

“So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.”
—*Ephesians 4:17–19 (NASB)*

There can be no doubt about man’s chief purpose in life. Jesus stated it in unequivocal language: “‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment” (Matt 22:37–38). Indeed, it should be natural for God’s image-bearers to love him without reservation and with all their being. The irresistible attractiveness of his glory, goodness, power, wisdom, and love should instinctively elicit the kind of response described by Jesus. *But it doesn’t.*

The problem, of course, is not due to a deficiency in God’s character or in the revelation of himself to his creatures. Instead, the problem is summed up in one word—*sin*. Man’s entire being—his material and his immaterial components, including his “heart,” “soul,” and “mind”—has been corrupted by sin, resulting in man’s refusal and inability to love God as Jesus commanded.

Sin’s particular impact on man’s mind—his faculty of judgment, of making sense of himself, the world, and God, of discerning between truth and error—is called ***the noetic effects of sin***. Sin has not only corrupted man’s passions and behaviors. It has warped the very instrument that chooses, justifies, entertains, and advances them—his mind. As the Reformer John Calvin stated, “We are so entirely controlled by the power of sin that the whole mind, the whole heart, and all our actions are under its influence” (*Commentary on Romans*, 261).

The word “**noetic**” comes from the Greek word **νοῦς (nous)** meaning “mind.” Thus, “noetic effect” is the effect that sin has on the *mind*.

“Sin is the natural man’s element; he is as unwilling to part with it as fish are to come out of the water onto dry land. . . . He is a captive, a prisoner, and a slave, but he loves his conqueror, his jailor, and master.”
—*Thomas Boston*

A text that describes this truth concisely is **Ephesians 4:17–19**. It is found in a section where the Apostle Paul addresses the conduct of the Christians in the ancient city of Ephesus. He implores them “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which they had been called” (4:1). In other words, the divinely initiated salvation they experienced was to produce a kind of behavior consistent with that reality. In the midst of this exhortation, Paul contrasts their new transformed state of existence with the state in which they once lived. This contrast provides an authoritative diagnosis of the mind of every unbeliever. It shows how sin manifests itself in **intellectual bankruptcy (4:17–18a)**, which in turn leads to **spiritual animosity (4:18b)** and **moral degeneracy (4:19)**.

The Natural Man’s Intellectual Bankruptcy (Eph 4:17–18a)

To show how out of character it is for a believer to live like an unbeliever, Paul points to the fundamental issue that is at the center of all discussions related to behavior—*the state of the mind*. He states that “Gentiles”—a metaphor for “unbelievers”—live their lives daily “**in the futility of their mind**” (4:17b). Once again, it is important to note that the word for “mind” (**νοῦς, nous**) does not refer to the brain or to one’s IQ. It refers to one’s way of thinking, to one’s pattern of making judgments. It is a disposition or worldview. This faculty of the unbeliever, Paul says, functions “in futility”—a description that refers to purposelessness, fruitlessness, or emptiness. In other words, **sin has rendered the unbeliever’s judgment empty**. In its natural state, the unbeliever’s mind is incapable of functioning in a true, productive, God-honoring manner. Understanding this emptiness goes a long way in understanding why the unbeliever lives out his life as he does.

But there is more. Paul further describes unbelievers as living life **“being darkened in their understanding”** (4:18a). The term for “understanding” (διάνοια, *dianoia*) is a synonym for the term “mind” used in the previous phrase. It too refers to the faculty of comprehending and reasoning. It is the same term used by Jesus in Matthew 22:37, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD . . . WITH ALL YOUR MIND.”

But Paul says that this faculty of the natural man is “darkened.” It is not clear and transparent but murky and concealed. The integrity of the mind’s operations is not as good or as wholesome as it appears on the surface. There are always dark thoughts at the root. They may express themselves directly in the ugliness of that darkness—as in the case of hardened criminal activity. Or they may express themselves in disguise—as in the case of morally respectable, religious activities cleverly designed to feed one’s pride or to attempt to manipulate God. Whatever the case, **sin has rendered the unbeliever’s judgment warped.**

With the number of professing Christians denying or downplaying this truth, one would think that other than Ephesians 4:17–19, the Bible is relatively silent about this characteristic of the unbeliever’s mind. But this is far from the truth. The doctrine of the noetic effects of sin is *one of the most emphasized* in the Bible. A few key passages include:

