

Sermon for August 9, 2015 - 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Ephesians 4:17-24 (NIV84)

Theme: **Christian: don't be like the people of the world!**

- 1) *Ignorant of Christ, they are driven by sinful passions.*
- 2) *Instructed in Christ, we have been made holy and new.*

<sup>17</sup> So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. <sup>18</sup> They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. <sup>19</sup> Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. <sup>20</sup> You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. <sup>21</sup> Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. <sup>22</sup> You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; <sup>23</sup> to be made new in the attitude of your minds; <sup>24</sup> and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Agree or Disagree: As long as you aren't hurting anyone else, you should be able to do whatever feels good to you.

This is the philosophy of our postmodern world; and I am convinced that this attitude – more than any other cause – is the reason Christianity is in decline. People don't "feel" like coming to church anymore. They would rather do something more relaxing on a Sunday morning. People don't feel like reading their Bibles at home – wanting to pursue other hobbies or forms of entertainment instead.

But why not do whatever makes you feel good? Doesn't God want our happiness? If we aren't hurting other people, what's the harm? The harm is that such an attitude leads us away from God and His salvation and back under the slavery of sin. Knowing this, God had the apostle Paul write down our sermon text, through which He warns: **Christian: don't be like the people of the world!** 1) *Ignorant of Christ, they are driven by sinful passions.* 2) *Instructed in Christ, we have been made holy and new.*

Part One: Ignorant of Christ, they are driven by sinful passions.

In order to understand our sermon text correctly, we should briefly review what St. Paul wrote before it. Up to this point, the apostle praises God for the mercy He showed by graciously saving us from our sins. You see, even though we were once *dead in our transgressions and sins (following the ways of this world; gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts), God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ.*<sup>i</sup>

"For," Paul writes, "*it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*"<sup>ii</sup>

And to keep us in this grace, God has united us together in the Church so that we might support each other through the preaching of His Gospel, which defends us from every evil that tries to drive us away from Him.<sup>iii</sup>

In view of the awesome mercy, grace, forgiveness and protection that God gives us through the ministry of His Gospel, the apostle Paul writes:

*So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, take careful note of what the apostle Paul is saying: living a god pleasing life is not optional, it is mandatory! You simply cannot believe in Christ and continue living like the people of this unbelieving world. Why not? Because, as the Apostle Paul says,

*They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.*

Even though the Gospel has been proclaimed for centuries, the unbelieving world neither understands nor believes it. Why not? Simply put: because they don't want to believe it. The people of this world enjoy living under the mantra: do what feels right for you. They do not want to accept the truth that sex should be reserved for one man and one woman in marriage. The people of this wicked world do not want to believe their desires for pride, greed and materialism are wrong. They love pursuing these sins and do not want to be condemned on account of them.

And so, even though their consciences may bear witness to the truth of God's Word, they harden their hearts against it - coming up with all sorts of excuses to justify their sins and convincing themselves that there is no god to whom they are responsible; or, if there is a god, that he would want people to pursue whatever their hearts desire.

*Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.*

Here you have our 21<sup>st</sup> century western world described in a nutshell! Abortion, homosexuality, pornography, and uncontrolled materialism are all escalating. Every video game that comes out tries to be more graphically violent than all those that came before. TV studios are constantly trying to produce shows that increasingly appeal to the baseness of humanity. They same can be said about music, books . . . you name it! And, as the Scriptures say, *because of these, the wrath of God is coming.*<sup>iv</sup>

And we Christians are not unaffected by the worlds efforts to push boundaries. Why? Because our post-modern world's mantra to do whatever feels good is nothing more than the crass manifestation of the sinful flesh that corrupts every human on this earth: including us!

Yes, even our own sinful flesh agrees with the world and cheers it on. It wants to be free to pursue whatever it desires – and what it desires is always contrary to God's will. It's important for you to understand this: that you have an enemy inside of you that is constantly trying to turn you away from your LORD. Your sinful mind will always try to rationalize things that God's Word clearly calls sin. Your sinful emotions will try to get you to feel like God's Word is too restrictive and that it's ok to chase after the things we shouldn't. Your sinful will does not want to learn about Jesus, but is always tempting you to pursue all the "exciting" things that the wicked world gets to do. Yes, temptations abound! How, then, can we avoid pursuing the same selfish passions the world pursues when they are a part of our own sinful flesh?

