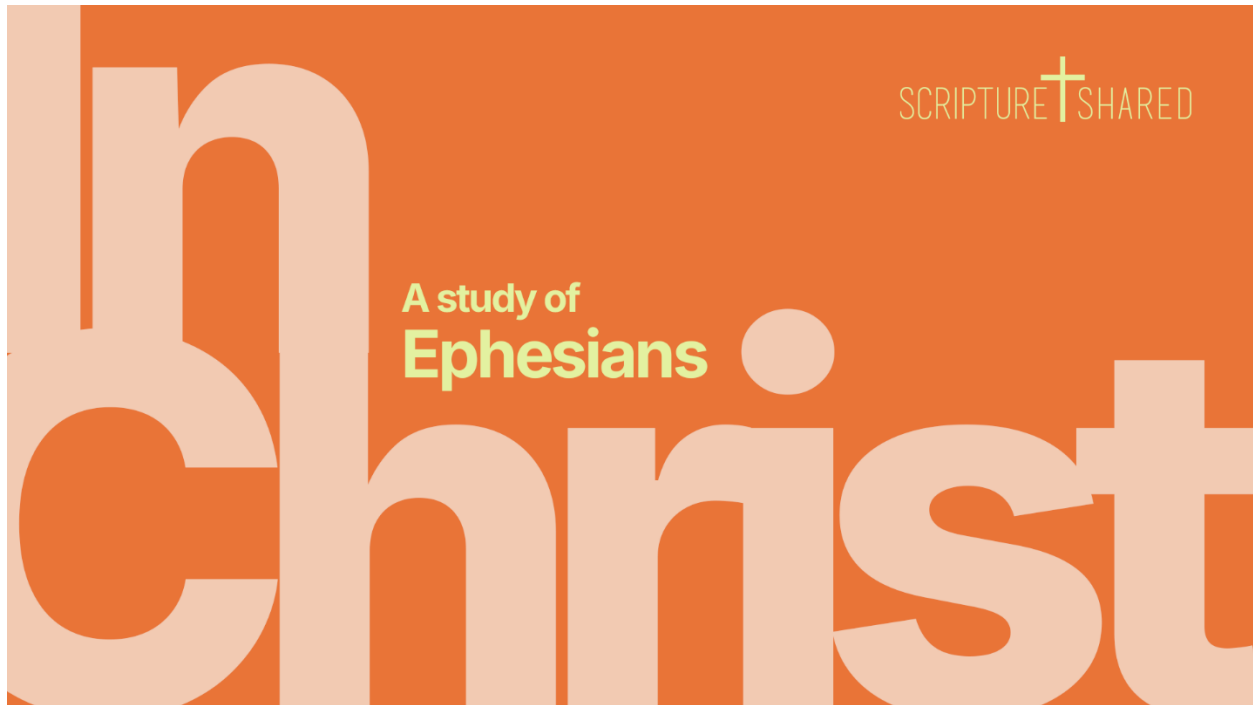




Week 5

Week 5, Day 1- Imitating God

Ephesians 5:1-2

¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Understanding the Passage:

The saying goes, “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.” I suspect Paul would adapt the adage to our Christian walk by saying “imitation is the sincerest form of worship.” The best way we can honor God is by imitating God’s character in all we do. This theme of imitating God runs all through Scripture. Genesis tells us that the human being is made in God’s image – God’s “mini-me.” We bear God’s likeness, which means we are also made to bear God’s character. Leviticus 11:45 says, “you shall be holy, for I am holy.” Jesus says, “Be merciful, even as your father is merciful.” (Luke 6:35) and “You shall be perfect, just as your father in heaven is perfect.” (Matt 5:48).

The imitation of God may seem like an impossibly high standard, but with his reference to “beloved children,” Paul is picking up the theme he began in chapter 4, where he says we must come to “maturity,” and “we must no longer be children...; we must grow up in every way into him...” No, we are not there yet – but because we are God’s children, the way we mature is by imitating God. Just as children learn by watching and imitating their parents, we imitate God as God is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. When we mature, we look in the mirror and see the very mannerisms of our mothers and fathers. When we mature as Christians, we see the very character traits in ourselves that we see in God.

