

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, move with vigour through the deepest reaches of my obstinate mind; stir up my feeble heart and excite my unwilling conscience. Dispel the gloom, panic and mistrust within that Satan uses to keep me bound, and cast his demons from me. Restore the joy and dynamism of my youthful grasp of faith so that all who look at me might glimpse the One to whom I owe my life. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Whenever you walk around, say prayers about what you are doing, and for those you are with

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the United Nations.** *Pray today for the United Nations Security Council, and the important influence it possesses on world opinion*
- *Give thanks to God for the food you purchase and eat*
- *Pray for the defeat of corruption and greed in industry*

Meditation

Am I ready for the call of God,
And respond to the touch of His hand on my life?

Am I ready to submit to Him,
So that He can use me however He will?

Am I ready to accept His challenge,
To live for others and not for myself?

Am I ready to put a stop to my sins,
And testify to the saving grace of our God?

Am I ready to deal with evil,
By the power of the Spirit and the truth of the Word?

Am I ready to help a stranger,
Because this is how I must show God's love?

Am I ready to declare the Gospel,
By word and deed, and in all I do?

Prepare me, Father, to do Your will,
So I may live by faith throughout my life.

Bible passage – Ephesians 5:1-5

¹ So be imitators of God, as children who are dearly loved, ² and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and handed Himself over for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. ³ Indeed, sexual immorality and any kind of impurity and greed must not even be mentioned by you, as is right among holy people; ⁴ and indecent behaviour, foolish talk or vulgarity are inappropriate, but thanksgiving is appropriate. ⁵ For of this you can be certain: no immoral, impure or greedy person (that is, an idolater) has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

Thought for the Day

Text – Ephesians 5:1

¹ *Be imitators of God, as children who are dearly loved.*

Thought

This phrase is unique in scripture. Elsewhere, Paul asks his readers to imitate him in order to be like Christ (1 Cor. 4:16), or he appeals to them to copy the example of Christ (Phil. 2:4,5), but this is the only scripture that says we must 'imitate God', which means we are to be 'like' Him.

You may feel that this is rather wide of the mark, for how can we be 'like God', or aspire to be like Him. Yet the Bible says we are created in God's 'likeness' (Genesis 1:27), meaning that He is our Father and we are His children. How amazing! He loves us as a perfect Father because we accept Jesus as our brother!

Bible Study

Review

This passage of Scripture paints a stark contrast between the high aims and ideal of those who have been redeemed and 'put on' the new life of Christ (4:24), and the spiritual darkness of those who have not yet dispensed with the characteristics of ungodliness. After the challenge of the previous verses (see yesterday's study), we begin chapter 5 in a positive frame of mind, and in the first two verses, the description of God's people as His children is inspirational. We are bought back down to earth again by the remaining verses, which contrast the glory of being God's 'family' with the ever present temptations of the evils of this world.

Such contrasts are typical of Paul's letters, and they remind the reader of the continuous need for vigilance. Satan uses every weakness to take people away from God's Kingdom, even though He has not failed to provide a full and complete way for us to deal with sin. Verse 2 reminds us, using the Old Testament language of sacrifice, that by His death, Jesus has offered Himself as a sufficient sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins of all. But this does not stop evil from clawing at the human nature of each individual. The price of being a child of God still living in this world is constant vigilance against sin, not so much in others but certainly within self.

The benefits of having 'put on' Christ are immense, and the consequences are radical and life-changing; Paul says that we are to be 'imitators of God'. At first sight, some may feel that this is completely unrealistic, for how can any one of us be 'like' God, the Maker of the world? However, this should not take us by surprise, because earlier, Ephesians says that people were '*created to be like God*', (4:24) and this is exactly what is said in the description of the creation of men and women; '*so God create them in His own image, male and female He created them ...*' (Gen 1:27). So if, as people who are fallen and subject to temptation and the troubles of this world, we feel like some part of creation far less than God, then our salvation in Christ restores us to our full humanity, as God intended. He made us to be like Him! Moreover, this text does not offer us moral laws by which we should measure this likeness, it says that our true likeness is a family likeness; we are 'children who are dearly loved' because of Christ's gift of loving self-sacrifice!

