

Book of Ephesians Bible Study Lesson 16

Ephesians 5:1-7

Enthronement of Desire

Introduction

(MacArthur) In this passage of Ephesians Paul first presents the positive truths about true godly love and then the negative truths about Satan's counterfeit love and its consequences.

The walk of the believer is a key matter to Paul. He has introduced the fact that ours is to be a worthy walk (Eph. 4:1) and a walk different from the world's (Eph. 4:17). He will also call for a walk in light (Eph. 5:8) and a walk in wisdom (Eph. 5:15). In this Scripture the apostle Paul pleads with believers to walk in such a way that daily life is characterized by love. Growing in love is a continuing need for every believer, since love fulfills all of God's law (Rom. 13:8-10). As we grow in love we also see the need to be even more loving. And since biblically defined love is so contrary to the flesh, we are always in need of reminders and encouragement to love.

(Sproul) Paul doesn't say, love God and do as you please, But He says, if you want to know what love demands, then pay attention to what the prime source of love requires. God's law reveals to us what is pleasing to Him. The point of this passage is that, if we are His children and we want to imitate Him, we must seek to obey His laws. This is not to be done slavishly, out of servile fear or out of some rigid, stoical desire for rule-keeping, *but rather from a profound desire to express our love for the Father.*

(Piper) It is utterly crucial in approaching a text like this that we see not only what the Scriptures forbid, but also *how* and *why* they forbid it. It is plain that Paul is eager to eliminate certain behaviors and attitudes from the Christian life. But how does he attempt to eliminate these things?

If we don't see the how, then we don't see the Gospel. And without the Gospel, the prohibitions become the letter that kills instead of the Spirit that gives life (2 Cor. 3:6). And this is true no matter how well we succeed in getting these things out of our lives. Success in morality without the Gospel is suicide.

So we must devote our earnest attention not only to what the apostle prohibits, but also to how he **motivates** this prohibition, how he **enforces** it and then how he **replaces** it with something else.

Paul is not testing us on our vocabulary; it is a test of our purity. Are there any of these that need to be eliminated from our lives?

Six Perversions

1. Immorality (Proneia):

This is a broad term for sexual sin, but in the New Testament it seems to focus on fornication, that is, the fulfillment of sexual cravings before marriage. So what I want to stress is that this word and this text clearly teach that premarital sexual intercourse is wrong; it is contrary to the revealed will of God.

There are at least three other texts where the word *proneia* clearly refers to premarital sexual intercourse. First, in 1 Corinthians 7:2, “Because of the temptation to immorality (*porneia*), each man should have his own wife and each her own husband.” In other words before you marry you are tempted to *porneia*. This sin in view is not adultery, but premarital sexual intercourse. In the preceding chapter (1 Cor. 6:18) Paul says this is to be shunned: “Flee immorality.”

Second, in Matthew 15:19 Jesus says, “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication (*porneia*).” Notice how adultery is listed alongside this word *porneia* and so is different from it. It is so clear that the RSV translation goes against its usual translation of “immorality” and calls it fornication. Jesus goes on to say that it is these things that defile. Our Lord Himself was crystal clear on this matter of premarital sexual intercourse: it comes from an evil heart and is a blatant contradiction of God’s will that sexuality be preserved for the lifelong union of one man and one woman in marriage. (Also see 1 Cor. 6:9 where Paul uses fornicators, *pornoi*, and adulterers, *moichoi*, the same way Jesus uses *porneia* and *moicheia*.)

Third, in John 8:41 Jesus is in a heated discussion with the Jewish leaders. Jesus pushes them so hard to recognize their own inconsistencies they resort to a slanderous attack and say, “We were not born of fornication!” The word is *porneia* and the point is: We weren’t born that way; You were. Everybody knew that Mary and Joseph were not married when Mary became pregnant. And so since they did not believe in the miracle of the virgin birth, the popular rumor was that Jesus was an illegitimate child of Mary by who knows whom. The only point to make from this is in all these texts the meaning is premarital sexual relations.

Therefore, this is the natural meaning to give to the word here in Ephesians 5:3. Fornication should be eliminated from our lives if we are Christians, His Children. It should be shunned like a dangerous disease. For it is far more dangerous than AIDS. AIDS can only kill your body. Fornication can kill your soul as we will see from verse six.

