

Ephesians 5:1-17 - Of Holiness and Sacrifice

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Turn with me, if you will, to Ephesians chapter 5, Ephesians 5. We've been studying through the book of Ephesians, and Paul is continuing in the passage before us this morning his discussion of the new life that God has created us for.

For us as the church, connected in Christ, to be the kind of peculiar people, the unique community that God intends for us to be.

And we come this morning to a particularly challenging passage, to one that speaks very relevantly into our lives today and will give us much needed direction.

Let's give our attention to the reading of God's holy word. True and relevant generation after generation, century after century, because it is His word.

[1 : 05] God's word, Ephesians chapter 5 at verse 1. 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 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.

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore, do not associate 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, for it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.

[2 : 23] 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. Will you pray with me? Father, these are indeed your words. And so, Holy Spirit, we ask you to come and to teach us.

We need your spirit, Father, or we will not understand. We need you to open our eyes, to soften our hearts, to make us those who would desire to submit ourselves to your word.

Would you speak? Would you speak to each of us, and would you change us? We ask for Jesus' sake. Amen. My first semester of college was a confusing one for me.

[3 : 34] I was confused by why the cute girl in front of me in Western Civ kept making better grades than I did. So I did the only reasonable thing there was to do, and married her.

I was confused how you could gain so much weight so quickly on an unlimited meal plan. I'd never thought about that before. But I was confused mostly about what it looked like to engage in new and different relationships.

Lots of new relationships. For me, I'd grown up in what you might call a Christian bubble, so to speak. My dad's a pastor, so I spent a lot of time at church, around a lot of church people, and that was wonderful.

I was homeschooled for a while and went to a Christian school through high school. So most of the friends that I spent a lot of time with were also professing faith in Jesus and wanting to follow Him. And there were many wonderful things about that that I'm very, very thankful for. It was also one of the reasons I was eager to go to Clemson. I wanted to see if what I believed could actually survive outside the bubble.

[4 : 44] If I could go to a place where there were people who were different from me, who believed different things, who acted differently, and to see how that would go. I was looking forward to that. I was eager for that opportunity.

And so my first semester, after, of course, getting involved with RUF, our denomination's wonderful campus ministry, I went to meet somebody else who didn't think everything that I had thought when I was growing up.

So I joined the student newspaper staff. And through that first semester, I started spending a lot of time with them. Lots of late nights, meeting deadlines, parties, hanging out, and so on.

And I really enjoyed it. But I realized quickly, these people were very different from me. They didn't believe the things that I believed. They had different beliefs. They laughed at different jokes.

They drank different drinks. They talked differently. And I remember starting to get really confused about that. And I went to a guy who was a senior in RUF that I really respected.

[5 : 43] And I said, hey, man, help me figure this out. Like, I came here for these relationships. But I also know the Bible says things like bad company corrupts good character.

And what fellowship does light have with darkness? And so am I doing this right? Like, should I quit the newspaper? Do I need to stop hanging out with people who disagree with me about things and have different beliefs?

I'm wondering how this works. How is it that I figure out these new relationships? I was wrestling in real life with a dilemma that Christians often describe as being in the world, but not of the world.

You may have heard that phrase used before. It's not simply a struggle you run into in college. Paul tells the Ephesians in this passage, the days are evil. And there's plenty of darkness in our culture too, right?

I suspect all of us have wrestled with issues like this in our society today. Should I as a Christian be just like everyone around me? Do I have to be weird and awkward in order to be a Christian?

[6 : 51] Can I watch this or laugh at that or be on this board or foster these relationships? Am I able to do that and be a follower of Christ? If you haven't struggled with any of these things yourself, you may have for your kids.

Oh man, what am I going to let my kids participate in? How am I going to teach my kids holiness? How to be followers of Christ without being hokey and just weird and nobody wants to be around them?

How do I do that? How do I help my kids navigate that? The list could go on and on of difficult situations that are tough for us to navigate. And it's actually something that's very important to our holy God.

God's holiness, remember, being His otherness. That He's different from us. His separateness from sin. His utter purity. That's who He is.

And this passage tells us to live as His holy children. To be like Him, right? Right? As the new, different people He has made us to be. I'm going to go ahead and tell you up front, it's not going to give us all the detailed, specific answers to all the questions that we have.