Paul tells us how: by looking in faith to Christ, through whom we have been made holy and new!

Part Two: Instructed in Christ, we have been made holy and new.

The apostle Paul says: *You, however, did not come to know Christ that way, that is, by rejecting the Gospel and pursuing all sorts of selfish desires. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.*

Christians are different than the world. In what way? We know Christ. And how did we come to know him? By means of the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel to create faith in our hearts!

As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, the Apostle Paul, spent a considerable amount of ink reminding His readers of the grace of God, which loved us from before the creation of the world. According to this wonderful grace, God sent His son Jesus Christ to live the perfect life we all failed to live, and to die in our place in order to pay for our sins in full. God raised Jesus from the dead to show that he accepted his Son's payment for our sins. We stand forgiven before God – all because of Jesus.

But this forgiveness would do us no good if we didn't hear and believe it. We would be like the rest of the world for whom Jesus also died, but who reject this gift in order to pursue sin. So what did God do to change this outcome? He sent out apostles armed with His Gospel. As they shared the good news, the Holy Spirit worked faith in the hearts of many people. In turn, those new believers shared the Gospel with others who also believed . . . and so on and so forth until the Gospel came down to us!

By God's grace we have been taught the truth about both our need and our salvation. The Holy Spirit has led us to recognize our sins and repent of them. He has also led us to see the love God has for us in Christ – how he saved us to be his dearly loved children who, once again, have been restored in the image of God that Adam and Eve lost when they first fell into sin.

You see, when the Holy Spirit created faith in our hearts by means of the Gospel, he also did something else: he created in us a “new man,” whose will is not in tune with the world, but is in complete harmony with God. It was created in our hearts at our baptism, when we were “born” of water and the spirit. This new person inside of us is completely like Christ – desiring to do everything God the Father wishes – loving him above all things. This new man is righteous and holy. It is who we truly are.

And God's word encourages us to live according to this new man, as St. Paul says: *You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

Now understand Paul's words correctly. He is not saying that we can be sinless in this life. Such a thing will never happen this side of heaven because, as long as we live, our sinful flesh will oppose God and try to do whatever it wants. But this is not who we are. We, by God's grace, are the new man the Holy Spirit created in our hearts at our Baptisms.

This is why Paul encourages us to take off the old man and put on the new! How? Through daily prayer and repentance. When we confess our sins to God (trusting that He will forgive us for Christ sake), we take off the old Adam. As we remember our baptisms (when God declared us to be his dearly loved children) a new desire awakens in us – one that wants to thank God for all He has done by living according to his will.

In this way we crucify our sinful nature together with all its passions.<sup>v</sup> Trusting in God's promises, we seek ways to avoid sin and please God. We go against the feelings of our sinful flesh – understanding that they are trying to lead us away from Christ. We take time to study his Word and partake of His sacraments – even when we don't “feel” like it – because we understand that the LORD strengthens our faith through these means. We trust that God will send his Spirit to help us live according to the new man he created in

our hearts. He will keep his promise to deliver us safely through this life and bring us home to Himself in heaven.

“But,” you might wonder, “what if I sin? I am weak and I often find myself doing things that I should not be doing – giving into my sinful flesh instead of living according to God’s Word. What then?”

If this is what you fear, don’t despair. Rather, go to Jesus in prayer confessing your sin and trusting that He will forgive you and help you in your fight against your flesh. In an encouraging letter to Christians in Asia minor, the Apostle John once wrote: *I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense-- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world*<sup>vi</sup>.

Jesus has forgiven all your sin. You belong to him. In response to this, dear Christian, **don’t be like the people of the world!** *Ignorant of Christ, they are driven by sinful passions.* You, however, have been made *holy and new through faith in the Gospel.* With Christ’s help, live according to the new man that the Holy Spirit created in your heart – glorifying God’s saving grace through your words and actions. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> A summary of Ephesians 2:1-5

<sup>ii</sup> Ephesians 2:8-10 (NIV84)

<sup>iii</sup> Cf. Ephesians 4:4-16

<sup>iv</sup> Colossians 3:6 (NIV84)

<sup>v</sup> Galatians 5:24

<sup>vi</sup> 1 John 2:1 (NIV84)