Walking in Love

Believers are to imitate Christ by demonstrating His love and character.

One of my earliest boyhood memories is that of standing beside my dad in the morning as he shaved. He performed this task the old-fashioned way, using a shaving brush, a mug of shaving soap, and a safety razor. On Saturdays, because he wasn’t in a rush to leave for work, Dad would let me practice shaving. He would dab a little shaving cream on both my cheeks, hand me the razor (after secretly removing the sharp blade), and then pantomime in the mirror the first one or two strokes—which I then mimicked.

Perhaps you’ve had similar experiences of either imitating a grownup or giving an example for a youngster to follow. Now that I am a grandfather, I get a delight from watching my kindergarten-aged granddaughter trying to walk in her grandmother’s high heels or put on some of her makeup. These antics make an already adorable little girl that much cuter.

When we become adults, however, the question of imitating others gets trickier. In some ways, imitation can be a good thing. Mentors can help us form good work habits and avoid pitfalls. We can develop spiritually by watching mature believers and following their lead. From its earliest days, however, Christianity has emphasized that we as believers are to seek most of all to follow Christ’s example. The very word Christlike embodies this theme and is the goal toward which all believers ultimately strive.

In this session’s Bible passage, Paul urged the believers in Ephesus to live out their salvation by imitating the Lord in their lifestyles. They could do so by demonstrating His love and character in their words, attitudes, and actions.

Understand the Context

Ephesians 5:1-14

In this session, we continue to examine Paul’s instructions in the Letter to the Ephesians about how to live as believers. In the previous session’s
Bible passage (4:17-32), Paul contrasted the old ways believers lived before their conversion with the new ways of Christlike living as God’s people. The apostle used the striking image of taking off old, soiled garments (“the old self”) and putting on fresh, clean garments (“the new self”). Paul concluded that passage with a series of practical don’ts and do’s for Spirit-empowered believers (4:25-32). He noted a number of self-centered attitudes and actions to let go and then replace with Christlike attitudes and actions.

As the apostle continued to address the theme of holy living in 5:1-14, he began by summarizing the entire matter as a command to imitate God. Above all, doing this means allowing our lifestyles to be energized and guided by self-giving, godly (Christlike) love. Practically speaking, it also involves turning away from ungodly behaviors—sexual immorality and obscene talk, to name two examples.

The analogy Paul utilized in this session’s Bible passage is the contrast between light and darkness. Christ is the Light of the world. Thus, Christians are to live as children of the light. The old, pre-Christian way of life is the way of spiritual darkness. By using the light-darkness analogy, Paul urged believers to let Christ’s light—through them—humbly but effectively expose sin and spiritual darkness in the world.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

IMITATE (Eph. 5:1-2)

Paul challenged the recipients of his letter to be imitators of God, just as children learn by imitating their parents. Paul specifically defined such divine imitation in terms of expressing God’s love to others.

VERSE 1

Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children,

The Greek term rendered imitators describes those who intentionally mimic someone or follow the example of someone. In fact, the English word mimic is basically a transliteration of the Greek term. In almost all of the instances in which the term appears in the New Testament, it refers to mimicking or following the example of another human being (see 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6). Ephesians 5:1 is the only New Testament text in which believers are exhorted specifically to be imitators of God. Other passages imply the same command without using the term, including “Be holy, because I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16, quoting Lev. 19:2) and “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). In any case, the expectation is astounding!
Paul introduced this challenge with the word *therefore*, pointing back to his exhortations for believers to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving just as God forgave Christians (Eph. 4:32). Thus, these are some particulars of what Paul meant by imitating God. He went on to use a familiar human analogy to illuminate his point further. Believers are to be imitators of God as dearly loved children. Previously in the letter, Paul had made the theological case that God as the heavenly Father adopts believers into His redeemed family (1:5). Now the apostle made a practical case concerning the implications of God’s fatherhood for believers’ daily living.

