

A spirituality that works ... at growth

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[0 : 00] A Psalm. O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.

The Lord has made known his salvation. He has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Break forth into joyous song and sing praises.

Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre and the lyre and the sound of the melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn, make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.

Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the world and those who dwell in it. Let the rivers clap their hands. Let the hills sing for joy together.

[0 : 59] Before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the people with equity. So the second reading is from Ephesians chapter 4, verses 17 to 32, and it's found on 1176 of the church Bibles.

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their minds. They're darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that's in them due to their hardness of heart.

They become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that's not the way you've learned Christ.

Assuming that you've heard about him and were taught in him as the truth is in Jesus. So the truth is, to put off your old self, which belongs to the former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.

And to be renewed in the spirit of your minds. And to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

[2 : 23] Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor. For we're members one of another.

Be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. And give no opportunity to the devil.

Let the thief no longer steal. But rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands. So that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths. But only such as is good for building up. As fits the occasion. That it may give grace to those who hear.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. By whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you.

[3 : 30] Along with all malice. Be kind to one another. Tender hearted. Forgiving one another. As God in Christ forgave you.

Tim, thanks very much indeed for reading for us. Please do keep the Bible open at Ephesians 4 on page 1176. As we continue our series of talks in Ephesians.

Why don't I pray for us as we begin and ask for God to speak to us as we listen to his word. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father we praise you very much that you are indeed the Lord God.

Thank you that you are a speaking God. And we pray this morning. We thank you for this enormous privilege. That we have of hearing your word read and preached.

And we pray therefore. Please would you help us to be attentive. And we pray that you would transform our hearts and minds. For Jesus sake. Amen. Well we're simply focusing this morning on Ephesians 4 verses 17 to 24.

[4 : 39] And the key verse is verse 17 if you have a look at it. Now this I say and testify in the Lord. That you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do.

In the futility of their minds. It raises the whole issue of change. Change and transformation. If I'm a follower of Jesus Christ. How do I change such that my life might be described as a walk that is worthy of Jesus Christ.

Because you see if we've been following our series in Ephesians. Then we'll know that Ephesians reminds us that we are heading for the day. When there will be an entirely new world. A new creation.

When everyone will recognize that Jesus Christ is Lord. That is the direction of travel for our universe. Indeed it's what the spiritual powers and authorities in the universe know to be true.

When they look at the church. As people of all different backgrounds. As people of all different backgrounds. Nationalities. Cultures. Personalities. All under the rule of Jesus.

[5 : 48] As the Apostle Paul puts it in chapter 3 verse 10. So that through the church. The manifold wisdom of God. Might now be made known to the rulers and authorities.

In the heavenly places. Which means of course that our lives tell a story. Individually. And corporately.

As church. Hence chapter 4 verse 17. And it's insistence that we no longer live like the world around us.

And instead that we live lives that demonstrate to the invisible powers and authorities in the universe that we cannot see. As well as to friends, neighbours, family, colleagues that we can see that Jesus Christ is indeed Lord.

The alternative. Well I guess the alternative was best summed up by an article in the Times in the autumn. Written by Rod Liddle. Describing the state of our national church as it bends over backwards to fit in with the culture.

[6 : 57] This is what he wrote. It is that the Church of England has shelved God. And replaced him with a vapid narrative. And fraudulent virtue signalling of the liberal elite.

And we can get all that stuff elsewhere. Thank you very much. What is he saying? No one listens to the church when it's like the world.

No one listens. No one listens. So change is a big issue for the Christian. But I suspect it's also a big issue for those here this morning who are not yet followers of Jesus as well.

Because of course time and time again, what stops people putting their trust in Jesus? Well time and time again, it's the thought that they cannot keep it up.

And they won't be able to walk in a manner that is worthy of Jesus if they were to put their trust in him. And if that is you, then this passage I think will help you to grasp the change dynamic that is at the very heart of the Christian life.

[8 : 08] You'll see there's an outline on the back of the service sheet. First of all, the need for change. Because everyone who has put their trust in Jesus is called to live a transformed life.

Remember it's how the second half of Ephesians begins. Chapter 4 verse 1. I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called.

That's the positive. Every positive, of course, has a negative. There's a flip side. And that is our verse, chapter 4 verse 17.