- Genesis 6:5
- Psalm 14:1–3; 53:1–3; cited in Romans 3:11
- Romans 1:18–32; 8:5–8
- 1 Corinthians 1:18–31; 2:1–16
- 2 Corinthians 3:14
- Titus 1:15

These and other texts describe in vivid detail **the great epistemological devastation** brought about by sin (“epistemology” refers to the investigation of the methods, scope, and validity of knowing things). This devastation describes no mere isolated tribe living in the ancient world. It is *universal in scope*. The Apostle Paul uses these texts to describe ethnic Jews and Gentiles, elite wisemen and illiterate slaves, the ardently religious and the agnostics.

Yet it is also important to note that the universal affirmation of the noetic effects of sin does not imply that every natural man always thinks the worst possible thoughts and acts upon them. The evil nature of these thoughts, and the extent to which they are acted upon, varies greatly among sinners. What is certain is that every thought—regardless of its focus—is in some way corrupted by sin. This is what makes sin so devastating as it relates to the mind: its presence can be concealed at the most private level and then influence the outcome of one’s thoughts in such a way as to disguise its very existence. Herman Bavinck describes it as follows:

The teaching of Scripture . . . is not that every human lives at all times in all possible actual sins and is in fact guilty of violating all God’s commandments. It only refers to the deepest inclination, the innermost disposition, the fundamental directedness of human nature and confesses that it is not turned toward God but away from him. (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.120)

The Natural Man’s Spiritual Animosity (Eph 4:18b)

Paul describes a devastating consequence of the sinful mind: those with such a condition are **“excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them”** (4:18b). God is the source and sustainer of all life (Gen 1:1; 2:7; Deut 32:39; John 1:3–4; 5:24; 14:6; Acts 17:24–29). As the Psalmist states, “For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light” (Ps 36:9).

But due to the sinner’s “ignorance,” spiritual vitality and sustenance has been cut off, for as Paul states elsewhere, “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). The ignorance mentioned in Ephesians 4:18 is not an innocent unawareness. The ignorance Paul has in mind here marks every unbeliever is a culpable ignorance—a willful refusal to accept the truth the God has made plain about himself (Rom 1:19–21).

In fact, Paul continues by identifying the very source of this culpable ignorance: **“because of the hardness of their heart”** (Eph 4:18b). The idea of “hardness” here can be likened to the calcium that binds broken bones together, to the plaster that makes a cast hard, or to the mortar used to cement bricks into a wall. This hardening agent is what permeates the unbeliever’s heart. It is impervious to the noblest, sincerest, and clearest efforts to instruct, correct, and warn. Paul emphasizes this same truth in 2 Corinthians 3:14 when referring to the Jews, “But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ.” Once again, sin is the cause of such hardening (Heb 3:13).

The connection is obvious. Sin has corrupted the natural man’s mind. His thoughts and intentions are mischievous. Since darkness and light cannot coexist, alienation and hostility result. Paul summarizes this truth in greater detail elsewhere when he writes,

For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom 5:8–5)

The Natural Man’s Moral Degeneracy (Eph 4:19)

According to Paul, the intellectual bankruptcy caused by sin (Eph 4:17–18a) leads to spiritual animosity with God (4:18b). The natural outcome of this condition is moral degeneracy: **“and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness”** (4:19).

Paul describes the sinner as “callous,” referring to the inability to feel sensation or pain. In this context Paul uses the term to describe *moral apathy*—a despondency in which the natural man either is not aware of or does not care about the price he pays for his immoral actions. Like the stereotypical drug addict, the sinner continues to go back to sin, oblivious to the cost that must be paid and hoping against all odds that it will finally give him—even after so many failed attempts—what he is looking for.

This callousness leads the sinner to self-abandonment—they “give themselves over” (4:19). The same verb is used three times in Romans 1:

- 1:24a – “Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity . . .”
- 1:26a – “For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions . . .”
- 1:28 – “And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper.”