**VERSE 2**

*and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.*

Above all, imitating God means to walk in love (“walk in the way of love,” NIV). Paul used the term walk figuratively to refer to people’s daily progress on the journey of life. That journey for believers involves progress toward the destination of being Christlike. Indeed, Christ gave believers the supreme example of walking in love when He gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering (“sweetsmelling savour,” KJV) to God. The Greek verb rendered gave implies that Christ willingly delivered Himself over (see Rom. 4:25). Put another way, Christ submitted to God’s plan for Him to experience suffering and death as the only sufficient atonement sacrifice for sinners.

The apostle further described the effective nature of Christ’s love by using the language of the Old Testament sacrificial system (see Ex. 29:18,25,41). In His death, Christ Jesus became a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God. The idea is that God was pleased with the Son’s sacrifice. We should not take from this discussion, however, that the Father is somehow a sadistic Deity. Rather, Jesus’ death on the cross completely satisfied God’s righteous wrath against human sin. The cross provided the only possible path for the redeeming of sinners and restoring believers to right relationship with God. This is why the Father was pleased with Christ’s sacrificial and fragrant offering. It is also the reason Christ is the believer’s supreme example of what it means to love.

**EXPLORE FURTHER**

Read the article titled “Imitate” on page 792 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How would you express in your words what it means to imitate God? What are some ways that you are intentionally trying to follow Christ’s example of living in love?
Paul exhorted believers to cease activities and remove themselves from groups that display behavior contrary to God’s character. He emphasized the Christian’s responsibility to turn from the sins of sexual immorality, greed, and filthy, demeaning speech.

VERSE 3

But sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you, as is proper for saints.

Paul turned from encouraging loving self-sacrifice to condemning its opposite: self-indulgent immorality. Here Paul was dealing with the sinful corruption of God-given human desires and emotions. In creating us as physical beings, God gave humans a set of desires (hunger and thirst, love and companionship, procreation, and so forth) that equip us to survive and thrive as His stewards of the creation. However, from the time of Adam and Eve’s fall into sin in the garden of Eden until now, we have selfishly corrupted those God-given desires in myriads of ways.

One way that we are sorely and persistently tempted to corrupt a God-given desire is through sexual immorality (“fornication,” KJV). The first-century term (Greek, porneia [pohr NIGH uh]) was broad in meaning. (Think of the related English term pornography.) It could refer to lustfulness, prostitution, adultery, and any other type of illicit sexual behavior. The term translated impurity (“uncleanness,” KJV) characterizes the shameful, sordid, demeaning nature of sexual immorality in all of its forms.

The Greek term rendered greed (“covetousness,” KJV; ESV) refers to a corrupt and aggressive desire to own more, even far beyond what one needs for survival. The translators of the Septuagint [sep TOO uh jint] (an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) used a form of this word in the tenth commandment prohibiting coveting anything that belongs to one’s neighbor, including that neighbor’s spouse.

Paul was adamant that believers in Ephesus must shine brightly for Christ against the dark backdrop of that pagan-dominated city. He declared that whispers of sexual immorality and greed should not even be heard of among the believers. Believers must not compromise the scriptural, holy behavior God expects of them. Christians have been forgiven of their sins and delivered from sin’s bondage. They have been given the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit to guide them into a life of truth and holiness. They are a new community (the church) being built into a temple of the Lord. Christ has given His church gifted leaders to equip the saints to live in love and carry out His ongoing mission in the world.
Paul passionately urged the recipients of his letter—including we who read the letter today as Holy Scripture—to realize that it is altogether **proper for saints** to flee from every type of association with the sexually immoral attitudes and behaviors that characterize paganism. We should not consider such behavior an OK lifestyle. We should not joke approvingly about it. And for sure we as believers should not practice it. Sadly, whenever sexual sin of any kind occurs in a church congregation and becomes public knowledge, then the congregation’s reputation suffers severely. Further, we dishonor God’s name!

