

# “Let There Be Thanksgiving”

## The Eleventh in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

*Texts: Ephesians 5:1-14; Isaiah 60:1-9*

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If we were to ask Paul what the Christian life should look like, I am convinced that the Apostle would direct us to the life of Jesus. I say this because Paul does this very thing in 1 Corinthians 11:1, when he tells the Corinthians to be imitators of Christ. But Paul also does this in Ephesians 5. Now, in saying that Paul would point us to the life of Jesus as an example for Christians to follow, I don't mean that Paul expects us to cast out demons, walk on water, or heal the sick with but a single command. But from what Paul does say about Jesus—who is the very embodiment of the holiness and righteousness of God—it is clear that Jesus' life is the model for us in terms of love, humility and forgiveness. In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul tells us that the Christian life is much more than merely “doing what Jesus did.” “Doing what Jesus did” only makes sense after we believe those things Jesus and the apostles taught us about the depths of our sin and the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Once we understand that we were chosen by God in Christ before the foundation of the world, and once we understand that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, only then can we understand how the life of Jesus can serve as an example to us which we are to imitate. What does the Christian life look like? It should look a great deal like that life which Jesus lived.

We are in the midst of a series on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We now make our way into Ephesians 5. While I divided chapter 4 into three sections (so that we could spend sufficient time on Paul's discussion of the Christian life), it immediately becomes clear in chapter five that Paul is continuing to flesh out a number of the points made in chapter four. It is important to recall that Ephesians was a circular letter which Paul intended to be read aloud in its entirety in the churches. So there is a sense in which we do this letter a great injustice when we preach through it such short snippets (as we have been doing). The alternative would be an eight hour sermon—something which neither you nor I would be able to endure. So please keep in mind that as we go through this series that all of the points Paul is making are very closely interconnected, which is why I ask that you read through the entire book several times during this series, so that we don't lose sight of the forest for the trees.

As we saw last time, Paul uses the metaphor of a change in clothing to make his point that a fundamental change in our thinking and doing occurs when we come to faith in Christ. When God makes us alive with Christ, the old self is made new. Because the old self is now the new self, the Christian is to make a concerted effort to “take off the old self” with its sinful desires (indwelling sin), and “put on the new self” which is created in the image of Christ. While in one sense our sanctification is already complete (Christ's perfect righteousness is imputed to us through faith, so that God already regards us as “holy”), in another sense our sanctification is a life-long process. This life-long process of sanctification (which results from our justification) is what Paul is discussing in this section of Ephesians.

Paul has told us that the old self is characterized by falsehood, anger, theft, laziness and corrupting speech. The new self is characterized by truth-telling, a desire to resolve conflict and live in peace, hard work, and will speak words of grace and blessing. Jesus' death and resurrection is the pattern for this. Just as Jesus died for our sins and was raised from the dead (that event into which we are baptized) so too, we are to die to sin and be raised to newness of life. Just as we strip off our dirty clothing, take a shower and put on clean clothes, so too, the Christian life is one of continuously stripping off the old self and putting on the new—a theme which Paul continues to unpack in Ephesians 5.

Just as he urged us to change our spiritual clothing, Paul exhorts us to imitate Jesus Christ.

Before we even begin, we need to take note of fact that the very notion of imitating the life of Christ can go horribly wrong. We see this on Good Friday, when Filipino men are crucified to reenact the passion of Jesus. Imitating the life of Jesus was a preoccupation of the so-called Catholic mystics—Thomas a Kempis’ book on the imitation of Jesus is one of the best selling books of all time. We see how silly this can become when the Christian faith is reduced to “doing what Jesus did” through the WWJD campaign—a sad trivialization of what Jesus already did for sinners. So, it is very important that we listen to Paul carefully and think clearly about his exhortation for Christians to imitate Jesus Christ. Paul means something quite different than that kind of imitation typical of the examples just mentioned.

Verse one of chapter five is the conclusion to Paul’s prior point (i.e. Ephesians 4:30-32) that Christians not grieve the Holy Spirit through causing division within the body of Christ. Paul also says that we must not forget that we forgive others because we are such miserable sinners ourselves—sinners who have been forgiven by Jesus. When Paul writes, “*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,*” he is wrapping up his prior point by exhorting us to remember that since God has included us in his family—we are God’s adopted children by grace through faith, as our biological father is Adam in whom we are fallen—we are to imitate our heavenly Father who is supremely revealed through Jesus Christ.

