

The Hard Truth about Sinners

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[0 : 00] I would like you to turn this morning in your Bibles to Ephesians chapter 4. We are going to be looking at verses 17 through 19. And as we begin this morning, let me start by saying that when you look at the world and you look at all the individuals that you bump into, I want you to realize that there are really only two kinds of people in the world.

Only two kinds. Those who will be your neighbors and companions in heaven and those who will spend eternity away from Christ in hell.

I think we ought to think about that more often. And that thought should really make a difference in the way that we go through our life and the way we conduct our lives.

Isn't that true? That's really what we're looking at this morning in this passage. And as we take up the text, you look there at verse 17. It says this, 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 are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their hearts.

[1 : 24] They have become calloused and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

I want you to realize this morning as we take up this passage that the Scripture makes it clear that we are saved for a greater purpose than merely to protect us from going and spending eternity in hell.

Hell is an awful thing. It's a truth. It's a reality. But in saving us, Christ's purpose far transcends that business of where we would spend eternity.

And while we appreciate the blessing of knowing that we are delivered from the condemnation of sin and there is blessing in our eternity, I want you to realize that we who know Christ have an underlying responsibility that we need to be thinking about all the time.

It should be something that is pervasive and central to our lives. If you go back just for a moment to Ephesians chapter 3 verse 10, there's a little statement in that passage that helps us understand, so why is it that I have been saved?

[2 : 34] So that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. The truth of the matter is that in saving us, God ordained that you and I should be illustrations of His glory and the outcome of the way in which we live and act should cause heaven and earth to be really astonished at God's wisdom.

Wow, I can't believe He did that. As I was praying and thinking about this passage this morning, going over it in my mind again, I was reminded of the fact that during creation when God spoke a creation into being, it says that the angels shouted for joy as He was creating the stars in the universe.

And it's a little bit like I remember years ago at a basketball game, and one guy who was probably about 5'10", he ran down the floor, got a break open, and down he went and he dunked the ball. And everybody, I think it's the only time he'd ever dunked it in his life, and everybody was just absolutely stunned that he did it. And the whole place, at least the people who were on our side, just rose up and cheered, and they were wildly ecstatic that David Ratliff had dunked the ball. And I want you to understand that in creation, as God was throwing these stars into being and creating, the angels were going, wow, wow, wow. But that's not the end of it.

[4 : 01] In creation, he did something that's pretty spectacular, but it tells us in Scripture that when an unbeliever is drawn to the cross and comes to salvation, what does it make the angels do?

It causes them to shout for joy and just to sing out in praise of the amazing power of God to save. And so when you think about what the church is here for, you realize that we who are individuals

and part of the body of Christ, and that the church is his principal advertisement of glory in this age. That's what we are. We are here to make God look good. Isn't that right? That's what it's all about. That's why I draw breath, and that's why you draw breath, and that's part of the reason that we come together this morning is to have our hearts encouraged and reminded of why we exist.

If you were to look at the broad outline of the book of Ephesians, you would recognize that the first three chapters explain the nature of his salvation, what he has done in saving us, and then we begin in chapter 4 with an explanation of how we who have been saved are to live.

So what are we to do with the salvation that we enjoy? And in the first 16 verses, Paul talks about a very interesting and perhaps a little surprising responsibility that we have in the body of Christ of really caring for one another and getting along.

[5 : 29] He talks about the unity of the Spirit. Then in verse 17, he begins what will be his theme for the remainder of the book, and it is the matter of how we as believers are to behave.

And so as we pick up this lesson this morning, I want you to mark what we find there in verse 17. Now this I say, and testify in the Lord. We're looking here at a very solemn charge that is given to us who are believers.

And if you're here today and you know Christ as your Savior, it is the Spirit of God that is speaking to you explicitly and directly, and he has something that he wants you to hear.

This little statement that Paul makes here when he says, now this I say, and testify in the Lord, has a very formal ring to it. It carries with it the idea of receiving a charge in a formal setting.

I am reminded of the events in which my boys, Joseph and Sam, went into the military. And after you've signed the papers and all of that, you end up taking an oath of office.