Through Romans 1:24–28 and Ephesians 4:19, Paul explains how God’s punishment works hand-in-glove with the will of the sinner. God gives to the sinner the consequences of his sinful thoughts, which is exactly what the sinner himself wants. What are those consequences? “Sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness” (Eph 4:19b). The word “sensuality” is used to refer to a “lack of self-constraint which involves one in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable” (BDAG, 141). It is one of the terms that Paul uses frequently in his writings to refer to sexual sin (Rom 13:13; 2 Cor 12:21; Gal 5:19), although here Paul is probably using it to refer to “the practice of sin without concern to what God or people think” (Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 590). This purpose of this lack of self-restraint is to indulge in the “practice” or lifestyle of sexual sin and material greed—without inhibition or restraint. All is about self: “Self is everything; God is nothing” (Eadie, *Ephesians*, 334).

In the end, such hedonistic behavior is never the root of the problem. It is rather the manifestation of a corrupt mind. What is needed is not behavioral modification but heart/soul/mind regeneration. Apart from a supernatural work of rebirth (John 3:1–8), the sinner’s mind will continue to produce the sinful thoughts and intentions that spawn his evil desires and passions. These will eventually manifest is outward immorality (James 1:13–15).

How Then Shall We Respond?

How must we respond to the Apostle Paul's clear teaching on the noetic effects of sin in Ephesians 4:17–19? Here are five applications:

1. **Remember that a sinner is never intellectually neutral.** So-called intellectual neutrality is a myth. Every unregenerate person has an inescapable bias against the one true God and his revelation. As John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue state, “man’s spiritual state is not one of relative neutrality, in which he is able to accept or reject God and his gospel. He is an active hater of God (Rom 8:7) who cannot accept spiritual truth (1 Cor 2:14)” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 468).
2. **Recognize that even the sinner is a theologian.** All men have a sense of God (what Calvin called *sensus divinitatis*). All men think thoughts about God. The kind of thoughts they entertain, however, are evil. While they may conclude that $2 + 2 = 4$, they fail to give God the credit for that essential reality even while enjoying its benefits. While they may paint exceptional pieces of art, they fail to give God thanks for his beauty manifest in creation. Instead, they suppress and distort the truth about God, ascribing to him qualities he does not have and refusing to acknowledge the perfections he does have (Rom 1:18–23). Consequently, no sinner needs to be introduced to the concept of God or convinced of his existence. He already is aware.
3. **Resist looking to sinners to solve life’s most basic problems.** True, the unregenerate can accomplish significant feats and provide insightful observations on how things work in this world. But they do this while at the same time refusing to give God their love. How, then can we look to the unbelieving mind as a source for counsel on the most fundamental issues of life: Why am I here? What is my purpose? What is wrong with me? How do I change? If we really believe the Bible’s teaching on the noetic effects of sin, we will not look to the unbelieving world and its so-called solutions for answers.
4. **Realize sensuality is not the sinner’s primary dilemma.** Behavior modification is not the solution. While radical steps are sometimes necessary to prevent the sinner from irreversible harm, what he needs most is a gospel that is aimed at his heart, that proclaims truths about God and his Son Jesus, that calls for a full-personed response of repentance and faith, that provides a solution to the problem of his mind. The sinner’s problem is not aberrant behavior. It is the noetic effect of sin.
5. **Rejoice that salvation restores the sinner’s mind.** God’s gift of salvation achieves what no human effort can: the transformation of the heart and the restoration of the mind. Through this miraculous work of regeneration, the mind can once again function, albeit imperfectly, to love God.

For Further Study

1. Memorize 1 Corinthians 2:14.
2. In your own words, define the *noetic effects of sin*.
3. Over the coming week, spend time making observations from these key texts related to sin’s effects on the mind: Genesis 6:5; Psalm 14:1–3; 53:1–3 (cited in Romans 3:11); Romans 1:18–32; 8:5–8; 1 Corinthians 1:18–31; 2:1–16; 2 Corinthians 3:14; Titus 1:15.
4. Consider how the doctrine of the noetic effects of sin should impact the presentation of the gospel to sinners. Also consider how the noetic effects of sin factors into the regenerate believer’s life and growth.
5. The hymn “O Great God” (*Hymns of Grace*, 35) is a hymn that beautifully describes the sinner’s transformation from one who was blinded by a sinful mind to one who has been set free to love and enjoy God. Take time this week to sing through its stanzas several times in worshipful praise to our Savior God.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: September 29, 7pm – “The Lifting of the Veil”

Have a question? Write to menoftheword@gracechurch.org.