Just as you look at someone’s child and see a distinct family resemblance, so too those of us who are trusting in the savior should begin to reflect the image of Jesus Christ in whom we have been brought from death to life. These family traits include the conduct Paul mentioned at the end of chapter four—truth telling, a willingness to deal with anger, hard work and industriousness, along with speech which builds up and does not tear down our brothers and sisters.

Whenever we work through Paul’s letters, we need to keep in mind the indicative mood and the imperative mood. “Be imitators” is an imperative (a command). Paul commands us to imitate God. Why? Because we are God’s beloved children and we should demonstrate the appropriate family traits which reflect our new family identity. The key point here is that even though we are by nature children of wrath who formerly lived to indulge our sinful desires (the old self), now that God has made us alive with Christ, we have been made new (the new self), and we have been raised with Christ and seated with him in heavenly places. When Paul tells us to imitate God he means that we must begin to reflect what we now are. We are no longer pagans, dead in sin, enslaved to the desires of the flesh. We are now Christ’s—we have been made alive and have been made new. Our fundamental identity and orientation has now changed and we are to reflect this change by imitating that one who has saved us.

In verse 2, Paul again moves from the theological point (“*be imitators of God*”) to the concrete (that which we are supposed to do). “*And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*” Once again, Paul uses “walking” as a metaphor to remind us of that behavior we are to imitate. In this case we are to “*walk in love.*” Whenever people from my generation speak about love, the unfortunate tendency is to think of Woodstock, flowers, campfires, guitars and a sort of romantic sentimentality. Love is equated with a feeling and a sort of superficial sentimentalism often tied to fond memories of our past.

But Paul does not speak of love in such romantic or sentimental terms. For Paul, all genuine love within the body of Christ flows out of Christ’s sacrificial love for his people—people who are completely unworthy of such love. Yes, Jesus loves us even though we are unlovable. More to Paul’s point, Jesus

loved us while we reeked of sin and were covered with the filth of ungodly behavior (the old self). Jesus gave himself up for sinners. He willingly sacrificed himself to save us from God's wrath due us because of our sins. The very heart of that love which Paul says we should imitate, and that love which reflects the divine image, is a sacrificial love, a love which by its very nature is directed toward people (including us) who are not very lovable. Such love is not romantic, superficial, nor sentimental. Such love is difficult, costly and manifests itself in self-sacrifice made for the benefit of others. Such love comes from God, who creates it in our hearts through the preaching of the gospel, and this love can only flow forth from us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus "gave himself up" on the cross, he did so as a sacrifice which turned aside the wrath of God. Paul reminds us that such a sacrifice is a fragrant offering unto God (picking up on the idea that the aroma associated with the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament are said to have pleased God). When Paul speaks of love, his reference point is not hugs and kisses, or a superficial show of emotion. Paul's point of reference is a bloody cross and a sacrificial love directed to those who are the most difficult to love. When Paul commands us to love others, he is thinking of Christ's sacrificial love for us as the example which we are to follow. The supreme picture of such love is the cross.

Continuing his theme of describing the conduct associated with the old self which must be striped off, Paul repeats what he said in chapter four, only this time framing our conduct in terms of imitating Christ. Paul now adds a further injunction in verse 3. "*But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.*" Sexual immorality is sex before or outside of marriage. Impurity is a term which usually refers to sexual immorality, but could also extend to other forms of immorality such as perjury and lying, specifically when such sins are tied to treachery.<sup>1</sup> The new injunction added by Paul is that Christians (who are imitating a gracious but holy God) should not make these particular topics a matter of casual conversation—something at which our culture excels.

In fact, says Paul, "*Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.*" People who are to guard their speech so as to not tear down others but build them up, are not to speak about sinful things in a way which glorifies sinful things, or which trivializes the truth. Nor are we to waste our time on foolishness, or dirty jokes and crude speech. Those who imitate God when they put on the new self should not treat serious things lightly or flippantly. The conduct which Paul exhorts us to leave behind is the kind of thing which characterizes almost all forms of American pop culture, which continually mocks holy things, the family, chastity, sobriety and glorifies a seemingly endless series of celebrities who are famous not because they have done anything noteworthy or because they have any talent, but because they somehow manage to call attention to their outrageous antics. A hero does something of worth or valor beyond the ordinary. A celebrity is famous for being famous. Paul tells us not to waste time talking or thinking about such things. Christians, on the other hand, are to be thankful for all the good and wonderful things God has given us. Sound familiar?

