



LEARNING HOW TO WALK EPHESIANS 5:2-6

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About 40 years ago there emerged in the world of evangelical Christianity a movement designed to restructure the life and ministry of the local church known as **seeker sensitive**. Countless churches changed their vision statements and the way they conducted their Sunday services, all with a view to reaching and making a difference in the lives of “seekers,” those who were not yet Christians but who were “seeking” and exploring the claims of Christ. Everything in church life was redesigned and reconfigured to be “sensitive” to these seekers. Anything and everything that might be offensive to unbelievers was removed not just from what was preached but from the very building in which local churches gathered.

So, for example, virtually all religious language was eliminated, both from the content of preaching and the written material produced by a church. Images and photos of anything that looked “religious” was removed. The church building itself was transformed. No longer were there steeples or other indications that a church met there. The place of gathering often took on the form of a secular office building or local coffee shop.

Crosses were removed. Stained glass windows were replaced. The sanctuary was now renamed as the auditorium. Familiar hymns from centuries past were eliminated and replaced by contemporary songs. The pastor no longer preached a sermon but now delivered a message. And he did so not by standing behind a pulpit but rather by sitting on a stool. His aim, above all else, was to avoid saying or doing anything that might prove offensive or off-putting to the seekers in the service.

Sunday services were reduced to at most 60 minutes. Sermons sounded more like Ted talks. Messages, not sermons, were designed less to communicate biblical truth and more to soothe the anxious souls of those present. Providing tools for self-help and the building of self-esteem became the focus of every service.

I will say that I applaud the seeker-sensitive pastor and local church for their concern for the unsaved people of the world. Their zeal to see lost people brought into the kingdom is admirable. But I do not believe that the best way to do that is by sanitizing the service of anything and everything that might appear religious in nature.

The bottom line is this. ***If you ever attended a seeker-sensitive church it is highly unlikely that you would ever hear a message based on the words of the apostle Paul here in Ephesians 5:2-6.*** To speak of sexual immorality and the wrath of God and the reality of hell for those who persist unrepentant in their sinful behavior was out of bounds and never mentioned from the platforms of seeker-sensitive churches. Make no mistake. Their services were slick and smooth and carefully crafted and regulated down to the second lest someone be put off by their uncomfortable length. Their approach, generally speaking, was never confrontational. They were more inclined to accommodate to the surrounding culture than to critique it.

When we lived in Wheaton, Illinois, our home was only 35 minutes away from the most famous and prosperous seeker-sensitive church: Willowcreek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. We made a point of visiting the church one Sunday. Everything was prepackaged and precisely on time. If there was one thing that was forbidden at Willowcreek, it was spontaneity.

My purpose in describing for you the nature and practices of the seeker-sensitive church isn't to mock or ridicule how they conduct themselves, as much as I disagree with their approach to ministry local church life, but simply to point out how utterly impossible it would be to preach on a passage like Ephesians 5:2-6 in a church that was devoted to eliminating anything and everything that might hurt the feelings or be upsetting to the “seekers” who were present.

My greatest concern is that a sermon like this on a text like Ephesians 5 will likely serve to alienate a large portion of our people here today. I say this especially about the young people present. Most of them have been immersed in a culture that has one all-consuming value: self. What is right or wrong is ultimately up to each individual. What is ethical or sinful is again determined not by a transcendent authority like the Bible, but whatever each individual soul finds affirming and pleasing and serves to enhance one's sense of self-esteem. It's called **expressive individualism**. Whatever orientation or action or lifestyle the individual finds most acceptable is to be embraced. But not merely embraced, but expressed. And don't you dare tell someone what they are doing or believing is wrong. After all, who are you to judge! Such is the mindset of so many today.

That being said, let's turn our attention to the words of the apostle Paul.

Paul's Purpose in Ephesians 3-6

As it has been a few weeks since we were in Ephesians, let me briefly remind you of what Paul is seeking to accomplish in the final three chapters of the book.

Virtually everything he says, beginning with 4:1 and extending through to 6:20, is concerned with how Christian men and women are to live. The word he uses to make this point is the verb, **"to walk"**. In 4:1 he said, **"walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called."** Then, again, in 4:17 he says that Christians **"must no longer walk as the Gentiles do,"** the Gentiles being a catch-all term for unbelievers. In 5:2 he exhorts us to **"walk in love."** Again, in 5:6, he tells us to **"walk as children of light."** You might think he has made his point by now, but no. In 5:15 he urges us yet again to **"look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise."**

I hardly need to remind you that his use of the verb **"to walk"** has nothing to do with traveling around your neighborhood or at the mall on your feet. Paul has in mind **the way we live, how we conduct ourselves as those who know Christ**. The failure to walk in a manner that is consistent with the grace of God shown us in Jesus is to betray our confession.

