

HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH

20th in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"

Ephesians 4:17-19

Laurie and I were in a taco shop recently to buy some food to take out, looking at the menu up above the counter. There I saw a warning notice, telling us that eating raw or undercooked meat, poultry, seafood, shellfish or eggs may increase our risk of food-borne illness. This was a taco shop. I wasn't planning on ordering a burrito with raw chicken meat in it or a sushi taco. Were they warning me they didn't thoroughly cook their meats? I didn't think so. The sign was totally unnecessary. It would have been appropriate at a sushi restaurant maybe, but a taco shop? It made no sense. But then I noticed another sign that said, "Warning: Chemicals known to the state of California to cause cancer, birth defects or other reproductive harm may be present in food or beverages sold or served here." Now I was alarmed. I thought, "We've walked into a death trap. This place is going to make us sick from some food-borne illness or even worse, it's going to give us cancer. Let's get out of here!" We managed to get out alive; although, who knows...even now we may have cancer from our brief foray into that danger zone and not even know it.

It made me feel a little better when I gave it some thought and realized I've seen that sign about cancer or reproductive harm before. You've seen it too, because state law requires that it be posted in pretty much every eating establishment in the state. It makes it sound like eating at any such establishment is a foolhardy endeavor wherein we are putting our lives at risk. Since then I've realized that while I see myself as mostly risk averse and a very boring, play-it-safe person, that is in fact not true. I am a true risk taker, an exciting live-on-the-edge kind of guy. I am much more of a hair-on-fire daredevil than I ever realized. I read those signs, stare danger right in the face and laugh at it, boldly ordering and eating this death dealing food as though I had no fear whatsoever. Go ahead, you cheese enchilada, do your worst. You don't scare me. As I reflected on this it seemed to me that the state is warning us that eating is hazardous to our health. So what? We should just stop eating? I'm guessing that might have a somewhat negative impact on our health. These warning signs are the Nanny State playing the role of the boy who cried wolf. When you warn people constantly that everything on the planet is dangerous for them, after a while they don't listen to anything you say.

Sometimes we ignore warnings because they are so ridiculous. One sleep aid comes in a package that has the warning, "May cause drowsiness." Well, we certainly wouldn't want that when we're trying to fall asleep, now, would we? One mattress warning label cautioned, "Do not attempt to swallow." This, of course, addresses a huge problem. Our son frequently has to deal with patients in the ER who are there because they tried to swallow a mattress. We had a classic one at Christmas. We bought some Christmas lights and I noticed the box warned, "For indoor or outdoor use only." So that rules out, what? Maybe under water, or buried underground? All right, guess I won't try to put the lights in our bathtub.

There are some warnings that we should take very seriously. There are warning signs on the bluffs around here that they are unstable and you should stay clear of them. What happened on Friday at Grandview demonstrated tragically that we should all listen to those warnings. The verses that we are going to look at today are kind of a warning sign, and it's one to which we should give careful heed because it is about something that could be seriously hazardous to our health. The danger he cautions us about is the culture in which we live. Let's look at Ephesians 4:17-19 and see what the fuss is all about.

WE ARE TO BE DIFFERENT

Paul tells us we who believe in Jesus are to no longer live as the Gentiles do. He was using the term "Gentiles" to mean people who are not followers of Jesus. In this case it was the world around the Ephesian Christians. It would apply to our culture as well.

The Ephesians used to be that kind of Gentile. They lived like everyone else in their culture. That's why Paul says they should no longer live the way the "Gentiles" do. They used to, but now they are supposed to live in ways that are markedly different. The differences don't have anything to do with whether they ate certain foods or observed particular holy days or were circumcised. The difference is in how they lived, but that necessarily began with how they thought.