As for those who remain dead in sin, and who have not been made alive with Christ, the conduct mentioned by Paul is not uncharacteristic for them, as it is for those who are now in Christ. As for the Christian, all of us still sin, and nowhere does Paul teach a doctrine of Christian perfectionism—in which it is taught that we can advance so far in the Christian life that we are no longer subject to the sins of the flesh. Rather, the behavior mentioned by Paul is characteristic of non-Christians. It is what they are. It is what they do. They know nothing but the stench and filth of the old self, and they come to like it so

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce, The Epistle to the Colossians, 143.

much that they actually delight in being in such a wretched condition. They even dare call this stench and filth “righteousness.” They imitate their first father Adam in all his sinfulness, not the second Adam (Jesus), whom God sent to save us from the damage wrought by the first Adam.

It is the new self and the characteristics associated with it, such as truth telling, hard work, a desire to resolve anger, and speaking words of grace, which is foreign to those apart from Christ. Paul warns such people in no uncertain terms of where their rejection of Christ will lead. *“For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.”* Since these things characterize pagans, and since Christians have been made alive in Christ, these things should no longer characterize us. How can we profess to be Christ’s (and recite that creed of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism”), if we imitate pagan behavior, not that of the Holy God in whose image we are being recreated?

The issue here is not complete victory over these sins, but the struggle with sin. Those who claim not to struggle with immorality, impurity of heart, covetousness (as Christians) are either self-deceived or not telling the truth. Those who see nothing wrong with such behavior—indeed who are characterized by such behavior—are the ones who come under Paul’s indictment. Such people demonstrate that they are not in Christ based upon their affections and indifference to the things of God. Paul warns them that they will face God’s wrath on the day of judgment. Those whom God has made alive in Christ, on the other hand, have put on the new self and have come to hate the stench and filth of the old man even if they still struggle with spiritual b.o. and gravy stains. Christians will struggle with sin. We desire to strip off the grave clothes of the old self. The reason why desire to do these things is because God has made us alive with Christ, adopted us into God’s family, and then begins to create in us a family resemblance, framed here by Paul in terms of our imitation of Christ.

As Martin Luther once put it, original sin is like a man’s beard. No matter how close the morning’s shave, the beard is back the next day. The same is true of Paul’s doctrine of the Christian life. Stripping off the old self, putting on the new self, and imitating Christ, is a daily activity. The beard, the b.o. and the gravy stains keep coming back. But nevertheless, Christians desire to strip off the old self because God has already removed from us the guilt of our sins and clothed us with the perfect righteousness of Christ. Christians hate to see what Christ has cleansed become dirty all over again. Only a Christian struggles with the desire to do these things, and only a Christian experiences the remorse of not having done them. But non-Christians have no such struggle, and self-righteous Pharisees think they’ve already won the battle so they don’t need to struggle any longer.

For those who are tempted to argue that God doesn’t concern himself with such trivial things as a sinner’s behavior, Paul has an additional warning in verse 6. *“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”* There have always been those in our churches who find ways to justify their own sin, or even worse, encourage such sins in the lives of others (cf. Romans 1:32). Paul’s warning to such people cannot be ignored. Antinomians of every stripe need to realize that they will come face to face with the Holy God. In light of this stern warning from Paul, Christians must be careful not to be taken in by those who keep telling us to put the old self and its stench back on, after we’ve struggled so hard to strip it off.

Again, let us be perfectly clear about who these people are who are being warned—these are not Christians struggling with sin. These are people who are indifferent to sin, who love the sophistry and clever words about why we do not need to imitate God in our behavior, and why it is perfectly OK to act like the pagans around us. And no matter how clever and persuasive these words, God’s judgment will

overwhelm those who teach such things, if not in this life then certainly in the next.

Paul's warning to us regarding dealing with such people is crystal clear. *"Therefore do not become partners with them."* Paul is not commanding us to have no associations with non-Christians, but he is warning us not to become a "joint-partaker" with them. We may be friends and acquaintances with non-Christians, but we cannot be partners with them in their pagan behavior. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11, Paul writes *"I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one."* Paul will not allow us to self-righteously judge non-Christians for being non-Christians and doing what non-Christians do. There but the grace of God go I. But Paul does command us to make judgments about those who claim to be Christ's but who shamelessly flaunt their sin. This is why the Reformed consider church discipline to be a mark of a true church.

