

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

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Heart Disease

The Text: Ephesians 4: 17-21

17 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. 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. 19 They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. 20 But that is not the way you learned Christ!— 21 assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus...

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Over the past couple of days there have been discussions on the radio about road rage. I was listening to the CBC phone-in-show on Wednesday where the host, her guest, and those phoning in were describing how there appears to be an increase in incidents where drivers, either through rude gestures, dangerous driving, and even violent behaviour, are showing the stress of big city life. And while it is in part true that the increase of traffic has made drivers more testy, Ephesians would suggest something different. Here in the fourth chapter and beginning at the seventeenth verse, the Apostle Paul is laying before us the two realms in which people live. Those who live alienated from God and those who are in the school of Jesus where they are learning the way of Christ.

For those who are not enrolled in the School of Christ, Paul describes them as worldly, or we could say worldlings. Such lives are marked by traits the Bible terms as bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander and malice. However for those who are learning Christ, their lives are marked by traits the Bible terms as kindness, tenderheartedness and forgiveness.

As we will see in the next three weeks as we study Ephesians four and the first part of five, there is a marked difference between the person who is in Christ from the person who is in the world. These are two ways of life that are diametrically opposed to each other. So when we think about the problem of road rage in Calgary, Ephesians tells us that this is an escalating problem, not primarily because there are more cars on the road. No it has to do with the state of the human heart. When there are more stresses in life, the character of the heart is more clearly revealed by outward behaviour. Road rage is but one manifestation of the diseased heart that is characteristic of life lived apart from Christ.

As we will see this morning, the Apostle begins his discussion about the human heart by giving us a diagnosis of the human heart separated from God. This is the unredeemed heart. He will then move into contrasting the heart of this type of person with the heart of the person who knows Christ and is being taught by Jesus.

Next week we will see him moving from the more general diagnosis into the treatment of how Jesus heals the human heart. But before we can look at the healing, we have to see with Paul the state of the heart separated from God. When I am speaking of the heart here I mean this in the same way Jesus does when he says that out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.¹

What does Jesus mean by the heart when he uses it like this in Matthew 15? Jesus does not have in mind the physical heart. Rather he is talking about the centre and seat of the spiritual life, what we may call the inner man or woman. When Paul speaks of the mind in verse 17 of our text this is synonymous with Jesus' reference to the heart. The heart is understood as the seat of the thoughts, passions, desires, appetites, affections, purposes, sensibilities and emotions. It is the inner life which is triggered for good and ill, depending on its orientation, by the environments in which we live and finds expression in our outward action

We learn from St. Paul six things about the unregenerate heart that then finds its outward expression in things like bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice. An unregenerate heart is:

1. Hard
2. Dark

¹ Matthew 15:10-20

3. Ignorant
4. Sensual
5. Unclean
6. Alienated from God.

As Paul examines the unredeemed heart he is like a cardio vascular surgeon giving his diagnosis of a diseased heart. So let us look in turn at each of the six things he has to say about the heart.

1 Hardness:

First, the deepest problem is hardness (v. 18 at the end): "due to their hardness of heart." The deepest human problem in life is that apart from the free and sovereign grace of God the heart is hardened against God. People are like a stone toward all that I would call Christian spirituality. The things of the Spirit do not move, attract, or delight such a person. This is a far deeper problem than ignorance. It is the cause of ignorance, and the guilt of ignorance.

Do you see this in the last two phrases of verse 18?

"The ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart."

The hardness is deeper than ignorance. And therefore some one's ignorance of spiritual things is not innocent. It is evil. It is blameworthy, because it comes not from lack of truth or evidence, but from a deep hardness in the heart against God. That is the first and deepest problem that the surgeon shows us about the unredeemed life.

2. Darkness:

Second, there is in the unredeemed heart a deep darkness that swallows up understanding, and keeps people from seeing the glory of the gospel or the excellency of Christ (v. 18 at the very beginning): "they are darkened in their understanding."

St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:4-6 of the unregenerate person:

4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5 For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has

shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Do you see the contrast here? The mind of the unbeliever is blind from understanding the gospel because the god of this world is at work darkening his or her heart, whereas the believer is alive to God and so delights in the knowledge received from the glory of God. This is because their heart is enlightened.

You will remember back in chapter 2 St. Paul says to those who, although now Christians, were once unredeemed:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

The unregenerate life is one where the darkened heart affects the body and so people live dictated by the passions of the flesh. But notice what is different about the heart that is being redeemed. As Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians, such a heart is allowing the light of God's truth to shine upon it, which in turn is renewing the thought life of the believer so that in the words of Ephesians four, the Christian is learning Christ.

3. Deep Ignorance:

Third, the result of this darkness is a deep ignorance of reality (v. 18): "alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them." I say it is a DEEP ignorance, for there is a superficial knowledge in the darkened mind of man or woman. Apart from spiritual light I can know ten thousand things, but I can't know the true meaning of anything—not one thing. Because to know the meaning of a thing is to know why it exists and Colossians 1:16 says, "All things were created through Christ and for Christ." So until I know in my heart that every molecule in this universe exists for the sake of Jesus Christ, I don't know the final meaning of anything. I misunderstand everything, until the darkness of my mind is taken away.

Of course it requires the enlightened mind to even say this. Because for the person who is not in the School of Christ, there is no recognition of just how essential and central Jesus is to the Universe.