[8 : 04] But it does give us instructions and direction from our Father on what our lives as His children are to look like. The first thing God tells us as His children is to guard what your heart treasures.

Guard what your heart treasures. I'll show you where Paul gets there in this passage. But to get there, Paul jumps immediately into our sexuality. Look at verse 3.

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 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.

He starts right in there. These are God's words. Not my good advice on how to live as God's children. God's words. And the words He uses here are the broad and general ones that refer to any sexuality outside of the covenant of marriage.

[9 : 15] In fact, He even goes beyond sexuality in both of the lists that He gives here. Those not in God's kingdom, He says, include the covetous. The word that we've talked about before for being continually greedy for more.

Seeking fulfillment even beyond sexual issues. One brief side note for us here. You'll hear verses like this quoted a lot. You may have heard them recently.

They've been around social media a lot in days after the recent Supreme Court decision on marriage. Other verses like this that are similar to this with a list of sins and with God saying, people such as this will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven or inherit the kingdom of Christ and of God.

Do use terms that refer to particular misuses of God's gift of sexuality. Including those that have become controversial in our country in recent years.

Places like 1 Corinthians use words that are more specific than the ones here. God tells us in His word clearly that He has designed this beautiful gift of sex for one man and one woman in the covenant of marriage.

[10 : 29] And there are many things that could be said and should be said in regards to these issues. And how we both think biblically and at the same time love generously in our culture and with our neighbors and friends regarding these issues.

We want truth and love to connect there. And so often we fail and we're better at one than the other. And that's a whole other conversation. But I want us to be very careful on this point.

These verses in Ephesians remind us that those more particular words that are in some verses that are in some verses are never alone in these lists. Your and my crude joking, lustful hearts, impurity and so on are out of place, are against God's design, and can reveal hearts that are seeking fulfillment in doing things our way rather than His.

That's the air we breathe in our culture these days, isn't it? Materialism, immorality. It was the same way in Ephesus. All around us, we're greedy for more of all sorts of things, aren't we?

And because such sin is increasingly normal and is everywhere you turn, sometimes we can assume it's harmless. Well, it's all over the place. It must be harmless.

[11 : 57] But we dare not downplay the seriousness. Paul says these things have eternal consequences. They incite the wrath of a holy God. I think sometimes we in our circles ignore the seriousness of materialism, immorality, greed, lust.

By two right and good things. There's probably a number of ways we do it, but at least two that Reformed Presbyterians are prone to do. We misuse, first of all, the truth of God's grace and forgiveness.

We say to ourselves things like, well, if I cross the line a little here or indulge a little there, it's not that bad because God always forgives.

I won't go into that again this morning, but that's true. He does forgive. But it's not grace you're talking about if it's not transforming your heart and making you love the things that your Father loves.

Or secondly, we do it by misusing the priority of cultural engagement. We know we Reformed Christians love to talk about engaging the culture and redeeming the culture.

[13 : 12] We're supposed to be in the world, right? And so we'll use that. And we've got to be in the world. That's so true. But as true as it is, when we use it as an excuse to treat sin lightly, it's deadly.

We say things like, I just wanted to see what was out there, you know, what people are dealing with in the culture. I've got to have something to connect with the guys at work about. How will I be funny if I don't mix in some of those jokes anymore?

It's what I always make people laugh about. And Paul says, stop it. Stop. Stop. There's no room for that.

And listen, Paul's not here gone off the reservation. Paul is the apostle of grace, right? Not some legalist. Paul is the author of cultural engagement, that we would be all things to all men, that by any means we might save some.

He's not some isolationist. Remove yourself from the world. And Paul says, let no one deceive you with empty words. That make these things seem harmless or tame.

[14 : 25] Why? Why is he so concerned? Why is Paul worked up about this? He's concerned about our hearts, isn't he? He's saying guard your hearts. It's idolatry he's warning against, isn't it?

Those who desire more and more stuff, those who covet more and more money, those who crave more and more sex, are idolaters. Verse 5.

Are worshipping something ahead of God. One way to describe idolatry is when you're looking to anything else for what you should only get from God.

Say that again. Idolatry is looking to anything else for what you should only get from God. God. I've told you my heart is capable of making an idol out of donuts.

Right? Out of things that we think will get comfort and fulfillment and pleasure from when we should be driven to God. And we go to anything else and say it's that that I need more of.

