

“Walk in the light of Christ”

Ephesians 5:1-14; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7

Introduction

We know the Bible as one complete manuscript that points us to Christ. Every passage and laneway in Scripture points to Him as the fulfilment of prophecy.

Each book in the Bible has key instruction for the people of God. Paul’s letter to the saints in Ephesus is no different. Each of Paul’s letters contains sound teaching and instruction that Paul wanted to impart to the Christian Church. His exhortations come from a pastoral heart as the spiritual father of many of these churches, planted during his missionary trips.

To the Church in Ephesus, Paul has an important message – he wants them to walk in purity of life and holiness of character. Ephesians chapter 5 shows us distinctly how we are to be separate from the world around us. How the Christian must behave differently to the atheist.

When priests and under-shepherds are defrocked for child sex abuse, the church is shamed. The public lose confidence in us as an institution and safeguards are called into question. At the moment, the world is left shocked and reeling at the conviction of Australian Cardinal George Pell to five charges of child sex abuse.

Right now we should have Ephesians 5 verse 3 searing in our minds:
“But among you 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.”

As people called to follow Christ, we have come under the conviction of our own sinfulness and our need for Him. But how desperately do we need Him? To swear allegiance to Christ, we must abide by his teachings.

Verse 2 tells us that Christ is the exemplar of a life lived in love. Without Christ, there is no pure love. He taught us sacrificial love in the first place, by offering himself to God on our behalf, to atone for our sins.

We need the purity and holiness of Christ to enter into His kingdom. So what are the keys to Christ’s kingdom? Tonight’s passage has some important themes for us to explore:

- I. LOVE AND SACRIFICE: v.2
- II. DISCERNMENT: v.10
- III. FRUITFUL WORKS as opposed to unfruitful works: v.11
- IV. EXPOSURE TO THE LIGHT: v.13-14

Now I’m going to do something a little different and go over these four themes in reverse order. So firstly I’ll speak of exposure to the light, then fruitful works, the importance of discernment, and end with love and sacrifice.

Firstly, exposure to the light of Scripture:

We can draw inference that by exposure to the light, we mean exposure to the light of Scripture. For Paul's letter to the Hebrews tells us that ***the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart*** (Hebrews 4:12). There is no greater lamp to our soul than the word of God. No creature is hidden from his sight, but all [of us] are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and organised the murder of her husband Uriah, one of his loyal soldiers, the LORD God sent Nathan the prophet to rebuke him. The LORD speaks through Nathan, ***“Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? ...Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house.”*** (2 Samuel 12:9-11)

Paul's letter to the Hebrews reminds us that without holiness, no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). Sin separates us from God and hinders our prayers from being answered. But in Christ, we are called to live by the Spirit, exposing deeds of darkness and seeking to please Him.

If we look at vv.10-14 in their entirety, we are to test our actions by the wisdom and instruction from Scripture. For example, ***do our words and actions build up the Body of Christ?*** (Ephesians 4:15-16) ***Are we treating our bodies as a temple holy unto the LORD?*** (1 Corinthians 6:17-20)

Sexual immorality is mentioned twice in this passage, and 33 times in the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible. It's clearly a sticking point with God. Ephesians 5 speaks in definite terms. Sexual immorality, impurity, greediness and covetousness are not to be named among the people of God.

King Solomon, David's son from his union with Bathsheba gives us the prime example of what *not* to do. In addition to having 700 wives, Solomon had 300 concubines. All the female attention turned Solomon's heart away from the LORD. 1 Kings 11 says ***“Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites”***...and it says in v.9 that ***“the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel.”***

Both David and Solomon were guilty of sexual immorality, impurity, greed and covetousness. They and their families paid consequences for their sin. Ephesians 5 tells us that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (an idolator) has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. ***Should we fear being debarred from the Kingdom of God?*** Absolutely we should. When Calvin preached these verses in Geneva 460 years ago, he expressed the necessity of displeasure in our lusts so as to turn away from them. We need a healthy fear of God, and his wrath, to restrain us from our lusts. If we lose that fear of God, our hearts have become hardened to sin.

Can we see that happening in churches today? We cannot tolerate sin because God does not tolerate sin. We must loathe sin and fear God in appropriate measure.

In the apostolic era, we remember from Acts 15 that the Jerusalem Council's letter to Gentile believers included the instruction to abstain from sexual immorality. This was what seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to the Jerusalem Council of elders (Acts 15:28). Remember in Genesis 39 that Joseph had the sense to flee sexual immorality (Genesis 39:12), but that even the accusation by Potiphar's wife was enough to land him in the palace dungeon (Genesis 39:20).