In verses 8-10 of Ephesians 5, Paul makes this very point. *"For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord."* Before coming to faith, we walked in darkness. But God pulled us out of the darkness of paganism and brought us into the marvelous light of Christ. Therefore, we are to walk in the light—we are to behave as people who have been made alive. And the fruit of being brought into the light are those things which are good, right, and true. Goodness is one of the fruits of the Spirit (cf. Galatians 5:22). Righteousness is associated with being restored in the image of our creator (cf. Ephesians 4:24). Truth is associated with God's revelation of his person and will in Jesus Christ. Those who walk in the light will bear the fruit of goodness, righteousness and truth.<sup>2</sup>

Those who walk in the light also cannot help but ask the question, "what does God require of me, now that I am a Christian?" "What does it mean (in terms of my day to day Christian life) to bear fruit?" Paul's answer is that Christians are to discern what is pleasing to God—in other words, we are to discern his will. This means that Christians must know the word of God so that they have the proper categories to make such determinations. We should know the difference between the indicative mood (a statement of fact—"Christ died for your sins") and the imperative mood ("imitate God"). This requires that we are able to distinguish between the law (what God commands of us) and the gospel (what God freely gives to us in Christ which meets all of his demands). Having the proper categories (i.e., knowing the truth), Christians can both discern what God commands and what he gives to us. Discerning the will of God in those cases where no specific command is given involves deducing what to do in light of those things we already know to be truth. The better our knowledge of Scripture, the better our understanding of the basic theological categories summarized in our catechism, the better equipped we will be to walk in goodness, righteousness and the truth. If we invest no time in learning God's word or studying our catechism, discerning the will of God just becomes that much more difficult.

Because we walk in the light, Paul exhorts us in verse 11 to *"take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them."* If we are partakers with those who walk in darkness, like it or not, we are also partakers in their sinful deeds.<sup>3</sup> Paul is not instructing us to organize righteousness crusades

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 374.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 375.

to go and expose the sinful behavior of non-Christians. What the Apostle is telling us to do is call sin “sin.” We are to expose the deeds of darkness for what they are by bringing the truth of God’s word to bear as the means of exposing spiritual b.o. and gravy stains for what they are—characteristics of the old self. This is the function of the law, by the way, to expose sin and drive us to Christ. The law reveals to us that which God requires of us. Those who walk in the light (in terms of their imitation of Christ) should trust in what God has revealed in his word, not in what non-Christians “feel” is right or wrong—a feeling which arises out of the sinful darkness within them. As Paul reminds us, *“For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light.”*

While those around us may live to gratify their own sinful desires, God’s word exposes those sinful desires for what they are—sinful desires. People come up with all kinds of justification for any kind of conduct in which they wish to indulge themselves (all kinds of sexual immorality including homosexuality, pagan religion, etc.), but they seek to do so in the darkness of their sinful imaginations. Christians cannot walk in this darkness with them. What they do is shameful and we cannot be participants in it. Rather, we turn on the lights and watch such people scurry for cover when their unrighteousness is exposed. Don’t forget, it is Jesus himself who reminds us, *“For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light”* (Luke 8:17).

As Paul concludes his discussion of contrasting light and dark in verse 14 he cites what may be an early Christian hymn (perhaps sung at the time of baptism)<sup>4</sup> and which has strong echoes from both Isaiah 26:19 and Isaiah 60:1 (the latter was part of our Old Testament lesson). Paul’s words call our attention to the fact that while at one time we were children of darkness, we are now children of light. *“Therefore it says, ‘Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’”* In Jesus Christ we have been brought into the light and rescued from darkness. Because we now walk in the light we are to leave the darkness behind and live lives characterized by thanksgiving.

What should we take with us from this passage?

When God called us to faith in Jesus Christ, we were brought from darkness to light. As fallen, it is natural for us to imitate our first father Adam in all of his sinful desires. But now we are to imitate Jesus Christ in whose light we now live—light being a metaphor for goodness, righteousness and truth. Paul’s point is simply that we are to leave the old ways of thinking and doing behind. While God’s people must wage a continual war against indwelling sin (and daily strive to take off the old self and put on the new), we must not allow ourselves to become indifferent to our sinfulness, or seek to justify our sinful behavior as do the pagans. They do what they do in darkness in the vain hope that their sins will not be exposed. Yet, their sins will be exposed. It is utter foolishness to live like what we once were, especially when we know that sin always has such serious consequences. This is what Paul means when he says pagans live a life of futility.

While the pagans seek to hide their shameful conduct, or else dare call their sinful conduct “good” or “natural,” Christians must imitate the life of that Savior who has saved us by dying for our sins and clothing us in his perfect righteousness. Even as we wrestle with our sin, and take up the daily struggle of stripping off the old self and imitating Jesus, let us realize the wonders of the grace of God in saving us from that which will only destroy us. We have been raised from the dead and the light of Christ shines

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 376-377.

upon us. After all, the life we are to imitate, continually points us back to the cross, where the guilt of our many sins was washed away and where that costly sacrifice was made which saves us from ourselves. And this is why Paul can say to us, “let there be thanksgiving.” We have a great deal for which to be thankful!