

Find out what pleases the Lord

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Preacher: Robin Brough

[0 : 0 0] Now let's look again at Ephesians chapter 5, page 978 in the Church Bibles. In 1967, an American Bible scholar, William Hendrickson, wrote an introduction on a commentary he was writing on this letter to the Ephesians.

Here's the opening sentence. Loathsome wickedness marked the world of Paul's day. That's a statement not simply with hindsight, but a statement with which many first century writers agreed.

And yet in the city of Ephesus, as loathsome as anywhere else in the ancient world, there lived a small company of people who were different. We now call them Christians, but Paul said they were, chapter 1, verse 1, saints.

He, in chapter 2, verse 19, called them citizens of the household of faith. And in chapter 4, verse 15, described them essentially as the body of Christ. But they had not always been different.

Until around AD 54, they had been as dead in sin, chapter 2, verse 1, characterized by wrath, chapter 2, verse 3, and given over to fleshly passions, chapter 2, verse 3, like the rest of mankind.

[1 : 2 6] And that's the same passage. Then Paul came to the city of Ephesus. And as Acts chapter 19 relates, spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.

The result is that men and women believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and began to follow him. And that preaching was so bold and vigorous and relentless that we are told by Luke, recounting the story in Acts chapter 19, this continued for two years so that all the residents of the Roman province of Asia, essentially Turkey today, heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

But those new Christians, saints, citizens of heaven, still lived in Ephesus, which were still filled with loathsome wickedness.

And so we come to chapter 5 of this letter, whose first verse begins, you've got it before you, Therefore be imitators of God. Therefore.

Now, if in fact we did not have the words which we can see in front of us, the words of Paul, if we had some understanding of the situation in Ephesus, if we'd read the letters so far, and then somehow or other the rest of chapter 5 and chapter 6 had got lost, either in our copy or anybody's copy, I wonder what teaching we might have written in, what we might have done to, as it were, fill up the gap.

[3 : 0 0] What we might say to these Ephesian Christians and to ourselves, for we, remember, I would suggest, live in a society of loathsome wickedness, just as in the first century.

What would we say? Well, I dare to suggest that hardly one of us would have said, therefore be imitators of God. Now, we might have written, imitate me, because Paul said that to the church in Corinth, in another letter.

Or, we might have said, imitate the way that other churches live, which is what he did in writing to the church in Thessalonica, and praising them. But how do we imitate God?

Well, to answer first, complete the sentence. Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children. God's beloved children.

Which is, in fact, echoing a phrase of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he used when speaking of those who follow him. Children of God. And we have become children of God, because in chapter 4, verse 32, God in Christ forgave you.

[4 : 11] That's the way it works. We don't come to him with something and say, will this be enough? There is nothing in us that is enough. He initiates the process. God in Christ forgave you.

And the implication is, in verse 1, that as he gave himself for us in love, we are to give ourselves to him in love. Imitate.

Imitation, of course, is a regular feature of our everyday life. Perhaps the older we get, it is less obvious. We are doing the imitating, rather than being conscious of it.

But when we were young, we learned to speak by imitating those around us. And in the days when they had lengthy craft apprenticeships, and whatever trade, what you were essentially doing for years and years and years, was imitating the master craftsman.

And our overseas friends here are learning to speak English, by imitating how we speak. Which means they all have Glasgow accents. When people imitate us, also, of course, we have to say to them, no, no, no, no, don't do it that way.

[5 : 21] This is how. Or, don't pronounce it that way. This way. And in the verses of our reading passage, Paul weaves together a skein of teaching to help us.

And he's got both negative and positive injunctions. And to tease it out, we'll pick out the word that I hinted at earlier in the service. Did you find it? It's the word walk.

Actually, it occurs seven times in this letter, but three times significantly in this passage. And it acts like a framework for Paul's discourse. Now, for those that missed it, it's in verse two.

Walk in love. It's in verse eight. Walk as children of light. And in verse 15, how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise.

Now, we'll look at each of these sections that are marked off by the word, and notice how Paul gives us incentive and motivation, and points us to the resources that we need to walk as we ought.

[6 : 23] So, verse two. We are to walk in love. Now, we looked at this word walk before, earlier in the letter, if you remember, and I pointed out then, that it's literally walk about.

It's connected to peripatetic. In other words, walking is not a private activity. It's got to be living, walking, in the public arena.

In which, as we know, sexual immorality, and foul language, and other crudities abound. All the things that Paul is talking about. But nothing of that nature ought to find a place in us.

