

Ephesians 5

Richard Dawson

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Proverbs 4¹⁵⁻²³ / Ephesians 5¹⁻²⁰

¹⁵Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

G K Chesterton once said this...

"It has been often said, very truly, that religion is the thing that makes the ordinary [person] feel extraordinary; it is an equally important truth that religion is the thing that makes the extraordinary [person] feel ordinary."

When we come to Christ and humbly allow Him to enter our lives, something we all must do if we are to truly know Him and follow Him. And when we do this we discover and love and acceptance we could never have imagined and certainly never earned. We are, in a sense, all ordinary people who are made to feel extraordinary by such love. But a strange thing happens. Confidence rises. We feel we can contribute, we feel we have something to offer and we also feel, after a time, that we deserve God's love. The sense of the extraordinary rises within us and, perhaps, not without some cause. After all God has taxed the whole universe to love us. We must be special to Him – we must have some great purpose attached to our existence. We are special aren't we? It is precisely at this point that God must call us back to what is ordinary, back to a realisation of where we came from, back to an understanding that **all is grace, all is mercy, all is love**. Where and how this happens varies from person to person but I find in myself that it is most often in the context of God's call to action, to service, to obedience that I am humbled again and must retreat away from self reliance back to God. Grace is everything but grace itself calls us to **be something**, to **be** a living incarnation of the One who has saved us and it is as we step into that call that we rediscover our need for grace.

Two themes dominate this chapter. The first is a continuation of the emphasis on action begun in chapter 4 and the second is a section of teaching on how this should impact on Christian families. We're going to focus on the action again today.

Once we've believed and received Christ our task is not so much to act from this event but to continually immerse ourselves in that grace so that our lives begin to reflect the love of God in every aspect. This is not easy. At best it is a journey for most of us. It takes time to unlearn old habits, old fears and old prejudices. It takes time to trust God with real things, with our relationships, our habits, our possessions and our time. It takes time to cast aside old allegiances to things which once satisfied

us and which continue to beckon us – habits, addictions, comfort pillows. It takes a life time to learn the new parameters of a loving relationship with God and when we commit ourselves to Jesus this is what we commit to. Paul lists, at the end of chapter 4, several issues which I think we may take as being the typical trouble spots for the faithful in Ephesus.

- Speaking the truth – putting aside lies
- Not letting anger get the better of us
- Rejecting wrong ways of making money especially thieving
- Controlling our mouths/ speech
- Learning to have a basic attitude of kindness to others – changing our default setting to one of kindness.

And these things are not so much a matter of **obtaining righteousness** as they are of **imitating** Christ. They build up an image of the Lord we serve **for others**. They provide a witness which acts to powerfully convict those around us without us having to really say anything. We tend emphasise in the evangelical stream of the church the importance of ‘witnessing to Christ’ by which we usually mean explaining the way of salvation to people. And this is a good thing. But if at the same time our lives are full of uncaring attitudes, harshness, anger and a basic unkindness towards others we not only betray our words but we actually inoculate people against the Gospel.

A man by the name of Doug Nichols recalled this a few years ago.

While serving with Operation Mobilization in India in 1967 I contracted tuberculosis and spent several months in a TB sanitarium. After finally being admitted into the sanitarium, I tried to give tracts to the patients, doctors, and nurses, but no one would take them. You could tell that they weren't really happy with me, a rich American (to them all Americans were rich), being in a government sanitarium. They didn't know that serving with O.M., I was just as broke as they were!

I was quite discouraged with being sick, having everyone angry at me, not being able to witness because of the language barrier, and no one even bothering to take a tract or Gospel of John. The first few nights, I would wake around 2:00 a.m. coughing. One morning as I was going through my coughing spell, I noticed one of the older (and certainly sicker) patients across the aisle trying to get out of bed. He would sit up on the edge of the bed and try to stand, but because of weakness would fall back into bed. I really didn't understand what was happening or what he was trying to do. He finally fell back into bed exhausted. I then heard him begin to cry softly.

The next morning I realized what the man was trying to do. He was simply trying to get up and walk to the bathroom! Because of his sickness and extreme weakness he was not able to do this, and being so ill he simply went to the toilet in the bed. The next morning the stench in our ward was awful. Most of the other patients yelled insults at the man because of the smell. The nurses were extremely agitated and angry because they had to clean up the mess, and moved him roughly from side to side to take care of the problem. One of the nurses in her anger even slapped him. The man, terribly embarrassed, just curled up into a ball and wept.

