



A Post Tenebras Lux Study on Ephesians...

Imitators of God...

Ephesians 5:1-21

^{NIV} **Ephesians 5:1**...Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. ³ But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. ⁴ Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. ⁵ For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a man is an idolater-- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. ⁷ Therefore do not be partners with them. ⁸ For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) ¹⁰ and find out what pleases the Lord. ¹¹ Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. ¹³ But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴ for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." ¹⁵ Be very careful, then, how you live-- not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. ¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

I think of all the commands that we have in Scripture, this is one of the most startling. Notice, it is not try to imitate God, or imitate Christ, or even imitate Paul. The command is:

^{NIV} Ephesians 5:1...Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children...

At first glance, it makes me wonder what Paul could have been thinking. I mean, how are we as mere mortals supposed to be able to imitate God. It is obvious, I think, that there are certain attributes of God that we can never imitate. We can never be omniscient, or omnipotent, or omnipresent or eternal. Those are things that transcend our nature as mere humans and we know that Paul knew that as surely as we do. We could never be in all places or know all things or do all things as God can regardless of how we apply ourselves.

So, we are compelled to look further into Paul's words to see exactly what he had in mind.

^{NIV} Ephesians 5:1...Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love...

Reading further we get more insight. We are supposed to be imitators of God because we are His beloved children. There is a sense in which we can begin to understand where Paul is going. We are supposed to imitate God because He is our heavenly Father. We are supposed to imitate Him because we have had a new nature imparted to us.

It is natural enough for earthly children to imitate their parents. I always had a proclivity to imitate my Dad, sometimes for good and sometimes for bad. Once,

my Mom and Dad were having a heated argument, so my Mom tells the story. My Dad, who was not nearly as shy and retiring as I am, kept getting louder and louder. Finally, he shouted out an expletive that I will not repeat and slammed his plate down on the kitchen table.

I was in the next room watching the theatrics with great pleasure. So, I picked up a planter off the coffee table repeated as loudly as I could the same expletive and slammed it down as hard as a three-year old could on the aforementioned coffee table. The planter, which should have broken and did not, discharged most of the topsoil in it so that it became affixed to the ceiling of the living room.

I laughed and giggled with glee for the briefest of moments.

My Mom says she turned to my Dad and simply asked, **“Now, I wonder where he gets that?”**

My Dad stopped his ranting, apologized profusely to my Mom and redirected his concerns elsewhere. It is that part that I am particularly glad I do not remember.

But Paul says we are to:

^{NIV} **Ephesians 5:1**...Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and live a life of love...

So, we get a sense of the manner in which we are to imitate our heavenly Father. We are to imitate His love and in case there is any doubt as to what aspect of God's love he means, Paul next defines it for us.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 5:2...** and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Our imitation is to be of Jesus and His life. But I want you to notice that it is of a particular aspect of His life. We are to imitate or emulate or copy the sacrificial actions of Christ and that sacrificial life is to be lived in particular with relationship to forgiveness of one another.

In that sense, these first few verses of chapter 5 are a continuation of all that we discussed near the end of chapter 4. But as we try to put in practice this notion of forgiving one another, Paul says we are to remember that this action of forgiveness is viewed by God fragrant aroma, wafting up to heaven and filling His senses with a reminder of all that Christ has wrought on our behalf.

But there is something in us that finds this hard to do. I do not know why we are able to view ourselves as worthy of forgiveness and yet able to remain so unforgiving. It seems right, fair and even equitable for God to forgive us in Christ. Shouldn't it be right for us also to forgive others in Christ? I am not talking here of governmental justice either (*that is another issue for another time*), I am talking of rather of forgiving those sins committed against us by others.

The disciples understood something of the difficulty attached to this command. I love the story related in Luke 17.

^{NIV} **Luke 17:1**...Jesus said to his disciples: "**Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come.** ² **It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.** ³ **So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.** ⁴ **If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."**

Now, it is not that the disciples misunderstood the nature of the command. It is rather that they understood the command exactly. That is why in verse 5, they ask:

^{NIV} **Luke 17:5**...The apostles said to the Lord, "**Increase our faith!**" ⁶ He replied, "**If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you.**

I think it is interesting that the passage has been connected to praying down every kind of thing in the world other than that with which it is connected. If we had the "**faith of a mustard seed**" we would be able to say to this giant mulberry tree (*which I think stands for being able to forgive our brothers*) and it would be uprooted and cast from us.

