

Non-Gentile living

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[0:00] Open your Bibles at our passage for this evening.! You need to sit down and think, what might go wrong?

And in a sense, that's what Paul is doing in this passage we've got this evening. Paul's been explaining God's big project to unite the nations under Christ.

As we read earlier, as we saw earlier, this is a multicultural project. It explained in chapter 1 and expanded in chapter 3 that the nations, the Gentiles, the non-Jews, Christians individually, and the nations together, are to be united in Christ, as he said in Ephesians 1 verse 10, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment, to bring all things in heaven and on earth together, under one head, even Christ.

So Paul has been at pains to explain both the theology of this and what it means on the ground, and in the closing chapters he's going to go on to explain how it works out in practice.

But in today's passage, as I say, he does the risk assessment. What's the main threat to this project, to God's purpose? And this isn't just a theoretical exercise.

[1:55] We need to think of that, remind ourselves of that. Paul is aware that it could all go horribly wrong, because it did in Corinth. Perhaps he has reason to believe it might do so in Ephesus as well.

If we look at Revelation, we know that there were some problems in the Ephesian church, although it's not entirely clear from Revelation what they were. But we don't know exactly what the issue was. It's just described in Revelation as having lost their first love. But still, it is clear that it can go wrong for a particular church. Ultimately, no doubt, God's purpose cannot be frustrated.

God will make his promises good and bring his project to completion. But still, if we look in both scripture and history, we know that for individual, local and national churches, for denominations and groupings, things can most definitely go bad.

And so here, Paul tries to put his, well, he does put his finger on the problem. And he identifies it as Gentile thinking.

[3:10] In chapter 4, verse 17, you must no longer live as the Gentiles do in the futility of their thinking.

By incorporating Gentiles and Gentile culture into the church, that necessarily, inevitably, I suppose, means that Gentile thinking comes in too.

In a sense, this is part of the point, the glory of the nations are to be brought into the city. But if these ways of thinking are not taken captive for Christ, then the result will be a disaster.

And so Paul warns the Ephesians, and through them he warns us, against the danger, what we need to beware of, how it could all, as I say, go horribly wrong.

Let me remind you that when he talks about Gentiles, what he really means is the nations. And again, it's the same Greek word again, ethnos, nations in terms of their culture and values and community.

[4:23] And this whole passage is pretty much all about the mind. It may surprise us, in a sense, if we had done the risk assessment, we might not have started with the mind, with the way we think.

But that's what Paul says is the root of the problem. It's Gentile thinking. Because that affects the way we behave. And the passage divides fairly naturally into three sections.

So I'll just go through it in those three sections. It starts in verses 17 to 24, for the need for a change of spirit, is actually what the Greek says, pneumos, it gets various translations, it says attitude in the NIV, but the literal word there is spirit.

And that has two parts to it. First of all, he describes that futile thinking in verses 17 to 19, and then he goes on to talk about re-education.

And then he, in verses 25 to 29, he gives some practical implications and applications of this, so it makes it easy for me. I don't have to think out the applications.

[5:34] It's all done for me here. And what are they? Notice the therefore, by the way, in verse 25. These applications do follow from what's gone before.

It's not just a new tack. What are they? Falsehood, unrighteous anger, stealing, and unwholesome talk. And so we'll say a little bit about those.

And then in the last few verses, we get this glorious Trinitarian summary in 4.30 through to 5, verse 2. So it's the structure's all pretty much done for me here, so we'll just go through and look at these passages in turn.

So first of all, Paul reminds us that we need a change of mind or of attitude, or as I say, most literally in fact, a change of spirit.

And he says, the problem is that Gentiles' thinking is futile. Notice it's not that the Gentiles don't think. Of course they do.

[6:47] Greeks came up with some good ideas like mathematical proof and democracy. The Romans were good at military engineering. Lots of things, good ideas the Gentiles had come up with.

It's not that they're not thinking. It's just that, in the end, it doesn't get them where they want to go. So Paul wrote in, is it Corinthians, isn't it?

He wrote the following. Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

So in our current passage here, Paul is talking about a similar thing from perhaps a slightly different viewpoint. In a few lines, he puts his finger on the problem and sets out the cure.