**VERSE 4**

**Obscene and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable, but rather giving thanks.**

The kinds of immoral speech Paul mentioned in this verse have a connection to sexual sins in that they refer to sexually explicit talk—in other words, a dirty mind expressing filthy conversation. **Obscene** speech refers to vulgar, indecent talk. The phrase **foolish talking** points to senseless talk, perhaps the talk of drunkards or those who exhibit no control over what they say. **Crude joking** may include clever verbal put-downs of others. Consider the increased coarsening of public discourse in our society. We have generally become insensitive to the use of vulgar expletives on television. For followers of Jesus, however, this kind of speech is **not suitable** (“out of place,” ESV; NIV). Coarse speech is to be driven out by gracious, thankful speech.

**VERSE 5**

**For know and recognize this: Every sexually immoral or impure or greedy person, who is an idolater, does not have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.**

Paul returned to the topic of sinful sexual and greedy activities, emphasizing the negative consequences of such sins. In verses 5-7, Paul went on to talk about an important motivation for receiving new life in Christ and subsequently living holy lifestyles: God’s judgment against sin is certain. He urged believers to **know and recognize this** reality. He wasn’t giving the Ephesian believers a new teaching; rather, he was reminding them of a truth that can sometimes be forgotten in the day-by-day routines of life.

Whereas in Ephesians 5:3 Paul named the three sins of “sexual immorality,” “impurity,” and “greed,” here in this verse he spoke of people for whom those sins had become a lifestyle trait. The **sexually immoral** person, the **impure** person, and the **greedy person** had practiced these sins to the extent that the people were characterized by their sins. Paul’s shift reminds
us as believers that sin is not an abstract idea; it is a personal, human reality. Sin is what makes us sinners; and since Adam and Eve’s sin in the garden of Eden, human nature is a sinful nature. Only the atoning sacrifice of Christ (who did not sin) on the cross broke the dominion of sin over human nature. Only the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit empowers us as believers to replace sinful lifestyles with holy lifestyles.

As he did in Colossians 3:5, Paul identified greed as a form of idolatry. Thus, the consistently greedy person has essentially become an idolater. In other words, the person who lets greed enter the door of his or her heart soon finds it cannot be satisfied. It wants more. The more it gets, the more it wants until the greedy person soon worships at the throne of self rather than at the throne of the one true God.

Paul warned that those whose lives are characterized by sin rather than faith in Christ do not have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. The kingdom is only for those in whose hearts Christ reigns as King, who worship the one true God and not any kind of idol. Those who persist in sexual sin, greed, and idolatry demonstrate that they have rejected God from their lives; He has therefore excluded them from His kingdom. Interestingly, this verse is the only reference Paul made to the kingdom of God in his letter to the believers in Ephesus.

VERSE 6

Let no one deceive you with empty arguments, for God’s wrath is coming on the disobedient because of these things.

The apostle continued with another solemn word about the consequences of living in sin rather than living in love. He warned believers not to be deceived with empty arguments. The implication is that some Christians were hearing (and perhaps falling for) the kinds of debates that suggested believers, once saved, had no fear of divine consequences for sexual sins. Or perhaps the empty arguments suggested that God gave people their physical desires so there should be no shame—in satisfying those desires in whatever way a person has the opportunity to do so.

Paul warned that such arguments were baseless and, worse, dangerous. Sin always pays consequences and always provokes God’s wrath. Believers rightly emphasize such attributes of God as His grace and His love. But the Scriptures equally teach the reality that God’s judgment is coming on the disobedient. In truth, believers do not have to worry about eternal condemnation at the final judgment; in Christ, believers have been delivered from God’s wrath. Still, there are temporal consequences to sinful behavior that can severely impact believers’ daily lives. Just ask King David (2 Sam. 12:13-14)!
VERSE 7

Therefore, do not become their partners.

