

Ephesians 5:1-17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ephesians chapter 5 verses 1 to 17 That everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous, that is, an idolater, has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partakers with them, for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true. And try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them, for it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.

But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

[1 : 35] Ephesians chapter 5 continues Paul's presentation of the new form of life that should be characteristic of Christians, the sort of behaviours that they must put off, and the sort of behaviours that they must put on.

In exhorting the hearers of the epistle to be imitators of God, Paul is reinforcing the statement of chapter 4 verse 32. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

God himself forgave us, and so we must follow in his example. Paul's charge to be imitators of God is also a practical form that his earlier point about putting on the new self, created after the likeness of God, can take.

Those in the image of God are his children, and the appropriate way to behave as such is to walk in the footsteps of our father, imitating him. A true child's connection to the image of their father is not merely in the unchosen ways that they reflect their father's appearance, or even the ways that they naturally manifest behavioural traits or mannerisms that resemble those of their father, but also in their purposeful commitment to follow the pattern of their father, and become more and more like him.

The good father gives his child a model to look up to and to follow, so that the child can take after his father, not merely in those unchosen ways, but also as a willing commitment.

[2 : 52] Paul's teaching here has much in common with our Lord's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, where Christ connects sonship with following the pattern of our Heavenly Father in Matthew chapter 5 verses 44 to 48.

Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

You therefore must be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect. Christ, of course, is the Son, the one who is the image of God. He is the one in whom we see the Father fully and truly revealed.

If we are called to imitate the Father, we will be taking the example of the Son himself, who faithfully does the works of the Father in all respects. Those who see the Son have seen the Father.

[3 : 54] Those who see us should see something of God in our imitation of him, in the way that we manifest the image of God, in the way that Christ can be seen in us. Christ's model of walking in love is, of course, most fully seen in the sacrifice of the cross itself, in which, out of his love for us,

he willingly gave himself up for us.

This was a pleasing sacrifice to God, because, among other things, it was a manifestation of mature sonship. If they are to act as true children of God, the people that Paul is writing to must abhor and totally reject behaviours that are at odds with or opposed to his character.

Paul lists a number of the sins from which we must distance ourselves. This distancing is to be seen in the way that such sins must not even be named among you, or perhaps, must not even be hinted at among you.

In the first case, the point would be that we don't merely avoid such sins, but also firmly resist the salacious preoccupation with such sins that one finds in many quarters, the sort of preoccupation that sells gossip magazines, that drives much online traffic, and that makes us hungry for reports of other scandalous sins.

Even if we don't sin in these particular respects ourselves, we have an appetite for and a delight to hear of the sins of others, finding it titillating to reflect upon people's sexual wickedness, for instance.

[5 : 15] By contrast, the Christian community must be a place where there is no appetite for or delight in hearing about such things. Not only are they displeasing to God, they have also become displeasing to us.

The other possible translation is that Paul is referring to sins that are rumoured to exist within a community. Christians must not just desire to be righteous, but to be transparently righteous, not giving any fuel to gossip.

Paul begins by speaking of sexual immorality and impurity. These terms cover all sorts of illicit sexual behaviour outside of appropriate sexual relations in the context of marriage.

It doesn't matter whether or not it is consensual. If people engage in sexual behaviour outside of marriage, they are guilty of sexual immorality. This is one point where the teaching of scripture comes into direct collision with the values of modern society.

Impurity is another broad term. It refers to anything that is morally unclean, anything that stands opposed to holiness and the moral purity that should characterise us as God's people.

[6 : 17] Paul pushes against our society's norms in the way that he often foregrounds sexual immorality in his vice lists. For instance, in 1 Thessalonians 4, verses 3-7 To sexual immorality and impurity, Paul adds covetousness, the avarice and the desire that drives so much sinful human behaviour.

Greed is diametrically opposed to what should be our willingness to give up things for others, as Christ gave himself up for us. Paul often shares the wisdom literature's close attention to sins of speech.

The church should not be a place of obscene talk, foolish talk or coarse jesting. All of these sorts of speech are shameful and dishonourable. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and to engage in such speech is utterly opposed to everything that we are supposed to be, as holy to the Lord.