[7:49] So let's look first of all at the problem. And basically he says the problem is that Gentile thinking is futile. It doesn't get you anywhere, or at least it doesn't get you anywhere useful.

It's a moral and intellectual cul-de-sac. It may appear to offer wisdom and it may even have some useful insights, but in the end, it always ends up contradicting itself.

If your moral compass points to yourself, then you're going to go around in circles, aren't you? What uses a compass that always points to where you are? In the end, it always ends up contradicting itself, whether in abstract philosophical terms or practical moral terms.

The result is always contradiction. We see this in every attempt to construct a moral philosophy independently of God. So we could look at some modern attempts.

Richard Dawkins wrote a book on the selfish gene and claims that on the one hand that we are the result of our genes, that we are bound by them, and then in the same sentence that we can choose to be free of them.

[9:05] That is nonsense in the most basic sense of the word. Richard Vincent's favorite quote from Dawkins. He quotes that passage.

It is literally nonsense. Either we are the product of our genes and our intellectual activities have no real meaning at all, or they're not.

They have some different significance. You can't have it both ways, and yet that's exactly what Richard Dawkins tries to do. What about political correctness?

Well, I've said this before, but I'll say it again. political correctness claims to be based on inclusivism, multiculturalism, tolerance. But what happens in the end?

It repudiates all dissent, doesn't it? You disagree with the liberal elite at your peril. No platform.

[10:05] Again, I've said before, when I was a student, we demonstrated against the university authorities for trying to suppress freedom of speech. Now it's the other way around. The authorities complain that the students are suppressing freedom of speech.

No freedom of speech because you might offend someone. But of course, actually, when you look at what they really mean by that, is that you might offend me. Where does this come from?

Well, it comes really from the Garden of Eden. But in the West, it comes perhaps from Descartes. Descartes was not himself an atheist.

In fact, he was an Orthodox Catholic. But if you start, as Descartes did, with self, and saying, I think, therefore I am, in the end, you'll end up questioning whether you really do think and whether you exist in any sense other than as a brute machine.

Human reason on its own cannot give rise to a truly moral behavior. I think if one can't prove that mathematically, one can certainly say on the basis of any empirical evidence that that's the case.

[11:29] Nobody's managed to do it. It's not that human reason is as bad as it could be or that people are as bad as they might be. The problem is simply that human reason starts with the worship of self.

And if you start with the worship of self, in the end, you always land up contradicting yourself.

Worship self and your God is not up to the job.

Worship self and in the end, only self interest matters. That might not be where you start. And that's the thing that Paul is talking about here, isn't it? He says that they, not that they started with no sensitivity, but the way they're thinking means they lose moral sensitivity.

You may well do charitable things, but in the end, you find you're only doing them because it makes you feel good. And the problem then is that if some other sort of behavior makes other people feel good, then you've got no argument against them.

The whole program is flawed from the outset. Whether it's abstract philosophy, epimenides, paradox, Gerard's theorem, or whether it's practical morality, you always land up contradicting yourself in the end.

[12:55] God's mind. So I thought I'd do some work on application, not just take it straight out of the text. I thought I'd look at one example, which is not one actually that Paul deals with.

But let's look at the question of marriage. The question people like to ask nowadays is does this marriage work?

That's a legitimate question. And does this marriage work for me is a legitimate question as well.

But they're very different questions.

And what's worse is that the answer depends on the order you ask them. Because if you ask, does this marriage work first, you're asking whether the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

Whether you and your partner are being made into something that is better than the two individuals.

And if you then ask, does it work for me, you will then ask, am I being made into something better?

[14:13] And then if your answer to either question is no, the next question is then what do I need to do to make it work? And only as a last resort will you give up on it. But what happens if you ask the questions in the reverse order?

A whole different dynamic takes over, doesn't it? Of course, if you start by asking, does this marriage work for me, then what do you mean by that question?

You mean, is it contributing to my sense of self? Is it meeting my emotional and sexual needs? And if you hear what people in the media and dramas and so on talk about when they ask that sort of question, that seems to be what they're actually asking.

Not am I being made into something better, but am I getting what I need, what I deserve, what I want out of this marriage? is it contributing to my sense of self and meeting my emotional and sexual needs?

And then either answer then is dangerous, because if you answer yes, that means your partner in the marriage has been reduced to the role of a servant, somebody who's there to reflect you, and if you answer no, then the next question is how can I get out of it then?

