

Truth for Today

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Studies in Ephesians: Ephesians 4:17-5:20 - The Believer's Walk

I have long been impressed with how happily our lovely English Bible lends itself to alliteration. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians is an excellent example of this.

Taking the Epistle chapter by chapter, more or less, we get a good framework for more detailed study if we accept the following outline:

- Ephesians 1:1-23 The Will of God
- Ephesians 2:1-22 The Work of God
- Ephesians 3:1-21 The Wisdom of God
- Ephesians 4:1-32 The Christian's Walk
- Ephesians 5:1-33 The Christian's Witness
- Ephesians 6:1-24 The Christian's Warfare

The headings given for the chapters illustrate something else that sets the pattern in most of Paul's major epistles, or letters as we would say. The first half of each epistle, more or less, is devoted to doctrine. The second half, more or less, tells us the kind of life produced if we believe and live out the doctrine, or teaching.

There is a grand verse which sums up this balance, and it is a balance. Isaiah 30:21 says, "This is the way, walk ye in it." "This is the way" is a good way of saying, "This is a summary of what we Christians should believe." "Walk ye in it" is an equally good way of saying, "You've had the teaching. Now make sure that how you behave corresponds with what you believe." Indeed, long term, what we believe affects and regulates how we behave, That's why the teaching usually comes first in the Apostle Paul's letters.

This concept of "walking" included in Isaiah 30:21 brings us back to Ephesians 4.

The Christian life is not a gallop, charging headlong at every obstacle that presents itself. Neither is it a sprint, pursued at such a breakneck speed that there is no time to consider what is going on about us or do anything about it. At the other extreme, it is not intended to be an aimless, desultory crawl. The concept of a walk suggests steady, continuous, considered, measured, balanced progress towards a definite objective. For this reason, the concept of a walk is entirely suited to the thought of the Christian life. This is, no doubt, why the lives of those who live by faith in God is likened in the Bible to a walk. There are many examples in both Old and New Testaments.

The portion allocated for our study today is Ephesians 4:17-5:20. From Ephesians 4:1 we have been directed to this very idea of walking. As we read in Ephesians 4:1, the exhortation comes to those who have received the teaching of Ephesians 1:1-3:21, "I therefore ... beseech you ... walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called."

Where we pick up, Ephesians 4:17, we are again brought to this same idea. Don't walk or live like unconverted people or even like you used to yourselves. The Christian life is a new life with a new object, a new relationship and a new power. However, we must not anticipate too much.

And now a few brief comments on the detail verse by verse. It will help you concentrate if you keep your eye on the text as we move through the verses.

Ephesians 4:17-19

The behaviour of unconverted people who have no knowledge of God. They do not want to know God and there is therefore no restraint on their conduct.

Ephesians 4:20-21

Christians are different. They have put their trust in Christ as Saviour. They have yielded to Him as Lord.

Ephesians 4:22

They have committed themselves once and for all to be finished with the old life they once lived.

Ephesians 4:23-24

They have a completely new outlook. They are committed to living a completely new kind of life. Their lives are now Christ centred, where they were once completely self centred. Their lifestyle is now geared to pleasing God and not to pleasing themselves or impressing other people.

Ephesians 4:25-27

The evidence is there for all to see. Their tongues which were previously used for lying are now used to tell the truth. Why should this be the first matter mentioned? It has been well said that the tongue is the most difficult member of the body to control (see James 3:1-12). On the other hand, don't let the devil deceive you into an easy going compliance with the ungodly world in a mistaken idea of so called Christian charity. Speak the truth without fear or favour.

Ephesians 4:28

What a contrast! Hands that used to go surreptitiously into other people's pockets, to steal what was there, are now employed in useful work earning wages that can be used to buy things to put into the pockets of other people who are more needy than themselves. Now they are helping other people, rather than stealing from them. What a turn-round!

Ephesians 4:29

Instead of indulging in destructive criticism, constructive teaching, that will do others good, is now provided.