If we are the people of God, our speech must be congruent with this. If we habitually use our speech in careless and foolish ways, consistently speaking with levity, not controlling our tongues, employing obscenities, and filling our mouths with filthiness, not only will our speech be given very little weight, it will be a source of dishonour and corruption to everyone that we speak of and to.

As the people of God, we should be guardians of our tongues, knowing that people who do not weigh their words, control their speech, and keep their lips pure, will not be taken seriously.

[8 : 06] Our tongues routinely betray the character of our hearts, and impurity of speech is a characteristic expression of an unguarded heart. The alternative to this is thanksgiving to God, a form of speech that is weighty and glorious.

Like the prophet Isaiah, we should be acutely aware that we are people of unclean lips, dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips. We must seek the cleansing and purifying work of the Lord, so that we can bear his glorious name on lips that are suited for that purpose.

People who are sexually immoral, impure, or covetous, have no inheritance in the kingdom of God. They lack the character of sons, and so they also lack the privileges and the promises enjoyed by sons.

Somewhat surprisingly, Paul identifies covetousness and idolatry here. Covetousness replaces God with the objects of its desire, and with our desire itself, which become our supreme goal and God.

These things are not just unfitting and best avoided out of a sort of Christian propriety. They are fundamentally at odds with God, and God is fundamentally at enmity with them, and those who give themselves over to them.

[9 : 12] Such people are not the sons of God, but the sons of disobedience, and the fierce wrath of God will come upon them. Christians must be holy, maintaining distance from all such sinful behaviours, and avoiding aligning ourselves with people who practice them.

We must not enter into communion with them. Bad company corrupts us. Paul develops his point using the metaphor of the opposition of light and darkness, a common metaphor in scripture and elsewhere.

They were once darkness, and engaged in the unfruitful works of darkness, but now they have become children of the light. However, Paul's point here goes further than he does elsewhere. He does not merely argue that we are now in the light, or even just that we are now sons of the light. Rather, now we are light in the Lord. Our light bearing is a participation in the light of Christ himself.

We must conduct ourselves accordingly. Paul speaks here of the fruit of light, whereas later he will speak of the unfruitful works of darkness. Perhaps Paul is thinking of the contrast between the character of light, which conveys itself to other things, with darkness, which lacks the power to act in such a manner.

[10 : 18] Light produces its fruit in things that are good, right, and true, in contrast to all of the practices and desires that Paul has earlier condemned. As children of light, we will be eager to shine more brightly, bearing the light of the Lord, as we diligently seek to convey his character to others by discerning what is pleasing to him.

We must eschew the works of darkness, which stand opposed to everything that we are supposed to be, not participating in them. Light is at odds with darkness. Where light comes, the darkness is driven away.

There can be no truce between these two principles that are so fundamentally at odds. We don't just negatively avoid the unfruitful works of darkness. We positively expose them. We bring them into the light, or bring the light to them.

As we live as the light of Christ, our lives should expose the sinful character of the world that surrounds us by contrast. This will have the effect of exposing the darkness, which is seldom welcomed by the darkness itself.

The darkness does not want to be revealed for what it is, or to be expelled by the advent of the light. Certain persons and actions have a natural attraction to the darkness, and the cover and the secrecy that it offers.

[11 : 28] To such persons and actions, our presence as light will be deeply threatening and unwelcome. As light bearers, Christians transform the societies in which they live. Sins that are exposed for what they are will need to assume a different character.

Either their power or appeal will be dispelled or diminished by the light, or they will become more high-handed in character, involving an explicit resistance to, an antagonism with the light.

The long-expected light of the Messiah has dawned in Jesus. The day is breaking, and we are to act as people of the day. Paul's teaching about darkness and light is not merely a teaching about timelessly opposed moral characters, but about the coming of a new age, where light is in the ascendancy, and darkness will be driven out.

In this time between the times, we must be the light bearers heralding a new dawn, manifesting the fact that the time has arrived for everyone to wake up. This point is more directly made in places such as 1 Thessalonians 5, 4-6.

But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief, for you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness.

[12 : 38] So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. Christians are to be awake, alert, and mindful, characterised by the sort of sobriety that belongs to the day, in contrast to the actions of the night, as Paul expresses in Romans chapter 13, verses 12-14.

The night is far gone, the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light. Let us walk properly, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.