[15:44] If you start with the question about self, then you're in trouble right at the start, whereas if you ask the same two questions the other way around, you may come to an entirely different conclusion.

Where you start matters. Nowadays when you're travelling, where you start doesn't matter. I can put the app where I want to get to in my app, and it says, you're going from current location, you click on current location, and it will give you a route to get there.

The old country bumpkin thing, you can't get hit there from here, doesn't apply anymore. I can get from here to any point in the world if I need to. Some might take longer than others, but we'll get

there eventually, we'll get the route mapped out for us.

But when it comes to thinking, it doesn't work like that at all. It very much matters where you start, because it is indeed true for some destinations, you can't get there from here.

If you start in the wrong place, you won't arrive at the right place. so how does Paul talk about this? He describes it as a hardening in verse 18, a callous.

[17:09] The Greek word means something like a callous, a sort of bony growth that reduces sensitivity, and as in English, it's used also metaphorically to talk about a callous of the heart.

We talk about people being callous if they lost sensitivity to other people. Don't care about what other people feel. And that's pretty much what Paul is saying here.

If we focus on self, then eventually we'll become closed in like a shell. Eventually, we might not start there, but eventually other people will cease to matter except as characters in our drama.

And the result of this reasoning is what Paul says is ignorance. Agnosticism. Ignorance not just about God, but about everything.

But this is a very special sort of ignorance. It's not the ignorance of somebody who's been brought up as a desert island and has never gone to school. That sort of ignorance you can deal with fairly easily.

[18:22] You teach them to read and you give them evening classes or whatever and some books to read and you can cure that sort of ignorance.

But the sort of ignorance that Paul is talking about is a dead end. It's the ignorance that comes in a sense not from not thinking but from thinking too much.

Thinking yourself into the wrong place. And what you land up with is as Paul says ignorance agnosticism lack of knowledge in the end about anything let alone about God.

Self contradiction always gets you in the end. There's a destruction of any meaning whether it's moral or intellectual. And as one humorist put it on those words of Descartes said I think therefore I am I think that's exactly where it takes you now I'm not so sure.

I used to think I was the most skeptical person in the world but now I'm not so sure. So Paul is not claiming that all Gentiles are as bad as they could be.

[19:40] What he's saying is that the destination to which the worship of self will ultimately take you is self destruction. In Ephesus they'd made a goddess Diana but that was a goddess in their own image.

It's very much true of the Greek gods and goddesses that they were humans writ large weren't they? They were no moral guidance. They made a goddess in their own image and they worshipped that.

But in the West we'd taken this one step further. Why bother with the middle man? Why bother with the middle god? In the West now we worship self directly.

We don't even set up a separate image to worship. We worship self directly. And of course there are many in the world who maintain the need for moral standards for loving others.

The problem is that they can give no rational reason for doing so. And I think we need to be clear on this point. The world often accuses us of abandoning reason.

[20:52] But Francis Schaeffer wrote a book called *Escape from Reason* and it's worth reading although it's rather dated now. But he's right. It is the world that's escaping from reason, not the church.

Come let us reason together says the Lord. God. Faith is entirely reasonable and we should reason about it. That's exactly what the Bible tells us to do.

To seek wisdom, to seek understanding. But make reason the ultimate, worship reason itself and eventually reason takes over.

Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. if I live in a universe in which I'm my own God then the only thing that matters is me and in the end not even that matters.

As the teacher put it in Ecclesiastes he has made everything beautiful in its time. This is God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

[22:10] Start with self-worship and you end up knowing nothing. And you end up with no moral sense. So if the problem is faulty thinking what's the solution?

