

“Light in the Lord”

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This dark world needs Jesus followers who shine light with goodness and truth.

Ephesians 5:1-20

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Love and rules

This past week I was running late for a meeting at church. Most of the attendees were coming in person, but at least one was joining via Zoom. As I came down 127 with no cars in sight (or so I thought), that person texted me and said, “Standing by....” I saw the message on the phone and typed in, “On my way. Sorry.” As I did so, a car next to me tapped the horn.

My first thought was, “Someone’s on their way to work and saying Hi.” I kept typing my text. There was a double horn tap from the car next to me. I looked over this time, and it wasn’t anyone I knew. It was a sheriff’s deputy scolding me with his look and a wagging finger. I deserved it. He could have given me a ticket.

I tell you that story not because I think it’s funny. It isn’t. Or because I’m proud of it. I’m not. It’s a great setup for today’s sermon. There are areas in all of our lives where we make excuses for our behavior or rationalize “Just this once.”

In the first three chapters of Ephesians Paul wants his readers to know they are “unconditionally and permanently loved” through Jesus. The only direct command in those chapters is “Remember.” Remember who you were before you were saved by grace through faith. By contrast, there are about 60 commands in chapters 4-6.

How can Paul tell us we are “unconditionally and permanently loved” and then give us this whole series of Do’s and Don’ts? Is he saying, “God won’t love you quite as much if you don’t do these things?” Not at all.

When you bring a child into the world, do you convey to that child, “You are unconditionally and permanently loved?” Yes, you do. Loving your child unconditionally and permanently from birth is what it means to be a mother or a father.

Fast forward to when that child turns 15 or 16. Are there any Do’s and Don’ts as you teach your child to drive? Maybe more of them than they heard collectively in the first decade and a half of life! “Put your seat belt on. Check your surroundings. Use your turn signals. Never get behind the wheel if you’re under the influence of any drug or alcohol. And never, ever, text and drive.”

“But I thought I was loved unconditionally and permanently. Why all the rules?”

“Love is why I make the rules. Driving is the riskiest thing I’ve ever taught you to do. You take your own life and that of others into your hands when you get behind that wheel. I won’t let you get your license if you don’t learn to follow these rules.”

That’s how we need to read Ephesians 5:1-20. They are Do’s and Don’ts from the God who loves you unconditionally and permanently.

A better approach

Christians misuse lists of rules like this one in the Bible in two primary ways. The first is to *overthink* it: to list all twenty commands, study them carefully in the original language, come up with the precise and correct meaning of each, argue vehemently if others interpret wrongly, and apply with precision or even go further than what Paul said just to be sure you don’t come anywhere close to breaking the rule.

This is like a teenager thinking, “I’ve got to remember every one of those driving rules Mom and Dad gave me. I’ll tape them in my car. Better yet, I’ll put them on my phone. That way when I’m driving and I’m not sure what to do I can check the list.”

The other way to misuse a text like this is to *disregard* it. Paul, after all, wrote at a different time and audience. Again, back to our teen driver. “My parents are old-fashioned. They were just giving suggestions. I shouldn’t text while driving unless it’s critically urgent, like being late to start a Zoom meeting....”

Ephesians 5 gives a much better approach to God’s rules.

First, it’s always about love. “Love” appears in every book of the Bible except one. (Can you guess? Acts. I’m not sure why.) It’s a shame “love” is used so often and with so many meanings that it loses its power. Not for Paul, not in Ephesians. In the first three chapters Paul can’t find enough words or strong enough words to express the love of God. “In love he predestined us” (1:4-5). “Because of his great love for us” (2:4). “...how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.”

As he opens chapter 5, Paul writes, “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children, 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). This connects to the previous chapter, where Paul had said to forgive “Just as God in Christ forgave you” (4:32).

“Follow God’s example” is a bit weak in its translation. Literally it’s “Be mimickers of God.” Observe God, and do what he does.

While there are different ways to express the overarching theme of the Bible, one of the best is this: God wants us to be like him. Genesis 1:26 says that God created human beings in his image. 1 John 3:2 says that when we see God “we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.” In between those covers of the Bible God gave grand displays of what he’s like to the Jewish people in the Old Testament. Then he came into the world through Jesus so we could see more precisely what it’s like to be like God in a fully human form. If you want to know what Godlikeness looks like, think Jesus.

