

Walking in Love

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[0 : 00] Good morning again to worship. I'm Jeff Simpson, I'm one of the pastors here. Let me extend a warm welcome, especially if you're new and joining us for the first time. We'd love to meet you after the service.

We'll be towards the front on the steps and we'd love to get to know you and hear your story. The past several weeks, the lectionary has taken us through the book of Ephesians.

It's this letter that St. Paul wrote to this church in Ephesus. And this morning, the lectionary brings us to the first half of Ephesians chapter five.

And since we're in the latter half of this letter, let's briefly just review what has come before in this letter. In the first half of the book of Ephesians, Paul unpacks what the gospel message is and what happens to those who believe the gospel.

In Jesus, we have been redeemed, we've been forgiven, we've been adopted as God's children, we've been filled with the Holy Spirit, united to Christ, seated at God's right hand, and given an eternal inheritance.

[1 : 02] That's Ephesians chapter one. That though we were dead in our trespasses and sins, God rescued us, made us alive in Christ, saved us by grace through faith, not by works, and has made us fellow citizens of his kingdom and members of his household together with a family from all the nations on earth.

That's Ephesians chapter two. And then Paul spends chapter three praying that the Ephesians would have the spiritual power to comprehend all of this, not just that they would get it on an intellectual level, but that they would have a deep experience of the incredible riches of God's love for them.

So Ephesians chapter one through three basically is about here's what Christ has done for you, here's what the gospel is, and here's who you are now, here is your new identity based on what Christ has done for you.

And then in Ephesians four through six, the focus is basically given who Christ is and given what he's done for you, given your new identity in him, here is now how we live into that identity.

Here's how we practically live the Christian life. That's the structure of the book of Ephesians. And so as we come to the beginning of Ephesians chapter five, we see that it's the continuation of what Paul is talking about in chapter four.

[2 : 22] It's about how to practically live the Christian life, how to practically live out our identity in Christ as adopted sons and daughters. And so that's what we're gonna look at this morning.

We're gonna look at two images that Paul gives us for what it means to practically live out the Christian life that are centered on this theme of walking in love.

Walking in love is one of the main themes of the Christian life. And we're gonna look at walking in love as beloved children and walking in love as God's holy people.

Walking in love as God's beloved children and walking in love as God's holy people. That's what we're gonna look at this morning. So first of all, let's look at walking in love as God's beloved children.

In verses one and two, Paul says, therefore be imitators of God as beloved children and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[3 : 26] Throughout the Old Testament, the image of walking is an image that meant to refer to your whole life, every aspect of your life. In Genesis 17, God tells Abraham, Abraham, walk before me and be blameless.

In other words, live your whole life, live every aspect of your life in obedience to me. And walking is a helpful image not only because it involves our whole life, but because it involves purpose.

It involves direction. It involves a destination and a goal. So what is the destination? What is the goal? What is the direction of the Christian life? Well, Paul says here, verses one and two, it's to imitate God.

It's to become like God by walking in love, to love God and love others in the same way that Christ loved us by giving himself up for us and sacrificing himself.

And we actually remind ourselves of this truth every week in worship, where we do the summary of the law. We're to love God with everything that we have and we're to love our neighbors as ourselves.

[4 : 30] There's lots of things that we're supposed to learn and do in order to grow as a Christian. But this is the destination. This is the goal, to become like God by learning to love like God.

And we're to walk in love as people who are already beloved. And the order of this, the sequence of this is absolutely crucial to understand in scripture, in the Christian life, the indicatives always empower the imperatives.

What is true about us in Christ fuels what we're to do. What God has done for us motivates what we're to do for him.

God doesn't love us because we obey. We obey because we are already loved in Christ. And if you've never heard the Christian life talk about this way, it is absolutely crucial and essential that you get this.

Because it's completely different from every other religion or philosophy. If you feel like this is something that you've heard a million times, well, that's good. Because you need to hear it another million times.

[5 : 43] Because this is the center, it's the core of how we grow as a Christian. It's critical to understand that obedience in the Christian life isn't about becoming something that we're not yet.

Growing as a Christian isn't about becoming somebody that we hope to be in the future. No, it's actually about becoming more and more of who we already are in Christ.

Let me say that again. It's about becoming more and more of who we already are in Christ by grace. It's easy, I think, to think of the Christian life or obedience as a Christian as over time depositing money into our bank account and seeing our bank account grow slowly over time.

