The implication of the phrase, “*that you no longer live,*” is that some of the believers in Ephesus had in fact drifted back into their old unregenerate ways and were living like unsaved persons. Paul is trying to correct their potentially destructive behaviour by correcting their defective **thinking**. He therefore begins by reminding them that they had been delivered from the moral sewer in which they had once wallowed.

Paul reinforces his admonition with an argument from the spiritual experience of his readers. Again the emphasis is on the **mind** of the believer. “*But ye have not so **learned** Christ.*” It is important for us to note that he did not say “But ye have not so learned **about** Christ,” because it is possible to learn about Christ and never learn Christ! It is possible to know about Christ and never be genuinely saved. To “learn Christ” means to have a personal relationship with Christ so that we

come to know Him with increasing intimacy. It is possible for us to learn about Julius Caesar by reading books about his life. But we can never “learn” him or know him because he is dead. But Jesus Christ is alive! Therefore, we can “learn Christ” and know Him through personal fellowship with Him.

Paul did not link Christian belief and behaviour and blessing to a principle or a practice. He linked them to a **person!** He did not link them to a creed or a code or to conduct. He linked them to **Christ!** The noted professor of New Testament exegesis and criticism **Marvin Vincent**, stated that the phrase “*learned Christ*,” does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament. He said that in verse **20**, “Christ does not stand for the doctrine of Christ; but Christ is the subject of His own message.”

Brothers and sisters, it is vitally important for us to understand and appreciate that Christianity is not merely “about Christ.” Christianity is Christ!

The word “*learned*,” is a translation of the Greek word **manthanó**: (**man-than’-o**), which means “to gain knowledge or skill by instruction.” It conveys a basic meaning of directing one’s mind to something and producing an external effect. Depending on the context, the learning can be through instruction, through inquiry, through practice or experience, or as achieving understanding. The idea is to genuinely understand a teaching, accept it as true, **and to apply it to one’s life.** The individual who is not applying what they have learned **about** Christ, has not yet “learned Christ.” It is the application of the teaching that makes all the difference.

When did the Ephesian believers “learn Christ?” The words are in a construction in the Greek which marks a specific time, which would equate with the time of their conversion. They did not learn to follow Christ by the natural mental processes that customarily lead to the degradation of unsaved Gentiles. They learned to follow Him as His

disciples from the Gospel. The Gospel teaches men and women to renounce sin and immorality and to cultivate holiness and integrity. Before they had heard the Gospel, the Gentiles in the Church at Ephesus had known nothing about Jesus Christ. Now they had not only learned about Him, they had learned Him! **Christ** was the totality of the instruction that they had received, and **Christ** was the knowledge that they had gained at the time of their conversion. It was Paul himself who had preached the “Gospel of the grace of God” to them and as far as Paul was concerned, **Jesus Christ was the Gospel!** In **1 Corinthians 1:22-24** he wrote,

22 For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom:

*23 But we preach **Christ** crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness;*

*24 But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, **Christ** the power of God, and the wisdom of God.*

And in **2 Corinthians 1:22-24** he wrote,

1 And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God.

*2 For I determined not to know any thing among you, save **Jesus Christ, and him crucified.***

Paul says in effect to the believers in Ephesus: “Your minds are no longer darkened; your lives are no longer alienated from the life of God; your hearts are no longer hardened and impure. You have learned Christ. Christ is the Subject of your learning and He is your area of interest and activity. You have come out from the world, and you are to show the world an example of the heavenly life that you possess. You are no longer to live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. Your lives now have a purpose and that purpose is Christ. You must

henceforth live your lives for the glory of God. **Since you have learned Christ, live Christ!**”

In verse **21** Paul writes, *“If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus.”* The **King James Version** translates *“if”* as the conditional particle of a hypothetical case. This is misleading because it is a particle of a fulfilled condition. The translation should read: *“If as is the case,”* or *“since.”* In other words, what follows is not in any doubt but is taken for granted. The Ephesian believers had in fact heard Christ and had been taught by Him concerning the truth.

The Ephesians had heard Christ. The word *“heard,”* is the translation of a Greek word which means *“to hear with attention, to hear effectively.”* It refers to hearing with the *“ear of the mind”* so as to respond appropriately to what has been spoken or taught.

Why do some persons hear the message of the Gospel and respond positively, while others, who hear the same message do not respond positively? In **John 8:46-47**, Jesus gives us some insight into who will listen, hear and heed the Gospel and who will not. The **New English Translation** renders the verses as follows:

46 Who among you can prove me guilty of any sin? If I am telling you the truth, why don't you believe me?

*47 **The one who belongs to God** listens and responds to God's words. You don't listen and respond, **because you don't belong to God.***”

In **John 10:24-28**, John records for us an encounter between our Lord and the Jewish religious leaders which is particularly instructive. The **New English Translation** renders the passage in the following way:

24 The Jewish leaders surrounded him and asked, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.”

25 Jesus replied, "I told you and you do not believe. The deeds I do in my Father's name testify about me.

*26 But you refuse to believe **because you are not my sheep.***

*27 **My sheep listen to my voice,** and I know them, and they follow me.*

28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one will snatch them from my hand.