Well obviously education or perhaps we should say re-education. what is required as we said is a different mindset a different spirit and as I said it's not an end to reason as I wrote come let us reason together says the Lord though your sins are like scarlet they shall be white as snow though they're red as crimson they shall be like wool but what is required is this change of attitude or more literally in the Greek a change of spirit so how are we to get that how do we get that well conversion I suppose can be described in a variety of ways and categories but here Paul describes it in terms of knowledge did you notice that in verses 20 and 21 he says when you heard about Christ what did you learn all the words in verse 20 and 21 are school words words about education what did you learn about

Christ what did you learn Christ what is required then is truth and wholeness and integrity and uprightness but that's not the kind of education that leaves you thinking you know more than you actually do because that kind of truth is ultimately self-defeating and self-contradicting and futile it's the knowledge of Christ the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and so what is required is a change so fundamental that Paul describes it in verse 22 as putting on a new person he says as it were you need a personality transplant because the old person is terminally sick and that's what we get when we learn Christ that's why we talk about new birth of course but still the old person tends to fight back and how does he do that he does it by trying to skew the way we think corrupting our desires trying to make us go back to the old ways of thinking and so we need constantly to check our attitudes are we living by the renewed spirit or are we grieving the holy spirit verse 30

Paul is writing to Christians here remember he's not doing the evangelistic sermon here he's saying that live up to what you have already learned and he's reminding them to get back sometimes to first principles to basics make sure that you're still living in a way and thinking in a way that's consistent with what you learned when you started so we need to be consciously and continually putting on the new person verse 24 the words refer to like a change of clothing a change of style in one sense that seems a little slightly weak metaphor but you can see why he says it you've got to consciously do it you've got to take off the old stuff don't try and wash it bin it and you've got to put on the new lifestyle like changing your clothes the old stuff's had it it's worn out it's dead it's filthy you can't just wash it and try again you've got to have a complete new suit as prophet

Zechariah said to Joshua the high priest your clothes are just filthy rags but the Lord will give you clean clothes so let's move on to these four practical implications so Paul is going to give four examples of how this change of attitude leads to a change of behaviour firstly in verse 25 it necessarily results in truth if our identity is found not in ourselves but in Christ and in his body in the relationships in the church relationships with God and with the Holy Spirit and with man then it simply makes no sense to try to undermine that body by falsehood whether within the church or outside it after all if your eyes or your ears are giving the wrong information or if your nerves are not transmitting that information properly then your whole body is going to be impaired isn't it ultimately it will be crippled it will cease to operate at all we do not function at full efficiency if our nervous system is not working properly and so what's to be done well first of all of course we need to stop telling lies but as

[28:01] Paul points out here that doesn't go far enough we need positively to speak truth and a particular kind of truth the truth that builds up and does not tear down if we are one body then to do anything else is simply self-harm isn't it and we all know that when a person starts harming themselves starts cutting their wrists or jabbing themselves with a razor blade that's an outside injury but we know that it points to something very wrong going on the inside of that person and that's true of the local church it's true of the church generally but particularly it's true of the local church if it starts harming itself then that's evidence there's something very wrong going on in the nervous system and in the mind of the church inside so we need to watch out for that and make sure that our nervous system as a church as it were is working properly that we are conveying truth to one another and doing it in the right way so that it builds up and does not tear down secondly

Paul moves on to this tricky issue of anger in verse 26 and we need to be careful here Paul is not saying that we should never be angry in fact actually it's partly a Greek way of saying things but the Greek here is actually an imperative it literally says be angry and do not sin after all Jesus was

angry on occasions wasn't he and yet he did not sin sometimes anger is the only appropriate response to a situation but it is dangerous anger provides an opportunity for the devil to get a foothold or as we might put it for the old man the old person to strike back the image of getting a foothold of course is perhaps one of a siege or maybe somebody might have to break into a house but it means if you have a chink in the wall then the enemy will exploit it there will be a foot in and it will be over the wall so we need to make sure we don't have a chink in the wall and if we are angry and when it's appropriate to be angry we need to be very careful we mustn't allow it to stew because if it does it will develop into something very different into violence or vengeance don't take it to bed with you is what

Paul says don't make it your bed companion don't make it the thing you lie awake thinking about with the right attitude this is possible but it's not easy so Paul says think clearly and handle anger particularly with care thirdly stealing verse 28 you might think this seems a bit of a change this isn't about the mind and the attitude at all is it it's about what you do until you look closely at what Paul actually says here because if you worship self then in the end stealing makes sense and the only question is how to get away with it ok you may not be mugging people in the street but are you stealing from your employer are you in the job just for the money and do as little as you can get away with and so

