

Ephesians 4: Bible Wisdom for Today's Problems

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | September 28, 2020



People are often told that in our modern world, the Bible is no longer relevant – that it is merely an ancient text for the primitive mind. But the Bible is God's Word, and it is packed with wisdom for humanity applicable throughout all history. In today's blog, we will examine Ephesians 4:17-32 (NIV84) and demonstrate how God's truths remain vital to us today.

Verse 17: 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.

What makes their thinking futile? Gentiles are those who don't know God and have not had their hearts and minds renewed to operate in harmony with God's design laws. Thus, they continue to practice the core motive of this fallen world – the me-first principle of power over others, the fear-driven, survival-of-the-fittest motive that results in "might makes right" and "the ends justify the means."

Such practices lead to the strong dominating and exploiting the weak. People in fear seek safety and security and, thus, band together to form tribes and societies for self-protection and, ultimately, they form governments that impose law and enforce obedience.

Known as the “rule of law,” this philosophy of governing is the highest form of order that sinful beings can achieve. And it is futile! Why? Because no amount of externally imposed might and power can heal hearts and minds. In fact, such actions make the problem worse. It makes it worse because while the rule of law does reduce anarchy and chaos, thereby providing a sense of order and a sense of safety that reduces fear, it leads people to a false sense of security and the belief that they have control over their safety. This deception is so powerful that it is not only the model for human governments, but, for the same reasons (to provide a sense of safety and reduce fear, fear of punishment and eternal loss), it has also infected the church and resulted in the false legal/penal view of salvation. But the sense of safety and security the penal view provides is likewise an illusion:

- As long as I keep the rules – pay my taxes, don’t speed, don’t commit crimes – I will be safe in the world.
- As long as I can figure out the right doctrines and make a pledge to accept them...
- As long as I can identify the right rituals and perform them in the right way...
- As long as I can know the right rules and keep them – or accept that Jesus kept the rules for me and, thus, claim that I have perfect legal rule-keeping in my record in heaven...

“If I do all of this, then whenever fear and guilt assail me, I can feel safe because I believe the ‘truth,’ have performed the right rituals, obey the right rules, and/or have the legal payment applied to my account.” In other words, using a baseball metaphor, “If I am on base, the authorities (either the government or God) can’t tag me out.”

But this is a false security because it is all predicated on imposed laws or rules, and imposed laws have no power to change hearts and heal minds. Further, imposed laws and rules can be broken at any time by those in power. (Remember, the Japanese citizens interned during WWII kept all the laws of the land but were imprisoned anyway.)

We see the arbitrary application of imposed laws all the time in society. Those without power get punished or mistreated for crimes they didn’t commit, while those in power can commit all kinds of crimes and never be held accountable. The imposed-law system is the best system that sinful humans can create, but the sense of safety and security it provides is an illusion.

When this imposed-law lie is applied to Christianity, it misleads people into believing that the sin-problem is one of rule-breaking, in deeds and behavior, rather than the condition of the heart, the motive that leads to our actions. And this leads people to create legal solutions to the sin problem that have no ability to change hearts and heal minds.

Believing the penal/legal view of reality – imposed laws with imposed punishments – is futile because it actually prevents real transformation of character by creating this false sense of legal security.

It is only by rejecting imposed law and returning to design law that we can understand the truth of our condition and God’s amazing sacrifice to provide us a remedy that, when we trust Him, heals us.

Verse 18: 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.

The futility of the world’s way of thinking, with its imposed-law view of reality, darkens the mind and

separates people from God. The imposed-law lie leads religious people to conclude that sin is being in legal trouble with God and, therefore, it needs a legal solution. This leads people to create all kinds of theologies designed to protect themselves from God: paying legal penalties with the blood of a sinless human sacrifice; various mediators to plead for us to the offended god; various devices to hide us from the punishing god's scrutiny; or application of sinless blood to erase the record of our sin so the deity won't have a legal right to punish us. All of this thinking is pagan; it is futile, it darkens the mind, and it puts barriers between people and God, which ultimately further hardens the heart. People either become religiously abusive or reject God altogether.

This infection of imposed law into Christianity led to the Dark Ages – darkness covering the people – yet they remained religious. This led to crusades, inquisitions, and the burning of dissenters at the stake, which ultimately resulted in the rejection of God and the surge of modern atheism, with all of its destructive results, furthering the futility of people's thinking and the hardening of more hearts.

Verse 19: 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.

Accepting the false paradigm of human-like imposed law – with its imposed punishments and the false sense of legal security – fails to heal the heart and, thus, fails to resolve guilt, shame, and the searing of the conscience. The unresolved internal sense of inadequacy, guilt, shame, and uneasiness in the soul leads to sensuality in both the legally religious and the non-religious.

In the legally religious, their sense of guilt leads to greater religiosity and rule-keeping, but with no change of heart, there is no real peace. Such people become Pharisaical, with increasing intolerance toward others who don't practice their form or religion or obey their rules. And ultimately, they seek to enforce their religious rules on others. But simultaneously, having no real peace of heart, they seek emotional relief through secret self-indulgences of various kinds. Addiction rates (substance use, pornography) in those who identify as Christian is no different than those who do not identify as Christian.

In the non-religious, sensual indulgence as a means to achieve emotional relief is open and celebrated.

Both groups (religious and non-religious) hold to penal/legal views and do this as a way of trying to numb a guilty conscience and feel emotionally better. But instead, things only get worse.

Why do they do this? Because people want happiness, but happiness is only possible in harmony with God's design laws for life. The penal/legal lie leads to rule-keeping but no healing of hearts and, thus, people continue to be out of harmony with God and His design for life and cannot experience the happiness God designed. Thus, they substitute pleasure-seeking for happiness and end up chasing ever-more destructive cycles of sensual indulges. (For more on how to experience genuine happiness, see my blog [The Secret of Happiness and Joy.](#))

Verses 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 (my emphasis).

