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Stinking Accumulation of Mental and Emotional Garbage – Ephesians 4:17-24

This week we arrive at a sin in Galatians 5 that is translated in several different ways. The original Greek word is “aselgeia.” The King James Version uses the word, “lasciviousness.” Then that gets defined as “filthy or wantonness.” We get other uses too. Our NIV translation uses “debauchery.” The same Greek word is then translated “sensuality” in the passage in Ephesians we are going to examine this morning. Then Eugene Peterson's Message takes the meaning of the word further by calling it a “stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage.” That is definitely a stretch from the literal meaning of the word, but it does get at the heart of it. I perhaps most prefer translating the term “outrageousness.”

Now just to be clear, there is clearly a sexual nature to this sin carried out in the outrageous nature of sexuality gone wrong. We talked about this last week when we discussed sexual immorality, but this outrageousness does not just take sexual forms in our hearts and minds. As Peterson's translation makes evident, it also includes a whole host of other mental and emotional garbage.

This morning then I want us to look at a passage from Ephesians 4 that I think illustrates the effect and pervasiveness of this sin. **I want to call our problem foolish thinking and shallow emotions.** Let's begin though by looking at God's word on this.

Read Ephesians 4:17-24.

In this passage we find a contrast between two ways of living. The first and godly way of living in this passage is characterized by truth, newness of mind, righteousness, and holiness. The alternative is described as futility of thinking, darkened understanding, ignorance, hardened hearts, sensuality and indulgence.

So what is the problem? Again, I am going to call the sins we are addressing foolish thinking and shallow emotions.

Let's look at foolish thinking first. Our passage describes this problem as “the futility of their thinking” and “ignorance.”

Futility is “uselessness.” Paul is saying that their thinking is useless. He is not saying that their minds no longer work. **They can still add and subtract and remember people's names and solve problems and so on. They can still think . . . it is just that their thinking is useless.**

We live in a world that prides itself on good thinking. We believe that we are exceedingly intellectual and superior people of reason. But the truth is that while we may be experts in various aspects of the world, much of our God-given capacity for effective thought has been significantly marred by our sinfulness.

We must begin by understanding that sin is not just wrong action. It is much more complex than this. Larry Crabb describes sin as **“an organic network of compulsive attitudes, beliefs and behaviors deeply rooted in an alienation from God.”** Sin actually stems from a deeply-rooted system of wrong thinking in our lives.

Let's take pornography for example since we talked about it last week. There were some crazy statistics that someone sent me this week about pornography in our culture and they got posted on the church website under my blog. 12% of all websites are pornographic. 25% of all internet searches are for porn. 35% of all internet downloads are porn. The average age that a child first sees porn online is 11. And the most popular day of the week to view porn is of course Sunday.

But the viewing of pornography is not just a some wrong action, it is much deeper than that. It is actually the product of useless thinking too. We believe a lie and act upon it. We perhaps have unmet desires in our life. Or perhaps have a particularly uneasy spirit and need an escape. There is some void in our lives that exists and we are thus sticking something in that place hoping that the void will disappear. We are seeking fulfillment and we choose to view pornography because we believe (whether consciously or not) that viewing a bunch of websites of naked people will provide that satisfaction.

And here is the tricky part. We do it because it works. We are satisfied in some way. We do get some form of immediate sexual satisfaction. Or we do get an escape. There is often pleasure in sin for a while . . . sometimes for a long while. In fact satisfaction is often felt more immediately in handling things wrongfully than biblically. This is one of Satan's most effective weapons in our lives: the pleasure of sin.

Here is the problem though. This satisfaction that comes from sin is only skin deep. It is not only temporary but it is shallow. It is a fake imitation of true peace, fulfillment, life in Christ. Remember in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, **“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”**

When a child predator seeks to lure a child away from their parents, from the path to get home, whatever . . . they entice them with something good. Perhaps ice cream or a ride home or toys. And in and of themselves those are good things . . . things that are clearly attractive to a child. And that is why they go with them too often. All they can see before them is the immediate pleasure of getting ice cream, they cannot see or comprehend “the thief.”

Jesus and God's word calls us beyond poor thinking that is ineffective in telling the difference between God and “the thief.” What good is the mind that God has given us, if we don't know how to use it to evaluate our world in such a way that we are drawn closer to God?