Sexual immorality became a problem in the Corinthian Church that Paul felt compelled to write to the Christians in Corinth not to associate with sexually immoral people. Look at what 1 Corinthians 5:11 says ***“But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to eat with such a one.”***

Paul never contradicts himself. Look at Colossians 3:5 ***“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.”*** And Ephesians 5, verse 6 in the New Living Translation says, ***“Don't be fooled by those who try to excuse these sins, for the anger of God will fall on all who disobey him.”***

Paul's letters help us to realise there must be corporate accountability in our churches for sexual sin. Harry Schaumberg, a counsellor who specialises in the area of sexual sin in the church suggests we are corporately responsible for each other's spiritual, relational and sexual maturity. Hebrews 12:15 says, ***“See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”*** And in v.16 ***“See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau...”***

Rev. Marty O'Rourke, who developed a program for training Christian leaders on specific ways they can avoid sexual misconduct, found that God himself calls us to consider the consequences of sin. Look at what Galatians 6:7 says, ***“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.”***

There's truth to the saying: ***“Sin always takes you farther than you want to go, keeps you longer than you want to stay, and costs you more than you are willing to pay.”*** Church leadership cannot neglect to offer loving discipline towards wayward brothers and sisters, for the purpose of repentance and restoration. Men's accountability groups and ministry to the unmarried are essential. 1 Thessalonians 4 tells us that our sanctification is God's will. Exposure to the light is a call to confession and repentance. So if God is speaking to you tonight, through His word, through this sermon, I encourage you to acknowledge your sin and confess it to both God and man, who can forgive, restore and hold you accountable.

Reading from 1 John 1, vv.7-9

“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

And then Proverbs 3:7-8

*Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.
This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.*

From our passage tonight, verses 8-9 says, **“For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord (NLT). *Live as children of light (NIV). For this light within you produces only what is good and right and true.” (NLT)***

Friends, let us not underestimate the power of Scripture to examine and transform our hearts, minds and lives. As we read the Word of God, the Spirit is speaking to our inner conscience, to our inner man, bringing about a conviction to faith and a compulsion to obey. We are only to produce what is good, what is right and what is true. Let no falsehood or deceit be found on our lips.

We are to take no part in the worthless deeds of evil and darkness, but instead expose them. As Christians, it is our responsibility to expose the works of the ungodly, i.e. the evils of abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage, the dangerous ideology of gender fluidity entering into our schools and universities. These are an immoral corruption of natural law, an attempt to take creation out of the Creator’s purpose and are abhorrent to the LORD our God and maker.

Reading God’s Word should correct our attitudes and habits to one of giving greater glory to Him. Words and works are not separate or mutually exclusive. Look at how verse 10 exhorts us to discern what is pleasing to the LORD. We please our biological fathers with words and actions - how much so our Father in heaven!

So discernment and fruitful works go together.

They come under the banner of discerning God’s will and living that out in our lives. The NIV says find out what pleases the LORD. That only comes by reading Scripture. From reading the Old Testament and the New, we know that **the LORD cares for orphans and widows** (Deuteronomy 10:18; Hosea 14:3; John 14:18; James 1:27), **the sick and disabled** (Matthew 4:24, 8:3; Mark 1:30-31), **the poor and the needy** (Matthew 6:2-4). He cares for **the alien, refugee and sojourner**, both **the immigrant and the asylum seeker** (Deuteronomy 10:18). **The disadvantaged and marginalised.**

Paul gives us in v.9 the characteristics, or fruit, of our walk as children of light. We are to walk in all goodness and righteousness and truth. These are the tests of true faith that demonstrate to the world that we are children of God and followers of Christ Jesus. The Greek word here refers to moral excellence, a goodness that finds its fullest and highest expression in what is willingly and sacrificially done for others, so that they might know him.

Mary Slessor was a Scottish Presbyterian missionary to Nigeria, who was able to spread Christianity in Africa, promote women's rights and protect native children. She was responsible for rescuing children from infanticide, the intentional killing of twin babies. It was believed in Calabar, West Africa, that the birth of twins was an evil curse, that one of them had to be a devil, and so the babies were abandoned in the bush in clay pots and left to die. Mary adopted every child she found abandoned, and sent out twin missionaries to find, protect and care for them at the Mission House. She successfully fought against this practice and would eventually become vice-consul in Okoyong, further up north, where male missionaries had been killed. Mary went there with the bold conviction that her teachings, and the fact that she was a woman, would be less threatening to unreached tribes. Despite contracting Malaria during her first station in Calabar, Slessor remained on the mission field until her death. She made a significant contribution to the cause of Christ and managed to advance the gospel in West Africa, despite humble origins of coming from a poor working-class family that lived in the slums of Dundee. May Slessor's story be an encouragement to all of us; she wasn't particularly wealthy when she became a missionary at 28 years of age, but God used her to save hundreds and hundreds of twin babies.

