

LIVING THE NEW LIFE (3)

WALK IN THE LIGHT

Ephesians 5:3-20

What does a Christian life look like? Over the past weeks we have looked at how Paul addressed certain issues in the churches in and around Ephesus. His key message has been the centrality of reconciliation and unity. In this present passage he sketches a picture of what unity might look like. This flow of thought seems to me to be an important factor in how we read these verses. Two extremes may be considered. On the one hand, some hold that these injunctions are for another time and place. Times change and with them moral standards ebb and flow. Paul's fixation with sex, speech and greed tell us a lot about Paul, but not about how we are to behave as Christians in the twenty-first century. On the other hand there are those who see these verses as timeless commands delivered, via Paul, directly from God. They say what they mean and they mean what they say. God's law, like God himself, is unchanging. Any attempt to alter their meaning or application is an affront to God. These two approaches are sometimes called relativism and absolutism, and both are to be treated with suspicion.

It is clear from this passage that Paul is not giving the sum-total of Christian ethics and lifestyle. Many circumstances that these first century Christians would have faced are not touched on and no rules are given. Instead, Paul focuses on fairly limited situations as examples rather than absolutes. Furthermore, they are examples of reconciliation and unity in action – there are other Christian principles that Paul is not concerned with at this point. In other letters he addresses other issues, drawing out the practical implications of divine principles that speak directly to different situations. Love, the cross, Christ-likeness, church order and discipline, God's ongoing plan and purposes, leadership, among many others are all in turn addressed. Yet we should be weary of drawing disparate passages together as though they form a complete compendium of Christian ethics, even within the context of

the first century, for there are many issues still untouched. And for twenty-first century Christians, who face moral and ethical dilemmas that were undreamt of in Paul's day, treating the New Testament as an ethics handbook simply will not work.

This is not to say that Christian ethics is therefore relative, bending to suit the times. In the case of the Ephesian church the principle they needed to hear was not 'don't get involved in sexual immorality, watch your mouth, don't be greedy'. Those are examples – the principle is, "Live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:1–6) The examples Paul gives are to be seen in the light of this teaching on unity in Christ. Hence the harsh words in 5:5. It is not that fornication, impurity or greed are worse than any other sin (as Paul points out elsewhere), but in this case they are the unholy fruit of disunity and a breaking of the bonds that exist in Christ.

(This focus on reconciliation and unity in Christ will also help us understand, interpret and apply the more contentious verses that follow this passage – but more on that next time.)

Paul also tells the Ephesians why it is important to live a distinctive way. "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light." (8) We are to be lights, showing by the way we live that there is an alternative to the spirit-numbing, death-dealing ways of this world. And because it is not enough simply to put off the old (the 'don'ts') Paul again refers to putting on an alternative: "Find out what pleases the Lord." (10) Christian ethics is never to be presented as negative, a simple list of things to be avoided. As we consider what it might mean today to, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (4:3) we too might identify certain behaviours and words that should be avoided that Paul doesn't mention here. At the same time we must be actively searching out ways that enhance our witness, ways that are pleasing to the Lord.

Of course, this path is a difficult path to walk. Some prefer to be free of all rules and constraints and some like to fall back on the old certainties.

Paul, however, says we are to be wise, be careful, understand (5:15-17), all words that involve effort. And all this only happens as we live life in the power of the Spirit (18). It is only as we are energised by the Spirit that we will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

Amen.

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