Either as individuals, or as a fellowship. Why? Well, says Paul, because it's not proper. It doesn't belong to being a Christian.

Christians, or saints, Paul's word, remember, just do not do or say such things. Now, the word saint essentially means somebody who is separated from the pattern of life which others follow.

[7 : 23] They stand out. They are distinctive. Therefore, we do not just say we are different if we are Christians. We are to adopt appropriate words and actions which are distinct and different.

And we will adopt them. We will have them as our life pattern because the Spirit of God is in us. It won't be proper for us therefore to speak or to think or to do any of these things.

If it's not proper, it's also out of place. Verse 4. And the implication is since we do not ourselves act immorally or covetously, covetously, we should not have any occasion to speak crudely of such things.

They shouldn't even be in our minds. However, since the words and the actions of others often come to us through the medium of newspapers or television or the conversation at school or college or place of work, then perhaps we will need to avoid reading certain newspapers or watching certain TV channels and be ready even to walk away from the coffee time huddle if the talk is improper.

And thirdly, verse 5. those who are sexually immoral or impure or covetousness have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

[8 : 53] So the avoidance of such impure words and actions is not an added extra for some specially pious believers who've got the time to do it or the inclination.

It is part of what marks us out as God's beloved children. In clear distinction from what Paul calls the children of disobedience.

Sons of disobedience in our translation. Now this is a phrase that is commonly used by Paul and of Jewish writers. It simply means those who have the character of something.

They are of the company of the disobedient and the immoral and so on. We are to be distinct from them. We are to be children of God. In all of this, of course, there is no suggestion that Christians will not on occasion lapse into speech, perhaps actions which characterise those they perform before they came to faith.

In a society like ours which is saturated with immoral images and words, it is almost impossible for us to go through a day unstained. And of course, it's not simply sexual imagery or innuendo with which we are bombarded, but also the subtle and sometimes not so subtle persuasions of the advertisers for all the other kinds of false thinking.

[10 : 17] The one that occurred to me immediately shows how it is saturated into even my mind as a man. You're worth it. And then there's the whole philosophy which pervades the deal-no-deal program or the various other so-called talent shows and getting ahead which is in The Apprentice.

And more gently but as insidiously are all the programs hinting that to be really somebody who stands out from the crowd. You probably need your house treated to a makeover.

Perhaps even your face. And as Paul teaches us, all of this is cuffitousness idolatry.

putting someone or something at the center of your life which is where Christ must reign supreme. Walk in love says Paul.

In other words love Christ who loved us and do nothing say nothing think nothing which would dishonor or deny him. In the place of all the foulness that we're to abhor and avoid there is to be thanksgiving verse 4.

[11 : 33] Now he will speak more of it in verse 20 but here thanksgiving is an alternative to filthiness and foolish talk. And in particular we can't realize it in the English but what Paul is doing is making a play with a word in Greek for crude joking.

And that's a kind of devilishly clever playing with words that some people possess. You can possess it positively and in a good way but very many people are able to take a genuinely innocent remark that's passed in a conversation and turn it wittily to something shameful.

No, says Paul, not that kind of thing, not crude phrase but clarion praise. We must learn to be as ready with thanksgiving on our lips as others are with coarseness.

And as he moves into the second section of this passage, Paul says very plainly in verse 7, therefore do not associate with them. Now here the word associate is the same word that we find slightly differently translated in chapter 3 verse 6, partakers of the promise.

And in that verse each phrase carries the thought of something equally shared. And so the Gentiles, says Paul there, are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise.

[12 : 58] You can see the togetherness that's intended. Therefore in New International Translation here in chapter 5 verse 7, do not be partners with them.

It's like associates in a legal firm or something similar. Do not be partners with them. Or this conjures up another image that Paul is tackling here in verse 8, and it seemed to me we could translate it this way, you once were team darkness, but now you're team light.

There can be no connection. Team light. Walk as children of light. Verse 8, again, the public aspect of our life in Christ.

Think of the fact of babies, perhaps, some of the ones that are downstairs, some in the gallery, who, as they become toddlers, at some point along the way, must have something come into their minds that sees other children and adults walking and think, that's a good idea, I must try that.

I will, now they don't consciously think of this, but what they do is they imitate what they see. They try this business of getting up and imitate and imitate until they get the hang of it.

[14 : 15] Now we are as children of light in the world constantly to try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. What does he want us to do? Try to see him, stand up, walk around like that.

