

<b>SCRIPTURE FOCUS</b>	<b>Ephesians 5:1-14</b>	<b>DATE</b>	<b>11.03.19</b>
	FROM: Mike Smith, Discipleship Minister	First Woodway Baptist Church	
<b>LESSON SUMMARY</b>	Our new identities in Christ call us to put away sexual immorality, greed, and poor speech. More than this, we are to show with our lives just how futile these ways of living really are.		

*all scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted*

## ENCOUNTER THE TEXT

**<sup>5:1</sup> Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children <sup>2</sup>and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**

5:1-2 fits better with the last section (4:17-32), which dealt with relational vices and virtues. The Ephesian Christians were to put off vices that destroy relationships (bitterness, rage, malice, etc.) and put on virtues that support and even save relationships (kindness, compassion, forgiveness, etc.). Here, Paul rounds out what has already been said about relational living with an appeal to “follow God’s example . . . and walk in the way of love” (he has just spoken of God forgiving in Christ). The Ephesians are to walk in love knowing that they themselves are the objects of God’s love (see 3:14-21, where Paul prayed that the Ephesians might know the deep love of God). This is an important realization for Christians to have, for their own loving lifestyles become an extension of the love they have received. As they walk the way of love, Christ’s own love becomes the example for emulation.

**<sup>3</sup> But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. <sup>4</sup> Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. <sup>5</sup> For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. <sup>6</sup> Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient. <sup>7</sup> Therefore do not be partners with them.**

5:3 begins a new section with a new focus. Moving away from relational vices/virtues, Paul now addresses sexual immorality, greed, and obscene speech in the Christian community. His stance on all of these issues is firm – they have no place among God’s people. The NIV’s “there must not be even a hint” is more literally translated “[these things] should not be even be named among you” (see ESV, NASB). Rather than saying Christians shouldn’t speak about such things (though there is some merit in that argument), Paul is arguing that “an outsider who observes the daily behavior of Christians should never have an opportunity ‘to name’ one of these vices as characterizing the lifestyle of any member of the community. Or, similarly, that an insider may never see any fellow believer committing one of these sinful practices.”<sup>1</sup> At issue is the conduct and witness of the community rather than a “mum’s the word” approach to vices that very well might need to be addressed (as they are here in this letter!<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>1</sup> Arnold, C. E. (2010). *Ephesians* (p. 321). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> This insight from Best, 477.

Moving now to the vices themselves, Paul begins with sexual immorality and impurity (impurity here is linked to sexual acts). Here it is helpful to understand the social context from which the Ephesian Gentiles came. Arnold helps us here:

Illicit sexual activity was an enormous problem for new Gentile Christians to overcome in the early church. Adulterous relationships, men sleeping with their slave girls, incest, prostitution, “sacred” sexual encounters in the local temples, and homosexuality were all a part of everyday life. There was not an accepted social standard with regard to sexual relations ... Rampant sexual immorality in Graeco-Roman society was why the Jews had long been appalled at the behavior of the Gentiles in this regard and considered them “impure.”<sup>3</sup>

Imagine the dissonance that Gentile converts must have felt as they traded their old way of life for the new one found in Christ! They stepped from an “anything goes” sexual attitude to a sexual ethic that celebrated sex only in the marriage relationship between a man and woman (any sexual activity outside of this relationship falls under the category of “sexual immorality”). Here, Paul reinforces the new view of sex that the Ephesians adopted post conversion.

Following admonitions on sexual immorality and impurity, Paul moves to the vice of greed, which he equates with idolatry in v5. To speak of greed is to speak of “the insatiable desire to acquire more and more, whatever the object.”<sup>4</sup> In this context, Paul may be giving a nod toward sexual greed (a number of scholars take this to be his meaning), but it seems better to leave the object of greed undefined. When we do, we see that any number of things can become idols in our lives when our want for them becomes insatiable. The very language of idolatry intimates just how dangerous greed can be to our hearts and minds!