I wish I had known this in 1970. I will never forget a conversation that I had with a fraternity brother of mine. His name was Trey, and I had finally found the courage to explain the gospel to him. Sadly, something I said led him to a horrible and unbiblical conclusion, one that I had no intention of communicating. At the end of our time, he said, "Well, that's good news. It means I can become a Christian and still live like hell!" I was so stunned when he said this, that I didn't know how to respond. I was still growing in my understanding of Christianity and failed to set him straight. I can't recall if I ever got around to telling him, "No, that is not good news. If I had been better acquainted with Scripture, I could have responded by pointing him to Ephesians 5:5-6,

"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. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience."

After our time together, upon reading these verses as well as many others in the NT, I realized that I was guilty of deceiving Trey with empty words. I don't know what ultimately became of him, but I hope that someone along the way set him straight. It grieves me to think I may have been responsible for him embracing a view of Christianity that put his soul in jeopardy of eternal damnation.

All this to say that how we "walk" throughout the course of our lives is of utmost and eternal importance. I pray to God that I'm never again guilty of deceiving someone with empty words.

As we look at Paul's instruction, I can't help but lament the fact that in so many cases the Christian appears no different from the unbeliever. The church appears no different from the country club. Preachers appear no different from political pundits. And it is tragic.

Eight Characteristics of the Christian's Walk

(1) Love one another by imitating how God loved you by providing Jesus to die for your sins (5:2).

To talk about the importance of loving one another in the body of Christ, sadly, has become rather trite, even trivial, in our day. We have heard so much about it that it no longer registers with transforming power in our hearts. It is one of those truths that confirms the old saying that "familiarity breeds contempt." We are so accustomed to it, having heard it repeatedly throughout our lives as Christians, that our response is a somewhat indifferent, "Yeah, yeah, tell me something I don't know." The reason for this, I believe, is that **we have lost sight of the deeply profound way in which God loved us by sending Jesus to die for us**. In other words, the reason we react so passively to this command is that we have lost sight of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Don't overlook or miss the connection Paul makes between the importance of loving one another and Christ having loved us by dying in our place. Look at v. 2 again: "And walk in love." Ok, but why? Because "Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." A perfect example of this is how the apostle John appeals

to us to love one another and grounds this exhortation in God's love for us. How can John speak so passionately about our responsibility to love one another? He tells us in 1 John 4:16 - "We have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us."

How do Christians love one another?

- By praying consistently for each other
- By providing physical and financial aid when others are in need
- By speaking the truth in love
- By speaking words of encouragement and not ridicule
- By affirming them and praising them when called for
- By spending time with them when they are facing difficult problems
- By defending them and coming to their aid when they are unjustly criticized
- By weeping with them when they weep, and by rejoicing when they rejoice
- By treating them as more important than yourself
- By lovingly and gently correcting them when they embrace false doctrine or engage in sinful behavior
- By being willing to die for them if the situation should ever demand it
- By being patient with them when you are tempted to cast them aside
- By never viewing them as an inconvenience
- By staying in contact with them lest they think that nobody cares

How do you know and believe the love that God has for you? Surely, it is because of what it cost him! This is the point of Paul in Romans 8:32 - "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" *The depth and intensity of God's love for you is proven in that it led him to sacrifice his own son, Jesus.*

But the magnitude of God's love for you and me is also seen by taking note of *how little we deserve it*. The more undeserving we are, the greater is his love. This is Paul's point in Romans 5:8 and 10 - "God shows his love for us in that while we were still *sinners*, Christ died for us. . . For if while we were *enemies* we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life."

If you had spent your entire life loving God and faithfully serving him and obeying his every command, Christ's death for you would not register in your hearts as greatly as it does when you remember that you were a hell-deserving sinner who merited only eternal condemnation.

And never forget that God did this for us *freely*. He had no obligation to send Jesus to die for us. He was under no mandate from some authority outside himself. He could have left all of us in our sin and never suffered reproach.