Paul says have a different attitude take a different viewpoint look at this business of earning money differently it's not a matter of stealing only points out it's not wrong to work for money far from it in fact that's a praiseworthy thing because actually it pays a double bonus that's what he says here isn't it you get a double bonus if you have this attitude why because first of all the work you're doing itself is useful that's what he says do something useful with your hands rather than something destructive and secondly you earn money and so you've got something to share after all if nobody earns any money how is the church ever going to give gifts to the needy earning money is a good thing if you do it to have something to share work is useful and the wages give you something to share with others instead of taking what is theirs so this is a matter of attitude of the way you think do you think work is there just to make me rich to see what I can get out of it or do you think work is firstly to do something useful and secondly what I do get out of it is to be shared with others it's all to do with your attitude to others if you worship self then stealing does make sense and the only question is how can I get away with it and fourthly he tells us to be careful what we say verse 29 why is that well because of course what you say betrays what you are thinking and it does that even if you don't mean it to and so if your talk is unwholesome

I'm not clear exactly what this means about an unwholesome talk it might mean sort of lewd or frivolous or it might mean gossipy talk talk but if it's unwholesome in any sense then what's that showing it's showing that the mind that is doing the speaking is unwholesome isn't it so it's unwholesome talk shows that the mind does not have the right attitude and so that's a check for you if you find that your talk is unwholesome check what you say and that will enable you to check what you're thinking won't it I mean we do basically think in language all of us do what we say checks what we're thinking is your attitude when you speak to benefit the listener or because you think they really want to hear you really want an audience for what we have to say so

[35:40] Paul is saying we need a change of attitude he calls it as living as children of light and then he finishes with this glorious trinitarian summary note how it is trinitarian in verses 430 through to 5 verse 2 depends on the three persons of the Godhead God has forgiven you he says if you have been forgiven and if God has forgiven you then you are in Christ because that forgiveness is found in Christ but if you're in Christ that means adopting that same forgiving attitude gratitude to others if there was one theme above all others that Jesus was always on about it was that wasn't it give us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and if we're in

Christ then we receive the Holy Spirit we've got a guest as it were and if we have a guest it's not very hospitable to make them feel uncomfortable is it you know if you have a guest you don't sort of go around well I don't know I can't give a good example perhaps but if you have a guest you want to welcome them you want to make them feel at home and that means to some extent ordering your household so that your guest feels at home and so that's what Paul tells us that we need to do we need to live in a way that does not grieve the Holy Spirit of course in the end that will be

self-defeating and so he points out there is stuff we need to get rid of bitterness the wrong kind of anger and fighting and really

I think the last bit sums it up basically he's saying you need to get rid of malice that view that thinks that you are important and wants to put other people down that's what malice is isn't it but instead there's a new lifestyle and it's one based on love which is the opposite of malice here the trouble is love can mean different things and there are different sorts of love and sometimes love is described as something that could be turned on and off but the sort of love that changes lives is this love that is the opposite of malice that seeks the good of the lovey if that's a word I don't know the one love there is to be loved love love that God has is one that seeks the good of the recipient of that love some kinds of love can be selfish and I talked about marriage earlier you can say oh I love my wife or husband but if that love is a selfish demanding love then it's that jealousy that is described in the Song of Solomon isn't it that can be fatal only if that love is set as a seal on the arm according to the law according to the right attitude is even love a useful thing but that love that is the opposite of malice that seeks the good of the loved one that benefits the listener that is the sort of love that God has and that is the sort of light the Holy Spirit brings and that's the sort of thinking that the spirit the change spirit I think translators are right in not to talk about the Holy Spirit earlier and they say you need a change of spirit but it is a spirit we need a change of spirit that brings it in line with the Holy Spirit and the spirit what is a spirit really it's more than an attitude really isn't it a spirit is the foundation of your thinking the way in which you think the sort of thinking that you do who knows what is in a man but the spirit that's within him says the scripture and that's right what is the spirit that's within us that is what we need to question it's not just a case of a new lifestyle imposed from the outside there is a new lifestyle yes that lifestyle comes from the inside out not from the outside in starts with a change of spirit a change of thinking and it starts with a delight in what God has said so don't be your own God don't be a child of darkness instead choose a new parent be imitators of God let me just read it be imitators of God therefore as dearly loved children and live a life of love what sort of love is it just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God that's the lifestyle that we need that's the thinking that we need that thinking that was in Christ who gave up his life for us so let's sing our final song which is a prayer for precisely that