[15 : 28] My heart wants that more than it wants God in this moment. It's why God says in this passage the antidote to the crude talk and the filthiness is what?

What is it? Instead of crude talk and filthiness, let there be thanksgiving? What's he saying?

Thanksgiving. Worship of God.

Thanking Him, for instance, for His good gift of sex rather than selfishly using it for our own ends.

Finding your fulfillment in Him alone. Worshiping.

Valuing Him above all else. Treasuring God in your heart. That's what Paul's after. Guards your heart against other things that would creep in to take His place.

It's not just physical sin, he says, but where do your eyes and your tongue lead your heart? Paul says make no room for it. But do we make room for it?

[16 : 26] In our conversations? In the privacy of our own homes? In the longings of our hearts? Where have you made room for it?

There's danger there. And if no one has ever warned you, hear God's word clearly this morning.

There is grave danger in anything else displacing God in your heart.

Anything else taking His place. Danger. The bridge is out ahead. What is it for you? Is it someone or something you're gazing at?

Is it things you constantly talk about? Something you long to have? I gotta tell you, some of the things we talk about and complain about in regard to our material possessions are as obscene as the jokes that we won't laugh at.

And we miss it. We don't see it. It's become normal and we don't realize the hold that it has on our hearts. You see, that's what this verse means.

[17 : 30] Is it really saying that everyone who's slipped up sexually is going to hell? That there's no forgiveness for sins in the categories listed here in this passage? Is that what he's saying?

No. No, that's not what Paul's saying. It's talking about people who have set their hearts on seeking fulfillment apart from God. Who have unabashedly and unrepentantly pursued their own means of finding life and won't turn back.

He uses light and darkness to make a similar point about our hearts in verses 7 and 8. He says, don't become partners with them.

At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light. When he says, don't become partners with them, he means don't share their values and pursue their goals.

Not never be seen with them. The word goes to our hearts. What do we treasure? What do we prioritize? And again here, God's children are called to guard their hearts.

[18 : 40] Not, mind you, because they're better than someone else. But because he has called them to be different. We're not the source of light.

We're reflecting light. We're now light in the Lord. Even though we struggle with sin, just the same as others, we know the sin, don't we? It's not that we're better, it's that God has changed something about us.

We do have an inheritance in the kingdom of God. He's not looking to pounce on his children for a sin this afternoon. But he's calling them to guard what their hearts treasure.

The example of Moses mentioned in Hebrews 11 is instructive for us. You remember Moses? Do you remember when Moses was born, his mom placed him in a basket and put him out among the reeds so that he wouldn't get killed along with the other Hebrew children?

And who finds Moses in the reeds? Pharaoh's daughter. The princess finds Moses, raises him as prince of Egypt, right?

[19 : 45] At least you've seen the movie. Okay, so here he is, prince of Egypt. And what happens with Moses as he grows up? He chooses to side with the oppressed, miserable people of God instead of enjoying life in the palace.

Here's how Hebrews talks about it. By faith, Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.

He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. Why was Moses able to deny himself temporal comfort and pleasure?

Because his heart was fixed on an eternal home, something he was looking forward to, something worth more. The reproach of Christ greater than the riches of Egypt.

Wow. Father, change my heart. Make me long for that. Make me treasure you more. Don't you long to treasure him like that?

[20 : 58] At this point, I think if you're tracking with me, you're ready to take yourself and your family, get in a hole somewhere in the ground, cover up, never see a mall or a computer or a catalog ever again.

And I get that. I've got three young daughters. And there are many days where that option makes a lot of sense to me. It seems very logical. Seems like a great idea.

We'll wait for Jesus to come back. We'll be in the hole in the ground when he gets here. But God says, I've actually got a harder path for you. Guard what your heart treasures and exercise godly wisdom.

Look at verse 9. Walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is found in all that's good and right and true. And try to do what? To discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

Verse 15 says it a different way. 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, don't be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

[22 : 07] Good news. Apparently, how you live matters. God cares about it. It's important. It's a big deal. But it's not simple.

God's doing something magnificent in the world with eternal consequences. And the decisions you make and the actions you take are significant in that. You're to look carefully at how you live.

To make the most of opportunities. To seek after God's will in each situation. But it's hard, isn't it? It's not simple. The rest of the light and dark verses remind us it's not simply run away and hide from the world.

