

*Ephesians 2:1-10 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins<sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience--<sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*

*<sup>4</sup> But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

## Perspicacity – Mental Health

Today is the first installment of a series that I will be doing throughout 2018. I will be preaching on the fourth Sunday of each month. So, there will be twelve parts. We've titled the series "Perspicacity," which is a less familiar term to most of us. Yet, it has a very interesting meaning:

perspicacity \ pər-spə-'ka-sə-tē \ noun \ the capacity to assess situations or circumstances shrewdly and to draw sound conclusions.<sup>1</sup>

The orientation of this series will function a lot like Malcolm Gladwell's tag line on his podcast *Revisionist History*: "We will go back and reinterpret something from the past: an event, a person, an idea. Something overlooked. Something misunderstood."<sup>2</sup>

The series objective is also captured in a recent Tim Keller tweet:

Our problem is not so much the unanswered questions but the unquestioned answers out there.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past several years, mental health has become an increasing interest for each of us as individuals and as a society as a whole. Recent data (2013) indicates just how serious the issue of mental health has become. The Huffington Post reported these surprising statistics in May of 2016:

---

<sup>1</sup> "perspicacity" - <http://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/perspicacity>, accessed 1/19/18.

<sup>2</sup> Malcom Gladwell, *Revisionist History*, <http://www.revisionisthistory.com>, accessed 1/19/18.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Keller, @timkellernyc, 1/16/18.

If you're still of the belief that mental health conditions aren't as devastating as physical ones, a new report will open your eyes. ... The United States spent an estimated \$201 billion on mental disorders like anxiety and depression in 2013, according to the new analysis published in the Journal of Health Affairs. That makes it the costliest medical condition in the country.<sup>4</sup>

What's particularly interesting about this data is that it indicates a significant shift in what we consider to be mental health and illness:

Before the 1960s, America spent the majority of its mental health budget providing treatment to people with serious mental illness. Since then, a shift took place and some mental health professionals argue the seriously mental ill have been abandoned.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past 50 years, our perception of mental illness has shifted from serious mental illness that required institutionalization to issues like anxiety and depression. What could possibly be contributing to such a drastic shift in perspective? And more importantly, what effects has that shift done to us as individuals and our society?

The passage from the book of Ephesians that you heard earlier provides two key factors in understanding mental health - what we need to overcome in our thinking and what we need to develop.

## 1. What We Need to Overcome

*Eph 2:1-3 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins<sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience--<sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*

The first three verses of Ephesians 2 give a fairly dismal description of the mental health condition of every human being. In that sense, it describes the default position in our thinking. In verse 1, Paul likens this condition to being "dead." He obviously isn't referring to a physical death since he goes on to

---

<sup>4</sup> Lindsay Holmes, "The Highest Health Care Cost In America? Mental Disorders: If this doesn't convince you mental illness is 'real,' nothing will", *Huffington Post*, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/highest-health-costs-mental\\_us\\_574302b8e4b045cc9a716371](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/highest-health-costs-mental_us_574302b8e4b045cc9a716371), accessed 1/16/18.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Flanagan, "America's Highest Healthcare Cost in 2016? Mental Health", *Health Care Recruiters International*, <http://www.hcrnetwork.com/americas-highest-healthcare-cost-2016-mental-health/>, accessed 1/16/18.

describe it to be the way we live when we're thinking that way - "in which you once walked" (v.2). His references to "trespasses" and "sins" are significant as they refer to a way of living that is in disregard or even outright defiance to the ways that God has revealed in regard to human existence.

It is also interesting that he uses the phrases "following the course of the world" and "following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience" to indicate that these conditions are the universal perspectives of all people and even the devil himself (v.2). The universality of his description is also emphasized by the phrase, "among whom we all once lived," (v.3) as it ensures that Christians also recognize that they once thought and lived according to this mindset.

The balance of verse 3 is actually the heart of his explanation of this mental disposition as it explains its primary motivation. The phrase "in the passions of our flesh" describes the fact that our primary purpose or inspiration was to gratify our own carnal desires. And the phrase "carrying out the desires of the body and the mind" depicts the fact that we were doing exactly what we wanted - without any force or outside coercion. In an almost eerie sense, we were actually adhering to popular contemporary exhortations that tell us to "follow your passion" or "do what you love."

The final clause of verse 3, "and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind," serves to reinforce the antagonism between us and God while in that condition, as well as the fact that each of us knows and understands what he is describing.

It's also interesting to note that this is not the only place where Paul described our primary or default mental condition this way:

*Col 1:21 And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds...*

*Tit 3:3 For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.*

Examples from other biblical writers also confirm what God intended for us to understand about our natural, most basic mental health condition:

*David - Psa 58:3 The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies.*

Solomon - Ecc 9:3b ...the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

The long and the short of these descriptions is that we all suffer from a form of mental illness - you could even call it a form of insanity. It is both universal and next to impossible to overcome since it is grounded in our own obsession with self-gratification. In that sense, it closely resembles one of today's most common diagnoses - narcissism - the pursuit of gratification from vanity or egotistic admiration of one's own attributes."<sup>6</sup>

I assure you that these conclusions are not merely religious fodder. Perhaps, no one in our generation better described them than David Foster Wallace in what is now considered by many to be one of the finest commencement speeches ever given just three years before he took his own life:<sup>7</sup>

A huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded. Here's one example of the utter wrongness of something I tend to be automatically sure of: everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely talk about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness, because it's so socially repulsive, but it's pretty much the same for all of us, deep down. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth...

