

“HOW NOT TO LIVE YOUR LIFE” (Ephesians 4:17-19)

This morning I want to talk to you about how not to live your life, and in way of preview, next week we will talk about how to live your life. The theme of this message brought to mind a groundbreaking book that came out in the late seventies called *How Shall We Then Live?* It was written by Francis Schaeffer, a very influential Christian philosopher who looked just like a philosopher (**slide**) – he had a little goatee and wore knickers – and his primary concern was the decline of God and morality in western culture, and the increasing failure of the church to resist the rising tide of secularism.

When I was a freshman in college, Francis Schaeffer was doing a nation-wide speaking tour called *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* and everyone from my Bible college went to hear Dr. Schaeffer speak for three days at a large conference center in downtown Portland. The main focus of his lectures was about abortion, euthanasia, and infanticide. As an eighteen-year-old in 1980 I barely knew what abortion was, and had never heard of euthanasia or infanticide. I honestly thought that euthanasia had something to do with young people in Asia. I had no idea.

I also had no idea how controversial these subjects were, and each day as we entered the conference center we walked past hundreds of demonstrators – this was Portland after all – who were carry signs and shouting at us. I remember that it was pretty scary and I wondered what all these people were so mad at, and why they were taking their anger out at all of us innocent-looking Bible college students.

I learned that those of us inside the conference center held a diametrically different worldview than those outside demonstrating. In their worldview mankind is the ultimate measure by which truth and values are determined, while our worldview is that God is the ultimate authority by which truth and values are determined. Francis Schaeffer was a prophet who predicted the disastrous results of a culture that rejects God, and 42 years later what he said would happen is happening at an accelerated pace.

2000 year earlier the Apostle Paul gave a similar warning in Ephesians 4 where he contrasted two ways to live – living according to the old self, apart from God, and living according to our new self that has been transformed to live for God. What Paul says fits into the overall theme of Ephesians. Chapters 1-3 talks about who we are as believers, while chapters 4-6 talks about how we live as believers – based on who we are, this is how we should live – our identity determines our behavior.

Paul begins chapter 4 by saying we are to walk worthy of our calling – God has saved us and set us apart from the world, and we should act according to who we are. In verses 1-16 of chapter 4 focus on walking in unity and maturity – God takes us as individual believers and makes us one body in Christ, and He’s given each believer unique spiritual gifts in order to build up the church.

Now, beginning in verse 17, the focus is on walking in holiness. God didn’t save us to stay the way we are, but to be holy as He is holy – to separate ourselves from the lifestyle and values of the world, and live a life that is pleasing to God. Paul will get very specific about what a holy life looks like beginning in verse 25 and going on into chapter 5. But before he talks about the marks of a holy life, he first draws a contrast between the way the world, apart from God, lives in verses 17-19 – and the new way of life to which God has called believers to live in verses 20-24. This week is going to be about how not to live, and next week will be on how to live.

In verses 17-19 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. 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. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.”

Like Francis Schaeffer, the Apostle Paul was concerned that the church God has called out of the world lives differently than the world – and he paints a dark, graphic picture of what the world without God looks like and says, “This is how you should not live.”

He begins by saying, “I insist in the Lord that you no longer live as the Gentiles do.” “I insist” shows the seriousness of what he’s about to say, and “in the Lord” indicates that his words are coming from the Lord. This is not Paul’s opinion, it’s a command of the Lord to no longer live as the Gentiles do.

In the Bible the word Gentiles referred ethnically to anyone who was not a Jew and religiously to the nations and people groups that were not part of the Jewish covenant of faith. The word Gentiles came to be used as a general term for unbelievers who indulged in a pagan, sinful lifestyle. Most of the people in the Ephesian church were Gentiles, and had once been a part of the heathen lifestyle of Ephesus. Ephesus a large, seaport city known for its “anything goes” culture – whatever sinful behavior could be thought of, they had it.

Paul says, “You used to live this way, but you can’t be the same people you used to be or do the same things you used to do. That’s because you’re different now – you been made a brand-new creation in Christ, and you’ve been called out of the world to live a new life.”