The difference begins in our minds. Our actions are the results of thoughts. For instance, Laurie and I have a picture of the two of us on our honeymoon in Hawaii hanging in our bedroom. We are very tan, especially Laurie. Back in the day we thought getting as tan as you could was great. It looks good, and the only real danger of sitting out in the sun for hours was sun burn. If you could avoid that, hey, sunshine is healthy, right? Years and a couple of skin cancer episodes later we don't think that anymore. So we don't bake out in the sun to get tan. We think differently, so we act differently. Actions are determined by thoughts. Our ideas determine our values, our priorities and our choices. So Paul zeroes in on our thinking, telling us we need to think differently than the world does.

He is warning us that the thinking of the culture around us is toxic. It is hazardous to our health. In fact, it is deadly. That was true 2000 years ago, and it is true today, though in a different way. It is always true because human culture is heavily influenced by our spiritual enemy and by fallen human nature. This is a concern because our culture exerts a powerful influence on us that we mostly are not aware of. It's kind of like gravity. Our lives are constantly affected by it, but we don't even notice it. Sadly, our culture influences us to the point where today most of us think a lot like our culture without even noticing it. In the last century scholar and writer Harry Blamires wrote a perceptive book titled, *The Christian Mind*. In it he wrote that unfortunately, "We Christians in the modern world accept...a frame of reference constructed by the secular mind...There is no Christian mind." In other words, except for within some narrow boundaries, Christians today mostly think just like the Gentiles think, and they are not even aware of it. But what is the problem with the thinking of those around us?

THEIR HEARTS ARE DARKENED

Paul used language very similar to this passage when he wrote to the church at Rome. In Romans 1:21 he said, “Although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” The problem begins with refusing to acknowledge God. In this passage Paul says in verse 18 they are darkened in their understanding because of the ignorance in them, and that they became ignorant due to the hardening of their hearts. When people refuse to bow to God, their hearts become hardened, and that starts the whole process of darkening their hearts.

But why do people refuse to bow to God? The roots of the human condition are the subject of the opening chapters of the Bible. We can see why people are the way they are by looking at those stories. In Genesis 3, we can see the very thing Paul refers to happening. The first two humans live in a perfect environment. There is beauty, love, life, plenty, perfect harmony between the humans and God, the humans themselves and the humans and nature. There was no sickness, no fear and no death. There was freedom. But the thought was presented to them that they shouldn’t have to always bow to God. They should be on a par with him. The implication was they would never experience the best life can offer if they had to submit to God. They should have the freedom to decide for themselves what is best. They should be like God. And they bought it. They believed that to be really free and really happy and fulfilled as humans they needed to be able to make whatever choices they wanted. They shouldn’t have to do what God told them. The results were disastrous.

People to this day refuse to let God be God over them for the same reason. They don’t want to bow to him and let him rule in their lives because they are sure that he will restrict their freedom and keep them from having the best that life could possibly offer. They are certain they know better than God what is good for them.

I once had a number of conversations with a guy who had lots of objections and questions about the Christian faith. Over a period of months I tried to respond to all of his issues, until one day he said he had no more questions. He was convinced that Christianity was the truth. But he didn’t want to accept Jesus as his Lord and Savior. The reason was he didn’t want God to rule his life. He wanted to do things his way!

When you look at the theory of Darwinian evolution, the religion of our culture, it is not hard to see that there is much wrong with it. But people cling to it with a passion and devotion that puts most religions to shame. Why is that? It is because they want to get away from God. If God is the Creator, then they have to answer to him, and that means they are not free to live however they want. So they hold to a theory that in their minds obviates the need for a Creator. God didn’t create us, so maybe there is no God, and thus we make our own way in this world, we decide what is right and what is best for us.

Sadly, when one refuses to bow to God, one’s heart will get hardened to him. He keeps hitting us with truth about him, and when we keep rejecting it our hearts harden. A few years ago I gave

Laurie a ukulele for her birthday. She has learned to play it a little. She has the ability to be quite good at it, but she has not pursued it diligently. There are two reasons for that. One is she doesn't have a lot of time to invest in it. But the other actually might be a bigger factor. It is that becoming better at it is a little bit painful. To play it, just like with a guitar, you have to press hard on the strings. At first that doesn't feel too bad, but rather quickly it starts to hurt, so it's hard to play it for more than a few minutes. The only way to actually improve is to simply stay at it and endure the pain, because over time the repeated pressure on your fingertips causes callouses to build up. The callouses are hard and thick enough that you don't feel the pain of the pressure anymore. The problem with us humans is when we keep refusing to bow to God a callous builds up on our hearts. They become hardened. Our thinking becomes futile.