2. Impurity:

This is a word Paul uses a half-dozen times in relation to sexual sin (Rom 1:24; 6:19; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 4:19; Col. 3:5). The word is probably added to fornication to emphasize the kind of degradation common in the city of Ephesus and Minneapolis. Such as homosexuality, where this meaning of the word is given in Romans 1:24. Paul is talking about the kinds of things that come into a culture when it exchanges God for the creature. He says that people start

exchanging the natural for the unnatural (Rom. 1:26-27): “He gave them up to dishonorable passion. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men.”

So even though our own culture may be returning to the debauchery and license of the first-century, near-Eastern paganism, those who have been called by Jesus Christ into His kingdom and glory will stand firm and pure against fornication and homosexuality.

3. Covetousness:

It generally refers to greed for money but is really much broader than that. It means strong, inordinate craving, an inability to be content and satisfied with the necessities of life and ministry (see Heb. 13:5; 1 Tim. 6:8). It may be a craving for money, or it may be a craving for sex, as it seems to be here.

The same word was used back in Ephesians 4:19 in this same sense. Paul refers to unbelievers in that culture as people “who have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness.” Literally: “they gave themselves up to licentiousness (lacking willpower or moral discipline, unwilling to conform to accepted rules) to do every kind of uncleanness in covetousness.” Covetousness is what drives the pursuit of unclean behavior. *It is the craving that ought to be conquered by a new and more powerful affection.*

As Christians, these things must go: fornication, homosexuality, and the dominating power of all the cravings in your life that are not cravings for God.

4-6. Filthiness, Silly Talk and Course Jestng:

Paul seems to be concerned mainly about two related errors: treating things as gross or treating things as trivial; filthiness and flippancy.

There are people who are so dirty inside that they can hardly refer to a tree or a cloud or a fish hook or a brake pedal without treating it as filthy; they may do it with some gross language or simply with a despising attitude and demeanor. And there are people whose vision of the world is so superficial that they trivialize everything. Paul condemns both of these and says, “Get rid of all filthiness and coarseness on the one hand, and all foolishness and levity on the other.”

It is good for us to be warned not to make light of God’s creation, You don’t have to trivialize the world in order to enjoy it. Charles Spurgeon has some wise words on the difference between humor and levity:

We must conquer our tendency to levity. A great distinction exists between holy cheerfulness, which is a virtue, and general levity, which is a vice. There is a levity which has not enough heart to laugh, but trifles with everything; it is flippant, hollow, unreal. A hearty laugh is no more levity than a hearty cry.

Replace Impurity with Gratitude

Now before we look at how the apostle motivates his prohibitions, let's notice carefully what he puts in the place of these six perversions. Keep in mind the model of Ephesians 4:22-24; take off the old self and put on the new self. We are to take off and throw away fornication, homosexuality; and by the way Paul says very plainly in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 that some of the believers in the church had been homosexuals; he believes that change is possible.

And what are we to put on? THANKSGIVING! Would you have chosen gratitude or thankfulness as the opposite of all these sexual and verbal sins? Why does Paul?

Why He Replaces Perversions with Gratitude

If fornication and impurity are driven by covetousness, and covetousness is a deep discontented craving that dominates your life and even leads you to go against the will of God, then it is clear that the opposite experience would be thanksgiving. If you are overflowing with thanksgiving to God, then you are not dominated and driven by discontentment at what you have been denied.

Gratitude is what we feel when we believe God is for us and not against us. It's what we feel when we believe that He gives us only what is good for us and withholds no good thing (single or married!). It's what we feel when we trust Him, that the tragedies of our life are not evidences of His meanness or His incompetence; but rather that they are the discipline of a loving Father who values our holiness above our fleeting worldly happiness. That's why Ephesians 5:20 goes so far as to say, "Always and for everything give thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father."

So we can see how thanksgiving is the alternative to a life driven by cravings for what we don't have (whether sex or money). Thanksgiving says, in God I have all that is good for me, and I will not be driven to dishonor the worth of His name just to get a few sexual sensations or a few new toys.