In v 4, Paul moves to sins of speech that include obscenity, foolish talk, and coarse joking. Obscenity refers to “shameful and indecent language,” foolish talk “suggests speech from a fool and brings to mind the frequent condemnation of the fool in the Old Testament,” and coarse joking has to do with witty speech that is turned to “indecent intent” (i.e. double entendre).<sup>5</sup> The flip side of this admonition is that the Ephesians should be pure in speech. The kinds of poor speech mentioned here are specific pitfalls to speaking well. Importantly, Paul is not saying that Christians must adopt a somber, serious manner of speech. I would argue that fun and humor can be pursued in ways that are pleasing to God. Christians, as people of joy, should be people who laugh long and laugh well. The key is that we should laugh about the right kinds of things rather than permitting small (or large) forms of perversity in the guise of humor. Conversely, our speech should be marked by thanksgiving, which connects it to God and reminds us of our “dearly loved” status before him.

Paul grounds all of these admonitions in the Ephesians’ new identity. They are now God’s holy people (or saints) and certain actions are not befitting this new station in life. Here we see that holiness/sainthood is both a status and a calling. As saints (God’s holy ones), we have been set aside for God himself. This being the case, we need to act like it! The reminder that immoral, impure, and greedy people will not inherit the kingdom of God is a negative reinforcement of the same idea. You have been taken out of that group, Paul says. More than that, the very idea of salvation entails the idea that God will punish such activities (we have

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<sup>3</sup> Arnold, C. E. (2010). [Ephesians](#) (p. 320). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold, C. E. (2010). [Ephesians](#) (pp. 320–321). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>5</sup> Snodgrass, 269.

been saved from this judgment). If all this is true, then the Ephesians shouldn't join their unbelieving Gentile countrymen in sin. After all, they have been saved from judgment and set apart for something new!

<sup>8</sup>For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light <sup>9</sup>(for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) <sup>10</sup>and find out what pleases the Lord. <sup>11</sup>Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. <sup>12</sup>It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. <sup>13</sup>But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. <sup>14</sup>This is why it is said:

“Wake up, sleeper,  
rise from the dead,  
and Christ will shine on you.”

In v 8 Paul approaches Christian identity from another angle, this time using the imagery of darkness and light. Interestingly, he equates the Ephesians with darkness and light themselves rather than speaking of being “of” darkness or “of” light. For Klyne Snodgrass, “No text is stronger in its explanation of conversion.”<sup>6</sup> The darkness of the world, it seems, is part of those who are in the world, while light has become part of those who experience light “in the Lord” (importantly, Christians are only light in their connection to Jesus). Now being light in the Lord, Christians should live as children of light. Here we once again see status leading to calling – we are light and should live like it! As we do, the fruit of all goodness, righteousness, and truth will show up in our lives.

In v 11, Paul gives a general call to abstain from “the fruitless deeds of darkness” (he has for a while now been dealing in specifics). Going a step further, he calls Christians to expose such acts. For some scholars, this exposing the deeds of darkness is directed primarily at the church – we call one another out for each other’s good. For others, exposing such deeds is directed at the surrounding world, where such practices are pervasive. I’m not sure that we need to make a choice between the two. Instead, I suspect that Paul means that children of the light should expose the deeds of darkness (wherever they are practiced) for what they are. This would mean so fully realizing the fullness of life in Christ that the futility of such works becomes apparent. It also might entail verbal confrontation, but this passage is not a call to vicious wars of words. Whenever we speak, we should keep in mind Peter’s call: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. *But do this with gentleness and respect*, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Peter 2:15b-16; emphasis mine).

Vv 12-14 expand on exposing the deeds of darkness. These deeds, Paul says, are shameful to even mention (much less practice). When they are exposed, though, their practitioners can step into the light. (I take this to be the meaning of v 13 – where darkness was present, light has come and taken over.) The words of the following hymn or liturgy (we’re not sure where v 14 comes from) sum things up. Exposing the deeds of darkness is akin to calling sleepers to awake and step into the light of Christ. When viewed in this way, exposing the deeds of darkness is invitational. It is a call to come out of the dark.