A little prayer here, it's a deposit. Attend church, that's a deposit. Serve in kids ministry, that's a big deposit, right?

It's easy to think about the Christian life as depositing into our bank account. But that's the opposite of what the Christian life is. No, rather, obedience as a Christian is the reverse.

[6 : 58] It's about learning to withdraw funds from a trust fund that you've inherited that has \$100 billion. That's more what obedience in the Christian life is.

We become, we learn to live into our identity. We become more and more of who we already are in Christ. We learn to experience the privileges and the inheritance that we have that's already ours. We learn to experience those privileges at a deeper level. That's what it means to grow and obey Christ. Grace empowers obedience. What God has done for us motivates what we're to do for him. And so what this means, based on verses one and two, is that much of the Christian life involves coming back again and again and again to our identity in Christ as beloved sons and daughters. It means asking ourselves, do I really believe that God loves me as much as he says he does in his word?

[8 : 04] And I think if we're honest, I think a lot of us would say, yeah, yeah, yeah. I know God loves me. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. I've heard that a million times. God loves me. Great. But do you?

Really? Do you really understand on an experiential level what a beloved son you are? Do you really understand on an experiential level what a beloved daughter you are, that he delights in you, that he feels great affection towards you, that he likes you, that as Zephaniah 3 says, that he rejoices over you with loud singing, that if you're a parent, that the amount of love and delight you feel for your kids is just a small shadow of how God feels towards you.

I think if we're honest, I think we all struggle to believe that God really loves us like this as much as his word says it. If I'm honest, this is certainly one of my greatest struggles in my Christian life.

I think that many of us are so loaded down with shame and perfectionism and even self-criticism and self-hatred. For many of us, the love of God is more of an abstract theological doctrine than an experiential reality.

And this is why if you go back two chapters to chapter three, this is why Paul is praying that they would have spiritual power to know the depths of God's love for them because experiencing the love of God isn't just about intellectual insight.

[9 : 37] It requires the power of the Spirit. When is the last time that you asked God for a deeper experience of his love?

That the Holy Spirit would so fill your heart with love that you would know in your soul that you belong to him, that you're secure, that you're his child, that you are the object of his affection, that he delights in you.

Maybe this is something that you need to receive prayer for today. Maybe after you receive communion, ask somebody over here to come and pray this over you.

Whatever area of your heart fails to understand God's love for you, maybe this is something you need to spend time praying with somebody about this week. It's not just about intellectual insight. We actually need the power of the Spirit to get this. And don't miss the sequence. The sequence here is so important. It's as beloved children walk in love.

[10 : 39] As Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, walk in love. So that's the first thing we see in this passage, that we're to walk in love as God's beloved children.

But the second image that Paul gives us here is that we're to walk in love as God's holy people. As God's holy people. The reason why it's important to follow this sequence, this order, that the indicatives empower the imperatives, that grace empowers obedience, that what is true informs what we're to do, is that learning to walk in love involves confronting the darkness within.

sin. It involves confronting the sin that dwells in us. It involves what Paul calls in chapter 4, verse 22, taking off the old self. If we're to walk in love towards our destination as Christians, to imitate God, to be like him, then there are some things in us that need to be put to death.

Christians across the ages have called this mortifying the flesh or mortifying the flesh. It's a helpful term. The word mortify means to put to death.

And that's what we have to do to our sin. We have to put it to death. This is what Paul is addressing in verses 3 and 4 when he says, but among you there must not even be a hint of sexual immorality or of any kind of impurity or of greed because these are improper for God's holy people.

[12 : 13] Nor should there be obscenity or foolish talk or coarse joking which are out of place but rather thanksgiving. And I think there's, for the average person, I think this is actually the kind of thing that people expect to hear when they hear about what it means to be a Christian.

Basically, someone sort of wagging their finger at you and giving you a list of things that you can't do. You gotta be holy. No sexual immorality. No greed. Stop making coarse jokes.

Right? This is what people expect to hear about this is what it means to be a Christian. But if you, if that is how you read these verses, number one, you've clearly not read the two verses before and you've also not read Ephesians chapter 1 through 4.

Paul isn't wagging his finger telling people to be more holy. No, he actually says the opposite. What does he say in verse 3? These things are improper for God's holy people.

He's saying, because of who you are in Christ, what? You are holy. You are holy because of what Christ did for you and because you, by the Spirit, are united to him.

[13 : 24] And that is so crucial. Because what this means is that pursuing holiness and obedience, confronting our sin, mortifying the flesh, taking off the old self isn't about just avoiding some checklist of bad behaviors.