Think about it: there is no experience you've had that you were not at the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is right there in front of you, or behind you, to the left or right of you, on your TV, or your monitor, or whatever. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real - you get the idea...This is not a matter of virtue - it's a matter of my choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered, and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self.

---

<sup>6</sup> Narcissism, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcissism>, accessed 1/23/18.

<sup>7</sup> David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life*, (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), pp. 33-44.

## Reasons Why So Few People Get This

It should seem obvious that a problem of this magnitude is complex and has a myriad of causes and correlations. However, I can tell you two things that I believe are significant reasons why so few people ever understand what we are up against and why we need to overcome it.

### **1. The Medication Narrative**

Perhaps, the greatest reason why so few people get this today is that for the past half-century, and particularly since 1987 and the introduction of Prozac and a myriad of other anti-depressants, psychiatry has convinced us of the narrative that portrays issues like depression “as a disease of the brain, instead of an illness of the mind.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, our problem is physiological and not in the way we think.

To be sure, there are mental health issues that are physiologically and even environmentally induced. However, the reality is that those situations are relatively few in comparison to those that are issues with our thinking. As long as we are convinced our problem is with our brain and not our thinking, there is little wonder that we would rather take the easier route of swallowing a pill than do the hard work of changing our thinking.

A recent research analysis by Quartz, put it this way:

This explanation [chemical imbalances in the brain], widely cited as empirical truth, is false. It was once a tentatively-posed hypothesis in the sciences, but no evidence for it has been found, and so it has been discarded by physicians and researchers. Yet the idea of chemical imbalances has remained stubbornly embedded in the public understanding of depression...

One reason the theory of chemical imbalances won't die is that it fits in with psychiatry's attempt, over the past half century, to portray depression as a disease of the brain, instead of an illness of the mind. This narrative, which depicts depression as a biological condition that afflicts the material substance of the body, much like cancer, divorces depression from the self.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Olivia Goldhill, “In The Dark: 30 years after Prozac arrived, we still buy the lie that chemical imbalances cause depression”, Quartz, <https://qz.com/1162154/30-years-after-prozac-arrived-we-still-buy-the-lie-that-chemical-imbalances-cause-depression/>, accessed 1/22/18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## **2. Misguided Self-Reliance**

We are all too familiar with common mantras that tell us to “pursue our passion” or “do what we love.” In other words, trust yourself more. While those might be helpful to someone who truly understands herself, they can be horribly misleading to a person trapped in a mindset that is self-absorbed – doing more of the same and expecting a different result is rarely a reliable option for change. If you have just come to realize that what you believe will make you truly happy is actually aggravating your misery, encouraging you to trust your own self-direction probably isn’t going to improve your mental health (c.f. Pro 3:7, 26:12, Rom 12:16).

What we most need to overcome in order to see the world clearly is our fixation on self-gratification. As long as we remain in its grip, our lives will continually be filled with sadness and heartbreak. That is a crystal-clear assertion from Christianity that is also now being articulated even by those who are not Christians.

## **2. What We Need to Develop**

*Eph 2:4-9 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved-- <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

In verses 4-9, Paul describes a radically different condition – a resurrection of sorts. One that actually transforms the “deadness” to life. According to the greatness of God’s love, people are made alive – not by their own ability to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, but by God’s grace. So now, instead of people living “dead” lives, they are able to live lives that are no longer plagued by their own self-absorption.

*Eph 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

Verse 10 explains that this new life is characterized by several realities that we are now realizing to be incredibly significant to our mental health:

### **1. Being Able to Live in Our Own Skin**

We are exactly what he intends us to be. The phrase, “we are his workmanship” depicts the creation of an object by an artist. It refers to every aspect of our human condition – our gender, our personality, our height and weight, and even the place and time in history in which we live (c.f. Act 17:26). It speaks deeply to what most Americans tend to struggle with in regard to wishing they were smarter, prettier, taller, or stronger – all the attributes that are most idolized today. Instead, it dares you to believe that you are exactly who God wanted you to be.

### **2. A Fresh Start Free from Shame & Guilt**

Being “created in Christ Jesus” refers to the means by which God finally breaks the cycle of our self-absorption and the insane notions about the things that will satisfy us. The gospel explains that person and work of Jesus to be the only thing that has the power to accomplish that. And through the forgiveness offered in Jesus, our lives can have a fresh start and freedom from all the shame and guilt that we accrued in our lives.

### **3. Genuine Significance & Purpose**

Lastly, he explains that this new identity has always had a goal to it – one that is completely unique to who we are and therefore different from anyone that has ever lived. Its outward expression is that of “good works” that come into the world – not in spite of you, but because of you. And these good works are exactly the reason that God created us the way he did as they were “prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” – they belong uniquely to us and no one else. I have yet to see someone truly grasp their identity and purpose who didn’t have amazing mental health.

I suppose if we were to summarize everything that we’ve considered today, it sounds somewhat radical. That true mental health can only be realized through believing the gospel and all that it tells us about God, ourselves, others, and the world around us. And without it, our mental health will never be anchored in reality since it will always be shackled to the inescapable burden of our self-absorption that blinds us to who we really are and our purpose in life.

I realize the objections that raises in our minds. After all, we’ve all known people that are kinder, smarter, and apparently better “adjusted” than many of the Christians we know. Nonetheless, the assertions here are simply that without coming to Jesus and placing our faith in what God has revealed, we will be hopelessly trapped – whether that is by power, sex, money, or what others might think about us. Without the gospel, we will always be pursuing the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind. And our perceptions of mental health will also be brief interludes that happen between our life-long struggle with mental illness.