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<sup>6</sup> Snodgrass, 271.

## TEACH THE TEXT

In teaching this text, I would focus on sex and greed, new identity in Christ, and exposing the deeds of darkness.

### SEX AND GREED

We live in a time when sexual mores are shifting in our society. Thus, it is important to present group members with the sexual ethic of the NT, which celebrates sex in the marriage relationship between a man and woman. I say celebrate here because sex is a good gift from God. When pursued in the bounds of a committed marriage it is an avenue of intimacy and pleasure. We Christians need to get this right. We are not prudes. Rather, we celebrate sex so long as it is kept in its proper place.

If you do address this topic, do so with finesse. Yes, Paul is pretty hard hitting in his language, but he is speaking in generalities to an unseen audience. You'll be chatting with real people who may be having real struggles. The key here is to speak the truth in love. As you speak you'll be exposing deeds of darkness just as the scripture says, but you'll want to do so in the invitational vein of the hymn that Paul quotes in v 14. We are issuing a call to wake up and know the light of Christ rather than beating people over the head with Christian morality.

A further thought on the topic of sexual immorality is that pornography is included in this category. The ideas that it is okay to "look but not touch" or that watching porn together can somehow help a married couple's relationship just doesn't live up to Jesus' teaching on lust. In Matthew 5:27-30 we find these words from Christ:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Jesus is pretty serious on the matter of lust, the vice that the pornography industry is built on. As such, porn just doesn't fit among Jesus' people.

Regarding greed, I found it surprising at first that Paul would group it with sexual sins. Then I remembered that we often talk about the great temptations as money, sex, and power. If sexual sin is the inappropriate pursuit of the fulfillment of sexual passion, greed is the inappropriate pursuit of *any* passion. Paul goes so far as to call greed idolatry, meaning that it causes us to worship created things rather than the Creator. If this is so, we Christians need to take greed seriously because it hinders our worship and disorders our hearts.

## NEW IDENTITY IN CHRIST

As has often been the case in Ephesians, Paul majors on Christian identity in this section. This time, moral living is grounded in being saints (or holy ones), who have been rescued from the judgment that will come on sin and set apart for better things. As noted above, we are dealing here with a status and a calling. New identity in Christ anchors us in the truth of the gospel and propels us to live into that truth.

## EXPOSING THE DEEDS OF DARKNESS

We live in an age of outrage, where people unload verbally on one another on a regular basis (just take a look at social media around election season). We need to keep this in mind when we hear Paul's call to expose the deeds of darkness. This is not a call to use the Bible as a sledge hammer or to wade into debates ungraciously. Rather, it is a call to embody the light to the extent that our lives show the deeds of darkness as the futile things that they are. When we speak, we offer invitations to awake. This is even true of hard conversations that we may need to have every now and again with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### Vv 1-2

1. What does it mean to follow God's example?
2. What does this mean in practicality?

### Vv 3-7

1. Why do you think sexual immorality and impurity are out of place among God's saints?
2. What lands in the category of sexual immorality?
3. How should we interact with a culture that has very different views of sex than we do?
4. Why do you think greed is out of place among God's saints?
5. What does it mean for Paul to equate greed with idolatry?
6. What lands in the category of greed?
7. Why is Paul against obscene, foolish, and coarse speech?
8. Does this mean that Christians should only be serious and somber in the way we speak?
9. Why does Paul bring up judgment? Are Christians in danger of losing their salvation?

### Vv 8-14

1. What does it mean that we were once darkness but now are light in the Lord?
2. How do you think the fruit of the light – goodness, righteousness, and truth – show up in our lives?
3. What does Paul mean when he calls us to expose the deeds of darkness?
4. What does this look like in real life?

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