Then Paul gets specific about *how* we are to imitate God: by walking in love, imitating Christ's love for us. Paul uses the term "walk" to point to how we behave, much as we might say "she doesn't just talk the talk; she walks the walk!"

Finally, in these two short verses, Paul says that our very way of living is to be a "fragrant offering" to God. Both Jewish and Gentile readers would understand this allusion to a fragrant offering. The image is used over fifty times in the Old Testament. Pagan and Jewish sacrifices included burnt offerings, and the thought was that the smell of the burning was pleasing in the nostrils of the gods. But Paul isn't interested in burnt offerings. Rather, our very lives are to be a pleasing fragrance. The reader may be reminded of Romans 12:1: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." Paul doesn't actually mean only our physical bodies, but rather our whole lives are to be a fragrant offering, pleasing to God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What are some of the ways you find yourself, consciously or unconsciously, imitating your parents?
2. Can you think of ways you have matured in your Christian "walk in love," so that your life and character more closely imitate God's character?

Week 5, Day 2 - Turning Away from Immorality

Ephesians 5:3-5

But sexual immorality and impurity of any kind or greed must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints. ⁴ Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving. ⁵ Be sure of this, that no sexually immoral or impure person or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater) has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

Understanding the Passage:

Sexual promiscuity was a rampant part of the Greco-Roman pagan culture to which Paul writes. If you visit the city of Ephesus, the tour guide can show you the brothel. Outside the front door, etched into the marble street stone are a carved footprint, a woman's head, and a heart-shaped purse. This is widely interpreted as the world's oldest advertisement, directing patrons toward the building if their foot matched the size requirement (adulthood) and they had enough coins.

In these verses, Paul turns from the positive to the negative, pointing out the things which followers of Christ must renounce. These three mirror the verses that are found in Colossians 3:5: "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)." The Greek word translated as "sexual immorality" is "porneia," and is intended to be a broad category - not easily defined. In a famous 1964 Supreme Court case, Justice Potter Stewart said of the word "obscenity" that he could not define it, but "I know it when I see it." Impurity is even more broad in its meaning. It points not only to certain practices, but condemns even having proximity to them in any way. Just as surgical tools must be kept clean and pure before they can be useful, we also must be kept completely free of certain practices. There is no half in/half out here. Converts from the pagan religions must turn away from these completely. In our reading of Ephesians 4 last week, we considered a list of the characteristics of "the old self," a

similar list of behavior which Christians should reject. With these specific sins in Chapter 5, however, the warning against them is intensified; not only are these vices always unacceptable, but they are also not even to be discussed – not even mentioned!

It is particularly interesting that here, as he often does, Paul pairs greed and sexual immorality together. Both sins, Paul would argue, must be avoided because of the powerful force they have to pull us away from Christ. Any detective will tell you that the two most common motives for crime are money and sex. Further, Paul argues here, as he does in Colossians 3:5, that greed is synonymous with idolatry. It turns money into a god. Greed is giving in to the demand from money that we worship it, believing that it will keep us safe and secure. It is succumbing to a belief that somehow, the material goods of life will fill that empty spot inside us and bring fulfillment.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How do you think “not even discussing it” helps to keep us from sexual immorality?
2. Why do you think it is so difficult in our world to avoid sexual immorality, impurity, and greed?

Week 5, Day 3: From Darkness to Light

Ephesians 5:6-14

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. ⁷ Therefore do not be associated with them, ⁸ for once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Walk as children of light, ⁹ for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. ¹⁰ Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness; rather, expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly, ¹³ but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, ¹⁴ for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

“Sleeper, awake!

*Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”*

Understanding the Passage:

Who are these people who might deceive us with empty words? Among the most prevalent schools of thought in Paul’s world was Gnosticism, derived from the Greek word “gnosis” meaning knowledge. There were pagan Gnostics, but Gnosticism was also a growing concern for Paul within the church. Gnostics believe that the world consists of two components – matter and spirit. Additionally, Gnosticism proposes that humans consist of two primary components – body and spirit. For Gnostics, the only thing that is significant and real is spirit. This elevation of spirit over matter can manifest itself in one of two ways. First, some in Paul’s day believed that if you have the special knowledge, revealed to you by the Holy Spirit, then you should turn away from all things physical. Eat only what is required to survive, but do not eat for pleasure. Abstain from all sexual activity. Focus on all things spiritual. Second, others in Paul’s day believed that if you have the special knowledge revealed to you by the Spirit, it doesn’t matter what you do with material things. Enjoy your promiscuity. Eat, drink, be merry, because in the end, it is only having the Spirit that mattered. Paul vehemently rejects both approaches.

We find gnostic tendencies still at work today. Some take Paul's instruction that we are "saved by grace through faith, not by works" (Ephesians 2:8-9) to mean that as long as we accept Jesus in faith, we can live however we want to. Faith is the sole criteria for the Christian life. Indeed, Paul is clear that grace is accessed only through faith, but would be just as clear that faith necessarily produces a new way of life, bearing the fruit of love and righteousness. One can determine if one has faith by looking at the fruit.

Often, Gnostics would use images of light and darkness to speak of this special knowledge one might have, revealed by the Spirit. Paul appropriates their own language to explain our transformation as Christians. Yes, when we are in Christ, there is an inner spiritual light, a transformation, just as Gnosticism supposes. But that inner transformation must lead to changes in the way we live, bearing fruit and demonstrated by behavior that is good and right and true. Again, Paul says we must "walk the walk," in the light. If we have light within, then that light will shine in our behavior, visible for others to see as well.

No scholar is quite sure where Paul's quotation "sleeper awake" originates. It is not an Old Testament quote, so scholars surmise it must be an early Christian hymn or poem. But Paul uses the image to say that when the sun rises and the lights come on in the morning, we wake up and behave differently!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Can you think of ways we tend to separate spirit and body?
2. How have you seen inner change in someone lead to outer change in behavior? How have you seen it in your own life?

Week 5, Day 4: Wisdom or Foolishness

Ephesians 5:15-21

¹⁵ Be careful, then, how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to one another, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰ giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Understanding the Passage:

Once again, Paul is turning gnostic imagery on its head. Wisdom and knowledge are important, but only because they impact how we live. A wise person is one who *lives* wisely, understanding the will of God. A foolish or unwise person neither knows nor follows God's purposes for life. And then Paul ratchets up the rhetoric here, adding urgency to the admonition to walk in light and love. We must make the most of the time, for the days are evil. Paul never varies from his view from earlier letters that the return of Christ is soon, and so the church must remain faithful for its own sake, as well as be an effective witness to the world.

As Paul continues to draw contrasts between the ways of the world and the ways of the community of faith, he describes what a Christian gathering should look like. It is not simply that each

individual person in the church lives differently; the community itself functions differently. When the pagan people gather, they are drunk with wine. When the people of the church gather, they are filled with the Holy Spirit. Pastor A.C. Welch, when preaching on this passage, began his sermon with “You’ve got to fill a man with something.” There is emptiness within each of us that seeks to be filled, and church gatherings are to be Spirit-filled and joyful times that celebrate God’s goodness.

The gathering of the community of faith is given four characteristics: 1) It is full of singing to one another – we gather to encourage one another. 2) There is singing to the Lord – we gather to praise and worship. 3) It is characterized by gratitude – we gather to say thank you to God for everything, the good, the bad, and the ugly. 4) It is a communal and mutual experience - we are subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

It is important for us to consider how each person plays a part in shaping our faith community, the church, and conversely to consider how our faith community functions to shape each one of us personally. The two forces interact. As we choose to walk in the light, then we influence others around us to do so as well, and our common practices together form us so that we grow and mature together.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Do you feel a sense of urgency in your Christian witness to the world? Why or why not?
2. How does your Christian community – its worship, studies, celebrations – shape you as a follower? Do you see the characteristics mentioned here?