How does our mind become so distorted and ineffective? In Romans 1, Paul says that **“the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.”**

Our minds have become useless through sin because we have suppressed the truth. We have chosen to believe a whole host of lies about God, ourselves and our world. And the church has not always done a very good job of going deep in this area. **Much of church teaching has only been concerned with an “iceberg view” of sin. (PIC)** All they worry about is what is visible above the water line. Christians are too often satisfied when people turn from church-defined sins of misbehavior. For instance, as long as you stop getting drunk, you are right with God. There is not examination of the why someone is choosing to get drunk and the deep rooted wrong thinking that is underneath causing a bad choice.

The Bible is concerned with these deeper modes of wrong thinking. In fact, real change demands that we wrestle and overcome our useless beliefs and motivations. And the Bible tells us that this is only possible through the Holy Spirit renewing our minds. Again Romans helps us to understand this. Romans 12:1-2 says, **“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living**

sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

We are transformed by the renewing of our minds. Some, especially in our world, have believed that in order to fully trust in God that we have to give up our commitment to thinking. That faith is opposed to clear thinking. But what the Bible makes clear is that godly thinking is not no thinking, but the clearest thinking. Clear thinking that is more than just memorizing scripture or reading the Bible, which are good things . . . clear thinking is the regular and right exposure of lies that we believe about ourselves, God and the world. **Clear thinking is self-examination and discernment that gradually tears apart false belief and rebuilds it with a foundation of the message God.**

Sin includes unconscious beliefs and motives that deny the truth about life in Christ and lead us away from Him to other alleged sources of life. Wrong ways that lead to death do seem right. Then we must look carefully at how we think, what we think, and how our thinking can be renewed.

I think Larry Crab has a good illustration that helps us to see how our thinking is often futile and ignorant, and ultimately outrageous by godly standards.

As people created in the image of God, we resemble God. We can think. We observe the world around us and evaluate it in various ways. But our thinking is significantly impacted by our sinfulness.

This circle represents our capacity to think. (PIC) Before the Fall, whatever Adam and Eve believed, they believed correctly. They were not foolish. Their thinking was 100% consistent with God’s desires for them. And this is the key. They completely understood themselves as existing completely dependent upon God. They knew that they did not have within themselves the resources necessary for a fulfilling life. They needed God and they understood this. Adam and Eve could think objectively and accurately about everything. **This circle depicts the degree to which ones thinking is accurate. (PIC)** For Adam and Eve, their capacity to think was filled with accuracy. They used all they had to think rightly.

For reasons that we don’t fully understand, though, Adam and Eve chose to pursue a “better life” without God. We all know the story in the Garden of Eden when Satan tempts them to eat from the Tree

of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and assures them that what God has told them about dying if they do so is not true. In fact, Satan tells them that they will be better off if they don't do what God has instructed. They buy the lie and do it. Their rebellion and our rebellion today makes us foolish.

The most basic truth of life is that true life, the abundant life, the clear-thinking life of wisdom is not in ourselves, but only to be found in God. In Genesis and in our daily lives we believe the lie that a better life can be found through independence and self-determination. And so instead of relying upon God for wisdom and the filling of our "circles," we try to fill them with our own ideas, efforts and resources. We believe we know better than God. We are committed to thinking and being independent.

And because this basic premise of our existence – that we are dependent upon God is not trusted and believed, our thinking is corrupted and thus our beliefs about moral issues is usually wrong. We can still figure out $2+2=4$, but when we try to make good decisions we reveal our mental bankruptcy. We are foolish, darkened, and blind. **We have what Crabb calls an "empty rational circle." (PIC)**

The famous passage in Isaiah illustrates the effect of this. **Isaiah 53:6, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way." Another translation says, "All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own."**

The longer we believe the lie that we are independent beings and that fulfillment can be found through our own effort and self-determination, the more deeply we sink into a state of corrupted thinking.

Listen again to the words in Ephesians. We have illustrated what Paul is describing . . . why their thinking is worthless and ineffective. It does not rely upon God as the source. Ephesians 4:17-18, **"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."**

This last portion of the passage points to something beyond our mental capacities too. **"They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts."** This "hardening of hearts" points to emotional garbage too.

Exploring deeply what goes on inside us can be a scary thing. We generally prefer to only go deep enough within ourselves to solve whatever problem we face quickly . . . to restore some sense of emotional well-being. We don't like to take the time to look real deeply. "Hardening of hearts" is a callous behavior of insensitivity, a lack of awareness of feeling or an inability or unwillingness to respond or react. This results in evil behavior.