But there is yet another reason why the death of Jesus for us demonstrates the depth of God's love. It has to do with *the value of the person who died*. Again, in v. 2b, Paul describes the death of Jesus as *"a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* We can almost envision the Father bending low, hovering over the death of Jesus, taking in the aroma of his sacrifice, satisfied with the sweet smell of so great a love. And why was it so pleasing to the Father and so great a gift to you and me? It is because he "gave *himself* us for us." He didn't redeem us by paying a ransom of gold and silver, but the ransom was his own blood. He didn't simply sacrifice time and privilege and convenience for us. *He sacrificed himself!* The reason why his sacrifice smelled good to God is because he was the sinless, selfless Son of God. If Jesus had gone to the cross as a criminal or thief or liar, his death would never have been sufficient to redeem you and me. It was the infinite and immeasurable value of his dignity as the Son of God that made his sacrifice so powerful.

"He left the glory of heaven and took on human nature so that he could hunger and get weary and in the end suffer and die. The incarnation was the preparation of nerve endings for the nails of the cross. Jesus needed a broad human back for a place to be scourged. He needed a brow and skull as a place for the thorns. He needed cheeks for Judas' kiss and soldiers' spit. He needed hands and feet for spikes. He needed a side as a place for the sword to pierce. And he needed a brain and a spinal cord, with no vinegar and no gall, so that he could feel the entire excruciating death—for you" (John Piper).

Do you feel the force of that today? I hope so. Because if you don't, you will only be put off by people who offend you. You will only be impatient by their need of you. You will find the time it takes to serve and help them to be a

massive intrusion into the convenience and schedule of your life. But when you think of the lengths to which God went in giving his Son for you, loving others will come easily and joyfully to you. And not simply loving others, but also the next seven things that Paul emphasizes in vv. 3-4.

And let me say again, it is only as you are deeply rooted in God's love for you in Christ Jesus that you will find the strength and the incentive to do what he says.

(2) Avoid sexual immorality (5:3a)

How many times have you heard someone say: "Fornication is a trivial sin. God will overlook it. He knows your nature. He knows your needs. You are not under law but under grace. So indulge and enjoy yourself." Paul's perspective on this is decidedly different.

Sexual immorality, once again, is the translation of a single Greek word: *porneia*. It refers to any form of sexual activity outside of marriage. This would include premarital sex, homosexuality, sex with a prostitute, incestuous relationships, etc. As much as you might be inclined to think this sort of sexual sin is more prominent in our day than it was in the first century, you would be wrong. Among Gentiles in the Roman empire there were few if any accepted standards for sexual conduct. All of these expressions of sexual immorality were rampant in Ephesus.

Contrary to those who insist that the Bible is against sex, these guardrails are designed to preserve and protect sexual relations for the optimum pleasure of a husband and a wife. *Personal property* is a blessing, and that is why the NT prohibits stealing. *Telling the truth* is a blessing, and that is why the NT prohibits lying. *Human life* is precious, and that is why the Bible prohibits murder. In much the same way, *sexual intimacy* between a husband and his wife is a blessing, and that is why we find commandments such as this one in Ephesians 5:23.

(3) Resist all impurity (5:3b)

Paul uses the word "impurity" at least six times in reference to sexual sin (Romans 1:24; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 4:19; Colossians 3:5). But I think Paul has homosexuality primarily in view. Look closely with me at Romans 1:24 and 26-27 –

"Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to *impurity* (there's our word), to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, . . . For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error."

This is what happens when a culture exchanges God for some other idol. The people abandon the proper expression of sexuality and start exchanging what is natural (heterosexual sex) for what is unnatural (homosexual sex).

(4) Avoid covetousness (5:3c)

Paul doesn't specify what the object of coveting might be. In all likelihood he has in mind *the insatiable desire or the strong inordinate craving to acquire more and more of whatever it is that is the focus of your pursuits* (see Heb. 13:5; 1 Tim. 6:8). The primary reason this is considered a serious sin is that it means God isn't enough for you. When you are unsatisfied with him and his love, grace, and forgiveness, a person turns to fill the hole in one's soul with some other object that he believes will do for him what God won't. When you long for something or someone or perhaps an experience in place of resting in the beauty and delight that we find in Jesus, you are guilty of covetousness.

When Paul writes that such sinful activities "must not even be named among you," he doesn't mean you should never speak the words themselves. He isn't saying that you are forbidden from talking about or discussing these things. He's concerned with the actions. What is "proper" among Christians is that no one would ever have grounds for accusing those in the church of behaving in these sinful ways.

