

Ephesians 4:17-24

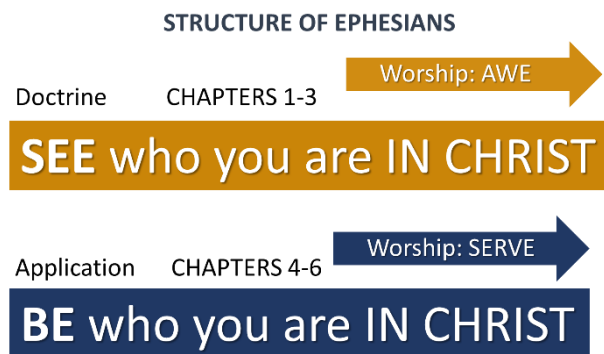
Millions of people around the world attacked him on social media. Jimmy Kimmel cried on TV. Crowds gathered around him and screamed “Murderer! We’ll never forget what you did.”<sup>1</sup> You’d think I was referring to a mass murderer or some crazy psychopath but all of this anger was directed at Walter Palmer, the dentist from Minnesota who shot Cecil the lion in 2015. The hate and vitriol was intense. Many would rather have seen Palmer’s stuffed head hanging on a wall in a den rather than Cecil the lion.

Interestingly, when Palmer shot a lion they all blamed the hunter but when Stephen Paddock ruthlessly gunned down 58 people in Las Vegas one week ago, everyone is blaming his guns. That part doesn’t make sense to me. Whichever side you stand on in terms of gun control, the bottom line is that people are looking for answers in the midst of tragedy and senseless violence. Those who are in favor of gun control are searching for a simple solution to the overwhelming problem. Admittedly, some of them just hate guns and turn every gun murder into a political football to take down the NRA but others are simply afraid. They are grasping for answers and solutions to the chaos in our world.

We are all saddened and maybe even a little fearful if we are honest. All of us would like simple answers to these difficult and complex problems. We want to understand how the human heart could be so calloused, so hard, so given over to deceit and evil. As believers, we know that the answer is sin but is it really that simple? Can we just dismiss it as sin? Is there a solution to the madness? The world says that the Bible is not relevant to our modern scientific world. But as we read this passage this morning, I think you will see that nothing could be further from the truth. It so clearly identifies both the problem and the solution.

*<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. <sup>20</sup> But that is not the way you learned Christ!— <sup>21</sup> assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, <sup>22</sup> to put off your old self, which belongs to*

*your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,<sup>23</sup> and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,<sup>24</sup> and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*



As we enter the second half of Ephesians, let me remind you of how the letter is laid out. You will hopefully recall this diagram I have used several times before. The first three chapters are largely doctrine. They contain foundational teaching about what Christ has done for us and who we are as a result. Chapters 4-6 mostly deal with application of the doctrine.

Further, you may recall that this matches the two types of worship. One type of worship is to be in awe of the Lord. This kind of worship makes us want to raise our hands or bow our heads or shed tears of joy. It's what Moses did when he took off his sandals in front of the burning bush because he was standing on holy ground. The Lord's presence had made it so. It's what King David did when the Israelites brought the ark of the covenant back to the temple in Jerusalem. David removed his robe and unashamedly danced before the Lord. It's a whole person response to the majesty and glory of God. If the first three chapters of Ephesians has not caused this response within you at times, then you need to go back and read it again. Its truths must penetrate your heart and mind until awe and wonder take hold of you.

The second type of worship is service. And these are based on the two Greek words for worship in the New Testament. This type of service causes you to want to obey the Lord in every area of your life and to serve him with your heart, soul and mind. As we progress into the rest of the letter of Ephesians we must remember to never separate the application from the doctrine. Here's what I mean. Chapters 4-6 are filled with ethical commands. Don't lie. Don't steal. Forgive one another. Speak the truth to one another. Love your wives. Obey your parents. One and on it goes. When you add them all together, you get the picture of a very nice person, the ideal Christian if you will. In no way do we ever want to water down these standards. We are called to holiness because God is holy. These are his standards and we must strive toward them.

However, the most important questions is why and how we will follow these commands. If we seek to follow them simply because that's how a Christian is supposed to behave, failure is most likely to follow hard on the heels of our effort. We will be attempting to obey for the wrong reasons and with inadequate strength. If I separate application from doctrine I will be resting in my own strength for life change. However, if I first see who I am in Christ, then I will have the right motive and right power to be who I am in Christ.

Almost twenty years ago I wrote a personal mission and vision statement which begins this way. "I am in a lifelong pursuit of increasing in the knowledge and experience of Christ's intimate love for me and out of gratitude and humility, serving Christ by leading others toward this same pursuit."

