

The grace that leads to new thinking

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

One of the most influential people of the last 50 years would have been Steve Jobs,
one of the co-founders of Apple computers.

By many accounts a rather complex man, a very difficult man,
but a man who has changed the way we live.
Smart phones are having a profound impact on our society,

These days the iPhone is facing stiff competition from a number of competitors,
but for a long time the Apple product—Steve Jobs' product, the iPhone—
it set the pace when it came to smart phone technology.
No matter what you think of it, this is a world changing invention.
As did another of Steve Jobs' products in the decade before;
The iPod changed the way we listened to music.

What was it about Steve Jobs that made him able to come up with winning ideas?
There's a biography about Steve Jobs written for young people
and its title gives us the answer *Steve Jobs: Thinking Differently*
That's the answer—he thought differently to everyone else.

You see, the usual pattern in business is to follow the market.
You do all your market research to discover what the market wants
And you create something to meet the desire that's out there.

Steve Jobs thought differently. He *hated* market research.
He just designed items that he and his team were interested in.
He once told a journalist that
“people don't know what they want until you show it to them”.

It was a very different approach:
Invent a thing that no-one has ever seen before, but make sure they love it.
It's impossible for most people to pull that off,
but it's the kind of thinking that changes the world.

Now, what do Steve Jobs and the apostle Paul have in common?
Both were world changers, and both were champions of *thinking differently*.
For the Apostle Paul, being Christian meant having a renewed mind
that viewed the world through a different lens.
And just like different thinking leads to great advances in technology,
the different thinking that Christians employ
can make great changes within our society.

So, what is the mindset that Paul would have us pursue?

We're continuing on in Ephesians picking things up in Ch 4:17,
where Paul first spends a few verses outlining *the wrong way* to think.

So I tell you this, he writes in verse 17, and insist on it in the Lord,
that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.
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.
As is his usual style, Paul jams many different concepts into these verses,
but if we unravel them a bit
we can see there is logic that attends to the wrong type of thinking.

It all starts with *a hardening of the heart*,
when you shut yourself off from the truth because you don't want to hear it:
I don't want to know, I don't want to listen
I'm bored with the message, I find this information threatening

We all seen this happen, and we've all hardened our *own* hearts occasionally.
A new scientific report comes out,
and the captains of industry seek to discredit what is published.
"The research is flawed, our product isn't that damaging!"

Or, our diary tells us that an important date is coming up requiring our
attention and some preparation,
and so we shut the diary, pretending that weeks ahead are free and open.

Or, the credit card statement lands in our or inbox or mailbox,
and we just keep scrolling to the next email,
or we leave it unopened on the bench.
Maybe we use it to hide the bowel-testing kit that's also arrived!

These are very simple ways of hardening the heart,
of stubbornly refusing to hear difficult things,
things that, although hard to hear, might actually be of benefit to us.

And what's the result?
Paul describes the result of a hard heart in a number of different ways.
He speaks about *ignorance* and *darkened understanding*
He speaks about *futile thinking*.
The result of a hard heart is to be without knowledge,
to be stumbling around in the dark,
to be involved in futile activity that doesn't get you anywhere.

The Ashes are on in England at the moment
so I've been staying up watching the first session's play.
By the time I get to bed Jas is already asleep
and so I group around in the dark trying to find my pajamas.

I wake up in the morning and I've got the wrong T-shirt on,
and it's back to front.
Without the knowledge that light brings then I'm going to make mistakes.
I might *think* I'm getting it right,
but in the morning light I can see I've made some wrong moves.
This is the danger of acting with ignorance.

And the cost of the ignorance that Paul is speaking of is very high indeed.
He speaks about separation from the Life of God.
Probably separation in two senses:
separated from the new spiritual life we have now —
the forgiveness of sins, the presence of the Holy Spirit within us—
and separation from the life we still have ahead of us—eternal life.
This is much more serious than putting on the wrong Pajamas
Harden your heart against the truth of Christ
and the cost will be one you carry for all eternity.

This hardness of heart is a way of thinking that tends to compound over time.

In verse 19 Paul describes how having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed. The end result of this out-of-kilter thinking is a life that is all about satisfying your own senses, about fulfilling all your own wants.

And so what happens is the cycle continues.
Because life becomes about wish fulfillment
you become even more hardened towards messages that tell you otherwise
and even further estranged from the life that God would want you to have

It's a passage of Scripture that offers us an explanation
of what we see happening in the world.
Why all the greed? Why all the violence?
Why the very different sexual standards?
Because people have hardened their hearts to the truth,
and so without proper direction they are doing as they please.

So far Paul hasn't actually identified the specific truth that people are missing. He gets there in verses 20-21. That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹ when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.

The truth that people are hardening their hearts towards is the truth about Christ:
The truth that in Jesus God has given us both a savior from our sin
and a Lord for us to follow.

Why don't people want to hear this?

Maybe they don't like the idea of having a Lord to whom they are accountable.
 Maybe they just can't believe it because it seems so fanciful.
 Whatever the reason, the truth about Jesus is a truth that divides.
 For some it's the smell of life, for others it's the stench of death.

And it's a truth that needs to be *taught* and *learnt*.