(5) Avoid filthiness (5:4a)

Verse 4 has our speech specifically in mind. "All three (of Paul's references) refer to a dirty mind expressing itself in dirty conversation" (Stott, 192).

"Filthiness" could refer to anything that is shameful or debased, or it might be a reference to filthy words and speech. Quite honestly, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find a TV show or movie or comedian that does not build their fame or following on the strength of filthy talk. I often wonder if our world might look for a different adjective other than the f-word. It almost seems as if everything in life is characterized as f-ing this or f-ing that. I'm sorry for describing this, but such is the demented nature of our world. May it never be true among the followers of Jesus.

(6) Refrain from foolish talk (5:4b).

The word translated "foolish" is built on two parts. The word for foolish is the Greek term *mōros*, from which we get our English term, moron. The term for word or speech is then added to it. It refers to silly, stupid, salacious talk. Using such language doesn't mean you are cool or in touch with society or that you are more clever than others. It means that you are disobedience and have no regard for the holiness of God and of your own life.

(7) Crude joking is out of place (5:4c)

The word translated "crude joking" only appears one time in the NT: right here. Clint Arnold says that it could refer to "some kind of inhumane or degrading jesting . . . often at somebody's else's expense" (322). So, what do you do if you're in the company of people who speak this way? There's no need to engage them in an argument about the impropriety of such dirty, shameful language. Just turn and walk away. They'll get the message. I think Clint Arnold has captured Paul's emphasis:

"There is no indication here that Paul is a prude who is advocating an unreasonable moratorium on all forms of humor. He seems to be saying that humor is like anger – it may be appropriate on certain occasions, but it needs to be carefully controlled because it can easily degenerate into sin" (322).

One thing that I find exceedingly important about each of these warnings by Paul is the fact that he believes everything he has mentioned is within our power to avoid, as long as we rely upon the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit. Nothing said here is beyond your ability to tame and to control, if you rely on the presence of the Holy Spirit. We often hear from so-called experts that certain impulses and desires are not ours to control. We can't do anything to resist them. Therefore, they cannot be considered sinful or immoral. These desires and impulses and inclinations are simply a part of our nature and should be embraced, not defied.

Clearly, Scripture takes a different approach. It is within our power to change our desires and to resist the temptations that they bring us. But this power is not inherent within us. It must come from the energizing presence of the Holy Spirit.

(8) Instead of such dirty speech, let there be thanksgiving on your lips (5:4c).

Why thanksgiving? Of all the responses he might have suggested, it is gratitude on which he focuses. Why? For one thing, if your heart and mind are flooded with gratitude, you will find it extremely difficult to give yourself over to sexual immorality and crude and offensive speech. ***Gratitude is the antithesis of entitlement.*** Once you realize and meditate on the fact that everything you have is a gift from God, the mere thought of sexual impurity and covetousness and crude joking will be offensive to you. When you realize that you deserve to be on the outside of God's eternal kingdom, but because of his saving grace and love you will be on the inside, there is little room left for the many sins that he mentions in vv. 3-4.

John Piper has greatly helped me to understand why Paul replaces these many sins with gratitude:

"Would you have chosen gratitude or thankfulness as the opposite of all these sexual and verbal sins? Why does Paul? Here's what I would suggest is the reason. If fornication and impurity are driven by covetousness, and covetousness is a deep discontented craving that dominates your life and even leads you to go against the will of God, then it is clear that the opposite experience would be thanksgiving. If you are overflowing with thanksgiving to God, then you are not dominated and driven by discontentment at what you have been denied.

Gratitude is what you feel when you believe God is for you and not against you. It's what you feel when you believe that he gives you only what is good for you and withholds no good thing (single or married!). It's what you feel when you trust him, that the tragedies of your life are not evidences of his meanness or his

incompetence; but rather that they are the discipline of a loving Father who values your holiness above your fleeting worldly happiness. That's why verse 20 goes so far as to say, "Always and for everything give thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father."

So you can see how thanksgiving is the alternative to a life driven by cravings for what you don't have (whether sex or money). Thanksgiving says, in God I have all that is good for me, and I will not be driven to dishonor the worth of his name just to get a few sexual sensations or a few new toys.

And you can see easily how thanksgiving is also the opposite of treating God's gifts as filthy or as trivial. When you are truly grateful for something, you don't despise it and you don't trivialize it. Just test yourself: When your heart is overflowing with gratitude to God, do you use filthy language or make light of things? No. Gratitude is what you feel when you have been given eyes to see that all of life is the work of a sovereign and gracious God. It is not for trifling and it's not for defiling."