Paul concluded with a warning for believers not to entangle themselves in close relationships with those whose lifestyles are ungodly. The injunction do not become their partners is similar to the command Paul gave to the Christians in Corinth, a city that, like Ephesus, was known for its pagan and sexually immoral culture. The danger was that believers who entered into relationships (business partnerships, marriages, close friendships) with pagans could falter in faith and join in their ungodly behavior. In fact, in the Corinthian church the believers were tolerating a situation in which a man was “sleeping with his father’s wife” (1 Cor. 5:1). Paul commanded that church “not to associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister and is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or verbally abusive, a drunkard or a swindler” (5:11). Here in Ephesians 5:7, the apostle felt the need to deliver a similar warning (and directive) to the Christians in Ephesus. The stakes were too high for believers to willingly compromise their Christian morals.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 and John 17:15-17. How does Paul’s directive for believers not to be partners with the ungodly fit with Christ’s prayer that believers be in the world but not of the world? What are ways that believers today might be tempted to compromise their Christian morals?

ILLUMINATE (Eph. 5:8-14)

Paul went on to challenge believers to live as lights in a dark world. Believers are to produce acts that are pleasing to God and that expose ungodly actions.

VERSES 8-9

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 of all goodness, righteousness, and truth—

In Ephesians 5:5-7, Paul warned about the certainty of God’s judgment against sinful living. Beginning in verse 8, he added a positive rationale for living a holy life. He reminded the recipients of the letter that in Christ their past sinful lifestyles were just that—in the past: you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. The change in what used to be and what
presently existed could not be starker. Paul pointed to the one-hundred-and-eighty-degree difference between darkness and light.

It is instructive to notice that Paul did not say that believers once lived (and still lived) in a dominant culture characterized by darkness. In other words, we as believers can never excuse or seek to justify immoral behavior—before or after believing in Christ—by blaming our cultural environment. Before conversion to Christ we were not just in a dark culture, we were an integral part of that culture. We were spiritual darkness!

Faith in Christ radically transformed the former darkness: now you are light. Christ referred to Himself as “the light of the world” (John 8:12). He also taught His followers that, by virtue of their faith-relationship to Him (in the Lord), they too were “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:14). Consequently, as Christians we must live up to who we are. We must daily live as children of light. Our lifestyles are to be consistent with our new character.

The phrase fruit of the light is an unusual analogy that appears only here in Scripture. A few ancient manuscripts of the New Testament have “fruit of the Spirit” (see KJV) in place of fruit of the light. On one hand, the phrase fruit of the light is consistent with the imagery of light and darkness Paul introduced in Ephesians 5:8. On the other hand, “fruit of the Spirit” is a phrase the apostle used also in Galatians 5:22 to introduce a series of character qualities in believers. The bottom line seems to be that whatever wording Paul used in the original manuscript of his letter, he was talking about the resulting lifestyle (fruit) produced by genuine Christian faith.

Here are three spiritual qualities that people can expect to see being demonstrated in the believer’s lifestyle:

• Goodness—The Greek term rendered goodness can also mean “kindness.” It refers to that which God deems as satisfactory or fitting. Goodness is the opposite of evil. People can therefore rightly expect the believer’s actions to be appropriate and kind, not evil.

• Righteousness—This Greek term refers to that which is right, just, and fair. In terms of salvation, it refers to being put in right standing with God through faith in Christ. Thus, people can expect the Christian’s lifestyle to reflect a right relationship with God. The believer’s actions ought to be consistently Christlike.

• Truth—The Greek term rendered truth can refer to honest speech, reality, sincerity, or moral genuineness. It is the opposite of falsehood and deceit. Thus, people can expect Christians to tell the truth and act with Christlike integrity. They are not to act hypocritically but are to be authentic.

VERSE 10

testing what is pleasing to the Lord.
Living as children of light does not mean merely following a code of abstract virtues. (Even the ancient Greeks held philosophical views about goodness, truth, and beauty as human virtues.) For the believer, these qualities have their origin in God. The believer receives them in a faith-relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit nurtures the qualities in the believer, producing the fruit of Christlike attitudes and actions. When a believer exhibits such spiritual fruit, especially in a dominant culture of pagan darkness, he or she effectively proves what is pleasing to the Lord. The Greek root word behind testing means “to prove, examine, put to the test.”

VERSE 11

Don’t participate in the fruitless works of darkness, but instead expose them.

Spiritual darkness cannot produce Christlike behavior. Living in moral darkness can never lead to a life of Christlike goodness, righteousness, and truth. Paul therefore had two words of counsel for the children of light (believers) as they encounter those who remain in spiritual darkness and therefore practice all types of immoral behavior.

On one hand, believers must scrupulously avoid participating in the fruitless works of darkness. The Greek verb rendered don’t participate in (“have no fellowship with,” KJV; “take no part in,” ESV; “have nothing to do with,” NIV) literally means “do not share with or be an accomplice with” someone or some activity. Christians have an obligation to flee from activities that God’s Word has revealed to be sinful.

On the other hand, Christians are called to expose (“reprove,” KJV) the deeds of darkness for what they are. In one sense, believers do this by example when they live Christlike lives. The darkness of immorality cannot help but stand out against a backdrop of Christian people who consistently demonstrate purity and holiness in their relationships. Yet, on the other hand, sometimes believers must boldly speak up, taking a public stand to shine Christ’s moral light on the entrenched evils of an immoral culture.

VERSE 12

For it is shameful even to mention what is done by them in secret.

Paul continued with his counsel to the children of light. He explained the reason they were to be involved in exposing evil deeds. Too often those who live in the darkness practice their wicked behavior in secret. Paul felt a degree of embarrassment about even mentioning in a letter to believers some of the immoral activities that were being practiced. Yet, the only way to confront and hopefully end such activities was to expose them.
VERSES 13-14

Everything exposed by the light is made visible, for what makes everything visible is light. Therefore it is said: Get up, sleeper, and rise up from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

Most of us likely have had the experience of turning over a stone in the grass only to see insects or worms squirm for cover. In a similar way, when believers shine the light of Christlike morals on the secret places of moral darkness, the practitioners of wickedness often squirm for cover as well. But when the lights are turned on—whether it be literal lights or the exposure of evil in other ways—everything exposed ... is made visible. Evil is seen for what it is and does to people.

Paul extended the analogy of what occurs when Christians shine the light of Christ into the places of darkness. Evil deeds are made visible and are recognized as evil. Moreover, the exposure gives an opportunity for the practitioners of evil to be transformed from workers of evil to workers of light. This is a possible understanding of the words what makes everything visible is light (“everything that is illuminated becomes a light,” NIV).

Paul concluded this section with a poetic quotation. Some Bible students suggest that the apostle was paraphrasing an Old Testament text such as Isaiah 60:1 or was reciting a line from an early Christian hymn. Whatever the case, the quotation can be understood to emphasize three truths:

• First, when we were living sinful lives before conversion, it was as though we were asleep. Now that we have believed in Christ, we have awakened.
• Second, we were not just asleep before believing in Christ; in fact, we were spiritually dead. Now that we have believed, we have arisen from the dead.
• Third, before believing in Christ we lived in spiritual darkness. But now that we have believed, the light of Christ has shined on us and we have become light. If this is what has happened to us, then we have been called to live a new kind of life. Baptism was a dramatic, symbolic portrayal of our awakening from sleep, rising from death, and being filled with Christ’s light. By demonstrating His love and character in our daily lives, we function as spiritual lighthouses to all of those around us—both believers and unbelievers.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article titled “Light, Light of the World” on pages 1017–1018 in the Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded. In what ways do you think of yourself as a child of light? How are you demonstrating that you are a child of the Light of the world?