Paul paints a very dark picture of an unbeliever – a picture some of you can identify with before you were saved. You say, “Yep, that was me, I was a true pagan.” Some of you may say, “I wasn’t that bad, I wasn’t that depraved.” These characteristics described here does not mean that every person apart from Christ is as bad as they can possibly be, or that every unsaved person lives like an uncontrolled animal – but in a general sense they describe every lost person because we’ve been more affected by sin that we realize, and everyone is born with a predisposition to sin. The degree of sin may vary from person to person, but this description is true of everyone who is still under the curse of sin.

It’s also important to see that Paul is not denouncing unbelieving people – he loved Gentiles and sacrificed his life to reach them for Christ – he is not denouncing Gentiles, but denouncing their way of life that leads to chaos and destruction. He wants everyone to be free from this destructive lifestyle and be made whole in Christ. These verses help us understand our friends and family and co-workers who do not know Christ, so we can better pray for them and be equipped to reach them for Christ.

In verses 17-19 Paul describes five basic characteristics of worldly unbelievers that have a downward trajectory, and it starts with the way they think – their **thinking is futile**. The word “futile” means meaningless, pointless, empty. Their thinking – their reasoning process – leads them nowhere. A whole book of the Bible – Ecclesiastes – was written to show the futility of finding meaning in life apart from God. Every person has the same basic desires in life – to find meaning and purpose, to be happy and fulfilled – and everything people do is driven by these desires.

In Ecclesiastes, King Solomon sets out to find meaning and fulfillment, and unlike most people he had the money and power to test every possible means of happiness. He also just happened to be the wisest man on earth. So if anyone could find meaning in life, it was Solomon. Solomon went out and denied himself no pleasure – he ate the finest foods, drank the choicest wine, and was entertained by the best actors, singers, and comedians. He built large, palatial houses surrounded by lush gardens and vineyards and water fountains. He had servants at his beck and call. He acquired mass amounts of flocks and herds, and silver and gold. And he had lots and lots of wives – 700 in all, as well as 300 concubines.

Anyone looking at Solomon would say, “That’s the life I want – if I could just have what Solomon had and experience what Solomon experienced, I’d be happy.” But here’s what Solomon says... “I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11).

This is the futile thinking that Paul is talking about in Ephesians. To think that you can find any meaning in life apart from God is shallow, worldly thinking. No amount of money or pleasure or fame or success under the sun brings lasting satisfaction, only deeper disappointment once you discover that they don’t work. Solomon says, “When it’s all said and done – when I’ve done everything, had everything – when I’ve experienced every possible avenue of happiness – I didn’t find what I was looking for, and I was worse off than when I began my quest.”

Many unbelievers do some pretty noble things – some give lots of money to charity, some are involved in making their community a better place, and some dedicate their lives to finding the cure for cancer. Nonbelievers do some amazing things, but if they disregard God and live only for this life, all that they do is ultimately futile. They live a few years and help a few people and then they die. What’s the point? And if the people they help die without Christ, then any good they do has no ultimate meaning.

Paul says, “Don’t go back to the futile thinking of the world because it’s pointless and empty, and it’s short-sighted. They live only for this present world and give no thought as to God or eternity.” As believers our meaning and purpose and fulfillment is found in knowing God through Christ, and living each day for His glory. Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher said, “There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.” As believers we get the best of both worlds – we get to live with God in heaven for all eternity, and we get meaning and purpose in life. This outlook lifts us above the despair and hopelessness of the world, for we know that it is only temporary.

That’s why so many of the New Testament writers stress the importance of our thinking. Romans 12:2 says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Everyday our minds are assaulted with worldly thinking, with worldly perspectives, and we must be diligent to renew our minds with God’s truth and God’s perspective, and we will talk more about this next week.

The second characteristic of the unbelieving world is that their **understanding is darkened**. This goes a little deeper into explaining why the thinking of unbelievers is futile – it’s because their understanding, their reasoning process, is darkened so that they cannot know God. Romans 1 is a parallel passage to Ephesians 4, and there it explains how God makes Himself known to every person through creation – all a person has to do is look out at the ocean or up into the sky at night and see His amazing handiwork. But ungodly people suppress the truth of God and their foolish hearts are darkened.