We are exposed to the truth about God continually. Nature, at the very least, points us to him. When you refuse to see a truth that confronts you over and over, you must build an argument in your mind against it that allows you to deny it. Over time through repetition you begin to believe your own lie. A callous builds up that deadens your heart to the truth.

How should the thinking of a follower of Jesus be different from the futile thinking of our world? There are quite a few ways, but I will identify three crucial areas.

A Jesus follower believes that God is the ultimate reality.

The Scriptures claim that God is the fundamental reality of all that exists. He is the center of it, the source of it and the point of it. Romans 11:36 says of God, "From him and through him and for him are all things." Colossians 1:16 says of Christ, "In him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him." Life, all life, comes from God. And he created all of it, all of us, for his purposes. He is the ultimate reality, the core of everything. That is the starting point, the most basic truth about life. If that is true and you start your view of life, yourself and the world by denying that, what is going to happen? Your starting point is way off. Everything you construct will be skewed. It won't be in line with reality. There will be fatal flaws in all of it. In Paul's language, it will be futile.

Recently my phone was dying so, as much as I didn't want to do it, I had to get a new one. I knew that Michael and Carissa just order one online when they have to get a new one. But in the past when we bought new phones we did it at the phone company store and they did all the work of activating the phone and transferring our contacts, photos and data from the old phone to the new. I was leery of trying to do all that myself. I told Laurie that I was thinking about buying a phone online and skipping the ordeal of the phone store. She said, "But you'd have to do all the activating and transferring yourself, and I'm pretty sure that would be a disaster." I said, "Well Michael and Carissa do it." She just started laughing. The message was clear. The idea that I could do what they do was hysterically funny to her. I had to admit that this was a reasonable position. So I went to the phone company store and went through the whole process of buying a phone, a process I hate because it is time consuming, confusing, and I always choke. I end up

feeling like I made the wrong decision. Imagine my dismay when I finally made a decision and bought the phone, and they told me that they don't do all that work of transferring data anymore. They just send you a text that tells you how to do it yourself. My fundamental premise was wrong, so my whole approach to buying the phone was skewed. If I had correct information I would have had a completely different approach, and I'm pretty sure I'd have had a different outcome. That's what happens when your fundamental assumptions are wrong. Make a fundamental error in assumptions about God and life, and you'll never get life right.

Unfortunately, if you don't believe God is the center of all things, then you inevitably will conclude that you are the center. George Saunders, award winning writer who was at one point named Man of the Year by GQ magazine has said, "The big kahuna of all moral questions as far as I'm concerned is ego. How do you correct the fundamental misperception that we are all born with – namely, 'I am central.' All of the nasty stuff in this life comes out of that misunderstanding."

There is only one throne, and I want to be on it, so God can't be. People choose that because they think it will lead them to life and make them happy. But Saunders says, correctly, it produces all of the nasty stuff of life. In other words, all the evil in the world stems from that one idea. Either God's on the throne and life is about him, or I am on the throne and it's about me.

So humans start with the desire to find life and convinced that they know what is best, they deny the reality of God in order to pursue what they want and think is best. But instead of producing life and happiness, it results in all the evil in the world. All of the prejudice, unkindness, conflict, violence, oppression, restlessness, emptiness, frustration and dissension in the world stems from that one choice. That is the very definition of futility. You choose something thinking it will bring you good; instead, it produces a horror and death. That is a tragic picture of futility.

A Jesus follower believes there is moral and spiritual truth.

Jesus said in John 8:32, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Truth exists, can be known, and is the key to freeing us from the darkness and futility of life. In John 14:6 Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." He is real, he is the ultimate truth, and he is the way to life. But our world claims there is no such truth. It says in the moral and spiritual realm there is only opinion. There is no objective truth.

