

A spirituality that works ... at love

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[0 : 00] We're in Ephesians for our reading. It's on page 1177, chapter 5. And we're going to read from chapter 5, verse 1 to verse 21.

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.

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness, nor foolish talk, nor crude joking, which are out of place.

But instead, let there be thanksgiving.

For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light. For the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.

[1 : 34] And try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.

But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible. For anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. Look carefully then how you walk. Not as unwise, but as wise. Making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery.

But be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another, out of reverence for Christ.

[2 : 53] Jake, thanks for reading. Please do keep Ephesians 5 open. In January 2012, the Italian cruise liner Costa Concordia, you may remember, ran aground and overturned after striking an underwater rock near an island off the western coast of Italy.

The 80-year-old ship was on the first leg of a cruise around the Mediterranean. The captain deviated from the main shipping channel, and instead he tried to sail as close as he could to the island, in order, it transpired later, to impress, one, his girlfriend, who was on the bridge of the ship at the time, two, the dignitaries who were also on the bridge with him.

32 people died. Well, God, in his great kindness, has given us Ephesians 5, verses 3 to 21, so that we don't make a similar shipwreck of our own Christian lives.

The warning is there in verse 6, let no one deceive you with empty words. Because remember that Ephesians has spelled out for us the mighty eternal plan of God.

It's there in chapter 1, verse 10, to bring to unity all things in heaven and all things on earth under the rule of Jesus.

[4 : 25] And in chapter 3, verse 10, we've seen that it's through the church that this plan is then made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms in our universe.

In other words, where do you look to see that God's plan is on track? You look at the local church. It's as we walk in a manner worthy of the risen Jesus that we demonstrate that Jesus is Lord as we point to the future day, to God's future plan to bring everything under the rule of Christ.

And so the second half of this letter spells out then what it looks like to be a church like that. And the key note, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, is chapter 4, verse 17.

It is to live distinctively rather than like the world around us. We began to see last week what that looks like in practice in terms of the way we relate to each other as a church, the way we love each

other as a church.

And this week it's in the whole area of sexual purity and temptation. Because I wonder if you remember the dynamic back in chapter 2.

[5 : 41] Just have a look back to chapter 2, verses 8 and 9. Chapter 2, verses 8 and 9. For by grace you have been saved through faith.

And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not result of works, so that no one may boast. We are not saved by our good works. We are saved by trusting in Jesus Christ and his death upon the cross for our sins.

But having received forgiveness, we are now to live the new life that we've been given. Verse 10. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

So please don't mistake what you hear this morning as saying that we are to earn our salvation. Or that as Christians we think we are good enough to receive it.

No, what we're talking about this morning in Ephesians 5 is the life that we should now live, those of us who have put our trust in Jesus Christ.

[6 : 53] Living a life that demonstrates that he is Lord. And you'll see there's an outline on the back of the service sheet. First of all, don't be deceived.

Don't be deceived. Verse 3. But sexual immorality and all impurity, all covetousness, must not even be named among you as is proper among saints.

The word translated sexual immorality refers to all sexual activity outside heterosexual marriage, outside God's good creation pattern for sex and marriage.

That's not because Christians are anti-sex or because we have a warped Victorian view of sex and are ashamed or afraid of it. It is simply that we have a high, holy view of sex and marriage as God's good gift.

I can't turn my piece of paper over. He goes on, doesn't he? Not even named among you. Still in verse 3. The idea that there shouldn't even be sexual immorality.

[8 : 10] Not even a hint of it among us. In verse 5, notice that Paul uses similar kind of language. Few may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure or who is covetous, that is an idolater, has no inheritance in the kingdom of God.

He includes, later, his covetousness. I take it he means sexual covetousness and the growing appetite for more. He talks about idolatry. Illicit sex was linked with idolatry of first century Ephesus, and it's very difficult, I think, to see it in any other way in contemporary Britain as we look to sex and relationships as a culture for the satisfaction and fulfillment that only God himself can give.

Notice verse 4 includes the way in which we talk. Let there be no filthiness, nor foolish talk, nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.

It's very challenging, that, isn't it? Think of boys' banter and the girls' gossip, that in reality so often is simply just crude joking.

Or the social media comments, which are filthy and out of place. The problem with humor in this whole area is that it can make what is sinful seem normal, even attractive, just a bit of fun.

[9 : 42] It's not going to do anyone any harm. Those who don't know Jesus may well debase sex and engage in smutty language, but in contrast, what comes from the lips of those who know Jesus should be completely different.

Our culture loves to portray sexual immorality as something that is fun and beautiful. Next time you watch a film or television program, ask the question, what is it saying about sexual immorality? And generally it is saying it is fun and beautiful and attractive. Don't be deceived. So you see, put verses 3 to 5 together, and it's quite the opposite, isn't it, of what the captain of the Costa Concordia boat did with his ship.

Rather than seeing how close we can get to danger, it is staying as far away as possible. And yet it's the classic question, isn't it, of the teenager or the young adult.

How far can I go? You know, what about this sort of kiss? Or that kind of touch? Or that particular party? Or the holiday that's a rite of passage?

[11 : 05] And of course, the rest of us, older adults, are not immune, are we, from that kind of how far can I go mentality? And yet notice that the Apostle Paul completely pulls the rug out from underneath us as soon as we begin to think like that.

Not even named. Not even a hint. When Mike Pence was appointed the U.S. Vice President, some of the things that he had put in place to ensure that there wasn't even a hint of sexual immorality in his life were reported in the newspapers.

How during his 12 years previously in Congress, he had tried to avoid any rumors of impropriety. So it included requiring that any aide who had to work with him late in the evening be male.

It included that he would never attend an event where alcohol is served unless his wife was there. And that he would never dine alone with another woman.

And not surprisingly, our secular media picked up on that and thought the whole thing was completely ridiculous. Really? Or actually, is he simply taking these warnings in Ephesians chapter 5 seriously?

[12:33] I take it it's what you watch on late night TV. It's what you read in the women's or men's magazine. It's the racy novel. It's the film that 20 or 30 years ago would have been an 18, but it's now a 12 because it no longer shocks our culture.

It's going on holiday with your girlfriend and sharing a room because it's cheaper. It's the clothes you wear. It's what you say and joke about. It's who you spend time with at work. It's what you do with your evenings when you're on business travel.

Not to mention, of course, the elephant in the room, which is pornography. Covetous, yes, because it never satisfies.

And idolatrous, yes, because it enslaves and captures. May I say, if this is you, and statistically it will be a significant number of us, then please will you do perhaps the unthinkable thing and speak to someone and seek help because sin flourishes in the dark.

Not even a hint. Don't be deceived. So then our big question is going to be, if we've been following Ephesians, the second half so far, how am I to push the gospel into my mind so that actually my behavior changes in this whole area?

[14:09] Well, two things. First of all, Paul reminds us of our identity. Verse 3, among the saints. We saw back in chapter 1, verse 1, that every Christian is a saint.

The word saint is linked to the word holy. It means set apart for a particular purpose of serving God. It takes us straight back, doesn't it, to chapter 2, verse 10, where we started this morning.

We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, that we should walk in them.

Secondly, there's the warning of verse 5.

Here is one thing we can be absolutely confident of. Verse 5, for you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure or who is covetous, that is an idolater, has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

Now, this isn't talking about the times when Christians sin and stumble and are repentant. Rather, it is addressing those who are unrepentant and for whom sexual immorality and impurity is part of their lifestyle.

[15:18] And the Apostle Paul reminds us, you can be certain that they are heading for a different destination. Now, that is not an easy thing to say.

It's not an easy thing to hear. But notice that actually the Apostle Paul goes further. Verse 6, Sadly, there are plenty of deceivers today, just as there were in first century Ephesus.

I came across an article online recently by a supposedly Christian author. The headline of the article simply ran, That was the day I knew my theology, in other words, what I believe about God, that was the day I knew my theology had to change.

And the article explains that rather than heeding the Bible and fleeing sexual sin and repenting of sexual sin, he had decided to disregard the Bible's teaching and instead change his theology to fit his lifestyle.

That, verse 6, is the mark of the person who doesn't know God. Don't be deceived. Whether it's the loud voices of those outside the church or the siren voices of those within, if you accept the idea that sexual sin is not sinful, then actually, however loudly the world tells us we are being intolerant and unaccepting, it is actually preaching a different Jesus.

[17:12] It is preaching a Jesus who isn't Lord. So don't be deceived. Secondly, walk in the light.

Have a look at verses 7 to 10. Therefore, do not become partners with them. For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true. And try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. Now the whole of Ephesians, you've probably noticed if you've been with us over these last couple of months or so, the whole of Ephesians is about before and after.

Before we put our trust in Jesus, if we've done so, and what we are afterwards. So in chapter 2, you were spiritually dead, but now you're spiritually alive.

[18:19] You were far off, but now you've been brought near. You were alienated from God. You've now been reconciled to God. You get a very similar thing in chapter 4.

You were ignorant, but now you've had your minds renewed. The old self has gone. You now have a new self that you've put on. You were in darkness, but now you are in light.

So, walk in the light. Just like the students starting work in London we've thought about over the last couple of weeks or so, the jeans they've lived in for the last three years, and the trainers that are falling apart, and the disheveled haircut, all that is gone.

On comes the new suit, the shiny shoes, the nice smart haircuts. But how strange it would then be if dressed in their new suit and shiny shoes and smart haircuts, they carried on living like a student. You know, not getting up until 10 o'clock in the morning and then after a couple of hours at work going off to socialize with friends the rest of the day. Hence, verse 7.

[19:29] Do not associate with them. Verse 8. Walk as children of light. Verse 11. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness.

The idea here is not that we should withdraw absolutely from the world. Rather, it is that we are to have no active allegiance with the world in these works of darkness.

Instead, walk as children of light. You see, what's the best way? To be safe.

As safe as possible. Cycling through London on a grey, dark January evening. Well, I take it to be safe.

You want to be as visible as possible. And just to show that Andy isn't the only one who does visual aids. This is what you need to wear.

[20:29] There. So you need to have your high-vis helmets on. That makes you pretty visible. You need to have your special pro-vis cover on the back of your rucksack so that, in the night, lights up completely white.

Massive. And then, above all of those things, you then need to have your enormous front light, which, when it's on, looks like a lighthouse.

So rather than just kind of seeing one person on a bicycle cycling along, it looks like this enormous lighthouse beam coming towards you. Now, yes, of course, your trendy friends will all say, well, you look like a complete geek.

You know, a cycling geek with your silly helmet and your cover on your rucksack and this beam thingy. But actually, every cyclist knows that visibility is the key to staying safe.

Likewise, being visible as a Christian is the key to staying safe in the whole area of godliness and sex. And yet, of course, when the world looks big and impressive and the church looks small and unimpressive, as it did in first century Ephesus, as it does so often to us in 21st century London, then the huge temptation is just to fit in, isn't it?

[21:55] We just want to be like everyone else. And all the more so, if like the church in Ephesus, we're perhaps losing heart as a Christian, that's the point that actually the world begins to look more and more attractive to us.

And rather than cycling through London with a massive, massive headlight lighthouse beam on the front of our bike so that everyone can see us, we become invisible. and we don't want to be noticed.

I wonder what active steps you need to take this week to be visible in this whole area. But notice too, will you, that living distinctively is not just for our own benefit.

Living distinctively is also for the enormous benefit of our friends and colleagues and neighbours.

You see, what's the best way to persuade those around us to take the claims of Jesus seriously? Question. Is it by living a life that is as similar to them as possible and perhaps justifying it by saying, well, you know, we need to show that Christians are normal people and have a good time and so on?

[23:12] Or is it by living a life that is distinctive and as distinctive as possible in this whole area of godliness and sex?

Is it by being as similar as possible? Or is it by being as distinctive as possible? Well, the answer is in verses 13 and 14.

In fact, let's go back to verse 11. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness but instead expose them for it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.

But when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible. For anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore, it says, awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead and Christ will shine on you. The answer is by being as distinctive as possible. It's by doing the Christian equivalent of riding through London on a bicycle with a high-vis cover on your rucksack and a fluorescent helmet on and a front light which shines the beam of a lighthouse.

[24 : 27] And of course, that immediately pulls the rug out from any thoughts that we may have about needing to be as close and to fit in as much as possible in order to show that Christians are normal people and can have a good time.

What do you say? How might that work? Well, I think verse 14 is perhaps explaining something like this. I was reading recently of a Christian doctor at a medical conference at which the whole issue of AIDS was being discussed and the issues surrounding AIDS.

and he dared to stand up and to say, I believe there is no such thing as safe sex. There are biblical standards of sex and if we want to deal with the issues surrounding AIDS, we'll only begin to deal with them when we actually follow what the Bible teaches about sex.

Well, how do you think that went down? Well, you guessed it, he was held down as being unloving and intolerant and everything else. But the interesting thing was that afterwards, over coffee, the number of colleagues who came up to him and said, of course you're exactly right.

It's just that you can't say that kind of thing nowadays. In other words, you see, we need to be courageous and we need to keep speaking the truth, we need to keep living the truth, until people see the folly and consequences of living in the dark and living without Christ.

[26 : 11] In the hope, as verse 14 I think is saying, in the hope that some will turn to the light and experience the light and life that Jesus Christ alone offers.

So just think of tomorrow morning. I guess many of us will know exactly what's going on tomorrow morning. Perhaps you can think even now of who you're going to be meeting with tomorrow morning.

For those going to school, what kind of Christian do your friends at school need you to be? One who is barely visible or one who is as visible as a lighthouse?

For those going to work tomorrow, perhaps mentally you can think of meetings you've got or just the people you'll be seeing as you walk into your workplace.

What kind of Christian do your colleagues or the clients you're seeing need you to be? One who is barely visible or one who is as visible as a lighthouse?

[27 : 22] Or perhaps you're meeting up with someone for coffee or you're going to the gym or you're going to the school gates tomorrow morning? What kind of person, what kind of Christian do the people you're going to be seeing tomorrow morning need you to be?

One who is invisible or one who is as visible as a lighthouse? Walk in the light.

Thirdly, in every area of life. This whole principle of living distinctively which began in chapter 4 verse 17 is now broadened out to include all of life.

There are a series of contrasts which I've put there on the outline. First of all, not as unwise but as wise. Verse 15, look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time because the days are evil.

We're not to live as those who have no understanding of where the world is heading. We should be spending our time differently from the world around us because people in the world around us they're simply living with what they can see with the eyes in our heads.

[28 : 35] God in his great kindness has opened the eyes of our hearts to see reality as it really is. Not foolish but understanding verse 17, therefore do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is.

So often when we think about God's will for our lives we think about small things don't we? Small things like what job I do or where should I live, things like that. God's will for us in Ephesians is so much bigger than that.

God's will chapter 1 verse 10 is a whole new creation under the rule of Jesus. God's will chapter 3 verse 6 is that we don't lose heart as his people. God's will chapter 4 verse 17 is that we live distinctively not like the world around us.

God's will chapter 6 verse 14 is that we stand firm. Those things are so much more important aren't they? Than the job I do and where I live and all that kind of stuff which we so often think about when we think about understanding God's will.

Thirdly, not drunk on wine but filled with the Spirit verse 18. Do not get drunk with wine for that is debauchery but be filled with the Spirit.

[29 : 52] Now being filled with the Spirit is not about having some strange or out of the ordinary spiritual experiences but actually being filled with things is a really big idea in Ephesians.

So for example back in chapter 1 verse 22 the church we are told is the fullness of the risen Jesus. Jesus. In 319 Paul prays that he might be filled with the fullness of God and that we might be filled with the Spirit and there are already different ways of saying the same thing which that our lives should demonstrate that Jesus is Lord and King over everything and that's to affect the whole of our lives.

Verse 19 our singing our speaking verse 20 our thankfulness verse 21 verse 21 onwards in rightly submitting to God's ordering of relationships as we see and we'll see this as we come back to Ephesians in a few weeks time what a Spirit filled marriage looks like what it looks like to be a Spirit filled parent a Spirit filled child a Spirit filled employer a Spirit filled employee as in every area of life we demonstrate that Jesus Christ is Lord and as we do so as we point to the new creation that future day when everyone will have to recognize that Jesus is Lord.

Don't be deceived walk in the light in every area of life. Let's spend a few moments in quiet and then I shall lead us in prayer.

Look carefully then how you walk. Heavenly Father, we thank you very much for Ephesians chapter 5. Thank you for this passage, such a warning to us as it reminds us of the world in which we live.

[32 : 06] And yet also the wonderful encouragement it is to be reminded of how distinctive we are, those of us who put our trust in the Lord Jesus, those who've been moved from the whole realm of darkness to that of light under the rule of King Jesus.

And we pray therefore, Heavenly Father, for your mercy on us. Please would you help us to be distinctive in every area of our lives, and especially in this whole area of sex and purity.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.