



Lesson 9: Living Holy in a Defiled World – Walk in Love

Teacher's Edition

Overview: Paul continues describing the changes that should be seen in the individual lives of the members of a church so that they can do their part to help the body grow together in unity to the fullness of Christ. He spends a fair amount of time addressing an issue that was a big deal for his day as it is for ours – the issue of immorality.

Purpose: Believers should see that a changed life should result in a life that looks like God, specifically by loving him and others, and that such a life will mean resisting all forms of sexual impurity (actions, words, thoughts).

Passage: Ephesians 5:1-6

To say that our culture is obsessed with immorality might be the understatement of the century. Everywhere we turn we are faced with all manner of perversions. We find it in almost every corner of entertainment, plastered proudly on billboards and public spaces, and discussed incessantly by those who don't know Christ. Yet even among believers things aren't always what they should be. More and more Christians see nothing wrong with an unmarried but serious couple sleeping together. Many men and more and more women find themselves sucked into a world of online pornography. Some have given up the battle to find clean entertainment and simply accept that the shows and movies they like will be laced with sexual filth and ignore it, or

worse yet, come to enjoy it. We look around and see things getting worse and perhaps wonder to ourselves if people in Bible times could have any idea what we are going through.

But the message of the gospel came into a society that was likewise saturated with sex. Rome and Greece were filled with all forms of perversity and depravity. Paul actually had to tell Corinthian Christians, who thought that filling their lustful appetites was no different than eating, not to sleep with prostitutes (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). Paul felt the need to warn Thessalonian believers not to sexually defraud each other (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8). Warnings against immoral living also show up in Colossians, Galatians, Hebrews, 2 Peter, Jude, and Revelation.

In Acts 19, we find that in Ephesus silversmiths became furious with Paul and Christianity. Their entire livelihood depended on people worshipping and buying souvenirs of the chief goddess Artemis, or Diana. In fact, Artemis's temple was so magnificent and impressive that it became one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Artemis was, you guessed it, a fertility goddess, whose statue had multiple breasts. Paul was writing to a church that resided in a city that was a tourist center for people coming to worship a fertility goddess. Ephesus knew a thing or two about how hard it was to live a holy life in a defiled culture.

We are at the third of five occurrences of the word "walk" in the second half of Ephesians. Paul wants believers to walk in unity (4:1-16), to walk different from the Gentiles (4:17-32), and now to walk in love (5:1-6). Paul uses the word "therefore" to break off each of these sections (4:1, 16; 5:1), showing that that these ideas build on each other.

I. Main command: Imitate God (vv 1-2)

A. The background for the command: the need to bring God glory

The first word in this sentence is a very importance one: therefore. (Whenever you see a therefore in the Bible, you should ask what it's "there for.")

***What did Paul intend to point back to with the word therefore?
What does what he says in this passage have to do with what
he has said in the previous verses and chapters?***

Paul is pointing back to everything he has already said in this book, but particularly what he has just said in the last chapter. The first three chapters tell us what we have been given in Christ. In chapter 4, Paul builds on what he has said by summarizing the goal for the church and then for each individual in the church: to live out their new life in Christ. To put off the deeds of the old man, since he has already been put off, and to put on the deeds of the new man, since he has been put on, and to allow one's mind to continue to be renewed.

B. The command itself: imitate God

The KJV translates this word "follower" but modern translations opt for "imitate." Webster's dictionary actually gives "imitate" as one of the possible meanings of the verb "follow."¹ The Greek word is *mimetes*, from which we get our word "mimic." God's desire is that we show people his glory; that we grow together as a church as each individual seeks to act like God as much as they can.

***What are some of the attributes of God that we can imitate?*²**

C. The illustration of the command: a child and a father

We are to follow God as a small child follows his father, or as a girl would copy her mom, because children are copiers. Boys shooting hoops at recess will often shout "Lebron James" or "Steph Curry" before they shoot. Little girls will play "house" or pretend to be mommy to their stuffed animals. You have to be very careful what you say around kids, because kids will copy whatever you say (especially if it's something they probably shouldn't say). In the same way a child looks with awe and admiration at an adult, desiring to copy their every move, so the

¹ Merriam-Webster, Inc. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003.

² Theologians often differentiate between the communicable attributes of God (those we can "catch" or imitate) and the incommunicable attributes of God (those we can never have, such as omniscience, omnipotence, or omnipresence).

believer should look at God with a childlike wonder and desire to imitate him as much as we possibly can.

Do you ever read your Bible and marvel at the patience, love, kindness, holiness, wisdom, or righteous anger of God? Does your time in his Word ever leave you so impressed by the God you see that you want like a little child to be just like him?

D. The method of carrying out the command: love God and others

So what does it look like to copy God? If we are going to act and look like him so that others can see his nature, what does that look like? Well, in part it looks like everything we've already seen in Ephesians: walking in selfless, patient unity and walking differently from the world around us. But the main way Paul tells us that we can look like God is by walking in love.

This makes sense, because all throughout the Bible we are told of the love of God (1 Chronicles 16:34, Zephaniah 3:17, John 3:16, Romans 5:8, 1 John 4:7-8, 19). Therefore, if we are going to imitate God's character and display God to the world, a good place to start would be God's love! Paul goes on to give the ultimate example of love, an example he will bring up again later in this chapter, the example of Christ's sacrifice.

How do most people think of love today? How does that differ from the biblical idea of love?

II. Main Threat: Immorality (vv 3-6)

Unfortunately, there is a counterfeit, a fraud that often masquerades as "love" but is in reality the ultimate selfishness and is poisonous to true love. It's called lust, and Paul immediately begins dealing with it because love and lust can't live together.