No, it's about becoming more and more of who we already are in Christ, of God's holy people. And doing that means learning to walk in love. Putting our sin to death and pursuing holiness is about increasing our capacity for love.

Your soul is like a balloon. Think of your soul like a balloon. When you first believe the gospel, God fills you with his Spirit. He fills you with his life like a balloon fills with air.

And that balloon always has air in it, but it can be stretched, it can grow. Its capacity for air can grow. And that's the Christian life. We've been filled with God's love through his Spirit.

And God never lets us go, but God wants us to stretch our hearts. He wants us to stretch our souls to experience more of his life, more of his love. And this, by the way, is what all the spiritual disciplines are for.

[14 : 41] Whether it's prayer or reading scripture or worship or fasting or confessing our sins, what we're doing is we're opening ourselves up to the work of the Spirit. And we're asking the Spirit to

stretch the balloon balloons of our hearts to increase our capacity for love, to both receive God's love and to love others.

And this informs how we're to think about this list of things that Paul tells us we should avoid. If pursuing holiness is about becoming more and more of who we already are in Christ, about his beloved people, his holy people, if pursuing holiness is about increasing our capacity to love, then this frames how we're to think about what it means to confront our sin.

This list, sexual immorality, impurity, greed, foolish talk, crude joking, what do all of these things have in common?

Well, seen in light of this text, what they have all in common is that they are ways that we live more like orphans than as beloved sons and daughters.

Instead of looking to our Father to meet our needs and trusting in his love and his provision, we seek to meet our needs elsewhere. Sin is any time we seek to meet a legitimate need in an illegitimate way.

[16:11] Sin is any time we seek to meet a legitimate, holy, God-given need in an illegitimate way. And so let's think about a few of these examples. Sexual immorality, greed, coarse joking.

All of these are ways that we have an orphan mentality. First of all, let's look at sexual morality. I know that as soon as we mention this, as soon as a pastor mentions this in a sermon, you know, a lot of people roll their eyes and just kind of check out.

They're like, yeah, yeah, yeah, I've heard all this before. I don't want to hear it. And I'm not here to avoid this topic because it's in the text, but I am here to reframe it for you.

The reason why the Bible takes sexual immorality so seriously is actually what comes later in Ephesians chapter 5, that our bodies reveal a sacred mystery.

And that mystery is the marriage of Christ in the church. The union of husband and wife reveals the heart of the gospel, the love story between God and humanity where we as the church, as Christ's bride, are united to our bridegroom in covenant relationship.

[17:21] An eternal life-giving relationship of divine love. Often when I'm doing premarital counseling for couples who are getting married, I will encourage them to think about the words of Jesus in the Eucharist.

This is my body which is given for you. This is my blood which is shed for you. And I encourage them to think about how these are the words of a bridegroom speaking to his beloved bride.

These are covenantal marriage vows. The Eucharist is where the bride communes with the bridegroom this side of heaven. It's this preview of the great marriage supper of the Lamb where Christ will unite all things in heaven and on earth.

Ephesians 1 verse 10. And I realize if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, you may not buy that story. But if it's true, what it means is that God has made you with an infinite longing for love and intimacy that goes far beyond sex.

A love and intimacy that sex can only hint at. And what it means is that the fulfillment of our deepest desires for love can only happen within God's design and authority and story of love for humanity.

[18:35] And so whether it's pornography or sex outside the covenant of marriage, all sexual immorality is like having an orphan mentality.

It's trying to meet a legitimate, holy, God-given desire for love through an illegitimate way that falls outside of God's design and authority.

And to live as a beloved child of God, to live as God's holy people is to understand that when we say no to sinful sexual desires, we are saying yes to our deeper God-given desires for love and intimacy.

We're asking the Spirit to stretch the balloon of our hearts, to increase our capacity to both receive God's love and to give love to others.

Second of all, covetousness or greed. Greed. Greed. What's the legitimate need underneath the sin of greed?

[19:37] Well, it's a need for provision. It's a need to have our basic human needs met for food and clothing and shelter and security. And these are things that we ask our Father for in the Lord's Prayer every week, for God to provide our daily bread.

But greed is when we start to begin less like sons and daughters and more like orphans by becoming discontent with what He has provided, we start to pursue money and possessions as ends in themselves, as objects of love, and we seek our security in those things rather than in God.

