

## **Introduction**

Ephesians is one of my favorite books by Paul.

It is short. As a result, it is easy to see a characteristic common to most of Paul's writing. That is, he establishes first theological groundwork; then he applies that theology to his readers.

In this case, the first three chapters of Ephesians put more weight on establishing theology, which (by the way) is not a word just for people with postgraduate degrees. It is a word that simply means knowledge about God.

Then, chapters 4 and following apply that theology to real life for real people.

This does not mean that there is nothing practical in the first three chapters, or that there is nothing theological in the last three chapters. It just means that the dominant themes are first theological and then practical.

The text assigned in the lectionary for today is Ephesians 5:1-14. As a portion of the practical section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, it stands in continuity with chapters 4-6.

Paul's primary theme runs something like this.

1. We have an unbelievable gift from God in our salvation.
2. As a result of that gift, a primary characteristic in our lives should be unity with other believers.
3. That unity is primarily characterized by increasing maturity.
4. God has provided for our increasing maturity in the church.
5. In the church, God has provided a variety of gifts in apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, and ultimately each other.
6. So grow up!
7. Growing up means being imitators of God.

8. And that brings us to chapter 5, verse one.

## Be Like God

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. (5:1–2)

How can we be imitators of God?

The image here is that of a child who mimics his father or mother. But how can we mimic God? How can we have omniscience, omnipresence, or exist outside of time?

The answer is that we cannot be imitators of God in those ways. Those are examples of God's fundamental nature and to imitate God in those ways would mean that we are God. Obviously, this cannot be the case.

Paul defines what he means by being "imitators of God" when he wrote "walk in love". The perfect specimen of walking in love was another child of God, the eternal son of God, even Christ Jesus. He walked in love perfectly. He gave himself up for us, as Paul has already described in the first three chapters of his letter, when he defined our salvation in Christ.

Therefore, Paul is saying that if we are in Christ, followers of Christ, we will increasingly become like the father who sent him, God. And in order to understand what that means, we have to become like the Son, Jesus.

This is not the only place where we are instructed to be like God.

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one

baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1–6)

Put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. (Ephesians 4:24)

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. (Ephesians 5:25–27)

If we are in Christ (see chapters 1-3), then “we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head into Christ”, so that “when each part is working properly, [it] makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (4:15-16).

In short, salvation necessarily brings on change to those who are saved. That change results in a change in our ethics. That is, it changes the way we think, speak, and act.

## Ethical Changes

### Put off/put on

These ethical changes aren't merely something that we add to our lives; these ethical changes also include things that we delete from our lives. This is a principal that Paul calls “put off/put on”.<sup>1</sup>

Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the

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<sup>1</sup>In the NASB: “lay aside/put on”; KJV: “put off/put on”.

likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22–24)

And these ethical changes to which Paul refers are all-encompassing: they include thought, word, and deed.

### **All-encompassing: Thought**

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. (Ephesians 5:6–10)

Put off deceptive thinking—stinkin' thinkin'—that is the product of empty words. Instead try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Deceptive thoughts were God pleasing thoughts?

Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. (Ephesians 5:15–17)

Foolishness, or wisdom?

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. (Ephesians 4:17–18)

Futility and darkness, ignorance and hardness of heart, or goodness, righteousness, and truth as children of light?

### **All-encompassing: Word**

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me? Not really. If anything, Paul spends more time on the value of words in chapters 4-5 than any other topic.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. (Ephesians 4:25)

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. (Ephesians 4:29–31)

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. 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. (Ephesians 5:3–5)

For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. (Ephesians 5:12)

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your

heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, (Ephesians 5:18–20)

Truth or falsehood? Building up or tearing down? Uncontrolled thoughtlessness, or melodic Thanksgiving?

### **All-encompassing: Deed**

Finally, Paul refers to our deeds.

Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26–27)

Those who excuse anger as some kind of genetic trait, like red hair, or how tall one is, are fooling themselves. Here the choice is between righteous anger, which has been defined as being angry about the things that make God angry, or demonic opportunity.

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. (Ephesians 4:28)

Productive labor leading to charity, or thievery?

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32)

This is in direct contrast to a few verses before.

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. (Ephesians 4:18–19)

Hard heartedness or tender heartedness? Callousness or kindness? The greedy desire for self-satisfaction, or forgiveness?

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. (Ephesians 5:11)

Notice a couple of things here. One is that the works of darkness are not just shameful, they are unfruitful, damaging, a waste of time, effort, and life. Second, we are to expose those works. In ourselves first!

Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” (Ephesians 5:14)

## Application

### What Does This Say about Me?

It has been said that what the heart desires, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.<sup>2</sup>

Consider Paul’s contrasting of the thoughts, words, and deeds of those who live in darkness with those who are children of light. One of the things that he is implying is that the futility of mind, the corrupting speech, and the unfruitful works of darkness are universal for the unbeliever. The mind of wisdom, the edifying speech, and the fruitful works of righteousness are to be universal for the follower of Christ.

Since the former things are universal with respect to our former lives, this makes the principle of put off/put on all the more crucial.

Think of it this way. What happens if you try to paint over rust? If you do not remove the rust, the paint hides it for a time, but the corruption continues

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<sup>2</sup>Ashley Null commenting on Thomas Cranmer’s view of anthropology.

and will eventually show again. One must remove the rust before applying the paint.

## **What Does This Say about God?**

This second consideration may require more poetry than prose.

If we are to be imitators of God— of course, as that is modeled in Christ Jesus— what does this text tell us about God?

- God is truth
- God is wisdom
- God is shameless, not shameful
- God is humble patience
- God is kindness
- God is fruitfulness rather than unfruitfulness
- God is unity
- God is a kind of exuberant melodiousness (thanks Ray F)

There is an image here of what God is like and how he wants us to be that is beyond a mere code of conduct. Heaven and hell are certainly important aspects of these considerations. Paul certainly has these things in mind when he wrote: “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.” (5:5)

Yet, in addition to questions of eternity, there is a richness of a life in God that cannot be had outside of him. And that is because he himself is the richness



of life. To be like him— to shamelessly steal a phrase from an old commercial— is to truly be all that you can be.

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Psalms 16:11)