The next night, also around 2:00 a.m., I again awoke coughing. I noticed the man across the aisle sit up to again try to make his way to the washroom. However, still being so weak, he fell back whimpering as the night before. I'm just like most of you. I don't like bad smells. I didn't want to become involved. I was sick myself but before I realized what had happened, not knowing why I did it, I got out of my bed and went over to the old man. He was still crying and did not hear me approach. As I reached down and touched his shoulder, his eyes opened with a fearful questioning look. I simply smiled, put my arm under his head and neck, and my other arm under his legs, and picked him up. Even though I was sick and weak, I was certainly stronger than he was. He was extremely light because of his old age and advanced TB. I walked down the hall to the washroom, which was really just a smelly, filthy small room with a hole in the floor. I stood behind him with my arms under his arms, holding him so he could take care of himself. After he finished, I picked him up and carried him back to his bed. As I began to lay him down, with my head next to his, he kissed me on the cheek, smiled, and said something which I suppose was "thank you."

It was amazing what happened the next morning. One of the other patients whom I didn't know woke me around 4:00 with a steaming cup of delicious Indian tea. He then made motions with his hands (he knew no English) indicating he wanted a tract. As the sun came up, some of the other patients began to approach, motioning that they would also like one of the booklets I had tried to distribute before. Throughout the day people came to me, asking for the Gospel booklets. This included the nurses, the hospital interns, the doctors, until everybody in the hospital had a tract, booklet, or Gospel of John. Over the next few days, several indicated they trusted Christ as Savior as a result of reading the Good News!

What did it take to reach these people with the Good News of salvation in Christ? It certainly wasn't health. It definitely wasn't the ability to speak or to give an intellectually moving discourse. Health, and the ability to communicate sensitively to other cultures and peoples are all very important, but what did God use to open their hearts to the Gospel? I simply took an old man to the toilet.

Everyday opportunities to **shout the Gospel** without saying a word pass us by because our actions do not square with who our Lord is and we don't even see them. An opportunity to confess, perhaps in some small way our own shortcomings, to speak the truth. An opportunity to put aside our very real anger, an opportunity to simply be honest, an opportunity to speak with control and not allow our mouth to run away with our emotion and even an opportunity to do some basic simple kindness. These things, friends, open doors no eloquence will ever unlock.

What is more, Paul is convinced that what we do either frees us to or prevents us from living productively for God. So there is a sense of being careful with how we live because we want to use our lives as well as possible. This lies behind the whole passage on sexual ethics. The Ephesians lived in times when sexual ethics were a point of confusion for many. Roman society for all its laws and mores surrounding sexuality was a highly sexualized society. Paintings, reliefs and sculptures depicting sexual acts were common place both in public and in private homes. Whilst prostitution was frowned upon (largely because it was thought wrong for women to earn money from their bodies) there were roughly 30,000 prostitutes in Rome itself at any one time. The poor could expect a waitress in a pub to

provide sex as well whilst the rich tended to buy a slave or slaves who were used for sexual purposes by all the men. Not surprisingly it was the first visit to the brothel which marked child's entry into manhood rather than the more formal ceremony of taking on the toga virilis. Marriage was still considered inviolate. Adultery was frowned upon – at least the adultery of women. And into this environment we have Paul introducing a completely countercultural sexual ethic. Why?

Two reasons are suggested. The first is that a major part of our task on this earth is to witness to all that we have received in Christ. To bear in our bodies the likeness of Jesus. Paul therefore says...

**⁸For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—
⁹for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.**

If we are to bear witness to Christ we need to reject what is darkness and accept what is light, that is, all that is good and true. Clearly treating our bodies in the manner Roman society found generally acceptable wasn't good for us, nor was it right and nor did it represent the truth.

A second reason is found further down.

¹⁵Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, ¹⁶making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

We have a limited time on this earth and so we are called to use that time wisely. Giving ourselves to the complete satisfaction of every sexual desire both sets our desires over and against God's will and places sexual satisfaction on the throne of our life. More than this, however, is the way it chews up our life, swallowing years at a time, wasting that which God has called us to be so careful with. The Bible consistently recognises sex as a good but powerful force within us that requires great care and very good boundaries if it is not to cause real harm.

Even at this place it's hard to avoid the old and faulty notion that sex is the great enemy and that most of what's wrong with the world today has something to do with it. This simply isn't a biblical notion but if we are to reflect God's light as a people we have to bring our sexual desires into a place where we control them rather than where they control us. Paul, therefore, introduces a couple of simple boundaries designed to keep sex from robbing us of a full and wholesome relationship. These are to avoid sex outside of marriage and to keep from making sex the subject of bawdy or gross conversation. These two things are marks not of a community that is healthy but of one that has allowed sex to become the controlling feature of its community. Roman society was remarkable for its political and social and military innovation. In many ways it was light years ahead of the populations around it. But it allowed a preoccupation with sex to rot it from the inside out. We in the West can avoid this if we take a more measured and realistic view of sex. And we can do this if we realise that sex is not the way to make an ordinary relationship extraordinary. Rather it more often than not turns what is extraordinary into something very ordinary.