Those of us who have genuinely come to know Christ, did not come to Him as an idea, a concept, or theory, but as a real person who loves us and who is our Creator – the One who built life. We have come to know Him as the source of truth, the light of love who destroys the lies of imposed law and leads us back to the kingdom of love built upon design laws.

As we know Christ and follow the truth of God's reality, we embrace His laws, the protocols upon which He built life to operate, and we are won to trust, open our heart to God, and experience the indwelling of the renewing agency of the Holy Spirit that removes our fear and selfishness and imparts the perfection of Jesus. We get new hearts, right spirits, new desires. We have new attitudes! We are new people who are healed to fulfill God's purpose in our creation – to be like God in righteousness and holiness. We live out God's law of love, truth, and liberty. This is not some legal accounting – this is actual healing and transformation of the hearts and minds of people. This is actual righteousness, holiness, and transformation of character, not some fictional legal declaration of righteousness while we remain unrighteous.

Verse 25: Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and *speak truthfully* to his neighbor, for we are *all members of one body* (my emphasis).

What does it mean that we are members of one body? Would it mean the same as: "all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"? (Galatians 3:27, 29 NIV84). For us today, wouldn't it mean that there is neither black or white or Asian or Hispanic but that in Jesus, we are one human race? Would it mean that we are to speak the truth that in God's kingdom all lives matter – and reject the racially divisive messages that suggest some lives matter more than others? The world doesn't know Jesus. The world wants to divide; Jesus wants to unite! The thinking of the world is futile indeed.

Verses 26, 27: In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

The world today seems to be exploding with anger, but is what we are seeing in society today the way Jesus would act? Will the genuine Christian, who is being renewed in his mind to be like God and to have the attitude of Christ, allow anger to cause them to act in violence toward others? Does that mean we are never to have anger? It all depends on the type of anger and the focus of the anger.

There is a difference between righteous anger and sinful anger; for a full exploration of these two types of anger, see my [blog on anger](#). But here is a brief review:

- **Righteous anger** is always motivated by love for people and focuses on destroying the disease of sin in order to heal and save people, such as the anger doctors have toward cancer, Alzheimer's disease, or Ebola – but doctors are not angry at their sick patients, even when their patients have ugly symptoms.

- **Sinful anger** is motivated by selfishness and focuses on punishing, hurting, or destroying other people who have offended us, perpetuating sin and selfishness. This is the anger at not getting our way, or having our ideas rejected, or being wronged by others.

Sinful anger can be projected out of the self onto proxies. We can see others in our society whose experiences approximate our own plight and then unconsciously project our own hurt, anger, and resentment (selfish desire to punish those who have wronged us) out onto these proxies and get angry at their plight, their mistreatment, and their injury. Then we vent our anger onto those alleged to be the exploiters and deceive ourselves that because we are angry about another person's mistreatment and are seeking to punish the people who hurt the other person that we are not being selfish. We tell ourselves that we are being loving and that it is okay to use coercion and force to punish wrongdoers. Truly, "the human mind is more deceitful than anything else. It is incurably bad" (Jeremiah 17:9 NET Bible).

Verse 28: He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

When we are renewed to be like Christ, we will not steal, riot, or destroy property. Instead, we work in our communities to build up, not tear down.

Verse 29: Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

Those who are like Jesus in character, who are part of God's kingdom, don't lie, slander, gossip, spread rumors, or speak in ways to injure others. But what if it is for the purpose of ensuring that our candidate wins the next election – is it okay to speak unkind things of the opposing candidate if it helps our team win?

When I speak of getting one's candidate elected, did you immediately think of human governments? But couldn't all of this apply to the church as well? Have you ever seen a political race for church office in which such unwholesome methods were used? Conversely, have you ever seen a political race, whether in government or church, in which both sides only spoke kind things that built up the opposing candidate?

There is a difference between speaking clearly about the differences in policy, methods, vision, goals, plans, beliefs, doctrines, and attacking a person. Jesus spoke clear truth about God's kingdom, law, methods, goals, plans, and principles that exposed the distortions that others were teaching. But Jesus never slandered others or spoke harmful words. We are to speak like Jesus did – the truth in love while leaving others free.

Verse 30: And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

What grieves the Holy Spirit? Rejecting His agency; i.e., holding to lies and resisting truth, clinging to selfishness, and resisting love. Thus, note what the apostle says next.

Verses 31, 32: Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Can you see why the genuine Christians in our society cannot align themselves with movements that fail to love every human being as an equal? And why genuine Christians won't align with movements that use methods of violence, deceit, slander, that incite fear and hostility, that coerce and intimidate and force their way?

Do you see how the devil is manipulating society right now by inciting wrong – the abuse or mistreatment of others – and then inspiring people to be outraged by it and then tricking them into pursuing the righteous goal of eliminating evil by the practice of his methods of force, violence, coercion? But this only spreads more evil because it incites more violence and hardens more hearts.

We are not to participate in such activities. We are to come out and be separate. We are to understand that the only God-ordained use for human governments (use of physical might and power) is to restrain evil, to hold in check people who overtly seek to exploit and harm others. There is no role for human governments to promote righteousness because righteousness is a heart issue and human governments have no power to heal hearts – human governments can only injure, harm, and damage hearts.

At this time in human history, the saving truths of God's Word are more relevant and needed than ever. I encourage you to reject the imposed-law methods of this sinful world and embrace the truth of our Creator God of love, invite Him into your heart, and be renewed to be like God in true righteousness and holiness!