The hole in the ground approach. But actually bring light into darkness. Expose it, the passage says, by which the word actually means bring light into darkness, thereby making it visible.

Exposing it. Showing what's right and true. But in every situation, redeem the time. Discern God's will without a specific detailed list.

[23 : 10] There's no list. There's no list, is there? Paul doesn't go into everything. When to speak. When to be silent. That seems hard. What about what movies to watch and what movies not to watch?

What's too much? What's not enough? There's no list. So godly wisdom is required. And so that means being suspect of our natural desires.

Here's what I mean. Our instinct, our tendency is to know that there are all these issues in the middle. We sometimes call them wisdom issues. There's no clear black and white, right and wrong on all of these things.

And so what do we naturally do? Instead of exercising godly wisdom, we justify our natural desires, don't we? We think this is my personal preference, so it's a wisdom issue.

I just do it the way that seems right to me. Rather than seeking godly wisdom that might challenge or stretch our personal preferences. For example, think this morning.

[24 : 15] How did it make you feel when I said there was no list in these verses of how to handle every situation? For those of you that that makes you feel happy, that there's no list, you're glad for that.

It makes you want to spike the ball on all of the legalists out there, right? There's no list. See, there's not a list you can hold over me. If that's the way it makes you feel when you realize there's no list, then likely your tendency is to indulgence.

To allowing yourself to pursue the desires of your heart unchecked. And to justify it by saying what? Cultural engagement. I love engaging the culture.

On the other hand, if the lack of a list makes you feel sad, fearful, you're worried about making the wrong decision, you were hoping to have a checklist for everything that's going to come up, you're afraid you're going to do it wrong, your tendency is probably to withdrawal.

To allowing yourself to miss opportunities for being light and darkness and engaging your neighbor or your culture because you're fearful of going too far, doing the wrong thing.

[25 : 27] Okay, great. Well, so what does that mean? So I've got some tendencies. Yeah, maybe. Maybe not. I don't know. What does it mean? Godly wisdom means submitting your natural desires and instincts to God's Word, to wrestling with God honestly in prayer, to godly counsel from people who have a different perspective from you, not just the people you know are going to tell you what you want to hear, but people who are going to challenge you in the other direction.

Exercising godly wisdom means asking Him for direction, not assuming you have all the wisdom you need on your own. Don't be foolish, Paul says.

Instead, understand what the Lord's will is. So guard your hearts, exercise godly wisdom, and above all else, demonstrate sacrificial love.

That's what drives this whole passage, isn't it? Look back at verses 1 and 2. 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.

The way we are like our Holy Father is by living a life of love where we sacrifice ourselves for others, right? In other words, there's nothing in this passage that says living as God's holy children is easy or pain-free.

[26 : 57] Jesus taught us that when He spoke to His disciples about following Him. He said it's going to cost you, right? It's going to cost you self-denial, taking up your cross, possibly even laying down your life to follow Him.

How are we called to love? Jesus put your needs before His own. He put your comfort before His own. He put your good before His own and paid a high price to rescue you.

That kind of sacrifice is not supposed to be an exceptional day for us, but our daily pattern. What will you have to sacrifice to follow God's Word above your own desires?

What will living as God's holy child, a life of love, cost you? It may cost you fitting in relationally. It may cost you advancement professionally.

It may cost you exercising your sexual desires the way you would like. The way that feels good or seems right to you.

[28 : 07] It may cost you venting your just judgment of others' sin and showing patience instead. It may cost you every day for the rest of your life the emotional turmoil of battling the sin in your heart day by day and moment by moment rather than just giving in and giving up.

The path of least resistance is often not the path of godly wisdom and holy living. So don't be surprised by that. God is not telling you this should all be a piece of cake.

He knows the struggle is real and He's calling you to believe that He's caring for you in the midst of it. To trust Him to know what's best for you. Don't think it's unusual that living as God's holy children is hard or painful or costly for you.

Remember Moses among many others in the Bible. Because he trusted God, he chose mistreatment and reproach and sacrificed wealth and status and comfort and fleeting pleasures of sin, a costly sacrifice because he knew God was worth it.

There are two emotions that are right below the surface for most of us when we talk about topics like this passage addresses this morning.