4. Sensuality

Fourth, the hardness and darkness and deep ignorance of the unredeemed heart results in sensuality. Verse 19 reads: "They have become callous [which is the same as 'hard'] and have given themselves up to sensuality." Do you see the sense of this verb? To give themselves up, means that they are no longer in charge of their lives. They are now under the control and under the rule of another who wants to dominate them. When seen in light of what Paul has written in chapter two, such people do not even know they have given themselves up to this power. As it says in one version of this passage:

Such people have stifled their consciences and then surrendered themselves to sensuality.²

The sense of the verse seems to be that when a person is ignorant of the true meaning of things, and the true values of life as God sees them, that person will make his goal in life something other than God. It may be the gratification of his body in sex or drink or drugs or food. Or it may be the gratification of his ego with more refined intellectual and cultural pursuits. They will choose anything but God, and everything apart from God. The heart that is hard and dark and ignorant of God will also be a sensual heart and will want to find satisfaction with that which cannot ultimately bring fulfillment and so they are in bondage.

5. Uncleaness

Fifth, inevitably the hardness and darkness and ignorance and sensuality spill over into practices of uncleaness. Notice how verse 19 ends: "greedy to practice every kind of impurity." Literally, their covetousness drives them to pursue practices that in God's eyes are impure.

So we have finally reached the level of outward behavior, or what verse 17 calls "walking" or "living"—

6. Alienated from the Life of God.

² J.B. Phillips

When a heart is callous, darkened, ignorant, sensual, and unclean, inevitably it leads to the sixth level of evil in this spiritual heart disease. Verse 18 says "alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart."

Hardness and darkness and ignorance and sensuality, and the practice of uncleanness cut me off from the one thing that could save me—the "life of God," and leave me dead. This is why Paul says in Ephesians 2:1 and 5: And you were dead in the trespasses and sins.... 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses.

And so here is the thing that we as Christian know and affirm. We are honest about the state of the heart that is separated from Jesus and alienated from God. In humility we are able to say that this was the state of my heart apart from Christ and the only way I can be different is by a supernatural working of the Holy Spirit deep within our own lives as he remakes us from the inside.

It would perhaps be a good thing for each of us to consider in our own lives where our hearts are in need of more healing and remaking. To walk as Christians means to learn Christ and to walk in his way. The idea behind this verb "learn" Christ is to "learn by use and practice to be in the habit of, accustomed to..."

No one learns to walk as a Christian without time and effort supported always by grace and the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. But as we are open to Jesus and say that it is our desire to learn him and to walk in his way then we can apply verse 21 to our own lives: "assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus..."

The Christian man or woman is that person who is forever changed because of Jesus' presence in our lives. The tense of the verbs represented by the words "heard" and "taught" are past tense but they continue to influence in the present life of the person who has heard and been taught. As we come to more fully realize that the truth is in Jesus than we are able to continue to hear more fully what is true about human life from Jesus' perspective as we are taught to live the Christian way. It is as we walk in Christ and not in the futility of our minds that we then discover that our hearts are in the process of healing so that out of the overflow of our hearts our mouths do speak and our lives reflect the one in whose life is alive within us.

How different is the Christian life from the life given up to a debased heart You may remember these words from John one where the Evangelist in presenting Jesus to the reader declares:

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12 But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

What a joy it is to know that we are children of God, children of our heavenly Father. For as we walk in the confidence of this knowledge rather than living in bondage we come into a true freedom where we are able to become our God intended selves. Jesus alone is the true light that can enlighten everyone. And yet as was true when John wrote these words, and as is true today, most people are willfully rejecting of Jesus because their hearts are hard.

What is controlling your life? Is it the Holy Spirit who has been given his rightful place at the centre of your being or are you still under the dominion of the passions of the flesh and are controlled by the Prince of the Ruler of the Air.

As I conclude I want to say something about the use of the verb "walk" in Ephesians 4.17. As Christians we are all prone to times when we are so influenced by the world that we too act out of our fallen nature, which although in the process of being redeemed, is not yet fully redeemed. Therefore we too can at times act in ways that would seem more indicative of an unredeemed heart. And yet there is a very real difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. When we are walking in the Spirit, there is an awareness of sin and a willingness to confess it. This is why confession is so important to the Christian because the more we can confess our sinfulness and weakness the more we are invited to trust in the grace that is in Jesus.

For the Christian the orientation of our lives is not to gratify the sinful nature but to please Jesus and glorify Him. This is why Paul is so emphatic in verse 17 when he says: *"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"*

Paul concern is that for the person who is in Jesus that they not walk as the Gentiles do. He is talking about an orientation of life that is governed by godlessness in the case of the unredeemed heart, and godliness in the case of the person who is in the school of Christ. What Paul means is clearly expressed in Psalm 1. There we read:

1 Blessed is the man
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.

You will notice that these verses describe the blessed life by reference to the negative. Verse one is a vivid description of the unredeemed heart. The whole of life is marked by a willfulness that not only rejects God but reinforces the rebellious spirit by living in the company of those with a like heart. But for the person who is in the school of Christ, he or she is blessed because they thrill on the law of God and nothing gives them more joy than to know and live in the will of God.

The Christian walks in verse two and not in verse one.

And so with this general understanding of the difference between the unredeemed heart and the heart that is in the process of being redeemed we will turn next week to see how our behaviour is affected according to the heart that is within us.

So while road rage and other social ills can be blamed on big city life and any number of other contemporary challenges, this problem has its origins not because of the outward problem of clogged highways, but because of the inner problem of a clogged and alienated spiritual heart where hardness, darkness, ignorance, sensuality and uncleanness lead to alienation from God.

I accept the surgeon Paul's diagnosis. Do you?