Do you see how this statement is broken into two parts? The first half is a statement of worship-awe and the second half is a response to awe which is worship-service. I could have just as easily said, “I am in a lifelong pursuit of seeing who I am in Christ so that I and others can be who we are in Christ.” This may seem unrelated to the topic of this message—why is there so much evil in the world? It’s relevant because this text gives us the answer to the question and the solution. But we also know that the evil in the world is not just “out there” somewhere, is it? Sin lies within each of our hearts. Maybe none of us is capable of killing 58 people in ten minutes but I cringe when I think of what my life might look like apart from Christ. I don’t like some of my thoughts and actions with Christ, let alone what I might look like apart from him.

It’s also relevant because the answer must be gospel-driven. As soon as you start talking about how to overcome sin, you will always be one step away from legalism. By legalism I mean self-effort. Try harder. Pick yourself up by your own bootstraps. All of these are attempts to live in a certain way without first truly understanding what Christ has already done for us. You can’t be who you are in Christ until you first see who you are in Christ. But if you focus on reforming outward behavior and miss the heart issues, you may succeed in changing some behaviors but you will also succeed in boosting your own pride as a result. If you remove the gospel of Christ and the human heart, all you are left with is hard work. That is sub-Christian.

I encountered this just a few days ago. I was listening to a message by traveling speaker who promotes discipleship, homeschooling and a Christian worldview—all great subjects. In the message he quoted Genesis 12:3. “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” He went on to say that the Israelites were supposed to be a blessing to the surrounding nations by following God’s law. Then he described how the Israelites failed so miserably to follow the Law but as Christian parents, we need to train our children to obey God.

So far this may all sound good to you but there was subtle problem here. Think about Genesis 12:3 again. “In you all of the families of the earth will be blessed.” Did this mean that the Israelites were supposed to be a blessing to other nations by following the Law of God? In one sense, that is true, had it even been possible. But this misses the vital fact that this promise spoken to Abraham, was the first and most clear promise of the Messiah ever given. The blessing was not going to come through their obedience to the Law. The blessing to all nations was going to come through the line of Abraham, which is Jesus. The Israelites did not follow the Law and so model righteousness to all nations because they could not do so. Besides, this promise was given hundreds of years before the Law was even given to the Israelites. So the problem is that the speaker—though very well intentioned as he was—removed the gospel from this promise and turned it into a command to do good works.

I mean think about it. The Israelites had the ten commandments which were carved in stone by the finger of God. They carried that with them everywhere they went. The stone tablets were placed in a gold-plated ark covered by two cherubim and all of it placed with the holy of holies in the Tabernacle, which was always in the dead center of their camp wherever they went. Not only that, but they could physically see the glory of God’s presence twenty-four hours a day. At night when they returned to their tents, the light from the pillar of fire over the Tabernacle would

have cast a shadow inside their tents. They would have seen its flicker as they fell asleep every night. And then each morning when they came out of their tents the first thing they would have seen was glory of God in the pillar of cloud over the Tabernacle. Immediately after that their eyes would fall to the ground to see it covered with manna, a daily miraculous provision from God's hand. So they had the Law of God carved by the finger of God constantly witnessing the glory of God and daily eating from the miraculous provision of God, yet they still could not obey God. The Israelites had all of those blessings and constant reminders yet they still lacked the power to obey.

So the speaker was using the utter and complete failure of the Israelites over two thousand years in order to tell parents that they are supposed to train their children to obey God. And worse still, he did this by ignoring the very first promise of the Messiah and turning it into a legalistic righteousness. He removed a gospel-centered promise and replaced it with a man-centered good works. The law of God without the gospel of God will never lead anyone to follow God. Period.

Understand that this is not a false teacher. This man travels around the country training parents how to disciple their children. As he speaks, I'm certain that all of the parents sitting there shake their heads and say "Amen." I'm sure most of what he says is very helpful and necessary to hear but I use him as an example to show how easy it is to jettison the gospel from our teaching and lives. If this well-respected speaker can fall into this trap, anyone can make the same error. This is the way we are wired. We are wired for self-effort. Our sinful nature will take this route first.

This is all preparatory for understanding the question, Why there is so much evil in the world? This text describes sin and evil in the clearest terms. And then it offers the correct solution. But as we work our way through the text, and as you think about events like what happened in Las Vegas, I don't want you to get in your head that this is simply a matter of good vs. bad, evil vs. righteousness. This is gospel vs. no gospel. To the question, Why is there so much evil in the world?, the simple answer is that there is not enough gospel in the world.

With that in mind, let's get into this powerful passage. Paul begins this way. <sup>17</sup> *Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do.*

See what I mean? Immediately we get into behavior issues. Don't do this. Stop doing that. That's exactly what needs to be said but context is everything. You can't rip this out of context and merely say, don't do bad things that other people do. Think about how often you hear that in a church setting. Those people do bad things and we don't want to be like those people so don't do bad things. Right? This is the reputation that Christians have with the rest of the world. Right message if you understand the context.

The context here is what we have been studying for the past seven weeks in the middle of chapter four. I won't review it all for you because it's in line with what I have already shared about the gospel. But at least back up two verses.

*Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

This was the crescendo of chapter four so far. Speaking the truth in love; growing into Christ, each part working properly. And when all of this happens it “makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” There’s our “all by itself” principle. Remember that one? The context is that we grow in Christ which is in turn based on what Paul taught in the first three chapters. This was stated clearly in 4:1. *I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...* What is the calling to which we have been called? Chapters 1-3. I want you to see how Paul has structured the commands to stop doing evil things. He rooted the command in Jesus and the gospel.

*Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do.*

Two quick comments. First, the word testify here means to call as a witness. You can see the power of the command by looking at other verses.

ESV—*Now this I say and testify in the Lord*

NIV—*So I tell you this and insist on it in the Lord*

NASB—*So this I say and affirm together with the Lord*

We believe that Paul and the other Biblical writers were penning the actual word of God but this was added for emphasis. Paul was saying that this was not just his idea, it was God’s will that they cease doing these things.

Second, for Paul to have told them to no longer walk as the Gentiles do means that they were still doing it then. The believers in Ephesus had been converted yet they were still doing some of the same things they had done prior to conversion. This is a reminder that conversion does not instantly remove our sinful patterns. There is an active part that we must take. Sin will lessen. We can choose to no longer walk as the Gentiles walked. It will get better but it will not happen overnight. 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan writer John Owen has a killer quote.

“Let no man think to kill sin with few, easy, or gentle strokes. He who hath once smitten a serpent, if he follow not on his blow until it be slain, may repent that ever he began the quarrel. And so he who undertakes to deal with sin, and pursues it not constantly to the death.”

The gospel says we can’t just behave rightly on our own. We can’t do it. But we must do it. We’ll get to that part later. There’s our part and there’s God’s part and we must never confuse the two. We must no longer walk as the Gentiles do. That never stops. That’s an ongoing process for us just as was for the church in Ephesus.

Now for the cause of all evil in the world. The Gentiles walked...

- in the futility of their minds
- They are darkened in their understanding,
- alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.
- They have become callous
- and have given themselves up to sensuality
- greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

That's an awful list. Paul's has several famous lists of sins in his letters, Romans 1 being among the best known—and probably the longest. This list is different. It doesn't list specific sins so much as it catalogues attitudes of the heart. The futility of their minds. Darkened in their understanding. Alienated from the life of God. These certainly describe Stephen Paddock, don't they? But they also describe me without Jesus. And you. Maybe we're not as far down the rabbit hole as men like Paddock, but we're still in that hole—and sinking.

But some will chafe at this. “But it doesn't seem fair, because even Paul says they were ignorant. How can you hold someone accountable if they don't know any better? People like this are not evil, they're just ignorant. It says so right here.” Yes it does, but keep reading. *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 were alienated from God because of ignorance but that was caused by the hardness of their hearts. Blindness and ignorance are not without blame. People who live in darkness in Paul's day and in ours choose to live in willful ignorance. They ignore the light that is given to them. Remember, Paul was saying this to former Gentiles, not Jews. The Jews had a lot more light than the Gentiles did, so one could argue that their hearts were even more hardened than the Gentile pagans who had very little light. This is why there is so much evil in the world.

We'll talk some more next week about the depths of hardened hearts. That's not just to depress you but because there is fruitfulness in it. But to close I'd like to tell “the rest of the story.” I'd like to read a section from one of my favorite articles of all time. I even love the title. My Wife Has Tattoos: Marriage, New Birth, and the Gospel.

Today is the day of my wedding. And I am not marrying the girl of my dreams.

If you would have told me when I was a teenager that my wife would have seven tattoos and a history in drugs, alcohol, and heavy metal concerts, I would have laughed at you, given you one of my courtship books, and told you to take a hike. My plans were much different, much more nuanced with careful planning, much more clean-cut, and much more, well, about me.

It wasn't my dream to marry a complicated girl. I never dreamed I'd sit on a couch with my future wife in premarital counseling listening to her cry and tell stories of drunken nights, listing the drugs she used, confessing mistakes made in past relationships.

But everything changes when people meet Jesus. Jesus takes people like rebellious teenage partiers, and goody-two-shoe homeschoolers and puts them together in marriage to put something on display much bigger than their own hand-crafted, perfectly planned love-story.<sup>2</sup>

Whether you are rebellious or clean cut, without Jesus, all are equally lost. But with Jesus, all things are possible. Let me ask you a final question. Are you in awe of Jesus? I'm not asking if you know him. If you don't, at any time you can turn from sin and trust in Christ alone for your

salvation. If you already know him, are you in awe of him? This kind of worship-awe is the fuel for all obedience.

**Rich Maurer**  
**October 8, 2017**

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/09/08/walter-palmer-dentist-who-hunted-and-killed-cecil-the-lion-returns-to-work/?utm\\_term=.c3ef6daf1486](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/09/08/walter-palmer-dentist-who-hunted-and-killed-cecil-the-lion-returns-to-work/?utm_term=.c3ef6daf1486)

<sup>2</sup> <https://unspokenblog.org/2014/04/26/my-wife-has-tattoos-marriage-new-birth-and-the-gospel/>