[6 : 38] And how many of you here, there are a number of you that at one point or another went into the military, and you can remember standing there at a pretty somber moment and saying, I swear to uphold the Constitution and defend it.

It is a life changer because you've made a promise that you're going to do certain things. And here is Paul communicating with that same kind of earnestness to believers, and he says, let me tell you something.

You have a particular responsibility that you are expected to carry out. And what is that? At the heart of it, it's that we're to be different. We're to be different. That's what's being said here.

It says, I testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do. And so I want you to imagine that you are standing at attention before God himself.

And I've got to tell you that that would be a pretty sober moment for us, wouldn't it? You remember when Isaiah received his commission to serve God, and he was absolutely overwhelmed by the reality of the glory and the holiness of Christ.

[7 : 41] And in that setting, he says, listen, I'm giving you a responsibility that you are to preach and announce the truth, even when everybody's not listening. He says, listen, you have a responsibility you take seriously.

And so as each of us are standing this morning at attention before God, and we're listening to what he has to say to us, he says this, you are to be different. And as we think about what is being said here, we recognize that there are several truths that stand underneath that.

For one, genuine salvation makes us different from what we used to be. Let me say that again because there's a lot of kind of misunderstanding floating around today that salvation is merely just saying a prayer at some point or having some kind of a little emotional hiccup in a particular situation, and, well, that's the end of it.

Salvation is something that is authentically the work of Christ and brings about genuine transformation. Now, is all of that transformation immediately evident in the life of every believer? And the answer is no. But I want you to listen to what it says over in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 17. If any man is in Christ Jesus, he's what? He's something different.

[8 : 57] Conversion doesn't just introduce us to a new set of rules. Conversion brings a change in our life and makes us something different on the inside.

In fact, if there's no real evidence of that change on the inside, there's a good reason to double-check whether or not what you think took place actually did.

For another, salvation calls us to act differently than we did in our past. I've bumped into people on occasion who will say, you don't know the background that I grew up with.

And maybe they grew up in a home where there was a lot of foul vocabulary and abuse and all different kinds of things, and they'll kind of justify that ongoing behavior by saying, well, you don't know my past.

Hey, listen, none of us had good pasts. Do you understand that? Apart from the cross, we were all equally miserable in our sins. And here's what it says in the Scriptures.

[9 : 55] It says, listen, we are to be different. We are changed by our conversion. And that change is something that does more than just kind of put a little gloss on veneer on our lives.

It's something that begins from the inside out. Now I want you to imagine just for a moment that instead of conversion changing a person's heart and bringing them salvation, that what conversion actually does is changes the physical intention and ambitions of an individual so that a person who was 450 pounds at one point prior to conversion now begins to change and become an athlete.

Do you follow that? Now, it's a little confusing. I can see it on your faces. But instead of a person having a heart change, I want you to imagine that they begin to change physically.

A person who was genuinely converted would begin making a migratory path from where they were at 400 down the food chain. Would you agree with that?

They'd probably begin huffing and puffing and taking about 30 extra steps a day. And pretty soon it'd be 50 and pretty soon it'd be 100. And a person would say, what are you doing that? I mean, here you are, you're this gargantuan individual.

[11 : 13] And what's, why are you doing, well, hey, I'm a runner. I'm a runner. And I'm not what I will be, but I'm not what I was. Conversion changes the heart and the affections and the interests of an individual.

And that should be evident. And Paul here in this passage, he makes this statement. He says, now listen, I'm telling you, you're not to walk the way you used to.

There's something else that we find here in this passage. Salvation calls us to act differently than our past. To be different. I am not what I will be, but I am not what I was.

And I want you to understand something. Being different is not an option for the genuine believer.

Let me say that again slowly. Being different is not an option for the genuine believer. It is the heart of our existence and our calling.

Do you understand that? It is the heart of our existence and our calling. If you are a child of God, there is no reason for you to stay the way you used to be.

[12 : 17] And can I tell you something? Staying the way you used to be, if you're a genuine believer, is a miserable place to be. Because there is something in our heart put there by the Spirit who indwells that leads us to desire to grow and change and move away from our past.