And we can see easily how thanksgiving is also the opposite of treating God's gifts as filthy or as trivial. When we are truly grateful for something, we don't despise or trivialize it. Just test yourself; When your heart is overflowing with gratitude to God, would we use filthy language or make light of things? Gratitude is what we feel when we have been given eyes to see that all of life is the work of a sovereign and gracious God. It is not for trifling and defiling.

Dethroning God

There is one other way to describe this change implied in this text. Notice in Ephesians 5 that a covetous person is called an idolater. The root problem about being driven by the domination of earthly desires is that it dethrones God. So when Paul puts gratitude in the place of covetousness, he is simply putting God

in the place of man, and specifically he is putting God in the place of self. Gratitude is the opposite of covetousness because it enthrones God. Gratitude says that God is the satisfaction of ALL my longings. Covetousness says that God is not adequate as a satisfying treasure. I must have money or I must have sex--- God will not suffice!

And so perhaps the most important thing for us to see is that even in the most physical, ordinary struggles of our lives, the central issue is God. When Paul calls the dominion of our craving idolatry, he is saying in effect, God should be everything to you. God should be your pleasure and satisfaction and hope and joy and master. And all your life should be governed by an overflowing gratitude to Him for His goodness and glory and grace and power and wisdom.

How Paul Motivates Us

First, notice what Paul did not do; he did not quote the tenth commandment: "Thou shalt not covet" (Exodus 20:17). It is, because the only obedience that counts is obedience from the heart (Rom. 6:17). And obedience from the heart is obedience that comes from a deep agreement that the will of God is not only required but beautiful and fitting.

Two times, one in Ephesians 5:3 and once in 5:4, Paul tells us that these things are not fitting for saints. He is pleading with believers to be renewed in the spirit of their minds (Eph. 4:23). He doesn't want mere obedience under the constraint of divine sanction. He wants new creatures, who have new ways of seeing the world; new values, new tastes, new desires, a whole new vision of the world, so all sin will just seem out of the question because they don't fit anymore the way we are.

The Root of Gospel Obedience

Let the great Martin Luther express the root of Gospel obedience. In his magnificent essay called "The Freedom of a Christian" (published in 1520), he said that the renewed mind of the Christian ought to think like this:

Although I am an unworthy and condemned man, my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart, and with an eager will do all things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with His inestimable riches?

In other words, for a person who is born again and stands justified before God with inestimable riches in him, covetousness with all its impurities is utterly unfitting and out of the question. They can't go together. This is the way Paul

wants people to obey God. This is Gospel (evangelical) obedience rather than legal obedience.

Why Paul Threatens Hell

One final question remains: If Paul's goal is to motivate Christians to obey with this kind of inner, free, joyful Gospel obedience, why does he now threaten that if they don't, they will miss heaven and go to hell (Eph. 5:5-6)?

What does the deceiver say? Who do you think it is today that does what the deceiver does? I would answer that the deceiver is the person today who says that Gospel obedience can't be motivated by these serious words in Ephesians. The deceiver is the person who says that the preaching of wrath belongs only to the law, and produces only legalistic fear.

This is not true. If it were true, Paul wouldn't warn his readers---professing Christians---about the danger of falling short of the kingdom and falling under the final wrath of God. The point of introducing the wrath of God and the danger of missing out on the kingdom of Christ is not to enslave people to unwilling and burdensome obedience. The point is this: Gospel obedience from a renewed mind and a heart brimming with joy and thanksgiving is not optional, but absolute for a child of God who desires to imitate their Father in heaven.

(Sprouls) Paul is talking about a style of life that is characteristic. That is, if the basis of your life is sexual immorality, impurity or covetousness, then as long as you remain in that state, you remain out of the kingdom of God. One may make a profession of faith in Christ, and then continue in a licentious lifestyle. This would reveal quicker than anything else that the profession of faith is false and the person is not in the kingdom of God.

There is a pernicious doctrine in the evangelical church in our day which says that all a person has to do to be redeemed is to accept Jesus as Savior; he doesn't have to receive Him as LORD. This dichotomy between Savior and Lord is the clearest, most blatant form of Antinomianism seen in the twentieth century. The moment we are regenerated, the Spirit of God comes to dwell in our hearts to motivate us, to give us an obedient heart. Now we love the law of God, not because it is the means by which we are redeemed, but because it reveals to us what pleases our Father whom we love. The moment we embrace Jesus as Savior, we bow to Him as LORD, and seek to show our love for Him by obeying His commandments.