Ephesians 4:30-31

As those who are indwelt and controlled by the Holy Spirit, the life is lived in a way that pleases God, not grieving Him.

Ephesians 4:32

The standard has been set. God has forgiven us, not because we deserve it, but for Christ's sake. Christ paid the price, the full price of redemption. As Peter says in his 1 Peter 1:18-19, "We were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver or gold ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."

The work is done. God has set His seal to it, the seal of the Holy Spirit. Full, final salvation is assured. It is a settled matter. God has given His word.

In the appreciation of that, Christians accept the need to forgive one another in the same spirit. "Be ye kind, tender hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32).

Ephesians 5:1-20

Turning now to Ephesians 5:1-20, we are directed once more to this concept of walking as an illustration of the Christian way of life. Indeed, more than an illustration. In Ephesians 5, we see that the Christian witness is based on the Christian life and is a major feature of it. That is, Christian walk and Christian witness are indissolubly linked and firmly intertwined. Let us consider some of the important matters referred to and taught in Ephesians 5.

Ephesians 5:1-2

As ever, the perfect example of everything that is good is the Lord Jesus Himself.

"You belong to God's family," says the Apostle Paul. "You are His children. Let His character shine out in you as it did in the Lord Jesus when He lived on the earth." Even His death, or, perhaps especially His death, is looked at in this way.

The words used here to describe the character of His death are quite special. In the first place, His death at Calvary is spoken of as a burnt offering. That is, His prime motive was to please God. There are many Scriptures that tell us that Jesus was never more pleasing to God than when He willingly gave Himself in death upon the cross. His devotion was never more pure or complete than then. And God never appreciated Him more. There are things about the purity and

beauty of the Lord Jesus that only God fully knows. As we read in Luke 10:22, "No man knoweth the Son but the Father."

Secondly, the other word used here, sacrifice, or peace offering, also has a special meaning. In the peace offering, detailed in Leviticus 3:1-17 and Leviticus 7:11-21, there was something for every party involved. The burnt offering (Leviticus 1:1-17 and Leviticus 6:8-13) teaches us that there are certain things about the value and worth of the death of Christ that only God can fully appreciate. The peace offering, or fellowship offering, tells us that through the death of Christ there are things about Him that we can not only know and enjoy, but enjoy in fellowship with God. What a great blessing it is that these things are said here to be a feature of normal Christian living.

Ephesians 5:3-7

These verses remind us that enjoying the spiritual blessings of Christianity leads to wanting nothing more to do with the sordid way of life of those who have no knowledge of God.

Ephesians 5:8-10

"You used to be like that," Paul says. "However respectable or cultured you seemed to be on the surface, deep down, inside, your life was self centred. Ultimately, your life was moving on eventually to judgement before God. A tremendous change has taken place since you believed the Christian gospel." That change is so great, the contrast so vivid that he puts it starkly, "Ye were sometimes darkness, now ye are light in the Lord." "Let it show," he says. "Walk as children of light. Prove what is acceptable to God." "Prove it in your own experience. Demonstrate it to others. You live in a way that pleases God. Let your light shine."

Ephesians 5:11-13

"Make a conscious decision to keep away, avoid from the start the sort of lifestyle that has its roots in sin." This is good advice. "Don't let the devil deceive you into thinking that it must be alright to do things because everybody else does them."

When the Apostle Paul wrote these words, there were things going on that were so shameful that those who did them did them surreptitiously, when no one was looking, in case they were found out, and became a public disgrace. One of the sadnesses of modern day life in many countries in the world is that things that were once considered shameful and clearly condemned by God in the Bible, are now not only tolerated, but also condoned and even actively encouraged and promoted by the law of the land. Promiscuity and homosexuality are clear examples of the trend. Man's standards are on a continuing downward spiral. God's standards never change. He will eventually bring into the open and condemn things that men and women would prefer to remain hidden.