And the word try to discern in verse 10 is more than just learn and acquire the knowledge so you could answer a quiz on it. It's more than that. It implies with the aim of applying the knowledge in daily life.

If that's what God wants, then that's what I will do. Tell me again what you want, that I will do. The resulting effect will demonstrate clearly the change in us from darkness to light.

Whereas darkness was all about, chapter 4 verse 31, bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, the fruit of light, chapter 5 verse 9, is all that is good and right and true.

It's all of one or all of the other. It can't be any mixture. Think of Jesus' words recorded by John in his gospel, whoever does what is true comes to the light so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God.

[15 : 27] You want to do it publicly because it's something in which you delight, imitating God. However, not only are our lives to be made public, so also are those in whom are the unfruitful works of darkness.

They're not to be allowed to hide away their darkness. Notice that the light in us, says Paul, will produce fruit, evidence. And this harks back to a phrase that some of you will be thinking about in Galatians chapter 5 and other of Paul's letters, where he talks about the fact that there is the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, evident things in our lives, because the Spirit of Christ, who is the light of the world, is in us.

But those who are in darkness and strive and work are unfruitful. In other words, for all their toil, when you have to say that folk in darkness do work hard at whatever it is that they do, there is no praise or glory for God.

And it was for that that God created us. And if there is no praise and glory for God then there is no fruit, they are sterile. Part of our calling as children of light is to expose the reality of the works of darkness.

And we do this simply by being children of light, living so clearly distinct and different lives that the reality of evil is revealed. Two rather contrasting and perhaps very simplistic images occurred to me in this context.

[17 : 11] If you open up a sewer manhole in the street or lift a stone and shine a light in the darkness, all sorts of rats and creepy crawlies will scurry away from the light. Or, perhaps you've done this, it's a while since I have, but you go into a shop, you want to buy a shirt or a blouse or a length of material, something similar, and there it is, but you're not sure it's the right colour.

And so you take it out into the street to the open doorway with the assistant standing by you and you check that it is in fact the colour that you had in mind. When you see it in the true light of day, you see it as it really is.

And it's to that kind of life that we are called by Christ. And the quotation at verse 14 encapsulates that. Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

Now, it's a quotation, and you might expect since most quotations in the Bible are from somewhere else in the Bible, that it is a Bible quotation, but it isn't. It is probably a verse from a hymn of the early church.

Or maybe, it's been suggested, some frequently used words at a baptism, which would be, of course, a believer's baptism, certainly in the early days. And twice in the letter to the Hebrews, if you're taking notes, chapter 6, verse 4, chapter 10, verse 32, there, the writer speaks of enlightenment as a simile for salvation, and its public profession, at baptism.

[18 : 45] And so we might imagine then a new believer being received into the fellowship of the church, and the minister, the pastor, whoever, is almost literally taking the person by the hand and saying, awake, O sleeper, you are dead, awake, dead in sin, not alive to life, arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.

awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you. And if you turn to number 816 in your praise book later on, 816, you will find what Graham Kendrick made of these words.

Bob Christie and I had a look at it and we thought you couldn't sing it, but you can have a look at the words later on. Thirdly, walk as wise children, verse 15.

Remember, this is a further illustration and teasing out of how we are to be imitators of God as beloved children. And as in the first two sections, the contrast is made between good and evil, and here, wise and unwise.

Wisdom is to be found mentioned earlier in this letter, in chapter 1 and chapter 3, and many other times in the letters of Paul. Paul, and he as a trained rabbi steeped in what we now call New Testament, had there quite clearly the concept was not intellectual, not an accumulation of facts, but spiritual.

[20 : 18] Wisdom is spiritual. Based on what is virtually the motto of the book of Proverbs, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. In that wisdom, we are to walk and do it now, not delay it with some hope that there is a better or more suitable time coming.

The days in which we live are evil, they are not going to get better. Paul thought that in the first century, and who would dare contradict him in this 21st century?

To guide our footsteps in what Psalm 23 calls the right paths, paths of righteousness, Paul says understand what the will of the Lord is.

Here is an echo of verse 10. Find out what the Lord wants us to do. How else do we do that? How do we discern? How do we understand? By listening to him in his written word.

Both what to avoid and what to follow. In the early years of World War II, German bombers found their way to their target cities in England and Scotland, along radio beams which carried parallel bands of pulses.

[21 : 36] On board the plane the crew had a receiver which told them whether they were straying to the right or to the left as they detected the pulses. But it was not long of course before British technicians understood what was happening and devised a means of disturbing the bomber's beam and making their task more difficult.