At the beginning of this lesson we said that we would be discussing the topic of sexual purity. Maybe you've been waiting for us to get through the introductory stuff and begin really talking about the issue. Perhaps this is part of our problem. Lust and immorality aren't

the ultimate issue. If we start with immorality, we're probably missing the bigger problem: a failure to reflect God's love. The goal is not to not lust; the goal is to love.

A. What to avoid (vv 3-4)

- 1. Immorality** – fornication in the KJV, the Greek word behind this is *porneia* and refers to all kinds of sexual perversion: homosexuality, adultery, incest, premarital sex. Any sex outside of marriage counts as *porneia*. God is very clear on this. Sexual intimacy inside marriage is good, outside of marriage it will be judged by God (**Hebrews 13:4**).³
- 2. Impurity** – Uncleaness (KJV) goes beyond just immorality to the thoughts, passions, and actions that lead up to and include outright immorality. Too many people think of purity as a destination, rather than as a direction. “If I get to my wedding night and I’m a virgin, I was pure.” Or, “If I never sleep with anyone other than my spouse, I’m pure.” People can be impure without being outright immoral. Someone who desires purity should be careful to stay far away from anything that could possibly pull them towards the sin of immorality.

While being discreet, what are some ways that Christians who want to be pure foolishly set themselves up for failure?

- 3. Covetousness** – Paul moves beyond our actions, though, to address our hearts. We do what we do because we want what we want. As with most sins, the desire for sexual intimacy is not a bad thing, God created it! But a refusal to be satisfied with what God has (and has not) allowed at the present time constitutes sin. Sexual sin comes from a heart that wants more than what God has provided. This was the first temptation in the garden of Eden, and it continues to be the main temptation Satan loves to use to trip up Christians.

³ Table leaders: Read this passage! Don't assume everyone at your table will agree with this statement!

Based on this teaching, what counsel would you give to someone struggling with immoral thoughts?

Paul also ties ingratitude and sin together in Romans 1:21-27. What specific sin does the ingratitude there lead to?

4. Inappropriate language – what we say with our mouths reflects what’s in our hearts (Matthew 12:34; Luke 6:45), and what we say with our mouths directs the things we and others think about. This is why God forbids not just wrong actions and wrong thoughts, but even wrong talk. There are three different words used here:

- Filthiness – “general obscenity, any talk that is degrading and disgraceful. It comes from the same Greek root as ‘disgraceful’ in verse 12, where Paul says that such vile things should not even be mentioned, much less participated in, and is related to the term in Colossians 3:8, meaning ‘dirty speech.’”⁴
- Foolish talk – stupid, empty, vain speech. “It is sometimes referred to as low obscenity, foolish talk that comes from the drunk or the gutter mouth. It has no point except to give an air of dirty worldliness.”⁵
- Crude joking – dirty jokes, double meanings. Some people have become masters at taking things said entirely in innocence and twisting them into something dirty. Such speech comes from a defiled heart and mind and has the potential to defile other hearts and minds. God leaves no room for such filthy talk.

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Ephesians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 201.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Some people will have had more exposure to wrong thinking and wrong language than others. How should someone respond when someone says something that reminds them of a double meaning they knew from their past? Should there ever be a time when one Christian warns another Christian that something they say might be taken the wrong way?

B. How to avoid it

1. Love God and others

When I was preparing to write this lesson, I originally was going to call it: Walk in purity. But then I remembered that's not what Paul said, he said "Walk in love." And suddenly the small but critical difference between those two hit me. Purity is self-focused. I want to be pure because I want to be right before God. That's not wrong; I should want that. But that's not enough. The goal in all of this is to better show love for God and others. Focusing on that gets the focus off of me (which is where it has been if I have been living an immoral lifestyle) and gets it on others.

How does a habit of pornography and/or lust hurt other people? What if no one ever finds out, are people still hurt?

How is it that two people who claim to love each other are actually hurting each other if they sleep together before marriage?

2. Be thankful for what you have

In verse 5 Paul ties together covetousness and idolatry. His point seems to be that covetous people have idols in their hearts they love and worship more than God.

How does ingratitude contribute to immorality?

Take some time to thank God for what he has given you, rather than focusing on what he has not. Thank him for family, friends, salvation, his Word, and anything and everything else you can think. Satan loves to whisper, "Look

what you're missing out on!" The best response to him is "Are you kidding me? Look at all that I have!"

C. Why you must avoid it (vv 5-6)

This passage has some of the most sobering words in the Bible. Immorality brings God's wrath and keeps us out of God's kingdom. Fighting immorality is about heaven versus hell. This isn't the only place Paul uses such strong language. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 he also warns that people living immoral, adulterous lives will not inherit God's kingdom. Immorality is a serious offense that could cost you your soul.

What about the promise that once we are saved we are always saved? How do we reconcile that promise with this passage?

Now, we need to be careful. We don't fight immorality to *earn* our salvation, but because we *have* salvation. But the stakes are high, and Paul wants us to know that. Paul's words are meant to shock us. Those living in unrepentant immorality can have no confidence that they are truly born again. This doesn't mean Christians can't sin sexually, but it does mean that when they persist in that sin, and become calloused and accept sin as a lifestyle, they are in great danger of showing that there hasn't been a true change of heart. Don't mess with sexual sin, it could cost you everything.

While fear should not be our only motive, fear is certainly a legitimate motive. Realizing the damning nature of this sin should cause us to shudder and fear every time we see its ugly head even think about cropping up in our life. A healthy fear of sin, a strong love for God and others, and grateful heart for all that God has given us with the help of the Holy Spirit's changing influence can give anyone the strength to live a life of holiness, even in as corrupt a world as ours.