If we have entered into the life of Christ and known the joy of this privilege, then we will have no difficulty with what is said here, which is that sin is incompatible with the life of faith. Here, Paul summarises some of these sins, twice listing '*sexual immorality, impurity and greed*' (5:3,5) and the related wrongs of '*indecent behaviour, foolish talk and vulgarity*' (5:4). However, we will not necessarily know what these words mean unless we read God's Word, the Bible; for example, sexual immorality is described in the Law (e.g. Leviticus 18); impurity is that which separates us from the holiness of God, and greed is another word for 'covetous' (as in the Ten Commandments), meaning all forms of wanton selfishness and desire. The message is this; if we sit too lightly to our faith and fail to learn from the revelation of God in His Word, then Satan will make the evils of the world very tempting for us. He has been skimming Christians off the church for centuries by tempting those who have not kept close to their Lord.

If we look closely at verses 3 to 5, however, we will find that Paul sets these vices against comments about the nature of the Christian community. Verse 3 tells us that God's children have not just been saved from sin, they have been liberated from the need to talk about it, moreover, where they were once characterised by foolish behaviour and talk, they are now to be characterised by thanksgiving to God (5:4). The heart that is filled with praise will not easily sin.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What does it mean to be a child of God, and loved by Christ (5:1,2)?
- What is the purpose behind forbidding people to talk about certain sins (5:3)?
- Why does Paul mention thanksgiving as 'appropriate' (5:4)?

- What has this to do with inheriting the Kingdom of God (5:5)?

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V2 'live'

The Greek word 'peripateo' means 'to walk, go around, live, or conduct oneself'. Most Bible versions use the word 'live', but knowing the range of meanings for this word will help our interpretation of it.

V2 'handed over'

The Greek word is 'paradidomi', meaning 'to hand over, betray, give up or commit'. It is used in many Biblical texts to refer to the handing over of Christ to the authorities before His trial and resurrection. Most Bible versions say 'and gave Himself up for us ...', but I have preferred to keep the phrase used largely in the Gospels.

Significant phrases

V3 'as is right among holy people'

Other translations:

'because these are improper for God's holy people.' (NIV)

'as is proper among saints.' (NRSV)

The Greek says 'just as it is proper for saints', and because we do not speak in quite this way, translators have sought to use expressions that reflect this. I have kept as close as I can to the Greek, whilst also using the phrase 'holy people' instead of 'saints', because it says openly what we mean by saints, and allows the reader to reflect on what it means to be a 'holy people'.

V4 'indecent behaviour, foolish talk or vulgarity are inappropriate, but thanksgiving is appropriate'

Other translations:

'Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.' (NIV)

'Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving' (NRSV)

The sentence is not easy to translate. The Greek reads like this, 'indecent behaviour, foolish talk and vulgarity, they are not right but thanksgiving is much more so'. The verse suggests a contrast between what is not right behaviour and what is, and I have chosen a method of translation that focuses on this contrast.

Going Deeper

What does it mean to be a child of God, and loved by Christ (5:1,2)?

This is the only place in Scripture where Paul says 'be imitators of God', and it is a powerful thing to say. Elsewhere, Paul asks his readers to imitate him (2 Thess 3:7,9, 1 Cor 4:16, 11:1), but only in order to be like Christ; and in various ways, he asks Christian people to imitate Jesus Himself, or be like Him (1 Thess 1:6 Phil 2:4,5). All of these passages boldly call on God's people to live up to a standard of high calling, and the example of this is Christ. If we read our passage carefully, then we will see that it says, just like the other scriptures quoted above, that the way we must imitate God is to be like Christ.

Being like Christ means to 'live a life of love'. When Paul says this, he is not asking people to tone down their characteristics in order to conform to some less energetic and inoffensive mode of life. He knew that church life was full of many kinds of characters and all kinds of emotional experiences. His call to love is a tough call, because the example of love we must follow is not that of a sentimental novel, but of Jesus Himself. Neither does Paul talk about the Jesus who taught and healed, travelled and preached throughout Judea and Jerusalem in the first century AD. He speaks about the Jesus who loved both God and people enough to do what was necessary to save them, despite the pain and agony of His death. He *'loved us and handed Himself over for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God'* (5:2). Jesus was used by God for the salvation of others, and we can do the same in a smaller way by loving others so much that we let ourselves be used by God for their salvation. We are not sacrificed like Christ, but we can be the means whereby

others hear about Jesus, or we can love people so much that we do everything in our power to break down the barriers that prevent people from knowing God.