Of course, that is absurdly futile. To state that there is no moral or spiritual truth is itself a moral and spiritual statement, and it claims to be absolute. It is a self-defeating statement. If it is true, then it is not true.

Many in our world insist that if anyone claims to know the truth morally or spiritually, they will inevitably become arrogant, intolerant of others and possibly even violent. They've seen it happen. That has happened over and over in history and it is still happening today. In an effort to achieve peace in the world they must do away with such truth claims.

But here again we see the futility of the thinking of the world. If there is no truth, then all philosophies, religions, approaches to life are equally valid, and equally invalid. No one way is any better than any other. That means that the way of the Nazis is equally as good as living by the Golden Rule. Pedophiles have an alternative lifestyle that is as valid as the life of Mother Teresa. That position slams head-on into a reality roadblock. No one wants to live in a world where that is true. And everyone, and I mean everyone, knows such a thing is absolutely not true.

There is a major logical problem with the idea that we should have peace in the world and people should be treated equally and with dignity. All must be accepted and respected. But that idea, again, is a moral and spiritual truth claim. It is, by the reasoning of the one who says there is no truth, no more valid than the belief of a man who thinks other people exist only for his personal use and amusement. It destroys its own premise.

What you are left with then, is nothing but raw power. If nothing is truly right or wrong, then we are left to choose to do whatever we are able to do. The best thing then is to gain power and to use it to make sure no one is ever able to thwart your personal desires. If there is no right or wrong, what is to stop one person from enslaving others? Only power. If he has the ability to do it, then there is nothing wrong with doing it, it is merely an alternative lifestyle. What is to stop men from forcing themselves on women because they are bigger and stronger and have the power to do it? Nothing. The only issue is what they have the power and ability to do. This is a terrifying theory of life. It leads to unchecked violence and oppression. Once again, the futility is horrifying.

There is another aspect to the futility of the thinking that there is no truth. I will suggest an analogy to reveal it. Imagine that you realize that there is something wrong with your head. You are having problems, so you go see a brain surgeon. Then suppose this surgeon says to you, “We all have our ideas about what’s going on inside people’s skulls, but no one idea is any better than others. The notion that there is truth about what is inside our skulls is merely a clever ploy foisted on us by the American Medical Association in an effort to gain power over a gullible public. My ideas are no better than anyone else’s, but I will break open your skull and dig around in there.” Are you going to choose to have that guy work on you? Absolutely not. You want a surgeon who knows the truth, who knows what’s happening inside your head. You want someone with the knowledge of the truth. That’s true in every area of life. It’s true of a plumber, an electrician, a mechanic, an accountant, everything in life, you want people with knowledge of the truth. Pastor and writer John Ortberg says that knowledge, truth, is indispensable for living.

A Jesus follower believes this life is not the end.

Our culture insists that this life is all there is. The idea of life after death is an illusion. But in Matthew 6:19-20 Jesus said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy and thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moths and vermin do not destroy and thieves do not break in and steal.” He claimed that

heaven, life after death, is quite real, and that it is far more important than what happens in this life.

Our culture does not take eternity seriously. It might give a nod to heaven, but doesn't really believe it. These are two drastically different positions. One says heaven is real and infinitely more important than this world, and the other says this world is all there is.

Consider the effect of this. Imagine that you are in high school and you believe that high school is all there is, like many high school students seem to do. After high school life is over, high school is all that matters. How will that affect you? The events of high school become all important. Who you take to homecoming is galactically important. Not being asked to prom is not just disappointing, it is like death. Who gets the lead role in the play is earth-shaking, earning a starting spot on the team is crucial and deserves your utmost effort. Actually learning material in classes is important for proving how smart you are, but that's the only reason because you are not preparing for something after high school. And of course, if high school events don't go well, if you're not popular, if you don't make the team, if you don't have that boyfriend or girlfriend you desire, then life is not worth living. And in the end there really is no point to the whole thing.