How Serious are Such Sins?

How serious are these sins? Am I overemphasizing them? Are we making a mountain out of a mole hill? Does it really matter all that much if a person chooses to live in such sins without repentance? I'll let the apostle Paul answer that question in vv. 5-6.

But before we do that, it is vital we remember that Paul isn't talking about someone who on occasion commits such sins. My guess is that all of us have at one time or another fallen prey to the temptation to act in the ways that Paul denounces. So, it isn't a singular act that he has in mind, but ***a lifestyle of unrepentant and willful immersion in these sins***. So, don't despair of eternal life if you have ever been guilty of these acts. The question is: have you come under conviction of the Holy Spirit and repented of such sin?

I was guilty of "foolish talk" and "empty words" when I spoke with my friend, Trey, and failed to warn him that to continue living in the way he had grown accustomed to could easily lead to the wrath of God. Empty words are the sort that tell people that since God is gracious and forgiving, he would never cast them out because of how they live. "Don't be concerned with your sexual conduct or how you speak to and about others. God will always let you in." Well, actually, no he won't.

What are the ***"empty words"*** that Paul mentions? Notice that its place in vv. 5-6 is in relation to these sins that bring eternal condemnation. This tells me that what Paul has specifically in mind are those people who try to tell you that *hell is a medieval myth, a superstitious boogey man* that you employ to keep your children in line. Hell doesn't exist. And you don't need to worry about your beliefs or conduct. Everyone will be saved. If ever there were empty words, those are it.

Paul is telling us in no uncertain terms that to deny the gravity of these sins, to refuse to repent of them, to put yourself in jeopardy of eternal damnation because of them is nothing more than "empty words." Words that have no grounding in truth. Words that only blind people to their perilous condition. Words that lie to you and try to deceive you into thinking that God will welcome you into his kingdom no matter how many times you sin in the way Paul describes in vv. 3-4.

Empty words are also those that ***deny the reality of God's wrath*** (v. 6). We hear it often said that God is a creampuff, an easily manipulated grandfather figure who wouldn't hurt a fly, much less the people he has created in his own image. To say that God gets so angry and displeased with these sins, when they are repeatedly committed without repentance, that he would consign a person to hell, is beneath his dignity. No, it is precisely because God is dignified and just and holy that he will not tolerate the idolatry that is beneath and behind these transgressions.

The NT gives us numerous reasons why we should avoid sexual immorality. One example is when Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 that our bodies belong to God and that we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 2 he spoke of us as temples of the Holy Spirit. But here he turns to the reality of eternal judgment and the wrath of God. Sadly, street preachers with their large signs that declare, "Turn or burn!" have prompted many only to laugh and trivialize God's eternal judgment. But the truth of God's anger at sin and the prospect of eternal damnation cannot be avoided. In fact, it is so important that Paul repeats his warning twice in vv. 5-6. He says much the same thing elsewhere:

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the

greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

"Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:19-21).

"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming" (Col. 3:5-6).

Look again at v. 5. **Why does Paul say that covetousness is idolatry?** That seems strange, doesn't it? To be covetous dethrones God from his place of supremacy in your life. To be covetous means you have cravings and longings for something other than God and that you elevate them to do for you what you don't believe God can accomplish. It means that God is not adequate or worthy enough to satisfy your deepest desires.

Paul is alerting us to the fact that God and God alone must be the all-consuming joy and satisfaction in our lives. No amount of stuff, be it material wealth or popularity or success or fame can do for you what only God can. That is why **when you replace God** and his immeasurable greatness with trinkets and toys and cars and computers and multiple homes and everything else that money can buy, you are guilty of idolatry! You are worshiping and giving ultimate allegiance to something other than God. That is idolatry!

There is a movement in American evangelicalism that contends that the "inheritance" that is in view here is not salvation itself, but only the rewards that a person will either gain by obedience or forfeit by sin. The failure to inherit the kingdom, so they say, is not to say that the person is unsaved and lost for eternity. It has to do solely with the rewards that they will either be granted or lost.

I believe those who advocate this view are hugely mistaken. But how do we know that not having an "inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" is the same thing as suffering in hell? We know this because in v. 6 he says that those who behave in this way are "the sons of disobedience" on whom "the wrath of God comes." It isn't the loss of rewards that they suffer, but the loss of eternal fellowship with God and the suffering of his wrath, forever.



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