To be imitators of God means to be like Christ in the heart of love we show for the salvation of others. This is clearly what this text asks of each one who is a member of God's family. If we are His children, we will bear His characteristics, and God has spent the whole of history seeking out those who have rejected Him, and working for their salvation. If we are His children, we will do the same.

What is the purpose behind forbidding people to talk about certain sins (5:3)?

In verse 3, Paul lists these three sins; 'sexual immorality, impurity and greed' (5:3) and I have hinted at their meaning above. Nevertheless, what is so significant about these three that he mentions them as being contrary to the true 'life of love' he has just mentioned?

- **Sexual immorality** – sex is the most powerful of human experiences and emotions, and this is natural, because God has made us to procreate and be 'fruitful' (Gen 1:28). Sex itself both unites man and woman in the love-making of their own relationship, and it is also the mean whereby children are born. Of course, God's perfect will is that Children are quite literally 'born out of love', not merely 'sex' as a performance. It is to defend this that the Law sets down marriage as the proper boundary for sexual expression, and sexual immorality is, by definition, the taking of sex beyond these boundaries. To do so strikes at the heart of an individual's perception of 'love', as we can clearly see when we observe the pain and distress of divorce, for example, or the struggles many people have with sex within marriage if they have been somewhat liberal in their sex-life before hand.
- **Impurity** – If we look into the Old Testament, we will discover that impurity is doing things that God has forbidden, especially treat with disrespect the things God has said are holy. For example, the Israelites would have made themselves impure if they had touched the mountain of Sinai when God appeared on it (Exodus 19). Today, we might say that such impurity is shown by those who assume that science, for example, can do for people what God has done in the past, when despite its amazing advances, it can never ask the ultimate questions of life, it can only describe ever complex observations. In general, we are in danger of becoming impure if we claim for ourselves the things of God, and treat lightly what He has said.
- **Greed** – Greed has its roots in covetousness, and it is interesting that in verse 5, Paul says that one who is greedy is an 'idolater'. What he means by this is that one who covets other things and will do anything to get them, places the possession or consumption of these things above God. Objects, desires, perhaps food (in the case of the related sin of gluttony) become more important than God, that is, they become little 'idols' that govern people's lives rather than God Himself. We naturally want certain things in life, but Satan uses this natural desire to make us desire more than we need, and this is where we cross the line from godliness to sinfulness and idolatry.

All these sins strike at the heart of a person's relationship with God, in each case, by placing something above God. Perhaps this is why Paul says that such things should not even be talked about. People who are one hundred percent committed to the Lord will not want to even discuss such things, because their lives are motivated by godly things. Some say that such aims are too high, but they are realistic, as we can plainly see in the lives of godly people who live without recourse of sexual immorality, impurity or greed of any kind. Although individuals would hardly claim any saintliness for themselves because of their manner of living, most of us can see these things in others.

Why does Paul mention thanksgiving as 'appropriate' (5:4)?

In verse 4, Paul draws a comparison between three different forms of sin, and thanksgiving offered to God. The three things Paul mentions are '*indecent behaviour, foolish talk and vulgarity*', but what do these have to do with thanksgiving given to God?

When someone offers thanksgiving, they are focussed exclusively on God. This is the nature of thanksgiving, for our hearts do not wish to do this unless we truly making an offering to God of our thoughts and grateful to Him for what He has done for us. This is in total contrast to what happens in the human souls when someone takes pleasure in 'indecent behaviour', or as some Bible translations say, 'filthiness', they are focussed on human experiences and reactions. The same is true of '*foolish talk*'. The exact Greek word here refers to 'the talk of a fool', meaning the words of someone who by definition, does not know the wisdom of God. The Proverbs are full of description of 'foolishness' that is contrary to the things of God. Lastly, vulgarity means taking pleasure in the faults and failings of others. It is not common to use the expression 'vulgarity' today, largely because a great deal of humour is based in vulgarity, but the soul that takes pleasure in the problems of others, even for a laugh, is one that is certainly not focussed on the things of God and the love that He has for all His children. Unfortunately, it is easy enough to laugh at humour that

is not vulgar; it is simply tragic that most comedians feel they must use vulgarity because it is a sure 'laugh'; it simply exposes their inabilities.