Now as an adult who has survived high school, you look back on it and shake your head. It was all so juvenile. All the drama and the angst was trivial, and you find that it is amazing how little effect it had on your real life, which is infinitely broader and more significant than anything that happened in high school. And you see that high school was just a minor step toward what your life is really about.

If our culture is right, we're in high school. This is all there is, and it's all trivial and meaningless, but it's all we've got. But if Jesus is right, this is a step toward what our existence is really about. What is ahead is infinitely broader, better and more significant than anything in this world. And that infuses this world with hope and meaning. It gives us reason to sacrifice, and enables us to deal with the disappointments and hurts we must endure now in high school.

I recall one time I asked a girl out when I was in high school and she said no thanks. She was kind about it, but quite clear. It was disappointing. I went through the disappointment of having no success in the high school sports that I so longed for. These were not huge hurts, but they were disappointing. But if I could have seen the life to come they wouldn't have mattered much. In fact, I wouldn't even have bothered asking the girl out because I would have known that some day I would marry a girl who wasn't the girl of my dreams because she was way better than my dreams. Why mess with that girl in high school when I know who is waiting for me in the future who is infinitely better than anyone I've ever known?

THEY ARE SEPARATED FROM THE LIFE OF GOD

The futility of our world comes into bright focus in verse 18 when it says of the "Gentiles," "They are separated from the life of God. Their efforts to live life on their own terms have distanced them from the source of all of life. Instead of finding life, they have lost it. Verse 19

says, “Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity.” That definitely fits our culture. But it actually fits even better than it initially sounds. The Greek word that is translated “sensuality” has a root that means “living without restraint.” So Paul says our culture has given itself over to living with no restraints. We are seeing that played out before our very eyes.

In his book, *The Christian Mind*, Harry Blamires said that the notion of freedom in our secular society resides in what he calls “unfettered autonomous individualism.” Our culture only believes it is free if it has the ability to choose to do whatever it pleases with no limit. Blamires goes on to say that when people in our culture now speak of freedom they have in mind “not just the renunciation of dictatorships and other repressive agencies, but also the rejection of bonds and obligations such as those constituted by marriage, the family, and all social hierarchies.”

In his book, *The Good Life*, the late Chuck Colson said the same thing. “Modern society tells us that the ultimate goal of life is personal autonomy – to be free from all restraints...Our culture tells us that we alone are capable of making ourselves happy, that life is all about finding what we really want and then letting nothing get in the way of achieving our...desires.”

So how does that work out for us? It turns out that autonomy is not all that it appears to be. Consider the matter of sex. Our media, especially the entertainment media, says this is maybe the most important area of all where autonomy is needed. It says freedom is found in being without restraint, being able to engage in whatever sexual escapades one desires whenever, however and wherever one desires. The more the better. That’s living without restraint, and that is real freedom, what life is about.

Marriage, in that construct, is not a good thing. Marriage is all about restraint. It is constraining oneself to just one sexual relationship and it excludes all others. In our culture’s view this is dull, boring and deadly. But what do the facts tell us? Research has consistently shown that the people who have the most satisfying sexual lives, the people who are most content and having the most and best sex, are those who are married! It is only when we live with restraint that we find the life we really want! That should give us a clue.

Jean Twenge is a professor of psychology at San Diego State who has made her specific specialty the study of today’s young people. In her book, *Generation Me*, she says that today’s generation has bought completely into autonomy and unrestrained living. They don’t care about rules or what people think. They’ve been raised to please themselves and that’s what they do. Do only what you want to do, and what anyone else thinks doesn’t matter.

How is that working out for them? Not that great. It turns out that relationships require restraint. To have any kind of friendship will inevitably infringe upon your freedom, and the closer the relationship, the more restraint it brings. That means autonomy is automatically and necessarily lonely. It is impossible to be unrestrained and in true relationships. One expert, Robert Lane, says among young people today, “there is a...famine of warm interpersonal relationships.” Twenge

says what has resulted for young people today is that clinical depression is commonplace! Maybe you have seen the recent news stories about the epidemic of depression in the young. This is what autonomy has wrought. Twenge says of this “free” generation that they are, “more confident, assertive, entitled, and more miserable than any ever before.”