[29 : 31] When we talk about the importance of living as God's holy children. I've experienced both of them this week. Emotions of shame. Emotions of fear.

Shame that comes so quickly into our hearts because we remember ways we've failed to live as children of light.

As the people God has called us to be and so in our shame we want to hide. We feel dirty or worthless. We blame ourselves.

Fear is right there too. Because it's easy to feel like I'll never measure up and God will be disappointed or He's going to subtly punish me if I don't meet the standard.

He's somehow going to get back at me when I cross the line or make the wrong decision. I'm going to do something that's going to ruin my children. So it's easy to walk out of this room into this world and be motivated and driven by shame.

[30 : 35] It's easy to walk out of this room into this world and knowing our own hearts to feel fearful and ashamed. And God would have you leave with neither of those this morning.

I want to remind you of how God actually feels about His beloved children. When these issues of holiness come up in Scripture, sacrifice is often close by.

Holiness and sacrifice. Holiness and sacrifice. Over and over you'll see them together. When the fragrant offering and sacrifice to God is mentioned in verse 2, it clearly calls to mind the Old Testament sacrifices and the way God spoke of them.

And when did those start? What was the background of those sacrifices? Here's where they came into play. In the book of Exodus, God has delivered His people out of Egypt, right? Out of their slavery there, He set them free.

But instead of following Him, they run after idols, don't they? They turn after idols. They turn their back on God. They go after fulfillment in their own ways rather than Him. All the things we have done.

[31 : 45] And yet the book of Exodus ends strangely. Not with God running away from His people, but with a tabernacle being built. A house for God in the midst of His people.

Listen to the last verses of Exodus. The cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not even able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day and fire was in it by night and the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys. Listen to me.

The holy God says to His shameful children, not, I want to get away from you and I can't stand you, but I want to live right there in the midst of you.

That's what He says to His children in the midst of their shame. I love you and I want to be with you. God's holy glory, not some halfway kind of pure part of God, His holy glory comes right in the midst of the people and says, I'm coming and I'm staying right here with you day after day, everywhere you go, I'm not leaving you.

[33 : 09] I love you. God's holy glory comes right here. God's holy. And so what's immediately necessary? Right after His holiness shows up, flip the page from Exodus, what's the next page of the Bible?

Leviticus. You ever read Leviticus? It sounds a lot like this. Sacrifice, offering, another offering, another sacrifice. Do it this way. Bring these animals. Here's how many times.

Here's what you're going to do. Sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice. Immediately when holiness shows up, what does God do? Sacrifice. Sacrifice. When the holy God moves in with sinful people, when light enters darkness, and when the children of light live where God has placed them in a broken world, sacrifice is necessary.

Beloved children of God, those for whom Jesus gave the fragrant offering and sacrifice acceptable to God, your Father would not have you leave this room this morning ashamed and fearful.

Your Father would not have you walk out the back of this sanctuary this morning feeling like He doesn't want anything to do with you. Like He'd rather get away from you.

[34 : 27] He would not have that. Where's that moment for you? Where's your shame? Where's your fear? Where's the most intense point that you feel?

What's run through your mind when I've said that? What experience? What decision? What circumstance causes the shame and the fear to well up in you? Your Father says, I want to meet you right there.

I want to be with you there. That's not the place I'm trying to avoid. It's not the place you have to hide from me. It's the place I want to enter in. He would have you remember that your holiness is so important to Him.

His desire to have fellowship as a holy God with you, His holy child, is so strong that He sent His Son to live and die so you would be holy for sure and forever.

That's how important it was to Him. And your Father says, I love you so much that I must tell you to guard what your heart treasures so that nothing else ever displaces me.

[35 : 37] To exercise godly wisdom because the days are evil and the way is hard. And to demonstrate sacrificial love because holiness always, always requires sacrifice.

Let's pray. Father, You are holy and we so quickly feel unworthy.

None of us is free from the stain of sin. And this passage reminds us of that. Thank You for Jesus. Thank You that You weren't willing to leave us there but that You made a way. That You sent a sacrifice. Father, would You make us people who drink deeply of that sacrifice for us and who are willing to sacrifice at great cost to ourselves to love others.

teach us what it looks like to live as Your children and make it something that changes every moment of every day for the rest of our lives. We pray in Jesus' name.

[36 : 48] Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org. For more information, you