What has this to do with inheriting the Kingdom of God (5:5)?

Verse 5 could be said to summarise the previous three verses, and says quite openly that those who are so focussed on godlessness will not 'inherit the Kingdom of God. Elsewhere in his writings, Paul says that the 'wicked will not inherit the Kingdom' (1 Cor 6:9), and also in Galatians, after describing the 'works of the flesh', he says 'those who live like this will not inherit the Kingdom ...' (Gal 5:21).

It is good to be reminded in Paul's letters that Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of God was not forgotten in the early church. Jesus Himself taught that people can live their lives in such a way as will mean that they cannot enter the Kingdom of God. The rich man could not enter (Matt 19:23f.), neither could Lazarus (Luke 16:20f.). Some like to think that whatever happens in life and whatever mistakes people make, then they will be able to enter God's Kingdom on the basis of His love, but words such as this remind us that those who respond to God in Christ have a responsibility to be obedient to their Lord. It means little to repent of sin and accept the ministry of Christ in your life, and then tacitly accept that sins will happen. It must remain an abhorrence to us, such that as soon as we know about it, we do something about it. Why? Because unless we do, we imperil our future inheritance.

This is a sharp message, and we can only rise above it by the glorious picture at the beginning of our text about being a child of God and an imitator of Him and of Jesus Christ, who first loved us.

Application

Most people find it hard to hear or read any part of scripture that condemns those who sin. However, the message is plain, there are consequences to sin, but we need to repent of it, in whatever form it arises. Paul's commendation to God's people to be 'imitators of God' calls us back to the perfection of our creation, and without such a call, we would be lost. We need these high aims in Scripture so that we do not get lost in the sea of sin in which we are immersed. I know that in saying this, some will say, 'but there is not that much sin around, the world is not all that bad'; indeed, I have had exactly this rebuke when speaking about sin from the Bible before. Of course, the prevalence of sin within the world is not a human opinion, but a statement of God found in His Word. There are indeed many apparently 'good' people in our world, and they do much good work, but unless they are willing to take their sins to the Lord, they remain people who must be happy, at the last, to weigh their efforts against that of Christ whom they have not accepted.

The other difficult scenario is this. Some believe themselves to be good Christian people, but beneath the surface, sin can lie un-confessed, and this can often be because people have been lazy and not learned the truths of God's Word, or been taught sufficient scripture to know what sin is in all its power. Those who work in Christian counselling know that tragically, church leaders can sometimes be abusers, and that 'pillars of the church' can destroy families because they have failed to show love in their attitude towards others in the home. Great vigilance and openness is required if sin is to be defeated and the testimony of God's people is to be believed within our world. The best way for us to respond to this text is to take hold of the call to be imitators of Christ in the quality and breadth of the love we show, and keep a very watchful eye on the nature of the sin we find itemised in Scripture, and the evidence of this today.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What are the privileges of faith, as mentioned in this passage of Scripture? Where are they found in the life of the church today?
2. If you were making a list of sins and vices that tempt people away from faith, what would you put in your list?
3. To what extent is foolish talk (or any of the other sins mentioned here) still prevalent within the church, and how may it be removed?

Topics covered by this text

- *The nature of our relationship with God and Christ*
- *The nature of sin and its consequences*

- *The inheritance of the Kingdom of God*

Personal comments by author

The letters of Paul frequently contain great contrasts, and we swing from a wonderful text in one verse to another that tells us about the depths of human experience or darkness, as here. We must avoid taking the 'good bits' for our preaching, and avoiding the 'difficult bits'. People do this to the Old Testament frequently, especially the psalms, and it is also tempting to do this to the New Testament. The truth is that salvation comes at a price, and we need to remember this. We are called to respond to this price with commitment and intent, not just religious feeling.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Would you say that any of the sins listed in this passage afflict you, and what do you feel about this? Pray about any issue raised by this passage of scripture, and seek the Lord's assurance that you are a child of God.*
- *Look at this passage and analyse what it says about the church of God. Can this passage help God's people today refocus on their calling?*

Final Prayer

Bless those we love this day, Lord Jesus. Keep them in Your care and protect them from all evil. If there are problems between us, may we be humble enough to confess our sin and let you heal us. May we give You the glory, for in our families, You have given us each other. Praise be to You, Lord Jesus, AMEN