I have a nephew who identifies as an atheist – we have a good relationship and have good conversations. My nephew, whose name is Dan, loves to go on long hikes, and has seen some spectacular sights. I asked him one time, “When you see a snow-capped mountain peak or a beautiful sunset, what do you think? Doesn’t that stir something in your soul?” I said, “When I see creation, I naturally think of a creator and I can’t help but marvel at what God has made.”

Dan said, “It does stir something in me, but I don’t attribute it to a creator – I just enjoy it for what it is. You think there is something beyond this life, but just take this life for what it is and don’t see anything more.” Our spiritual understanding and perception of the world is polar opposite.

When Adam and Eve sinned, the world was plunged into spiritual darkness, so that people cannot comprehend truth and God on their own. Not only that, but Satan – the prince of darkness – works to keep unbelievers in the dark. 2 Corinthians 4:4a says, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel.”

A while back I shared the plan of salvation with someone in my office, explaining as simply as I could his need for Christ and how he could be saved. I felt like I had explained it very well and very clearly – I even drew the plan of salvation out on a piece of paper – and all that was left was for him to pray to receive Christ. But he looked at me like I was from Mars – what seemed simple and clear to me, was anything but that to him. Sometime after that I shared the same plan of salvation another young guy and he got it – as the song says... he saw the light – it was as if he had just been waiting for someone to show Him the way to God, and he eagerly prayed to receive Christ.

I think of the wise men who came from a dark, pagan culture, but they were seeking – they just didn’t know what they were seeking. But God provided a star to guide them to Jesus, and when they arrived at the manger, the light came on and their quest was over. Jesus came into the world as the light to show us the way to God.

That leads to the third characteristic of the unbelieving world – they are **separated from the life of God**. The “life of God” is the life God created Adam and Eve to live – a fruitful and abundant life that never ends. But the moment they ate of the forbidden fruit they died spiritually, and eventually they died physically. Romans 5 explains how as a result of Adam’s sin we are all doomed to die in our sins and be forever separated from God. In chapter 2 Paul explained that we were dead in our trespasses and sins and deserving of God’s wrath – but God made us alive through Christ. We died to our old life and were born again to a brand-new life.

But the world apart from God remains separated from the life of God. It appears as though they have life, but it’s not the life of God. Sometimes you see a T-shirt or coffee mug that say, “Life is fishing,” or “Life is skydiving,” life is about some experience or feeling that makes me feel alive. But apart from God there will always be something missing. No matter how vital, healthy, active, and happy people may be, if they don’t know Christ, they are severed from the only life that is truly and eternally life.

The next characteristic of the unbelieving world is that they are **spiritually ignorant due to hard hearts**. This explains why people are separated from the life of God... “...because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.” The Greek word “ignorance” is *agnoian* from which we get “agnostic.” It means to be without knowledge.

Agnostics often say that they are open to believing in God if they had proof that He exists. But this takes us back to Romans 1 and the fact that God has provided proof – He has revealed Himself to the world through His amazing works of creation that can be seen by every person on every part of the globe – and He has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus who came to earth as God in the flesh. What’s more, He has revealed Himself through the written word of the Bible so that we know His plan and purpose and will.

Therefore, no one can claim to be without knowledge. Romans 1:20 says, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” No one on judgment day can say, “I didn’t know,” because the evidence is there if they will see it.

So why won’t people believe? Why do they remain ignorant? Paul explains that it’s due to *“the hardening of their hearts.”* When you pour concrete there’s a period of time when it’s still soft and moldable. That’s when you get the kids out and make footprints and handprints, because once the concrete hardens, it’s too late.

The same thing can happen to the heart. The heart is the place where God meets us spiritually – it’s the control center of our being, and what we feel, desire, and decide in our hearts determines what we become. God’s work in our lives is dependent on the condition of our heart. A soft heart is open and receptive to God, while a hard heart is closed and unwilling to receive from God. A prime example of a hard heart is King Pharaoh. When told to let God’s people go, Pharaoh’s heart was defiant and he said no. Even after God sent a series of devastating plagues, Pharaoh stubbornly refused. Seven different times it says that Pharaoh hardened his heart. He said, “I will not do it.”

