

"Pure as Jesus - Imitating God"

Ephesians 5:3-14

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I want you to imagine a police "line-up" and you are asked to identify a suspect.

You've seen enough cop shows on television to get the idea.

They bring in five people all the same gender and relatively the same size.

But instead of you being asked to identify a suspect, you are asked to identify which one is a Christian.

I'm certain you couldn't do it.

Oh, you might guess, based on stereotypes but you couldn't identify a Christian simply by appearance.

Even if I said you could follow each of them at work for a day it is still possible that you couldn't identify which was the Christian.

BUT if it were possible for you to observe them in their free time, their recreation, their casual conversations, and especially when they were alone, you could probably tell quite quickly.

And you'd know even more quickly if you could know what they were thinking.

What do Christians look like, what motivates them, and how do they think and act?

In the book of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul is describing what it means to **become** a Christian **AND** how **to live** as a Christian.

He spent the first 1½ chapters of his letter laying out the great truths of the gospel – the good news that a right relationship with a holy God is possible by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus alone.

Then secondly, from the middle of chapter 2 through the middle of chapter 3 he laid out the great truth that God is creating a new community, a new society, a whole new people called “the church.”

Look at Ephesians 2:19 & 3:6 “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household...

Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body.”

A new nation, a new people, a new culture.

You may be Americans but you are also, more importantly, part of a new group – the people of God.

One exciting thing about this is that this culture God is creating is, in microcosm, what he plans to create in the entire universe in the years to come.

The church is God's beachhead into the world to accomplish his great plan for eternity.

Ephesians 3:10-11 “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

If you are trusting in Jesus Christ as your saving-Lord then God wants you to know that you are part of this new thing that He is doing.

And after explaining how God is shaping us into a new community, a new people, Paul prays.

And his prayer is that individually as Christians and collectively as the church we may be filled to all the fullness of God – that we may reflect the character of God, that we may demonstrate here and now what God intends to do everywhere in the age to come.

It is why he writes in chapter 4:1 “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”

Reportedly, the young English Princess Margaret was sitting beside her mother, the Queen, at a public function where for the first time Margaret was expected to say a few words.

The girl was understandably nervous.

As she got up to move to the microphone the queen whispered to her, “You are a princess, act like one!”

That’s what Paul was doing. He was reminding them and us of who we now are.

You may still physically look like everyone else but you are new people - You’ve been given a whole new life, a new purpose, and a new destiny.

And like he did in the first verse of chapter 4, so in the middle of the chapter he says because you are a new person, a new people, I insist that you act like it.

Ephesians 4:17-19 “So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles (unbelievers) do, in the futility of their thinking. They are

darkened in their understanding... Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more."

But you, you were taught differently

Ephesians 4:22-24 "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; (You were taught) to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Then, Paul launches into a full-blown description of the kind of behavior that should not and should be true of Christians.

Ephesians 4:25-5:1

"Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor...

"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry...

"He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work...

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths...

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

"Be imitators of God..."

Remember the old slogan, WWJD "What would Jesus do?" Here it is right in the biblical text: Do what Jesus would do; Jesus is God; imitate him!

While these are great standards for every human being, please note that Paul is not talking to everyone; he is

talking here to God's new society, God's new people; to the church.

He is not simply promoting moral reform he is promoting integrity.

He wants the way we live to be consistent with who we are – God's people – Christ-imitators.

Do you hear the difference in emphasis?

These are not simply a series of "thou shalt nots", these are a **calling to something higher**.

Yes, He is calling us from something but it is in the context of who we are and who we are becoming in Christ.

Now with that high calling in mind listen to what Paul writes next: Please stand in honor of God's Word:

Ephesians 5:3-14

"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children 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. 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. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. 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. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is

shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 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."

Well, are verses 3-4 straight-talk enough for you?

Among believers there is not to be even a hint of immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking. Because, verse 6 says, God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

Paul doesn't pull any punches does he?

Should we actually preach a text like this in our day?

First of all, I wonder if even we, who call ourselves Christians, have gone so far in mimicking the culture that trying to call people back to this biblical standard is a fool's errand.

Secondly, in the evangelical subculture there is such a fear of what is called legalism that many won't call a spade a spade.

The result is that the only acceptable topic for preaching in some circles is a kind of hollow love.

I remember a few years ago I did a series on the Ten Commandments.

Before the series began, I invited a local scholar in to talk with us on staff about it.

The advice was that the Commandments are stated far too negatively for today's audiences.

We were told that what we needed to do was to preach the positive corollary to each negative command.

We didn't take the advice and I remember thinking at the time, somewhat sarcastically, "Isn't it odd that God doesn't understand human nature enough to have written the Ten Commandments in a better form?"

But God **does** understand us and because he does and because he loves us he doesn't beat around the bush.

He faces the real issues of life head on.

There seems to be another concern about preaching a text like this to today's Christians: That we might offend them and drive them away.