Did you notice how Paul uses the language of the classroom here?
 He speaks of teaching and learning: it's there in v20, and again in vs21 and 22.
 The truth of Christ is not something we're just going to get on our own.
 If you want your child to learn piano,
 you don't just put them in a room with the instrument while calling out
 "All the best kid!" as you shut the door behind them. You engage a teacher!

But sometimes this is what we do with our children's spirituality isn't it?
 we say "Well, maybe they'll work it out themselves, I don't want to force it!"
 Sometimes it's true that the Holy Spirit acts despite our own inaction.
 But if that's what we are hoping for,
 then we are hoping for an unusual miracle.
 God's usual manner of working—as we heard last week—
 is that he provides teachers to build up the church;
 our job is to expose our children to the groups and people who'll teach them!

And music lessons need to be regular, don't they?

That's if you want the children to reach any level of competence!
 And so if we want our young people to have spiritual competence
 then the lessons—
 Sunday school attendance, youth group, discussions in the home—
 they need to be regular.

Now once these lessons are taking place there will be a practical effect.

If ignorance leads to actions focused on a selfish pleasing of the senses,
 So too this new knowledge we've learnt has a practical outworking.
 Verse 22 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; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your
 minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.
 Note again how Paul describes the old way of thinking:
 to harden your heart is to give way to *deceitful desires*.

Recently there has been a spate of high profile Christian people,
 —authors and musicians—who've gone through a de-conversion experience,
 or at least they've turned towards a more liberal view of Christianity.
 They *think* they're acting in wisdom, they *feel* they're acting with wisdom,
 but any turn away from the truth of Christ is a turn towards deception.

Paul's asking us to remember what it is we've been taught,
 and then to build upon that thinking with a life that's righteous and holy.

Some might feel that being righteous and holy sounds boring or quaint,
 But righteous and holy is what God is like,
 and Paul says that we are created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

In verse 25 onwards Paul spells out what this new life looks like,
 and far from being boring or unfashionable it seems to me
 that lives of righteousness and holiness are what the world sorely needs.
 I've counted at least six new ways of thinking and living that Paul mentions,
 We'll consider them quickly but think about the difference they might make.

In verse 25 Paul mentions honest speech Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and
 speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.
 What's the new *thinking* that we have here?
 It's the idea that those who share a faith in Christ are unified in one body,
 and so the *action* is to embrace honesty, because honesty builds trust
 and trust is a vital if a group is going to work together.
 I wonder whether you've ever had to work with a compulsive liar,
 or had a liar within your family? If so you'll now how destructive it is.
 Open and honest dealing with one another is vital to any kind of community.

Verse 26 "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,
²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold. What truth are we reminded of here?
 That the Devil is a real enemy who seeks to destroy us by leading us to sin.
 The same Devil that Jesus did battle with so many times in the Gospels.
 So what is the action? Keep your anger under control.
 Anger, it seems to me, can be a gateway sin,
 it leads to other destructive things like envy and violence
 and so if you stay angry you're giving the devil his first foothold
 and from there he'll reach out to you with his other limbs.
 Anger can be useful if it's focused properly but left unchecked it's dangerous.
 Do you think the world could use a little less anger, a little more peace?
 Holiness might not be so quaint after all; righteousness might be a good thing.

Verse 28 Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something
 useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.
 What's the thinking that makes a difference here?
 It's the thinking that understands the importance of sharing with the needy,
 which is why we spend our days in honest work.
 Why *do we* spend all that time at work? The Bible gives a number of answers
 – so that we stay out of trouble, so that we can give order to the world,
 and so we have something to give others.

And while we're at work (and other places) Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of
 your mouths, Paul writes in verse 29 but only what is helpful for building others up
 according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.
 Old thinking might say that our mouths are to be used to our own advantage;

A sharp word to put someone in their place,
an off-colour joke to see someone squirm.
But new thinking sees us use language for the benefit of others.
Encouraging words to build others up, words of sympathy when needed.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, Paul continues in verse 30
with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.
The significant thought here is the understanding that in giving us the Spirit
we have been sealed by God ahead of the day of our resurrection.
He's referring to a wax seal that you would press a stamp or a ring into.
A wax seal makes something official.
The presence of the Spirit is the official mark meaning we *will* be resurrected.

And the Holy Spirit is a person who can be grieved.
You know how sad you get when *your* people
let you down by doing something really foolish or embarrassing?
You think “what are you doing? Why did you do that?”
That’s God’s reaction when we go back to old thinking and old actions.
Sin brings great grief to God—he’s marked us out for better things.

This means we need to keep up with the practice of what Christians used to call the *mortification of sin*. Mortification means to kill something, and sin is something to be killed off. Its what's describes from verse 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

And so with the end of our passage
we have the key thought that we're called to meditate on,
the key bit of knowledge that inspires our new life:
Because he loves us, Jesus gave himself up for us.
That's the vital truth that guides our actions.

When you look back over what Paul's been speaking about,
most of what he's saying hangs off this thread of other-person centeredness.
And the chief model for that is Christ's death on the cross.

The cross provides a different way of thinking.
That God would serve us to the point of death –
that's radically different in the world of religious thought.
That we would radically serve others in imitation of him,
that too might be very different to how the world operates most of the time.
It's a difference that makes an impact, so let's continue to think differently.

Pray