Now this I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do. In other words, as those who don't know Jesus do in the futility of their minds.

Now I presume that was the massive temptation for the Christians in Ephesus. To do, if you like, the spiritual splits. It's a reminder of the context of this letter.

[9 : 10] That just like in 21st century London, so in 1st century Ephesus, the world looked big, the world looked attractive. And the church of Jesus Christ looked small and unimpressive.

In Ephesians, in Ephesus in the 1st century, there were two enormous realities that you could see. The power of Rome, it was the second biggest city in the Roman Empire.

And the massive temple of Artemis, which dominated the whole city. And around which the cultural, religious, and political and social life of the city revolved. And yet, over and above those realities is one reality which we cannot see, and which they could not see.

Which is that Jesus Christ is Lord. And that is why Paul writes the letter. Hopefully chapter 3 verse 13 will be drilled into our heads by now.

It is so that they don't lose heart. But you see, what might losing heart look like? Well, presumably chapter 4 verse 17, living in a way that is indistinguishable from the world around.

[10 : 25] Just living like everyone else in Ephesus. Isn't that our temptation if we're followers of Jesus Christ? We lose heart.

We lose sight of the fact that Jesus is Lord. And as we do so, the world around us actually looks increasingly attractive. Isn't that how our hearts work?

One of the things I learnt to do last year was how not to get on a paddleboard.

Let me tell you how not to get on a paddleboard. It looked easy enough, I have to say. I was standing on a wooden jetty. And so with one foot on the jetty, I placed my other foot on the paddleboard.

Which, I have to say, looked as if it was going to be a reasonable thing to do. A paddleboard is bigger than a windsurfer. It's kind of fairly broad. It's fairly long. It looked fairly solid. And yet that was the point at which my lack of any formal educational qualification in physics revealed itself.

[11 : 30] And you can imagine exactly what happens. And if you want to know the story in more detail, then any of my children will be delighted to oblige.

Now that could not be more relevant to us in 21st century Britain. Because whereas 50 years ago the cultural land mass of this country was fairly closely aligned with a Christian world view, that is no longer the case.

And as the cultural land mass has shifted, those who are followers of Jesus Christ have had to make painful and difficult choices. In other words, you either step away from Jesus and side with the culture.

And sadly many have done that. And I guess many of us will know people who have done that. Or you step away from their culture and you side with Jesus.

The third alternative, doing the spiritual splits, is untenable. Although presumably the Apostle Paul writes chapter 4 verse 17, because actually we try to kid ourselves that we can put it off.

[12 : 50] Even though we can't. You cannot paddleboard with one foot on land and one foot on the board.

And you cannot be a Christian like that either. Because Jesus Christ is Lord. The need for change. I guess it's something that Charlotte will need to grasp, isn't it, as she grows up.

We pray that she'll come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. And not only so, but to live a distinctive life that is worthy of the Lord Jesus, rather than trying to have a foot in both worlds.

The need for change. Secondly, verses 18 to 24, the means of change. First of all, remember who you were.

Verse 18. Because what's happening here is that the phrase in verse 17, the futility of their minds, is now unpacked.

[13 : 58] Verse 18, 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 sensuality, greed, to practice every kind of impurity.

It is vital that we see the unbelieving non-Christian world for what it is. For those who are looking in on the Christian faith, who are not yet followers of Jesus, actually to see ourselves as God sees us.

And for those who are Christians, to see that the world, but to see the world that we find so tempting to head back to, to see the world for what it is.

So how is the non-Christian person described? Well, firstly, verse 18, they are darkened in their minds, alienated from God. They may still be able to appreciate art and beauty.

They may be funny. They may be attractive. And yet, inevitably, a mind that doesn't know God is a mind that is in the dark because God is light.

[15 : 10] Secondly, notice they are hardened in their hearts. That is the root cause of the darkened mind. And we are all, by nature, hard-hearted towards God. It's a shock, isn't it, of that well-known Christmas reading from John's Gospel speaking of Jesus Christ.

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. Not because God hasn't made himself known. He has.

It's what we celebrate at Christmas. It is that we are hard-hearted towards him and reject him. Thirdly, verse 19, a deadening of the conscience.