And when we love money and possessions more than God and people, it shrinks our hearts. Rather than giving ourselves up for others as Christ gave Himself up for us, we give ourselves up for our work and our careers and our money and for success.

And those things become an idol. Greed, at the end of the day, is a failure to live as a beloved child and to live like an orphan. It's seeking to meet a legitimate God-given need through an illegitimate means.

Finally, let's look at the example of coarse joking. Now, to be honest, in this list, you read this and you go, this one seems kind of random. You know? Okay, sexual immorality, greed, those seem kind of heavy and important.

[20 : 59] But coarse joking, why does Paul even mention this? Why is this even in the Bible? Let's think about it for a second. Why does it feel so good to make someone else laugh?

Have you ever thought about that? Why is making someone else laugh often more enjoyable than laughing ourselves? It's because when we do, we feel validated, we feel liked, we feel accepted, we feel loved.

Humor meets this legitimate God-given need that we have to feel connected to other people and laughter is a beautiful God-given part of that. God invented humor.

God is the funniest being in the universe. Can you imagine your deepest friendships and your relationships without laughter? I can't. I love a well-timed joke that makes other people laugh. I love doing that. But there is a difference between godly humor and coarse joking. The aim of godly humor is ultimately about giving up oneself for another in love.

[22 : 05] But the aim of coarse joking is love of self. Godly humor recognizes there are God-given boundaries about what's okay and not okay to laugh about. But coarse joking doesn't see any boundaries.

It seeks to poke fun at anything and everything. Godly humor over time connects people and brings people closer together. But over time coarse joking pushes people away.

To want to be liked and loved and accepted is a good human God-given desire. But when we get a laugh at someone else's expense, when we joke about things that cross a boundary that are inappropriate to joke about, when we joke in a way that makes us feel good and makes other people feel uncomfortable, it's usually because we're acting out of a place of insecurity.

We're acting like orphans. We're seeking to meet a legitimate need for connection in an illegitimate way. We're failing to live into our identity as beloved children of God.

We're not believing the gospel that we are already loved. We're already accepted. We're already liked by the one being who matters most by God himself.

[23 : 29] And so instead we seek a kind of false connection. The reason why we say no to coarse joking is so we can say yes to walking in love and pursuing real genuine connection with other people.

So sexual immorality and greed and coarse joking these are just a few of the many examples that Paul gives in this passage of the kind of sins that we have to confront.

If we're going to walk in love if we're going to embrace our people as God's beloved sons and daughters as his holy people it's not about avoiding a checklist of bad behaviors it's about learning to walk in love.

It's about becoming more and more of who we already are in Christ by grace. It's putting sin to death and pursuing holiness is about increasing our capacity to both receive God's love and also to give God's love to others.

And we do this as people who are already deeply deeply deeply loved by God. And so as we close our time together this morning I actually want to provide just a few minutes of prayer and reflection for us to meditate on these things.

[24 : 48] So I invite you where you're sitting just to close your eyes and to reflect on some of these questions together and to pray about them individually and then I'll close this out in prayer.

I want to invite you to think about a few things. And the first is this. In what area of your life do you have the most trouble believing that God loves you as his beloved child?

Spend a few moments thinking about that. In what area of your life, what place of your heart do you have the most trouble believing that God loves you as his beloved child?

And as you think about that, I invite you to ask him, ask the Lord, to give you a deeper experience of his love through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Spend a few minutes asking him, for that. Secondly, where do you live more like an orphan than as a beloved child of God?

[26 : 29] Where are you tempted to do that? Where are you tempted to meet a legitimate need? In an illegitimate way? Where are you living more like an orphan than a beloved child of God?

Spend a minute or two confessing that to the Lord. What? And finally, where in your life is God calling you to pursue greater holiness and greater obedience?

To become more and more of who you already are in Christ? Where is God calling you to pursue greater holiness and greater obedience? To become more and more of who you already are in Christ?

Spend a few moments reflecting on that. Father, thank you that you love us in Christ as your deeply loved children, as it says here in Ephesians chapter 5.

We ask that by the power of your spirit, you would give us a deeper experience of that love, especially in places in our lives where there's shame, where there might be perfectionism or self-criticism or maybe even some self-hatred.

[28 : 14] Thank you that through Christ you've made us your holy people. Help us to become more and more of who we already are by grace.

Help us to see where we act more like orphans than as beloved children. And help us to put sin to death in us so that we can walk in love as you have loved us and gave yourself up for us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.