Yes, like Adam and Eve, they have their freedom, their autonomy, but they are separated from the life of God, which is true life. The problem is when you seek to get away from God to live as you want, you are getting away from the source of true life. Inevitably you will be separated from life. You will exist, but your existence will be far from what you desire.

APPLICATION

UNDERSTAND OUR PLACE IN THIS WORLD

What we believe is fundamentally at odds with the world around us. Our starting point and our basic foundations are so different from our culture and so violently contradict it that they cannot begin to understand us, nor even care to try.

The Christian faith is thoroughly counter-cultural. It always has been and it always will be. God has given us the role of being anti-establishment. We are to think, live and speak as people who actually are here to jolt the establishment out of the comfortable coffin it has created for itself. God’s people have always had a role somewhat like that of John the Baptist, the iconoclast, the outcast voice of one crying out in the wilderness. To the degree that we fit in with the world around us we lose the role we are supposed to be fulfilling. Our role is to be the light in the darkness, and the light is quite distinct and different than the darkness. So let’s not worry about it. Let’s keep our eyes on what God has called us to be and to do.

DON’T BECOME ARROGANT

The temptation for one who knows the truth is to look down on those who don’t. Religious people have been terrible about this. And nothing could be more wrong. We have learned the truth because God, in his mercy and grace and for no other reason, has opened our blind eyes, has made us alive when we were dead. We are not smarter or better than anyone else, we are merely recipients of undeserved grace.

As we think about the world we must not become judgmental as we see their obvious errors. What we need to have for them is pity and compassion. Their hearts have been hardened and they don’t even know it. They are madly running after things that are futile. They are desperately trying to free themselves from all restraint and find some sense of the freedom and joy, and they are getting death as a result. They are living out the definition of futility and are separated from the life of God. So what they need from us is our compassion for them and our prayers.

DON'T BE CONNED

The scary thing is that we can know all this, and yet easily still be taken in by our culture. It is all around us every moment of every day, it is the very air we breathe, and as a result we can adopt its mindset without even noticing it. We need to guard our hearts and minds against its thinking.

We must never fall prey to the subtle thinking that we and our happiness is what life is all about, and that the way to achieve it is to break free, be autonomous, live by our own rules and no one else's. We must never fall prey to thinking that this life is all there is, all that counts, forgetting we are only in high school, and what's to come matters way more and is far more grand.

Harry Blamires asks us to look at our neighbors, our friends, our co-workers, at our TV shows, magazines, books and ask what sort of world they present to us. Is it, "A world packed full of sinners desperately dependent upon the mercy of God? A world amok with fundamentally powerless creatures, running hither and thither, foolishly imagining that they can do without God, and making an appalling mess of things as a result?" Is it "a world fashioned by God, sustained by God, worried over by God, died for by God?" No, it is "a self-sufficient world. It is a world whose temporality is conclusive and final...It is a world run by men, possessed by men, dominated by men, its course determined by men."

If we view the world through the lens of faith, success and prosperity in this present realm cannot be regarded as an important criterion in any way. Not even happiness can be regarded as a central issue. And yet, most of us fall into the trap of thinking these are the things that matter most. That's the world's thinking creeping into our minds.

Our world is less willing than ever to be confronted by inconvenient, objective truth. It firmly believes that what matters most and what is key to fulfillment, which we must have, is found in molding everything we encounter into the service of meeting our needs. We can easily find ourselves torn apart by the hardships, tragedies and losses of this world, because our happiness is paramount, and this world is all we've got. The Christian worldview answers, this is not true. This world is high school. The travails of high school are but for a time, and what comes later is far more important. So an unhappiness now is far from the end. It is to be endured, for sure, but always with an eye on the hope that is to come, and the joy of our high calling, for even in our pain we can bring glory to God. In fact, it is perhaps in our pain that we can most bring glory to God, and that is our true happiness.