Calloused skin, perhaps from rowing or gardening, no longer feels any pain. In the same way, here is a conscience that is no longer able to make the right call in terms of what is right and what is wrong.

Where there's no shame or embarrassment at sin because it is, well, it's just normal. Here, then, is God's identikit picture of what all of us are by nature like.

[16 : 18] A hardening of the heart leads to a darkening of the mind, leads to a deadening of the conscience, which at the end of verse 19 leads to a life given up to sensuality, which I take it simply means I end up living just how I want to live, in a way that seems right to me.

Now, it may well be that, if you're not a Christian here this morning, it may well be that actually you're already struggling to recognize this description of yourself.

Perhaps you're even angry that the Bible speaks like this. Just as some of us who are Christians, perhaps we struggle to apply this description to nice neighbors or generous family members or cultured colleagues or whoever it is.

And that is because, of course, when everyone is living the same way, it just looks normal, doesn't it? Because it's how everyone is living. And it's only when we step outside of what is normal that we see things as they really are.

In the first week of the new year, you may have caught it, Neil MacGregor, the former director of the British Museum, presented a fascinating series of five programs with a title, As Others See Us.

[17 : 41] As Britain grapples with Brexit and its role in the world, each episode interviewed people from different countries and effectively asking the question, how do you now see Britain?

Started with Germany, then Nigeria, Canada, Ireland and Egypt. And it's very revealing because the truth is, of course, that other people always see us, don't they, so much more clearly than we can see ourselves.

Well, here is God's assessment of what each one of us is by nature like. You will never make sense of the Christian message until you have grasped God's diagnosis of human nature.

Jesus himself said he did not come into the world for those who think they are good enough for God. He came into the world for those who know they are not good enough for God.

Well, for those here this morning who do belong to Jesus, why, I take it if you and I are to walk in a manner worthy of him, we need to be very, very clear-sighted about the nature of the world around us.

[18 : 58] Because it's not a comfortable thing, is it, to believe, verses 18 and 19. You see, if Ephesians 4 was saying, just imagine for a moment, if Ephesians chapter 4 was saying that actually the world around us really is not that bad a place after all, and especially in a place like Dulwich, so full of bright, attractive, clever, intelligent people, then following Jesus, well, it would be so much easier, wouldn't it?

Because we could just fit in and just live lives like everyone else. But the world is not like that. As God looks at his world, as God looks at human nature, it is a dark, hard-hearted, and calloused place.

Now, that is a personally, a very uncomfortable thing to believe. Because you see, it forces me to make choices. A very black and white choice.

Am I going to live like everyone else does? Or am I going to live in a manner that is worthy of Jesus? Can we see what an uncomfortable thing personally it is to believe what Paul says here about human nature?

In other words, sin matters. We so easily excuse sin, don't we? Have you noticed how easily we place off-limits some of the things, some of the changes perhaps, which might have the biggest impact on our lives and on our godliness?

[20 : 36] So, you know, a man with an anger problem explains, well, I've always had a bit of a short fuse. A woman consumed by career acknowledges, well, you know, I've always been a bit driven.

That someone who's disorganized and never makes time for Bible reading and prayer says, well, you know, I've never really been one for routines. Each one effectively saying, I won't change. This area of my life is off-limits.

But sin does matter. Back to verse 17. You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do. Remember who you were.

But next, remember who you now are. Verse 20. But that is not the way you learned Christ. Assume you've heard of him and were taught in him as the truth is in Jesus.

Because the follower of Jesus Christ has a new identity. Verse 22. To put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.

[21 : 46] And then verse 24. And to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. To be a Christian is to put off the old self of verses 18 and 19.

It is to put on a new self. Notice, will you, that these are not commands that we have to do again if we've already put our trust in Jesus.

Rather, it is a description of what has already happened. As Rupert reminded earlier, as Jesus Christ died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins.

He rose again from the dead to give us new life as his people. If you know Jesus today, then at some stage in the past, whether it is a particularly memorable event on a particular day, or whether it is more of a gradual process, this is what has happened to you.

And obviously, it's reflected, isn't it, in the baptism questions that were being asked earlier on this morning. Do you repent of your sins? Have you taken off your old self?