Now as Christian believers with that illustration in mind, we are to aim for where we're going, what pleases the Lord, and to achieve that we are to tune into the signals that he sends us in his written word regularly and often.

Because our enemy the devil has many clever devices and temptations to deflect us from our aim and make us look foolish and make us look as if we hadn't in fact arisen from the dead.

The more faithfully we pay attention to what pleases the Lord, the less we will be affected by the false signals around us. One sign of foolishness or unwisdom, if you like, is a life out of control by overindulgence in drink or nowadays drugs.

And such drunkenness, of course, may arise from deliberate seeking of pleasure in life or equally seeking to escape from life's problems. Christians whose joy in life is to be in the Lord need no external stimulants.

[23 : 02] We are to be filled with the Spirit. And if you look closely at verses 18 to 21, you might have realized that they form one single sentence in which the master verb is be filled.

And the other verbs are in fact dependent on the command be filled. And so they are rather like bullet points to show what being filled is like in action. Being filled, bullet point one, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

Bullet point two, singing and making melody to the Lord with all our heart. Bullet point three, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And fourthly, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. One sentence, one compact unit of thought. Ten days ago, there was held in this building a great meeting of 600 and more ministers and elders to consider the serious situation facing us following the vote of the General Assembly on homosexuality.

The hymn that was sung to open the proceedings was not a hymn of praise to God, as you might have expected. And if I had thought about it, perhaps I would have chosen a hymn of praise if I had been asked.

[24 : 26] But it wasn't. It was hymn 749, that wonderful, Oh, how the grace of God amazes me. We address one another in this gathering as Christians and reminded one another, using the words of the hymn, of our faith and the basis of our faith and our calling.

If you know the hymn, there are seven wonderful verses and they do culminate in a great cry, sing and rejoice. And one man who was there confessed to me that he could hardly sing for the tears in his eyes as he realized afresh in the company of God's people just what God's grace had done for him and meant for him.

Now, psalms and hymns and spiritual songs in a service such as this do not all have to be addressed directly to God in praise.

If you have remembered, then you will know that we began with Psalm 145 and that addressed itself to God. O Lord, my God and King, I'll praise you evermore.

Suitable for the beginning of a service. Fine. Hymn 747, freedom and life are ours for Christ to set us free. It's spoken to one another, including teaching about Christ's power which broke our chains of sin.

[25 : 54] 555 was a prayer. Lord God, who breathed your word of old, come and teach us again in essence. And we're going to conclude shortly with hymn 591.

We need each other's voice to sing the songs our hearts would raise. So we're speaking to one another again for mutual encouragement and praise to God. But through all, there ought to be a thread of thanksgiving.

And in verse 20, we've got that. Giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that takes us out beyond the building, beyond the public praise of God and singing to God and singing to one another into the life that we lead outside.

Always and for everything. Paul knew about that. He wasn't simply speaking and saying, oh, this is what ought to happen. He did it. You may well know that Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, which is full of positive thoughts, was written from a prison cell.

not that you would think so, because he has a great upwelling of thankfulness in which he says that everything that is happening to him, even being in prison, is good because the whole garrison of soldiers in that place have heard the gospel.

[27 : 18] That can't be bad, he says. Give thanks to God. And the focus of our thanksgiving is our heavenly Father, who is the source of every blessing, who has made himself known to us through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And we come to the Father, not in our own name or authority, but through our Lord Jesus Christ, who enabled us to be beloved children of God. So to the final bullet point, verse 21, which is the conclusion of this passage on walking.

walking love, walking light, walking wisdom. All of our life is to be a walk and not a strut, which is the essence of verse 21.

All of our life is to be a walk and not a strut. In chapter 4, verse 1, Paul wrote, walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called with all humility.

And to the church in Philippi, in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Now, as you see perfectly well, and as many of you probably realize almost before you open the passage, Paul goes on in a new section, verse 22, to develop all the teaching which flows from verse 21, but all of that is most certainly for another sermon on another day.

[28 : 48] today, let us rise in a moment or two and address one another in our final hymn, and then go out to walk and live in and around Glasgow this week at God's beloved children in love, in light, in wisdom, giving thanks to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Gracious God, as always, we thank you for your words.

You are a God who speaks and has given us the ability to hear by your Spirit. Help us to remember what we have read and understood today and seek to live it out for your glory, that we may give praise to you and be thankful always.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.