

Living as Wholly People!
Ephesians 5:1-20
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A young woman was under huge pressure from her boyfriend. Their passion had grown, their involvement had deepened, and they were both tempted to have sex. But she had drawn a line.

One night her boyfriend was angry and said, "You're saying "no" because you're afraid of what your father will do to you if he found out." "No," she replied, "I'm saying 'no' because of what it would do to my father."

It's because we are our Heavenly Father's dearly beloved children that the Lord calls us to live worthy lives. After ending chapter 4 of Ephesians with a plea *not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God...to get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger...*in order that we *be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other*, Paul began chapter 6 with this appeal:

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Jesus' death on the cross has cleansed us from sin if we have accepted his grace. We are washed clean, becoming vessels for God's Holy Spirit, who can live and love as Jesus lived and loved, as God always intended for people to live and love.

Living worthy lives is a constant struggle. Until resurrection, we must choose whether to imitate God, whether to follow Jesus. Because it's a struggle, we wonder, why does God care how we live? He cares how we live because He cares; God wants us to be **whole**, body and soul, so He calls us to be **holy**—if you will...**wholly people**. So until death yields complete resurrection, we practice resurrection, allowing the resurrected Lord within us to grow us into **holy people with whole lives**.

As the Creator who formed our bodies and gave us our appetites, the Lord has special concern that the natural appetites aren't distorted by sin, so the Lord wants to grow us into people who don't let appetites destroy us. Knowing the tendency for one compromise to lead to the next, Paul wrote, (*v. 3*) *but there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.*

The Bible isn't anti-sex; it's that God created us male and female for physical intimacy that is incredibly good and powerful when we reserve it for the life-long relationship of marriage. As Genesis 2 says, *a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave unto his wife, and the two shall become one flesh*. Sex between people who aren't committed to each other's best life makes a mockery of love. Using someone for your pleasure cheapens the relationship and corrodes your character. And so Paul writes that there *shouldn't even be a hint of immorality or impurity of any kind among God's people*.

We're tempted to dismiss him as hopelessly out of touch. "Give me a break...this is such an impossible standard! With young people delaying marriage, how do you expect them to be celibate? With pornographic images only a click away on a computer, how do you expect people to avoid impurity of any kind?"

Yet Paul wrote in a culture far more decadent than ours, as bad as it is. Before their baptism, many of the Ephesian Christians degraded themselves with unspeakable deeds of darkness. Yet throughout this letter Paul promises that the resurrection power of Christ enables us to *put off the old self...and put on the new self* (4:22-24). This is a continual process, for we are exposed to dirt every day. So we must constantly take off and wash our dirty clothes.

So guard yourselves against slipping into sexual immorality, against any kind of impurity. Don't rationalize watching pornography because it's on HBO and Showtime. The same for TV shows; can you really watch a diet of *Desperate Housewives* or *Sex in the City* and not be affected? And ladies, please watch how you dress! Looking attractive is fine, but should you be tempting the brothers by showing too much? And folks, let's watch our language—what you say, what you write on Facebook. As verse 4 says, *nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather **thanksgiving***.

Isn't it interesting that the opposite of sexual impurity is *thanksgiving*. If we focus on the goodness of life, and continually thank God for His good gifts, dirt doesn't stick to us so easily.

Paul also writes that **neither should there be any kind of greed**. That's really tough. Often Christians have kept strict standards on sex, yet lust for money, lust for possessions, and lust for travel experiences. Yet Paul insists that your appetites can consume your spiritual life. Look at verse 5:

For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.

Christians are gracious people, called to be friendly with everyone. But we can't be in close partnership with people who let their appetites control them. To maintain our integrity there may be times when we have to distance ourselves from corrupt people. Rather, Paul challenges us to **live as children of light**:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: "Wake up, O sleeper; rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Paul's not suggesting that we go around with flashlights to catch people in sin; he's saying that when we live as children of light our demonstration of true love can't help but expose what is false and ugly, which will wake people up.

Paul concludes this section by naming one more awkward issue. In order to be spiritually alert, we must watch out for our tendency to medicate ourselves:

*Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. **Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery.***

Nowhere in the Bible does it command God's people to abstain from wine; it was considered a blessing to enjoy. Jesus even made wine from water at a wedding feast when they ran out.

But there are many warnings against the abuse of alcohol. It wasn't that they were afraid of drunk-chariot-driving—the average person walked everywhere. The problem was that drinking too much led to debauchery, sexual sin. In Ephesus the pagans worshipped Dionysius with drunken feasts and casual sex. In our time, drinking too much makes it too easy to succumb to temptations and hurt others. Besides excessive drinking pickles your liver and kills brain cells!

Those of us who consume alcohol should take verse 15 to heart: *be very careful, then, how [we] live—not as unwise but as wise*, we must set boundaries, or we will surely slip into recklessness, or become dependent on alcohol. The alternative to being dependent on “spirits” is to ***be filled with the Spirit***. Instead of needing to medicate ourselves to enjoy life, verse 19 says:

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I'm tempted to call our worship services “Happy Hour,” but it might be confusing!

As we wrap up our study of this challenging section of Ephesians, some of us might wonder, “How do we teach these truths in a world where most people have already made sexual compromises, or are already worshipping money, or have already abused substances?” Many Christians will be offended if we teach these truths, because so many of us have lived compromised lives.

As a pastor I have struggled with how much to challenge people. Many times I notice when people are flirting with the darkness, but don't speak up, afraid of seeming judgmental. Eugene Peterson tells a story that reminds us that when our relationships deepen we can challenge each other to seek the best life.

A woman in her late twenties began to worship in Peterson's church. After a few weeks she made an appointment and said that she wanted to become a Christian, but had no idea how to begin. They talked and prayed, and she was baptized. They continued to meet every two or three weeks. Peterson writes,

She took everything in, embraced everything easily and gladly. But one thing puzzled me. She lived together with her boyfriend. I learned that she had always lived with her boyfriends, beginning when she was twenty. The living together rarely lasted more than six months or so. She wasn't interested in marriage. She told me all this without apology and not as a confession but quite casually, as we were getting acquainted with one another. I wondered if I should say anything. Surely she knew that the Christian way had some sexual implications for the way you lived...I waited for her to bring up the subject.

One day on impulse I said, “We have been having these conversations for seven months. Astrid, would you do something for me?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“Live celibate for the next six months.”

Surprised, she said, “Why would I do that?”

“Just because I asked you. Trust me. I think it’s important.”

I learned later that her boyfriend moved out before the week was over. A month later when she came to see me, she didn’t mention it. But the following month she brought it up, “When you asked me to live celibate for six months, I had no idea what you were up to. You asked me to trust you, and so I did. It’s been two months now and I think I understand what you were doing. I feel so free. I never felt so ‘myself’ before, never felt so at home with myself. I thought all my friends did what I was doing—all my friends did...And now I am noticing so many other things about my relations with others—they seem much more clean and whole. So uncluttered. And do you know what? I have been thinking that I might want to get married someday. Thank you.”

Sounds like her pursuit of holiness yielded wholeness. Peterson adds:

The celibacy decision survived the six month mark and continued for two more years, at which time she and her fiancé exchanged vows and I blessed their Christian marriage.

(Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ, pp. 195-96.)

Folks, I don’t want to beat up on people when they find it very hard to *live worthy lives*. Rather, I want to be the kind of pastor who loves you enough to risk offending you, a pastor who earns the right to challenge you to flee from sexual immorality, greed, and substance abuse. And I pray that you will be the kind of congregation who can trust the Bible when it promises you wholeness as you pursue holiness.