If we are to be able to forgive others it will be necessary for us to reflect on the nature of the forgiveness we have in Christ. We ought to think long and hard about the way He appeased God's anger. We ought to think about the new life that has been imparted to us. That's why I love that one verse in the old hymn, *Rock of Ages* by Augustus Toplady.

*Be of sin the double cure,
Save from wrath and make me pure.*

Paul has spent a great deal of time talking about what we are in Christ. In doing so, he has also spent a great deal of time talking about what we believe. You will see, I think, in the next few verses how those things ought to impact the way we live. In verse 3, Paul gets down to it.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 5:3**...But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. ⁴ Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. ⁵ For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a man is an idolater-- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. ⁷ Therefore do not be partners with them.

Now, there are essentially three issues covered here. They are: (1) Don't be sexually immoral or impure (2) Don't use dirty or suggestive language, and (3) Don't be covetous. Let's take them one at a time.

First, we are to avoid immorality or impurity or greed like it is the plague. Let me define what I mean. "**Immorality**" is the Greek word from which we get the English word pornography. It refers rather simply to all sex outside of marriage. We are to avoid this sin like the plague. Not just because it causes irreparable harm to us as individuals but also because it will do irreparable harm to us as a body of believers.

The second word is "**impurity**". It is generic term. It simply means uncleanness and most likely it refers to other sexual sins. It probably refers to sins like homosexuality.

The third word is “**greed**” and it refers in this context to covetousness in relation to sex. You can see, I think, how it fits and just how abominable it is in a body of believers who are supposed to love Christ in a self-sacrificial manner.

Paul says that all of these kinds of sins are not to be so much as named among believers. He says they are not proper.

If I could, I would like to relate to you a story that really drove that point home to me. I will be tactful recognizing my audience but I think the story provides a good illustration of what I mean.

A few years ago, I was involved in the wedding of one of my ex-students. She was a lovely girl and she married a young man with whom she attended church. Let’s call her Linda.

I counseled Linda and her fiancé and they openly admitted that they had been sexually active. Anyway, they got married and for awhile their marriage progressed along with no more than the usual bumps that newlyweds face.

Eventually, Linda called me and told me that her husband had begun to take less and less interest in her. He seldom wanted to show affection and when he did it was clearly for his own gratification. Then one day, she was putting away some of his clothes and found a stack of pornographic magazines.

She confronted him about the magazines and he had the nerve to tell her that he used them as a motivation to bring them closer together. She threw the fit that she should have and she made him throw away the magazines.

A few months later, they went through the process all over again. Later, her husband became progressively less and less able to show her any affection at all. She knew he was using pornography again. They underwent counseling but in the end he refused to give it up. He and Linda separated and were eventually divorced.

Almost three years to the day after he and Linda were married, her husband killed himself. When they found his body, he was lying on his bed in a flop-house with a gun in one hand and a pornographic magazine in the other.

Now, I tell you that not just to warn you of the dangers of pornography but rather to illustrate for you the destructive nature of immorality and impurity. Here was a young couple with their whole lives before them destroyed because of a man's obsession with fantasy. The destructive nature of such immorality can and has destroyed many individuals and it can destroy churches too.

But Paul goes on:

^{NIV} **Ephesians 5:4**...Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.

What Paul means here is much the same as we saw last week. Although I think the context is more particularly related to sexually oriented jokes and lewd talk. Paul says just as there is to be no immoral behavior, there is also to be no lewd speech.

Interestingly, Paul gives two reasons why we ought to abstain from such speech. The first reason is simply that we ought to be doing something else with our speech. The second is that such behavior is symptomatic of a much deeper spiritual problem. Let's see what he says:

^{NIV} **Ephesians 5:4**...but rather thanksgiving. ⁵ For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a man is an idolater-- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

Now, track Paul's argument with me. He is saying we ought to avoid all lewd and suggestive speech. In the context of his overall argument, one of the obvious reasons that we ought to avoid such speech is because it can be so detrimental to the unity of the church and the way Paul says that here is by admonishing us instead to give thanks. Let me ask you, in this context, what is he saying we ought to be thankful for?

I think it goes back to the redemptive work of Christ. It goes back to who we are in Christ and what Christ has done on our behalf. We are also to be thankful for the other brothers and sisters that Christ has incorporated into His body. If we are grateful for their inclusion, we will make every effort to see that they continue to grow and prosper. We won't want to sidetrack their Christian

growth with immoral scandals or lewd speech. Instead, we will offer words and behavior that will help them grow.

But beyond that Paul gives another reason why we ought to avoid such behavior and speech.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 5:6...** For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a man is an idolater-- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

Now I want to avoid two extremes here. First, I want to avoid the destruction of anybody's assurance because they have occasional immoral or covetous thoughts. There is not a man or woman among us that does not occasionally struggle with such things. Such occasional thoughts are wrong and sinful but a heart that desires to be rid of such things is a heart in which there has been a work of God.

Secondly, I want to avoid salving over someone's smitten conscience. Paul has two serious things to say: (1) that we know with certainty (*not my words but his*) that such people will not have an inheritance in the kingdom of God. I do not take this to be talking about rewards. I take it that they are not converted and hence not Christians. (2) Paul says we should not be deceived by people who say that such things do not matter.

It may be that there is someone here is perpetually inflamed with such desires, who longs for such things more than they long for purity in Christ. If that is the

case, Paul's words must not be denuded of their force. A man who perpetually is concerned with such things, who lives for such things, who wants these things more than Christ will get the fruit of his labor. Paul says such a man is an idolater. Paul says such people worship the god of their own desire.

I love what Stott says here:

It would be easy for Christians to speed read a paragraph like this, without pausing for reflection, on the assumption that it applies to unbelievers, not to us. Has not Paul assured us in the earlier part of his letter of our heavenly inheritance, taught us that the Holy Spirit within us is God's guarantee, even foretaste and first installment, of it "**until we acquire possession of it**", and prayed that our eyes might be opened to see "the riches of the glory of the inheritance" which will one day be ours? Yes, indeed He has. At the same time he also addresses to us this warning about the danger of forfeiting our inheritance in God's kingdom. How can we reconcile these things? Only by recalling that assurance of salvation is neither a synonym nor an excuse for presumption. And if we should fall into a life of greedy immorality, we would be supplying clear evidence that we are after all idolaters, not worshippers of god, disobedient people instead of obedient, and so the heirs not of heaven but hell. The apostle gives us solemn warning; we shall be wise to heed it. (Pg. 198)

So, Paul warns us about being partakers with such people. Instead, Paul admonishes us in verse 7:

^{NIV} **Ephesians 5:7**...Therefore do not be partners with them. ⁸ For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) ¹⁰ and find out what pleases the Lord. ¹¹ Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. ¹³ But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴ for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Paul says we are not to be partakers with them.

Paul says we are to try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.

Paul says we are not to participate in unfruitful deeds.

Paul says we are to expose unfruitful deeds.

Paul says everything becomes clear when exposed by light.

Paul says wake up and Christ shine on us.

As a result, we are to walk or live a certain way. Notice verse 15.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 5:15**...Be very careful, then, how you live-- not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. ¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

We are to be careful how we walk, not as ignorant men but as wise men and we are to make the most of our time. Why? The answer is because the days are evil.

I wish I could learn the lesson of using my time wisely. It is something I think about often and do not act upon nearly often enough. I love the **Resolutions** Jonathan Edwards wrote just before his twentieth birthday. One of them was the following:

“Resolved: Never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I can.”

Now, I don't know about you but to me that is a pretty impressive not just for a twenty year old but for any saint of any age. I have thought about his resolution a bit especially in light of the upcoming New Year and all the opportunities it offers. But how can I resolve not to waste any time when I have so many other responsibilities?