The American theologian, **J. Vernon McGee**, writes that "If anyone is not listening to Jesus, then Jesus must not be his Savior. The Lord Jesus is the Shepherd and His sheep hear His voice. If you haven't heard His voice, then you are not one of His sheep. What will change the Gentiles from their old nature? What are they to do? They are to listen to Christ. They are to hear Him. They are to be taught by Him. Those who are not His sheep will not hear Him."

Let us explore this matter of hearing, or not hearing a little further, by reading **Romans 10:13-21**, as translated by the **New English Translation**.

13 For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

14 How are they to call on one they have not believed in? And how are they to believe in one they have not heard of? And how are they to hear without someone preaching to them?

15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How timely is the arrival of those who proclaim the good news."

16 But not all have obeyed the good news, for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?"

17 Consequently faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the preached word of Christ.

18 But I ask, have they not heard? Yes, they have: Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.

19 But again I ask, didn't Israel understand? First Moses says, "I will make you jealous by those who are not a nation; with a senseless nation I will provoke you to anger."

20 And Isaiah is even bold enough to say, "I was found by those who did not seek me; I became well known to those who did not ask for me."

21 But about Israel he says, "All day long I held out my hands to this disobedient and stubborn people!"

In the context of hearing and faith, let us consider two passages, **1 Thessalonians 3:1-2** and **Ephesians 2:8-10**. We will read both from the **New English Translation**.

1 Thessalonians 3:1-2

1 Finally, pray for us, brothers and sisters, that the Lord's message may spread quickly and be honored as in fact it was among you,

*2 and that we may be delivered from perverse and evil people. **For not all have faith.***

Ephesians 2:8-10

*8 For by grace you are saved through faith, **and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God;***

9 it is not from works, so that no one can boast.

*10 **For we are his creative work,** having been created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared beforehand so we can do them.*

In the first passage Paul informs us that faith is **not** possessed by every individual. In the second passage he implies that saving faith **does not** inhere in any individual. In other words it is **not** intrinsic to human

beings. Saving faith is “*the gift of God.*” This means that the only way an unsaved person can be “born–again” is if God gives them **the gift** of faith which allows them to “*hear*” the Gospel!

Brothers and sisters, Paul tells us that the Ephesian believers had not only “*heard*” Christ, but they also had been “*taught*” by him. The word “*taught*” is a translation of the Greek word **didaskó: (did-as’-ko)**, which means, “to teach, instruct, or impart knowledge.” The word literally means, “to cause to learn.” In the New Testament, the word nearly always refers to teaching the Scriptures, the written Word of God in a group setting.

The word **Didaskó** means to teach students in such a way that the will of the students become conformed to the teaching taught. In other words, the teacher’s instruction is so effectual that it results in the transformation of the students. As they are taught, the students change their minds saying in essence “I have to change the way I view things and the way I think and operate based on the doctrine that is being taught.”

Brothers and sisters, the doctrine that we are taught determines our direction. Effective Scriptural instruction does not merely provide information. It challenges, inspires and transforms. It gives rise to men and women who are increasingly being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, and are increasingly living in responsive obedience to the will of God. In short, it makes disciples.

Teaching is especially the responsibility of church leaders. The New English translation renders **1 Timothy 3:1-2** as follows:

1 This saying is trustworthy: “If someone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a good work.”

*2 The overseer then must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, **an able teacher.***

It is to be noted that Paul does not say “You have heard **about** Christ, and have been taught **about** Christ.” He says, “You have heard **Him** and have been taught **by Him**.” “Him” is emphatic. It was **Christ** that the Ephesians had heard and it was **by Christ** that they had been taught. Paul is certainly not implying that they had seen and heard Jesus Christ in person. They had not seen or heard Him in the flesh, but they had seen and heard Him in the Apostle Paul. Paul is implying that Christ Himself speaks in those who proclaim the truth concerning Him. As our Lord said in **John 10:27**, “*My sheep hear my voice.*”

Paul informs us that, “*the truth is in Jesus.*” The word “*truth*” is a translation of the Greek word **alétheia**: (**al-ay’-thi-a**) which means “truth.” It refers to “the reality lying at the basis of an appearance; the manifested, veritable essence of a matter.” In ancient Greek culture, the word **alétheia** was synonymous for reality as the opposite of illusion. When Paul writes that the truth is **in** Jesus, he is testifying to the fact that ultimate reality is embodied in Jesus Christ. He is the personification of truth. Our Lord said as much in **John 14:6** when He declared, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.*” In other words, truth apart from the Person of Christ has very little power or efficacy.