There is nothing wrong with emotions. In fact, emotions are good. They too are a part of what makes us image bearers of God. God is emotional. God loves and gets angry. Jesus weeps and rejoices. So emotions are good. The experience of emotions is part of what it means to be alive and real. But emotions are reactions and can easily lead to sin.

I have mentioned this before, but our emotions have been referred to as our dashboard of warning lights. We need to be aware of them and when we feel them we need to seek to understand why we feel a particular way and then what we should do about it. They often say more about us than they really do about a given situation.

Let me give you a practical example of shallow emotions. This is will probably make me sound crazy.

A few weeks ago, Dana and I were at home, the girls were in bed and we were sitting on the couch. I decided to get on the floor then and to do some situps. I had done only a few when Dana looked down from the couch and told me that I was not doing them right. That the way that I was doing them was not doing any good and then she began to explain how I should be doing them.

Now, immediately rushes of emotion started running through me . . . and thoughts too, with more emotions. I thought, "I am the one doing the situps, I can feel my stomach straining, they are obviously working. I have been doing situps for 20 years, I think I know what I am doing. You are sitting on the couch, I am actually doing the situps and you are telling me what to do. Who died and made you the fitness queen?" . . . and so on. I didn't say those things, but I thought them. And along with those thoughts I felt angry and frustrated . . . and I wanted to snap back.

I am not they type of person that blows up though. My sinful way of dealing with anger and frustration with Dana, is to sinfully and passive aggressively prove that I am right.

So here is what I do. I first say, when I can feel the situps working. What is your better way? She explains it, which includes not putting my feet underneath the couch and several other steps. I then attempt to do her situps, but by following her instructions as literally as possible. “Perfectly straight back” . . . ok, that is impossible how do I even bend forward and I proceed to show why her method is both impossible and ridiculous. I eventually tell her to try them and critique her for everything she doesn’t do perfectly based upon her own instructions.

So you can imagine how that all goes. We both end up extremely frustrated and angry over a couple situps. Pretty stupid.

So here is the thing. My initial reaction to my emotions of frustration and anger over Dana giving a suggestion about my situps is to blame her. To justify them based upon her words and actions. But as I processed what really happened it became clear to me that I had the problem. She simply recommended a different way of doing situps and I lost it in a sense. Something is wrong there. My emotions of anger and frustration were a red light on the dashboard of my heart that she hit a nerve.

As I prayed and processed this, it became clearer to me that this was one example of a lifetime of sinful belief that my worth, value, etc. were tied to me being right. And when she challenged that I knew the best way to do a situp, it struck that nerve and I reacted even though all she was trying to do was help.

And I definitely don’t have this all sorted out, but I have begun to wrestle with how in this particular area of my life . . . “being right” has affected my relationship with God. I have believed that my fulfillment in some way comes from my ability to be right, to know the best way to do things etc. And as I have processed this, I have found lots of other little indications of this lie.

For instance, my brother is a lawyer too and when he completed law school and took the Illinois bar exam he did not pass the first time. He was clearly upset about it, and then posted his disappointment on a blog he kept. I remember admiring him for this, because I would have never done it. I would have told Dana if I didn’t pass and maybe some family, but I would have protected my “rightness.”

We all have these pervasive areas of sinfulness in our lives and our shallow understanding of emotion, don't ever deal with them. If we go back to our iceberg example (PIC), we just think "aw, I feel angry, that jerk." We never go deep and consider why we feel the way that we do. Why does that act cause such a reaction from us? Sometimes it is justified, other times it is not.

The last part of our passage in Ephesians explains the transformation that is needed for us. Ephesians 4:20-24, **"You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 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."**

A renewed mind involves a shift from images and beliefs that preserve independence to images and beliefs that require dependence. Until we deal with the sinfulness of our commitment to independence and our foolish pursuit of false hope we are not touching on the real problem within the human personality. Change towards godliness requires a return to dependence.

Our outrageous ways of thinking and immaturity in dealing with emotions is a core result of our sinfulness. Foolish thinking and shallow emotions are the result of our denial of the truth that we are wholly and completely dependent upon God for human fulfillment. We can't find in ourselves, in others, or in our world.

God desires to make us new in the attitude of our minds . . . to put on a new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

We have to do the hard work of self-examination . . . and more important, repentance and confession. We have to recognize our sinful thinking and reactions to emotions and acknowledge our dependence upon God for satisfaction.

Galatians 5 reminds us that to the extent we empty ourselves of sinfulness, the Spirit fills us with the things of God, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Let it be so.

Sources Consulted:

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