(Piper) Jesus said the same thing in John 3:3: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." This kind of warning is not a summons to legalistic fear and slavish, cowering obedience. Just the opposite! Both Jesus and Paul are warning us that getting rid of our legalistic fear, and getting rid of our slavish efforts to obey God, is infinitely serious. They

are saying that it is a matter of eternal importance whether you are really renewed in the spirit of your mind, and whether you are really born again, and really full of gratitude and joy and freedom in your obedience.

When God reveals His wrath, His intention is not to contradict or hinder the Gospel motives of faith, freedom and joy. Just the opposite: The revelation of His wrath is the intensification of His demand that we trust in His mercy and delight in His grace.

On this great spiritual transaction in our hearts hangs the inheritance of heaven or the torments of hell. Oh how serious and earnest and heart-searching we should be to make our calling and election sure and to know that we are born of God!

Imitators of God's Perfect Love, A Fragrant Aroma to God

(MacArthur) Because forgiveness is the supreme evidence of God's love, it will also be the most convincing proof of our love. Love will always lead us to forgive others just as love led God in Christ to forgive us (Eph. 4:32). Nothing more clearly discloses a hard, loveless heart than lack of forgiveness. Lack of forgiveness betrays lack of love (Eph. 4:31). The presence of forgiveness always proves the presence of love, because only love has the motive and power to forgive. The extent of our love is the extent of our ability to forgive.

The depth of our love is also shown by how much we know we have been forgiven. The person who sees the greatness of his own forgiveness by God's love will himself in love be forgiving. He forgives in love because his heavenly Father has forgiven in love and he desires to be an imitator of his Father.

God's love not only is forgiving and unconditional but is also self-sacrificing. Therefore to love as God loves is to love sacrificially, to love by the giving of ourselves as He gave Himself.

Christ's giving Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God was a fragrant aroma to His heavenly Father because that sacrifice demonstrated in the fullest and most ultimate way God's kind of love. The words for us indicate the personal expression of love directed at all who believe.

The first five chapters of Leviticus describe five offerings commanded by God of the Israelites. The first three were the burnt offering, the meal offering, and the peace offering. The burnt offering (Lev. 1:1-17) depicted Christ's total devotion to God in giving His very life to obey and please His Father; the meal (grain) offering (Lev. 2:1-16) depicted Christ's perfection, and the peace offering (Lev. 3:1-17; 4:27-31) depicted His making peace between God and man. All of those offerings obviously spoke of what was pleasing to God. Of each, the Scripture says it provided a "soothing aroma to the Lord" (Lev. 1:9, 13, 17; 2:2, 9, 12; 3:5, 16). Philippians 4:18 explains that the fragrant aroma meant the sacrifice

was “acceptable . . . well-pleasing to God.” But the other two offerings---the sin and the trespass offerings (Lev. 4:1-26, 32-35; 5:1-19)---were repulsive to God, because, though they depicted Christ, they depicted Him as bearing the sin of mankind. They depicted the Father’s turning His back on the Son when “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf” (2 Cor. 5:21), at which time Jesus exclaimed from the cross, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Matt. 27:46).

While Christ was the sin-bearer, God could not look on Him or rejoice in Him or be pleased in Him. But when the Father raised Christ from the dead, the sacrifice that caused Him to become sin became the sacrifice that conquered sin. The sin that put Him to death was itself put to death, and that great act of love was to God as a fragrant aroma. That fragrant aroma spreads its fragrance to everyone on earth who will place himself under the grace of that sacrifice, and it will spread its fragrance throughout heaven for all eternity. In all aspects, our lives should please God (2 Cor. 2:14-16).

Conclusion

I want to conclude with a prayer from John MacArthur:
Father we know that the world offers a selfish, conditional, unforgiving love, a counterfeit, and You offer selfless, forgiving, unconditional love. Thank You for loving us that way. You loved us when we didn’t deserve it, and then You told us to love each other when we don’t deserve it either. Help us to love like You loved, so that we can imitate You as dear, beloved children. Keep us from the world, and the evil one. God I pray that You’ll protect these precious people from this area of sin, so that it will not be once named among us, that Jesus may be glorified, in whose wonderful name we pray. Amen

References:

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