The fear of judgment and of confrontation is so strong, even in the church, that we are unwilling to call sin, sin.

What I'm impressed with is that apparently Paul didn't have that fear.

He trusted the Spirit of God more than we do.

He trusted that God's Spirit would bring conviction and repentance when God's people were shown the truth.

And he trusted that even if a prodigal son bolted and ran to a far-off country, God's Spirit was capable of eventually bringing him to his senses.

God does not fear telling us what needs to change.

And so Paul says bluntly:

Ephesians 5:3-4

“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. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.”

Paul gives the basic instruction in verses 3&4 and then he follows it in verses 5-7 with a negative reason why we should obey and in verses 8-14 with a positive reason.

What does Paul say is completely inconsistent with being a Christian?

He uses three words to describe conduct and attitude that are out of character for a believer and three words to describe talk that is out of character for a believer.

Look at the first three words: sexual immorality, any kind of impurity and greed.

Now I want you to listen closely to how the Scripture uses these words and thus what God means here in Ephesians 5.

This is important because even many Christians attempt to rationalize their behavior by suggesting that God doesn't really mean what he says or that the word doesn't mean what for 2000-4000 years it has meant.

- In growing numbers, unmarried Christians are engaging in sex.
Formerly it was with the rationale that “we really love each other” but increasingly it is seen simply as some kind of “natural right” of which they should not be deprived.
- In growing numbers Christians are living together without being married.

- In growing numbers Christians are trying to make even homosexual sex a legitimate expression of love.

The phrase, “Sexual immorality,” is the translation of a Greek word that includes any kind of illegitimate sexual relationship.

Combining **the Greek word** used here and elsewhere in the New Testament **and the Hebrew word** with the same meaning in the Old Testament, this word includes adultery, prostitution and using prostitutes, incest, bestiality, or any sexual intercourse outside of marriage including sexual relations of unmarried people.

That is “sexual immorality” and God says there should not be even a hint of it.

“Impurity” is sometimes coupled with the words “sexual immorality” and when the words “any kind of” are added, Paul means to include the whole range of sexual sin – without exception.

But Paul doesn’t stop with immoral acts, he goes to the root of those acts: Greed - that insatiable desire to have more.

The relationship of sex and greed is seen clearly in much advertising.

It is with intention that advertisers connect scantily clad women or men with the products they want you to purchase.

They appeal to your greed sexually to urge you to greed materially.

They attempt to get you in a greedy mood.

These verses directly address the current phenomena:

- Of people living together without being married.
- Of premarital intercourse.

- Of recreational sex.
- Of pornography used alone or even in marriage.
- Of thoughts almost invariably attending masturbation.

And it rules out all sexual relationships outside of marriage because those thoughts and actions are the opposite of who we now are.

But greed is not only sexual it is also material.

We want more.

The gambling industry feeds on greed and fuels greed – it wouldn't exist apart from greed, and we wouldn't gamble apart from greed.

I believe I say it on the authority of God's word, that all forms of gambling are out of character for the Christian because gambling is inextricably bound to greed and God says don't let there be even a hint of it among you.

I understand that just saying "no" is often not enough to help people who are habitually sinning in these ways.

I know we must come alongside and help each other in these things.

BUT change **begins** with understanding – And it begins with understanding it is wrong!

Later Paul will talk about deceit.

One of the things we so readily do is convince ourselves that our actions aren't all that wrong, maybe not wrong at all.

We deceive ourselves.

The solution then starts with knowing what God says, and the solution continues with repentance and Spirit-empowered refusal to participate.

One author with Paul's kind of confidence in the Spirit's ability to help us, said we need to hear:

“Do not go to it, do not rent it, do not read it. Do not allow the mind to dwell where it does not belong. Do not place yourself in compromising situations, and do not permit sexual sin of any type.” (Snodgrass, 280)

Paul continues in verse 4 saying that these actions and thoughts are so contrary to what it means to imitate God that they should not even be the subjects of our conversations.

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

Obscenity is lustful, crude speech about immoral behavior.

Foolish talk is from the Greek word, “morologia” - a moron’s word.

Coarse joking is sexually suggestive overtones or double entendres.

Like Johnny Carson before them, Leno, Letterman and Fallon are masters at it.

G.B. Caird notes, where (sin) is regarded as amusing, the practice becomes easy. (Found in Snodgrass, 276)

Using the **language** of sins only tends to desensitize us to them.

We listen to it until we are no longer shocked by the use of the “F” word or by off-color jokes.

IF Paul had been writing today would he have mentioned Jerry Springer and the other daytime-television purveyors of sexual perversion?

Would he have included the tabloids, the entertainment magazines and TV shows that wallow in the sins of the nation's celebrities?

Alexander Pope wrote:

(Sin) is a monster of such
Frightful mien
That to be hated needs
Only to be seen.

But seen too often
Familiar with his face
We first endure, then pity
then embrace.