Brothers and sisters, truth is the conformity between a reality and a declaration which professes to set it forth. To say it another way, words are true when they are consistent with objective reality. Persons and things are true when they correspond with their profession. Hence a truth is a declaration which has corresponding reality, or a reality which is correctly set forth. Since God is Himself the great reality, that which correctly sets forth His nature is pre-eminently the Truth.

Truth is the property of being in accord with fact or reality as defined by God. Whatever God says is Truth. Truth is a person, Jesus Christ.

It is to be noted that Paul uses the historical name “Jesus” rather than the official name “Christ.” He does so in this context because the life of Christianity consists in the believer’s fellowship with the historic Jesus,

the **human being** Jesus. The name “Jesus” takes us back to His life on earth, since that is His name in Incarnation, according to **Matthew 1:21**. In that wonderfully sinless life which He lived as a Man on the earth, we see the very opposite of the walk of the Gentiles which Paul has urged the believers to forsake.

We conclude this **Lesson** with a lengthy quote from **Ray Stedman**:

“In Christ, you have a different principle of living, a different way of thinking. In Christ, you have the truth by which you can test everything else, the truth as it is in Jesus. That is a wonderful phrase. That ought to form the basic concept of all Christian thinking. You have found in Jesus Christ the truth, the simple truth: About life, about yourself, about the world, about the makeup of science and nature, about human behavior. “In him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” (**Colossians 2:3**). You have found in Christ the truth. I wish to stress that, for this is the point the apostle is making.

The Lord Jesus said these challenging words. ‘If any man follow me, he shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life,’ (**John 8:12**). That means a Christian does not need to walk in uncertainty about things, in lack of knowledge. It means that, in Christ, we have the truth that reveals. It is popular today to think that nothing can be known for sure. That is part of the futility of the world's thinking, to think that there are no final answers, no ultimate knowledge, no ultimate truth. Recently I heard even a Christian pastor say that all knowledge must at last be reduced to the tentative, we can only think we know but we never know for sure. Now Christianity repudiates that concept utterly. The New Testament denies that. Christ has come that we might know... We do not know everything, but what we do know, we know. Christ said to his disciples, ‘If you continue in my word ... you shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free,’ (**John 8:31b, 8:32**). That is what the truth always does, it sets men free. Truth, even though it is hard

truth, difficult truth, is realistic and therefore it sets us free and tears away the veils of illusion...

The world knows quite a bit of truth, but the point is, it is so intermingled with error that it is indistinguishable until you lay it alongside the truth as it is in Jesus. That is the only measuring stick we have. How can you tell what is true? How can you tell what is wrong? How can you tell what is error? There is only one way, the truth as it is in Jesus. That truth is always to the point, it is purposeful, it leads to significant, useful, appropriate living. It is this the apostle is stressing. We must learn to test all our thinking by what the Lord Jesus has revealed, either directly himself or indirectly through the apostles whom he has sent to tell us the truth: The truth as it is in Jesus...

The truth is revealed in Jesus, therefore we reject all philosophies that urge the necessity of 'getting even' as a way of living with one another. We reject all philosophy that says that trials are tragic occurrences for which we ought to feel sorry for ourselves, and act as though we have been offended when they come into our lives as though we had been specially singled out for difficulty. We are to remember, in the light of the truth as it is in Jesus, that these trials and sufferings are part of the program, part of God's ministering to us, part of that which it takes to make us what God wants us to be.

We are to reject the common philosophy of the day that others are to blame for our weaknesses, that if we lived in different circumstances, with different people and had to face different problems, we could be different. The truth as it is in Jesus says that there is adequacy in Christ for any situation, any place; that God has put you where you are because he wants you to live the Christian life right there; that those around you will never have the chance to see the tremendous, revolutionary difference that being a Christian makes unless they see it in your life right where you are right now.

That is where we are to begin to live, and this is why Paul says we 'must no longer live as the *Gentiles* do,' in the emptiness of their minds, for we 'did not so learn Christ.' There are resources in him far greater than any worldling every dreamed of. There are possibilities of fruitfulness and glory and grace in Jesus Christ which, if they begin to manifest themselves in your life, will set your neighbors and friends saying, 'What has this person got?' 'What kind of a faith is this?' 'What do these people have that makes them able to live like this?' Now, that is the challenge the apostle sets before us.

In the rest of this chapter he will detail it for us in specifics, bringing it right down where we live. As we go through this, we shall see that what we do is itself witnessing, telling what we are. Therefore, *what we are* must be *what Christ is*, for that is the only life that arrests and changes and challenges men.'