Now, I should add that Jonathan Edwards worked really hard to keep his resolution. He was a successful preacher as most of you know and he had a strict schedule. His home was often filled with guests and Edwards often invited them to stay in his home. He would have young ministers or missionaries from various places come and visit and sometimes stay days or weeks. They wanted to learn from him; they wanted to emulate him. Now, what is interesting is that Edwards never departed from his schedule no matter how busy his home was. At night, he usually ate only a piece of bread with milk. He said he wanted to keep his mind clear for his studies and that too much food clouded his thinking. Anyway, after he ate he often would get up from the table and go to his study leaving his poor wife to fend for herself with the supper and with the guests. That is not something I would do and it is certainly not something my wife would allow me to do. But the point is that he set apart time for study and reflection. I am afraid that we do not.

How can we live as wise men and women if we do not have time for study and reflection? How can we be wise about things like truth and doctrine if we do not think and pray and read? The answer is, we can't. That doesn't mean that we are to become so academic that we are devoid of social contact either. We are to pay attention to our relationships and in order to pay attention to them we must actually have a few.

When I was in seminary, Dr. Hannah used to tell a story about Edwards. He was out riding his horse one day and reading. He came to a small gate and there was a boy sitting on it. Mr. Edwards, who had recently been rebuffed by his wife for not being more outgoing, spoke to the young boy as he opened the gate.

“How are you today young man?”

“I’m fine Mr. Edwards, thank you for asking.”

Edwards rode through the gate and let his horse wander around aimlessly while he read and wrote and thought. In a few minutes he came to another gate and there was a small boy sitting on top of it.

Edwards remembered his wife’s admonition and spoke with affection again.

“How are you today young man?” he asked.

“Well, honestly Mr. Edwards I haven’t changed much in the last 10 minutes since you first asked.” was the reply.

You see we are to stretch our minds and we are to stretch the field of our relationships. That is why Paul says:

^{NIV} **Ephesians 5:17...** Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. ¹⁹ Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord,

We are not to be consumed with ourselves and the wanted dissipation of our time and abilities that come with being self-absorbed. We are to be filled with the Spirit and that will work itself out in the encouragement of our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

How are we to do that?

We are to encourage them by speaking the encouraging words of the spiritual truth of Scripture. Now I think the context in which this was given may refer to the encouragement that occurs in the act of corporate worship. That is one of the reasons why I think everybody ought to sing. I do not have a good voice myself but I sing nevertheless as an encouragement to others. But the same is true even in our private conversations. We ought to be so filled with the truth of God that the words we speak are permeated with their repetition. And as we do that we ought not only to speak to others but we ought to sing and make melody in our heart for all that God has accomplished in our lives through the work of Christ.

And the attitude we ought to assume as we do so is one of thanksgiving and subjection. Look at what Paul says in verse 20.

^{NIV} **Ephesians 5:20**...always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

When I was in my sixth or seventh year of seminary, I was taking an exegetical class on 1 Corinthians. I had to write an exegetical paper which is a detailed grammatical and theological analysis of every part of that passage, both in the individual words and in its connection with the rest of the book.

I had worked on my passage for about six weeks and finally at last it came time to write it out. I began about a week before the paper was due. I had about two thirds of the paper done and had the rest written out in long-hand. I intended to spend the last day before the paper was due typing it up.

But early that morning, I got a call from East Texas. One of my aunts had died and my Mom and Dad had volunteered me to help with the funeral. They wanted me to come right away and I will tell you my first impulse was to think about that paper. I knew if I left the paper would be late by a day or two (*it was a letter grade each day it was late*) and so I told my Mom I would call right back. I went into Beverly and explained what had happened. I asked her what I should do.

She reminded me that I was in seminary to learn to do the work of the ministry. This was the work of the ministry. Either I wanted to do it or I didn't.

I called back and accepted.

Now, looking back it seems particularly ironic because my paper was on 1 Corinthians 13. The first two verse of which go like this.

^{NIV} **1 Corinthians 13:1**...If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. Next week, we'll talk about the being in subjection part.

Let's pray.