And I'm pretty sure you've never heard of Robert Raikes, the man who turned Sunday School into an international institution. The grandson of an Anglican vicar, Raikes was concerned about the effects the Industrial Revolution was having on children, especially boys. With boys working six out of seven days, he saw that they had no means of moral, religious or educational development. Adult factory workers were illiterate and either exhaustion or social circumstances prevented them from attending church. Raikes set up Sunday lessons where the Bible was used to teach the boys how to read, introduce them to Christianity and provide them with a moral foundation.

Robert owned the town's newspaper, and would promote Sunday School in it. Twenty years after his passing, Sunday Schools were teaching 1.25 million children in Great Britain, almost a quarter of the nation's population. Whilst Raikes didn't start the first Sunday School, he laid the groundwork for many Sunday Schools to open across England during his lifetime. He was also involved in prison reform and hospital care.

The fruit and legacy of Robert Raikes demonstrates to us that there are many good things we can be doing. Identifying our gifts can be a place to start when looking at areas of service. A process of trial and error, of trying different things might be appropriate when we are looking to identify our gifts and areas in which we are to serve. We know from verse 4 that shameful conduct, filthy talk and crude jokes do not give glory to God and do not bear good fruit.

Thanksgiving sets the right example. We give thanks to God with glad and sincere hearts, and by acts of service done in the humility of Christ... As Christians we are not to mislead or deceive others. In today's day and age that includes marketing, advertising, promotions and sales. We are to speak truthfully and give an accurate account. We are to be honest in our dealings with others. Verse 6 warns us that empty words provoke God's anger and will incur his wrath.

And finally, I'm going to talk about love and sacrifice:

In verse 2, we're commanded to live a life of love. How do we do that if loving others doesn't come naturally to us? Firstly, we can look to the love of Christ. Observe how Christ loved us. Jesus wasn't cautious in the way he approached loving others; those society had deemed outcast or unlovely. Think of the leper or the paralytic, those who were blind and those who were lame. **Jesus didn't love in order to get something from us, but he gave everything of himself to us.** He didn't withhold his love. Whenever he saw a crowd, those who were lost without a shepherd, he had compassion on them. We're to love like that.

It is a giving, unconditional, sacrificial type of love. But there's a disclaimer here, don't let love turn into lust. Perhaps that explains the transition we see from verses 2 to 3. A love that involves self-denial and dying to the sins of self and body is far removed from the sin of sexual immorality. We need to be appropriate in harbouring and expressing love for others. One thing that came up in the recent Advanced Safe Church training held here in Canterbury was that we are not to encroach the sexual boundaries of others. That includes being unnecessarily close and physical touch even, if it is in a manner that is inappropriate.

We are to keep ourselves pure, free from greed, selfishness, and idolatry, because these are improper for the people of God.

The Bible teaches that Christians must never use such things – food, sex, drugs, alcohol, cars, homes, investments – in such a way that we fall under their power (Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*).

To love is to cling to Christ. We're to keep company with him and learn a life of love. We are to sacrifice the things that might seem good to us, if they're keeping us from Christ.

James Montgomery Boice who was pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia considers biblical discipleship as consisting of three parts:

- (1) We are to deny ourselves,
- (2) So we can take up Christ's cross voluntarily and continuously, and
- (3) Follow Jesus

To love God in such a way means experiencing death and denial. It means having the courage to say 'no' to anything contrary to God's will for us.

For instance, marriage may not be God's will for you, and if it is not, as hard as that may be on the ear and on your heart, then you must say 'no' to marriage, consciously and deliberately. That may also hold true for an entrepreneurial business idea, career ambition or owning a home, if that is not God's will for us.

Yes, to deny ourselves these things is hard. It's hard on our hearts, our pride, our ego, and any potential partner. It's hard for the strongest saint as well as the weakest sinner (Boice). Remember what Paul says in his letter to the Romans. In verse 14 of Romans 7, Paul writes, ***"We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.*** And scrolling down to v.21: ***When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!***

CONCLUSION

Just as Christ is the beginning (John 1:1-4) and the end (Revelation 22:13), the first and the last (Revelation 1:17; 22:13), I started this sermon with Christ and I will end it with Christ.

At the beginning of our passage in verse 2, we were exhorted to walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. In v.1 we are told to be imitators of God. Now to discuss imitating God we need to go into the attributes of God, which Alan has done in the past, and it would take another sermon series. We could discuss attributes of God the Father, and of his beloved son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

We know that God is holy and righteous, so we are called to holy righteousness. In verse 8 we are commanded to walk as children of light. We're told from this passage that the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true. We know from John 14 that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6).

In John chapter 8 Jesus tells the scribes and Pharisees at temple that he is the light of the world. Whoever follows him will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (John 8:12)

May we cling closely to Christ and walk in his light, trusting in His merits alone. Amen