Week 5, Day 5 – Starting at Home

Ephesians 5: 21-33

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. (NIV) ²² Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord, ²³ for the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind, so that she may be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way, husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hates his own flesh, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a great mystery, but I am speaking about Christ and the church. ³³ Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

Understanding the Passage:

Sometimes, the hardest place to walk in the light and in God’s wisdom is at home. We save our nicest, most loving behavior for the church and out in the world. We smile at our neighbors, but because we know that our families love us and will take us as we are (and are kind of stuck with us), we often take them for granted and offer them our worst attitudes and actions. In this passage, Paul makes clear that the transformation the Holy Spirit creates within us must manifest itself in the home.

You may have noticed that we have included verse 21 in the readings for both day four and day five of this week. Remember that biblical Greek, the language of the New Testament, has no punctuation, so the translators must make decisions about where the sentences and clauses fit together. Additionally, translators put certain paragraphs together with subject headings, into sections to help us understand better. In this case, the translators of the New Revised Standard Version, which we are generally using in this study, include verse 21, “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,” as a conclusion to the former thought, a description of how the people of the church are to treat one another. The translators of the New International Version include verse 21 as a topic sentence for the whole section on the Christian household, which Paul then addresses in the subsequent verses. We have included it here in both places, and you can decide for yourself which makes more sense for you.

There are three key points to note regarding this passage. First, we are to be subject to one another. We practice mutual submission. This means that we belong to one another. In the Christian family, what I do impacts you, and what you do impacts me. We are in this together. I cannot say “I don’t really care what you think,” because we are part of one another. This is particularly difficult for those of us in the Western world, where we tend to focus so much on individual freedom. Throughout this section of Ephesians 5 and into Ephesians 6, mutual submission is the underlying principle.

Second, the relationship between husband and wife is to mirror the relationship between Christ and the church. There are some Christians who believe this passage suggests a “*complementarian* view” of marriage. These Christians believe that there are specific God-given roles in the home for husbands and wives, with different but complementary responsibilities for how we treat one another. Wives respect husbands. Husbands love wives. Further, such a view suggests this passage means that just as Christ is head of the church, the husband is head of the wife. Others understand an *egalitarian* view of marriage, in which both husbands and wives have equal and mutual responsibilities to love one another and respect one another. In this latter view, both husband and wife are called on to love one another as Christ loves the church, sacrificing for one another in love the way Christ sacrifices for us, accepting one another the way Christ accepts us, bringing out the best in one another the way Christ brings out the best in us, forgiving one another the way Christ forgives us. In this egalitarian perspective, the driving principle is mutual submission.

Third and finally, it is important to note that in the culture to which Paul is writing, both Jewish and Roman women are viewed as lesser beings, sometimes even treated as objects rather than persons. Paul’s admonitions that husbands are to love their wives and give themselves up for them would be a significant challenge to the cultural norms of his time. What might look to us as an affirmation of patriarchy is actually a challenge to that very system.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Can you give an example of what it means to “belong to one another.”
2. Do you have a complementarian or egalitarian view of marriage?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways do you, consciously or unconsciously, imitate your parents? Do you have mannerisms like theirs?
2. What does “be imitators of God” mean to you? Are there ways we are NOT to imitate God? After all, God is God and we are not!
3. Have you matured in your own faith journey, growing up to be better imitators of God, more Christlike? If so, how?
4. Gnosticism is the idea that if you have a special understanding of the Holy Spirit, what you do in your material life is of little consequence. Have you seen that at work anywhere in the world today?
5. In two places, Paul uses the image of “walking,” e.g., walking in love, and walking in the light. Why is that such an important image for the overall message of this chapter?
6. What does it mean to you to say “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ?” Can you give an example of that either in the church family or your home family?
7. Why do you think it is sometimes hardest to imitate God at home, in our family relationships? Why is it so important for it to be the first place we imitate God?
8. Do you find yourself drawn to a complementarian view of marriage (with specific roles for men and women) or an egalitarian view of marriage (where the focus is on mutuality)?

Prayer Requests and Other Notes: