

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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JANUARY 7, 2010



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Ephesians 5:1-21

"How To Live"

The Church is God's current "working model" of a reconciled and united community, according to Paul, so it's vital that all the members of this "body of Christ" in the world today should "live a life worthy of their calling" - that is, make sure the life of their community of faith appears attractive to the watching pagan world.

At this point in his long "homily" to the 1st century churches around Ephesus, Paul is giving long lists of instructions on things Christians should do and should not do if they are to live "worthy lives." These "vice-lists" and "virtue lists" were not news to the churches, any more than they are to us; what marks them as specifically Christian is the *motivations* for the behaviors. Do things because they please God; do these things because they are what Christ has done for you; do these things because they build up the Christian community.

Among the list of instructions, it helps to grasp the flow in this passage if we look at three imperatives to "live like this..."

1) *Live a Life of Love*

The first is "live a life of love." It follows directly from the command to "imitate God" - do as God does - specifically "love as Christ loved." The word that comes immediately to Paul about Christ's love is of course "sacrifice."

So here's how you live a life love: by giving yourself, or by giving up on your wants and needs, for the sake of other people. That fits the New Testament definition of love, which is not a warm feeling toward someone, but a devotion to that person's welfare. "God so loved the world that he gave..." for example.

What specific aspects of love does Paul have in mind? It's a surprise to realize that he has a lot to say here about sex. For the sake of other people's welfare, for the sake of the community, Christians should avoid all "porneia." That's the generic Greek word which the NIV translates "sexual immorality;" in the 1st century it would have included what we used to call fornication - sex before marriage - adultery, incest, prostitution.

Paul reminds the Christians that these are not Christian practices, for two reasons: they amount to idolatry (making something or someone more important than God); and they harm the community. That's easy to forget unless you stop and think about it: casual sex hurts other people! Adultery and incest can destroy marriages and families. Prostitution or the use of it can destroy communities - visit any "red-light district" and see. It was even worse when it was attached to pagan worship, as it was in Ephesus in the 1st century.

In our time, the “hooking-up” culture among younger people has left a whole generation wondering what has happened to them, and when and where they will ever find someone to marry. Read some of the current feminist back-lash at what the “sexual revolution” that began in the 1960s has bequeathed to women. Part of that is the main-streaming of pornography; it’s now well established that hours spent watching hard-core porn leave men and women with little or no appetite for real sex with real partners.

Something unexpected in Paul’s approach to *porneia* is his command “don’t even talk about it!” Foolish talk, dirty jokes, all contribute to the debasement of sex. Paul has argued that wrong thinking leads to vice – here he makes the link between thought and behavior: speech! Watch what you say, what you talk about. That’s the line you step across in going from ideas to action – when you start to talk about it.

The answer to all this? *Thanksgiving*, says Paul. Be grateful for what you have. “Do not covet your neighbor’s wife,” or husband! Be satisfied, be content. “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence” – until you get there. Notice too that Paul implicitly says to men in the 1st century, “what Greco-Roman culture allows you but forbids your wife, Christian culture forbids you too!” In our time, it’s now clear that women and men are more alike than different in this area: “locker-room talk” occurs when the “gals” get together, as well as when the “guys” do. Some surveys suggest that (at least among those under 35) about 1 in 3 women and 2 in 3 men watch pornography regularly.

Pornography disrupts our relationships with God, with our spouses, and with our community. It becomes like an idol to pursue and almost worship. *No porneia* for Christians! says Paul.

2) *Live a Life of Light*

On the contrary, “*live as children of light.*” The light of Jesus Christ has shone upon you, and you are now with the Spirit’s help able to reflect that light out into the world. In doing so you will illumine the darkness, and implicitly “chase away the things that are lurking in the darkness.” Light stands for goodness, truth, right living – signs of a Christian life that are like a beacon when they radiate from a Christian community.

Everyone knows there is a “dark side” to life – Paul says, “Christians, don’t go there!” It is a place of lies and shame, and you will regret the decision to go down into that pit. In our day we would want to include in it not only pornography but violence, drugs, alcohol, petty crime. It’s a world unto itself, and it’s easy enough to be drawn into, especially if you are young and insecure and depressed. But it is indeed shameful, as Paul says, to talk about what goes on in the dark.

No matter what our genetic pre-disposition or our mental health may be, there are environments that we can choose to enter or avoid, there are specific choices we can make one way or the other. Don’t go into the darkness or you will regret it, and it may take years to get out even when you have decided you want out, and parts of your life and your relationships may be damaged for a long time.

If we have once come into the light, we should stay in it, and reflect it into the dark corners – not by shining our flashlight into other people’s lives to “expose them,” but by reflecting enough light from our own lives that it reaches other people. In brief – we should “shine” with the special light of grace that God has given us in Jesus!

3) *Live a Life of Wisdom*

Third, says Paul, live a life of wisdom. Do not be a *fool* – biblically always a moral and not an intellectual category. Do not be one of the people who looks back and asks, or who other people look at and ask, “What was he thinking?” As Christians we have the privilege of knowing things that other people don’t know: the bridge that Christ has built between us and God now means we can know things about his will, things about ourselves, things about the way the world works, things about what God is up to, that other people do not know. So be wise, use your knowledge well!

Interestingly, the vice Paul goes after in this area of wisdom and folly is drunkenness. Maybe that’s because he wants to contrast being “filled with the Spirit” with being “filled with wine.” But whatever Paul’s rhetorical use of language intends, we ought to take seriously his reminder to Christians not to be drunkards. Now like so many other issues Paul chooses to discuss, this is a “touchy” one for our culture too.

(I’d like to ask your help in a little experiment: close your eyes, and raise your hand if alcohol has had a serious negative impact on the life of someone in your immediate family – yourself, your spouse, a sibling, a parent, a child...). A lot of people!

We can make choices! You *can* get away from the grip of alcohol on your life, and there are plenty of people and groups who will help you. But see Paul’s contrast – “*be filled with the Holy Spirit*” instead. Only the work of God in your life is sufficient, as every 12-Step program will tell you. Be repeatedly and continuously filled with the Spirit, not so that you will have ecstatic experiences or be given startling charismatic gifts, but so that you can live a life marked by good speech, praise and worship to God, thanksgiving for

what he has put into your life, and willing submission to other people as you seek their welfare as part of a community.

Don’t be foolish, be wise; make the most of the opportunities God gives you - be aware of the doors that God is opening or closing in front of you. Be careful how you live – not careful in an inward-facing, joy-denying, taking-yourself-too-seriously way - but wisely choosing a way marked with gratitude for what God has given you to do.

By the work of the Spirit, with gratitude, with wisdom, with worship, we can together contribute to the life of a Christian community that not only pleases God but draws other people to the light. That is what God designed his Church to do.

Let us pray...