Having said that we're not to behave like we used to, Paul then takes care to explain what our past was like.

And so I want you to follow along here and get an understanding of the nature of the unconverted. And that's really what we're looking at in the remainder of our time this morning. What is the nature of the unconverted?

And there at the beginning of the portion it says that you're not to walk like the Gentiles do in the futility of their minds.

And I just want you to understand in simple terms that when Paul uses that word Gentile, he's not talking about an ethnic group. But he's really making a comparison between those people who know Christ and those people who don't.

[13 : 28] And as we get started into this passage, it says, as Gentiles, in the futility of their mind. What is the nature of the unbeliever?

The sinner's life is empty of lasting value. The sinner's life is empty of lasting value. That doesn't mean that it isn't occupied with things.

But it does mean that the things that the mind of the unbeliever is occupied with are ultimately of no value whatsoever.

Reality shows are kind of all the rage at this time. And I am on occasion kind of intrigued by a couple different shows that I can stomach for about four or five minutes.

And that's all I've had. But I want you to know that I am really curious about doomsday preppers and hoarders. I think they kind of, they ought to make one called doomsday prepper hoarding.

[14 : 25] Because it would kind of be a blend. It would be the perfect mix. I could watch two and a half minutes instead of five. And that would be all I could take. And I watch these doomsday

preppers as they're kind of prepping for the ultimate meltdown of society.

And they must just love being on TV being profoundly dumb, you know. But, you know, and hoarders. Anybody out here besides me watch four or five minutes of hoarders?

Raise your hands. I just want to see that I am not alone, okay. That makes me feel so much better. You know, doomsday preppers and hoarders, and I hope there are none of you in here.

Listen. If your children are thinking to themselves, when mom and dad die, we're getting dumpsters. Enough said.

Okay. Well, we're not here to kind of get off on a sideline. But I do want you to understand that the sinner occupies his life with things that are of no eternal value. Holds on to things.

[15:40] Clings to them. Gravitates to them. Counts them as valuable and priceless. And I'm reminded what Jesus said over in Matthew chapter 16, verse 26. He said, what is it to profit to a man if he gains the whole world and he forfeits his own soul?

I've seen those bumper stickers that say, he who dies with the most toys wins. You ever seen those? And I think to myself, you know, that's just a profoundly foolish bumper sticker.

Because he who dies with the most stuff doesn't win. Scriptures tell us that you may have it all, but if you don't have Christ, your life is a miserable existence.

I want you to recognize also that the Scripture goes on there and says not only do they live in the emptiness of their mind, in that they're being consumed with things that have no eternal purpose.

The sinner lives with profound frustrations. And in the verse that follows and a little bit of the next one, we find that Paul kind of spells that out in particular.

[16:51] For one thing, it says there in the passage that they are darkened in their understanding. They endure darkened thinking. That doesn't mean that the sinner cannot think, but it means that his sinner doesn't move toward what is really clear and what is truly good.

And I think you can see that everywhere you look. You see illustrations of people who think that what they're doing is really ultimately pretty good, and it kind of ends up being nothing like that at all.

Our government is a classic illustration of what it is to be involved in thinking some things that are very profoundly unproductive and darkened.

There's another thing that the passage of Scripture says, and I want you to mark what it is there. It says that not only is their thinking darkened, but they're alienated from the life of God. Alienated from the life of God.

What that word communicates is the idea that an individual has been either separated from his community or he has been dismissed from his family.

[18:03] A citizen in the ancient world was one who enjoyed some very particular benefits, and to be banished from your citizenry or have your citizenry taken away from you was a very profound difficulty because you were put upon and struggled with all kinds of things that you didn't struggle with otherwise.

And it says here they are alienated from the life of God. You've been cast out. You have nothing to do with the blessings of the smile of God in your life. All the rich blessings that we who are the children of God enjoy are wiped away from the view of the sinner.

Now, does it say here that the sinner suffers every kind of conceivable heartache as a result of being a sinner? No, the truth of the matter is it tells us in Scripture that the rain falls on what?

It falls on the just and the unjust. There are benefits that come because of his common grace to all of us, but the truth of the matter is that those who do not know Christ do not have the benefit of the fatherhood of God and his care, his particular care for us.

We also read there in the passage, it says that not only do they have this struggle with being alienated from the life of God, but it says there because of the ignorance that is in them.

[19:27] The ignorance that is in them. As the result of their ignorance, they make one decision after another that ends up being profoundly destructive. You think of many of the illustrations that you can see in your own life being around individuals who at one point thought, you know, if I do this, it's going to work out.

It's going to be my blessing. And yet, because of their disobedience and unwillingness to follow the pattern that God has in the Scriptures, they just magnify one difficulty after another on top of their life.

And it's characteristic of a sinner. He makes decisions that ultimately are ignorant and harmful. Now I come to one other thing that it says in the passage I want you to recognize.

It says that this all happens because of the hardness of their heart. I want you to turn back in your Bible, if you will, to Romans.

Let's go there for a moment. Romans chapter 1. And Romans chapter 1 in particular is a very careful exposition or teaching about the nature of the unregenerate man's heart.

[20 : 41] Romans chapter 1, we're picking up there in verse 18. It says, For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

That's an interesting statement. It's telling us that those who are unbelievers, as a general rule, apart from the grace of God, are really not all that interested in hearing what the truth is.

It says there in verse 19, For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world and the things that have been made, so they're without excuse.

For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, nor give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

[21 : 56] And it says there in verse 24, and we find it repeatedly in this passage, it says, God gave them up. His punitive hand against the unbeliever is that God allows the heart to become more and more hardened towards sin.

And as you read that passage, I trust that one of the things that goes through your heart is that you think very soberly, Lord, if it had not been for your grace, these verses here would be a perfect description of my thinking at the moment.

And we cannot read this passage without having our hearts say, wow, I am so thankful for my salvation and the blessing that this is no longer describing me.

I used to be that way. And Christ in His mercy rescued me, and I am so incredibly thankful. And so when I hear the Spirit say to me, hey, listen, don't walk like a Gentile, I think about where I used to be, and I think, man, you're right.

I don't want to do that. We come to something else that I want you to see in the passage going back to Ephesians. It tells us that the sinner lives a desensitized, sensual life.

[23 : 32] A desensitized, sensual life. Let me stop just for a moment and ask you to recognize the kind of dissonance of that statement, the disconnect, right?

Desensitized, sensual. When we think about sensuality, what do we think about? Sensual.

Sensitive to the senses, right?

Paul, under the enabling of the Spirit of God, is describing the way the unbeliever really thinks.

Verse 19, They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality.

That word callous is an interesting word. It's not talking just about callouses on your hand. The word is actually communicating the idea of blushing for shame.

The early experience with sin produces shame and guilt and fear.

[24 : 48] Your child, who surprisingly is taking after your husband, is developing into being a liar.

You didn't realize that, but it's happening. And the first couple times that you catch your child in a lie, and you say, Honey, are you lying? What does the child do?

Looks you right in the eye. No. The child usually ducks her head, and there's a little bit of shame and a little bit of disappointment. You know, do you follow what I'm saying? But with practice, what does the child do? Does anybody know?

Looks you right in the eye and says, No. My brother did that. Really? Okay. The word that Paul uses here is a word that talks about the natural tendency we have of being a little embarrassed, a little ashamed, at being discovered in sin.

Here is what happens as you persist in sin. Slowly, slowly, over time, you lose your sense of shame and guilt.

[26 : 05] To the point that when you go and visit people in prison, every one of them would be the first to tell you that they are the only innocent individual in the entire place.

Whatever they have been put in prison for is wrong because they're innocent. I think about this matter of shame at sin's reality, and I think about some of our police officers who have been assigned to be parade monitors during the gay pride events.

Do you follow that? Something that is an abomination to God ends up being a point of pride and arrogance, and I've got to tell you that what the Scriptures tell us is that the sinner begins to desensitize himself to the shame and the guilt that should be associated with that.

I think about some of the other officers that I've heard describe what it is to go and be a chaperone for some of the proms. How many of you know what the word grinding means?

Does anybody know grinding? How many of you know what grinding means in a prom? It's not something to snicker at.

[27 : 40] And I really have a problem when I find Christian parents that aren't bothered extremely by that. Well, my kids don't grind.

Oh, I'm glad to hear that. But they're going to go around people that do. Hmm. I'm really impressed with how that fits into what we find here in 17 through 19.

The sinner, first of all, loses his sense of shame. And listen to me. When the believer continues to expose himself to the same raunchiness that the unbelieving world finds acceptable, the believer is also desensitized in the process.

It's interesting that what it says after that, he loses his sense of shame, but then he abandons himself to sensuality. That's what it says there, verse 19. They have become calloused, shameless, and they have given themselves up to sensuality.

Once we turn away from seeking our satisfaction in God, we descend into a spiral of sensuality that simply cannot be satisfied. Do you realize that we have been created, we were hardwired by our Creator to find our finest satisfactions in Him?

[29 : 16] And when we say no, and we begin the process of finding temporary satisfaction in any other things, it progressively devolves and takes us on a progressive cycle of greater and greater pursuit of sensual gratification.

Finally, look what it says there towards the end. It says, and he becomes greedy to practice every kind of impurity. Paul chose an interesting set of words here at the end of this verse.

The word greedy actually in the Greek communicates the idea of being an exploiter. Someone who exploits other people to gratify self.

Had you ever thought about sin that way? The sinner becomes more and more adept at using other people for self-gratification.

The sinner turns away from worshiping God and grows ever more intent on drawing other people into self-worship.

[30 : 45] Do you follow that? Now, as you read this passage, I want to go back and get our arms around what it's saying. Now, this I say and testify in the Lord that you must, that's a strong word, isn't it?

Must? Hey, must. You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do. And did we walk the way the Gentiles used to walk?

What's the answer? Yes, that describes us. We're not to be that way anymore. So, how does this all fit together in our life?

That's what I want to close with having you think. We are, we who are saved this morning and hear these words given to us by the Spirit of God are to cry out and say, yes, I am saved and I'm being different in my passion.

I remember my past. I remember the horrors of the days that used to find me living my life according to my own self-indulgence and ultimately I really found no satisfaction in that and it was just a progressively descending spiral of foul behavior and at the heart of it was this, I turned my back on God and there was nothing that I could find pleasure in ultimately.

[32 : 09] And we who are saved say, you know what? You know what? I want to be different in my passion. I am saved and being different in my passion is what I'm all about.

Now, there are some of you here today that do not know Christ and you're sitting here this morning and here we are, this passage is talking to those who are believers and is saying, listen, don't be the way you used to be.

That's what the point is being made and some of you are sitting there and saying, whoa, that's me, that's me, that's me, that's me. I want to have you know that God in His providence, He planned for

you to be here this morning as this passage is being opened up and you are hearing yourself being described by the Spirit of God and you're recognizing the moral bankruptcy of your heart and you're saying, what do I need to do?

The Scriptures tell us. What it says in the Scripture is that whosoever believes in the Lord Jesus Christ shall be saved. What do I do?

I cry out to God and I say, God, you're right. I am morally bankrupt. On the outside, I may be dressed and looking pretty reasonable but inside, my heart is black.

[33 : 29] I can't change it by myself but God sent His Son into the world to make it clear that all men stand justly condemned before a holy God and to provide salvation through His finished work on the cross.

Jesus died for your sins. And I want you to know that He stands ready this morning to save you and to give you a new heart and new hope and change the way you think.

But let me close with this. I want you to think about it carefully. Gospel truth either hardens the heart or draws the sinner to the cross.

Do you understand that? There are some of you here today that recognize that the truth of the matter is you may have the trappings of spiritual behavior but you're not saved.

And the Spirit of God is convicting you this morning. You need Christ as your personal Savior and you're sitting there saying, yeah, but I don't want to embarrass myself. I don't want to expose myself. I've got to tell you, gospel truth either hardens the heart or draws the sinner to the cross.

[34 : 51] Let's close in prayer.