At a certain point God said, ‘Okay, Pharaoh, have it your way,’ and then it says that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. When God hardens your heart, it means that you’ve hit a point of no return – when a person repeatedly rejects God over and over and over, He allows the hardening process to be permanent. The longer someone says “no” to God, the harder it will be for them to ever say “yes.” That is why Hebrews 3:7 says, “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” Don’t wait until tomorrow to trust Christ, do so now before your heart becomes hardened.

Number five, the natural result of futile thinking, of a darkened understanding, of a life separated from the life of God, of being willfully ignorant and hard of heart is a **calloused life of sin**. Verse 20 says, “Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.” This is what Francis Shaeffer warned about all those years ago – the natural result of a culture that ignores God is a calloused indifference to truth and morality, and a life that is given over to sinning without restraint. Do you watch the news? Sometimes it’s good to just step away from all that’s happening, but every day – literally – sin and callousness rises to new levels. Just when you think it couldn’t get any worse, it does.

When a person hardens their hearts to God, they lose moral sensitivity. When I first learned to play guitar, it was very painful to press my fingers down on the guitar strings, but eventually the tips of your fingers form callouses and they become insensitive to the pain. I saw a news story one time about a man with a very rare disease – his body was incapable of feeling pain. Imagine that – I thought, “I would like that disease.” The problem was that because he had no filter for pain, he was constantly injuring himself.

When people harden their hearts to God, they become morally and spiritually calloused, and the result is that “they give themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.” To give yourself over to sensuality means that all moral restraints are cast off and you do whatever your flesh desires.

One of the reasons God has ordained the family and human government and the church is to provide restraint and accountability. When I was growing up my dad’s presence and his paddle restrained me from doing things I might have done otherwise. But as our culture has abandoned God it has also abandoned the family and we are paying the cost as many kids – especially in urban areas – are growing up without dads. And in recent years government, to be politically correct, has not been a restraining force against crime and evil behavior. In addition to all this, unrestrained sensual behavior is applauded and rewarded in culture while moral standards are mocked and cancelled. More and more people feel free to indulge in any and every behavior without blushing – there is no shame or embarrassment because they’ve grown calloused to sin.

Paul describes a world without God as “indulging in every kind of impurity” and “full of greed.” The idea of these phrases is that they never get enough sensual and impure activity – their hunger for sin is a bottomless pit – they are never satisfied, always aching and desperate and lusting for more – and they are compelled to find new perversions to replace the old.

The modern-day word for this is addiction, and our nation in large part has become a nation of addicts – addicted to whatever feeds our flesh. This week I read an article by a 25-year-old man who watched pornography every night, for hours on end, since he was 13. One night he said he heard God say, “Son, what are you doing?” Over time, by God’s power, he was delivered from his addiction, but apart from God the world is engulfed with addiction to every kind of impurity.

The picture Paul paints in these verses is dark and depressing – not exactly the kind of message you came to church to hear – but the point of these verses is to show the transformation that takes place when Christ enters the picture. That’s what we’ll talk about next week – how through Christ we have been rescued from the old life of futility, darkness, alienation, and sin and have been given a new nature that empowers us to live a new way.

Before we learn God wants us to live, we must first see how not to live. Paul says, “This is how you used to live, but you can’t be the same people you used to be or do the same things you used to do. The old life is behind you, and now...

- Instead of futility, you have purpose and meaning.
- Instead of darkness of understanding, you walk in the light of God’s revelation.
- Instead of being alienated from God you now are made an intimate member of His family.
- Instead of being ignorant, you have knowledge to build your life on.
- Instead of hardness of heart, God has given you a new heart.
- Instead of callousness to sin, the Holy Spirit makes you sensitive to sin and a new appetite to live for God.

How shall we then live? Live for God – live according to His plan and purpose, according to His order and design – you are a new person, so be who you are, not who you used to be.