I'm only willing to use the following language because I don't want anyone to miss the point.

Obscene, degrading, coarse words are more and more easily flowing from the lips of God's people.

Words like "screwed" "sucks" "stud" "stallion" are unthinkingly part of our vocabulary.

I know the world around is using such language but I don't want our children or grandchildren exposed to it in the church, in their youth group or from their Sunday school teachers.

Why? **Because we have the high calling and privilege to imitate Jesus, not the culture.**

It is time that we recognize that Christianity IS, rightfully, positively, thankfully, **counter-cultural.**

We have been called to be a new people.

Did Paul reject coarse sexual talk because he was sexually repressed? NO!

God is not opposed to sex and doesn't see it as dirty but He does want his people to have and live out a high view of sex.

In God's view sex is holy.

It is holy because it is the highest expression of intimacy between a husband and a wife.

And the husband/wife relationship is in turn the clearest picture on earth of the intimacy of Christ's relationship with his church.

Sex is too important, too sacred, to be made light of.

We rightly recoil when someone desecrates a Bible or a so-called "artist" pictures a crucifix in a jar of urine or a comedian makes fun of Jesus.

So we ought to cringe when someone makes a joke of the intimacy of sex.

It's the same principle that ought to keep us from vainly using variations on the name of God or Jesus in our language – such variations as gol, gosh, jeeze, or OMG in texting.

Some will say, "Well, I didn't mean anything by it."
That is precisely the problem!

It's the same principle that ought to keep us from using lightly such eternally serious subjects as damnation and hell with our "damns", "darns", "hecks" and the rest in our speech.

Now I ask you, have I said more than God said?

Ephesians 5:3-4 “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. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.”

Paul calls us instead to what? To “thanksgiving”.

Why “thanksgiving?”

Because it is the antithesis of “greed.”

From greed spring the other vices.

Instead of taking God's good gifts, including sex, and turning them into means of self-gratification we are to be thankful to God for them and use them as God intended.

And the argument that it is easy for a “married person” to say that is as bogus as a three-dollar bill.

God has given to his children the ability to control their natural urges and to use them only in the way God intended or not use them at all.

Millions of married and unmarried people down through the centuries, including the Apostle Paul, can bear witness to that.

And how serious is the issue of there not being even a hint of these things among us?

Ephesians 5:5-6 “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. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.”

If we are surprised, in our tolerant day and age, that Paul would be so blunt as to actually say “no” to certain behaviors, we are doubly surprised that he would be willing to put a threat with it.

Many think that threats are totally inappropriate, especially for Christians. Apparently God doesn’t.

If Paul had been with the Ephesians when he said these words, he would have looked them squarely in the eyes and said, “Don’t be deceived. – don’t kid yourselves.”

The self-deception is in thinking we can continue to engage in these practices and be Christians.

I can’t tell you how many times I have heard people say in the midst of their sin, “I’ve never felt closer to Jesus.”

That is self-deception!

Is Paul saying that if you do these things you will cease being a Christian, lose your salvation?

Listen to him in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

So inconsistent is that former lifestyle with **being a child of God** that one who continues to unrepentantly engage in those things only shows that he or she has not become a Christian.

The Apostle John is likewise describing the person who lives this way, unrepentant and unconcerned.

1 John 3:9-10

“No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God.”

What he is saying is that people who continue to live like this demonstrate who their god actually is and it isn't the God of the Bible.

John Stott wrote, “If we 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.” (John Stott, 198)

As I said earlier in regard to immoral behavior and coarse language, Paul not only warns us about it in verses 5-7 but he also reminds us again, in a positive way why we shun such behavior.

In verses 8-10 he writes, “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.

In this we come full circle back to where Paul began this whole discussion –

Ephesians 4:1 “Live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”

Ephesians 5:1 “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.” Be pure as Jesus.

Paul wants us to realize what has happened to us – we have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.

He wants us to know who we are – we are new people, part of a new culture, we are the people of God.

And he wants us to know what we have been called to – to a life imitating Jesus.

At other times as here, Paul writes with words that express how incredible it is to even think that we could go on living in the ways of the world.

2 Corinthians 6:14-16 “What do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and (Satan)? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?

And again in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”

Here in Ephesians Paul uses the metaphor of light – a metaphor used so often of Jesus himself – He is the light of the world.

When we become a Christian, Jesus takes up residence in us.

We are not what we used to be – we are different.

We are now light – live as children of the light – imitate Jesus.

It starts with a decision.

Will we **believe** God's assessment of these actions, words and even attitudes – that they are contrary to what it means to be a Christ-follower?

It continues with a choice:

Will we choose to be done with those things?

And it continues further with action:

Will we go to God in true repentance calling out to him to not only forgive but empower us to imitate God - live as Jesus lived ?

And will we be serious enough about this to invite someone else to help us follow through?

If God has convicted you today about the need to live the life you have been called to – then don't quench the Spirit by delaying action.