[22 : 54] Do you turn to Christ? Have you put on this new self? You know, rather like a sort of graduate moving to work in London. They take off their old self, a pair of jeans they've been living in for the last three years.

The ancient trainers, the disheveled look is definitely out. And instead, they put on their new suits and their shiny shoes and the smart haircuts, all in anticipation of the new life that they are then going to be living.

You see, so often I think our shorthand doesn't really help us to grasp the fundamental change that happens when we become a Christian. We talk about following Jesus or having faith or finding God or turning to Christ, but on their own they are inadequate because at the heart of Christian conversion is this radical repentance and faith.

In other words, becoming a Christian isn't simply a kind of subjective experience, you know, like mindfulness, where even if it does make you feel better about yourself and about your life, actually there's no real change in your circumstances.

There's no underlying reality to it. No, becoming a Christian is a life-changing revolution as our lives are completely transformed by Jesus.

[24 : 20] But notice too, will you, that while verse 22, putting off the old self, and verse 24, putting on the new self, describe past events, verse 23 describes something that is ongoing.

Have a look again at verse 23. And to be renewed in the spirit of your mind. The contrast obviously with verse 17, where we once walked in the futility of our minds, but now our minds are to be renewed by our new identity.

And renewed minds are the key to a changed life. There was an article in the paper a couple of weeks ago about Edith Eger.

In 1944, she was sent along with her family to Auschwitz concentration camp. Most of her family died there. After the war, she married and she moved to the US and yet continued to suffer horrific flashbacks.

So on one occasion, when she was shouted out by a bus conductor in Baltimore, she found herself throwing herself to the ground, convinced that she was back inside the camps. She began to study psychology.

[25 : 37] Today she is an eminent psychologist. She began to study psychology. And in 1980, she summoned up the courage to return to Auschwitz. And this is what she has written about that visit.

I needed to go back to the lion's den and stop running from the lion. When I was there, I saw a man in uniform and I thought he was a Nazi.

But I reached in my pocket and saw my US passport and began to recognise that I didn't have to live there in my mind. I could choose to be free.

That is how genuine change comes about. Such that we live in a manner worthy of the Lord Jesus. Every time I am tempted to go back and live like the world around us, what do I do?

I reach into my pocket, so to speak, for my new identity in Christ. I remember who I once was. I say to myself, I am no longer that person.

[26 : 47] I no longer have to live like that. And we remember who we now are. New people transformed in our relationship both with God and with each other.

With a new life to live. Now, we are going to see what that looks like in the rest of Ephesians. But just to get a taster for a moment, have a look at chapter 4, verse 32.

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you. You see, how am I to be a forgiving person rather than a resentful person?

I take it that all of us recognise that it would actually be a wonderful thing, wouldn't it, to be a forgiving person, to live in a community full of forgiving people? But how is that possible? Well, only as my mind is renewed by the fact, verse 32, that I am a very sinful person and yet actually, Jesus Christ has forgiven me.

His kindness, his tender-heartedness, that is a humbling thing. It humbles the pride that finds it so very difficult to forgive others.

[28 : 00] That, then, is the pattern for the rest of this letter. In other words, the same gospel that saves us also renews us and changes us.

You see, we are not saved by grace and then changed simply by our own good works and by trying harder. No, change comes instead as we take the truth about Jesus, as we take the truth about the new identity that we have in Jesus and push it into our minds such that our thinking is transformed and our lives are then transformed.

And may I say, that is going to be thrilling to see what that looks like in practice in the rest of this letter over the next few weeks. Thrilling to imagine the impact a church gripped by the message of Jesus could have on Dulwich and beyond.

As we live, no longer like the world around us, but instead live lives worthy of Jesus, recognizing the fact that he is Lord.

Let's spend a few moments in quiet for reflection and then I will lead us in prayer. To be renewed in the spirit of your minds.

[29 : 25] Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for the reminder of what it is to put our trust in Jesus. The old self gone, a new self put on, as forgiven people, as those who have been raised to a new life to live out the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, as a church, our minds would indeed be renewed by this glorious truth and reflect it both in our corporate life together and in the individual lives we live, such that we might indeed be those who walk in a manner worthy of the Lord Jesus.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.