The Christian witness involves living a clean life. It also involves speaking out where necessary to reprove what is obnoxious to God. The Apostle Paul sums this up here by saying, "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret. But all things that are reprov'd are made manifest by the light: for whatsoever doth make manifest is light" (Ephesians 5:11-13)

Ephesians 5:14-17

"Come on," says Paul. "Leave people in no doubt. Live the Christian life to the full. Let your witness be bright. Don't doze off in the sordid environment of this sinful world." "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from among the dead and Christ shall shine upon thee."

"Keep clear of the moral filth which is the accepted norm. Christ is coming. Time is short. Spend your time well and wisely." "Redeem the time because the days are evil." "Apply spiritual wisdom. In keeping clear of sin and refusing to yield to the temptations of the devil, you will realise the will of the Lord for you."

Ephesians 5:18-20

So, we come to the climax of this important section of scripture. What is the power for the Christian walk? That is, what power is available for the Christian to live and behave in a way that pleases God? As for everything else connected with Christian life and practice, the power necessary, indeed the only power available, is the power of the Holy Spirit. This is emphasised in verses Ephesians 5:18-20 by taking up the case of the influence of alcohol in and with a drunken man.

Before taking up the detail of this illustration, it will be well to think about this very important but much misunderstood exhortation in Ephesians 5:18, "be filled with the Spirit." As ever with Scripture, it must be examined in its own context, and against the background of the teaching of Scripture as a whole. It is important to note that the exhortation is found in this vital practical section about Christian life and behaviour. The filling or fullness of the Spirit is to be seen, not in extravagant behaviour or ecstatic utterances, but in the way we meet all our domestic, business and spiritual obligations. It would be good if we were all to realise that in order to be filled with the Spirit we must first be emptied of everything that is self centred. Then, and only then, can we be filled with everything that is Christ centred in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, back to the illustration of the influence of alcohol on a drunken man (Ephesians 5:18). The illustration has force both by way of comparison and also by way of contrast, between a drunken man and a sober man.

The comparison might be taken up in this way. A drunken man's actions are under the control and influence of a power other than his own. He finds himself doing things and saying things of a nature and in a style completely foreign to his natural activity. So the Christian, under the influence and power of the Holy Spirit, can behave in a manner impossible in his own natural power and energy.

The contrast is almost, but not quite, along the same lines. Under the influence of alcohol, the thoughts and actions of a drunken man are completely out of control. The thoughts and actions of the Christian are under perfect control, the control of the Holy Spirit. At best, a drunken man intends to please himself. A Christian intends to and is capable of pleasing God.

This is reflected in the many and varied activities involved in living the Christian life. Most important of all, there is the life of the Christian Godward, expressing itself in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19).

Psalms, in general, are the expression of the feelings and appreciation produced in the heart and soul of those going through all the varied experiences of life in company with God. The Old Testament psalmist speaks in Psalm 45 of the "[things which] ...I have composed..." (Psalm 45:1, JN Darby Translation). Similarly, the Christian learns things about God and about himself by consciously facing up to the many experiences of life in the fear of God. This leads to spiritual joy in the soul and praise to God.

Hymns are not quite the same. Hymns are poetical expressions to God, i.e. addressed to God, in which praise and worship to God are offered in the appreciation of what the soul has learned of God and from God.

If hymns are addressed to God, spiritual songs are compositions about God, rehearsing the way God has taken in bringing about salvation for His glory and the blessing of mankind.

Turning from these proper activities Godward, the Scripture turns to many expressions of the Christian life manward. The Christian life is intended to be expressed in the various relationships in which a Christian finds himself or herself in Ephesians 5:21-6:9. That, however, is another big subject which I must leave to another speaker on another day.

But now, for the moment, let us pray.

O God our Father, we thank Thee for the power of the Holy Spirit Who indwells every believer of the Christian Gospel. We thank Thee that He is available to guide us into all truth and to lead us in every proper expression of the Christian life. Help us, we pray, to be willing to so live, by His power, in such a way as to encourage other people to trust the Saviour for themselves. We ask these things for Thy praise and glory and in the Name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

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