Here Paul summarizes what it means to imitate God by saying, “Walk in the way of love,” and Jesus is your model. While Jesus’ sacrificial death accomplished much more than just being an example for us, he was our great example. The Christian life should be lived out with the question, “What makes my life look more like Jesus giving himself up and sacrificing himself to God for me?”

From there Paul connects two themes – sex and money. What these themes have in common is not only their universal appeal but their potential for either exploitation or connection. When we use either sex or money to fulfill our lusts, when we use people, when we turn God’s holy gifts into cheap jokes, it’s the same as idolatry, Paul says. Idolatry is the worship of self. Love is the sacrifice of self for the other.

One of the right questions anytime we’re asking what’s right and wrong is, “What looks like Jesus’ love in this moment?” I add “Jesus” in there precisely because there are so many ways the word “love” is used and misused. But this also goes beyond WWJD (What would Jesus do?), which is often not a very helpful question. Jesus never owned or drove a car, so how would I know what he would do? “What would Jesus’ love do?” frames the question differently. He wouldn’t text while driving because it’s almost always an extremely selfish, impulsive act that puts others at risk.

There are actions and decisions in life that are so clearly unlike Jesus that Paul says they’re incompatible with the kingdom of God. Verses 5-6 are not designed to have you question whether you are unconditionally and permanently loved. Paul wants you to recoil in horror at the possibility that you could ever consciously choose immorality or greed which have no place among those who ruled by the King of love. The Bible never offers assurance to those who willfully spurn the Holy Spirit.

Second, the darkness needs your light. The metaphor of light and darkness is also a theme from Genesis to Revelation. God’s first creative act was, “Let there be

light...God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:3-4). The Apostle John loves this metaphor. Jesus is the light of God that came into the world (John 1:4), but people loved darkness rather than light (John 3:19). God is light and in him there is no darkness (1 John 1:5). Heaven will not need the sun or the moon because the Creator of light will shine his glory (Revelation 21:23).

The question for the Christian is not just “What looks like Jesus’ love?” but “What shines Jesus’ light?” Paul reminds his readers, “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light” (8). That verse is so central in Ephesians, it’s our verse of the week in Ephesians.

What shines light? Goodness, righteousness, and truth (9). This is the Ephesians version of “the fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23). Be *good*. Do the *right* thing. Tell the *truth*. It’s Christian Kindergarten stuff. It’s Driving 101 in the Christian life.

“Find out what pleases the Lord,” Paul says. When you are making decisions, ask, “Jesus, what would make you happy?” He’s happiest when our light shines.

Paul says to “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them” (11). He obviously doesn’t mean that Christians should go around with a flashlight attached to their head exposing every sin or sinner. That’s totally unlike Jesus, for one thing, and it generates heat, not light. At times our presence or our acts of service expose the darkness and shine the light. Sometimes we do have to call out injustice and immorality. It takes discernment to be lights.

We’re not sure who or what Paul is quoting in verse 14: “Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” It doesn’t seem to come from any Old Testament Scripture. It may be an early Christian hymn or liturgy, which is why music comes into the next section. Jesus’ light shines on us and then through us.

The world doesn’t need anything more than it needs Christians who, even though we never do it perfectly or consistently, want the world around us to see Jesus’ light in our goodness, righteousness, and truth.

Third, the details matter (15-20). The right questions are, “What demonstrates Jesus’ love?” and “What shines the light of the Lord?” but the answers to those questions could be so vague as to justify almost anything we want to do.

Paul is telling us you can’t excuse unchristian behavior by saying, “I’m just livin’ a life of love, man, shinin’ a light in the world” while sex and money and booze control your mind and your actions. Those whose lives are transformed by being loved unconditionally and permanently don’t allow that kind of thinking.

Paul’s conclusion to this section is to “Be very careful, then, how you live” (15). I like the literal translation better: “Watch carefully, therefore, how you walk.” When our

teens were learning how to drive, Linda's favorite word was, "Watch...." It's possible she might still use that word with me when she notices I'm distracted while driving. "Watch...." Just look at how you're living your life.

Paul follows that with "Making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil" (16). The details – *every* opportunity. "Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is" (17). What does God desire?

Here's a "detail" God cares a lot about: Who or what is in control in your life. The science about what feeds and reinforces addictions to drugs, alcohol, pornography, shopping, self-harm, or anything else that has come a long way since Paul wrote Ephesians. We know it's not just a simple matter of deciding to quit. I asked a sex addict recently, "What could I have said in a sermon 18 months ago that would have made a difference?" He answered, "Nothing. I had to hit bottom."

Paul isn't really saying it's all that simple either. He is using chemical addiction to illustrate being "under the influence." Literally we could translate his words, "Don't keep on getting drunk with wine, which is such a waste." In other words, "How's that workin' for ya? Does that really solve anything?" When you use chemicals to feel better in the midst of suffering, you're wasting the suffering.

Paul continues, "But keep being filled with the Spirit." It's a shame this phrase has been a topic of contention between charismatic and anti-charismatic Christians. It's actually rather rare in the New Testament – used only in Luke, Acts, and Ephesians. The point is to let your controlling influence be the Holy Spirit, not substance. It's not a one-time filling. Keep being filled in the same way a drunk needs more drink.

How do you do that? Paul follows with four participles – speaking, singing, thanking, and submitting. We'll get to that last one next week. But these are actions of the Christian community in relation to other believers. We're made to be like God – which means to be in connection. We can't live love or shine light or live out the details without some help from other Christians. That's why we're working so hard to get our church family back in church, back to eating together, back to serving together, back to learning together. Make it your aim to take steps in that direction this summer.

It's way too easy for Christians to take bits and pieces of Ephesians 5 and make it the whole thing. To listen to some Christians, the whole of the Christian life is "Don't have sex outside of marriage." In my view, we make either too much or too little out of sex. We make too much of it if we look at a passage like this one and fail to notice that Paul makes just as much or more out of greed, for example. We make too little out of sex if we're so afraid of being out of touch with culture that we think God doesn't care about it. Of course he cares about something that we think about so often and something he wired into our brains.

But what do we do with this long list of commands?

Love divine

My Thursday morning men's Bible study has a bit of a complex. I tell the guys they're very important to my sermon preparation because Thursday's a big day as I get ready for Sunday. I need their input. From time to time they complain that I never use the great ideas they give me, so I'll throw them a bone today. Here are three thoughts from my Thursday group about how to apply Ephesians 5:1-20.

Path-goal theory. This leadership model simply says that leaders are more effective when they consider the personal characteristics of their employees. We can reach the shared goal together if we personalize the path.

You're not going to become fully like Jesus all in one day. What's the next step on the path for you?

Tune up. Sometimes they use a line in the group and then tell me not to quote it. Someone in my group Thursday said, "Check yourself before you wreck yourself." As I wrote the words down, one of the guys said, "Don't use that in your sermon. That's from a rap song you wouldn't want to endorse." I looked it up. They were right.

But in that same conversation one of the guys said that a sermon like this is like a tune up. You can't keep all these commands in your frontal lobe at the same time, any more than a teen driver can consciously focus on all the Do's and Don'ts of driving.

Maybe there's just one of these commands that hits home today. Something in your behaviors that doesn't look much like Jesus' love. Something that the Spirit has convicted you makes the world darker, not lighter. Here's what to do about it: Don't ignore the check-engine light. Do something proactive. Do you know why I told you today that I was texting while I was driving? Because I am now *far* less likely to do it again. Confession and accountability have that effect.

Love Divine. Finally, one of my Thursday guys quoted the fourth verse of our closing hymn. I said, "We can't sing that one. We just sang it a couple of weeks ago."

Yes, we can. What this hymn does is take us from the greatest love we could ever know – the "pure unbounded love" of Jesus – to a prayer.

When we pray for the Lord to complete what he started in us, we know our prayers will be answered. In his unconditional and permanent love, he chose us before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless. He's not done with and won't give up on us. If you take nothing else today from this sermon, pray the prayer in this song.

"Finish, then, Thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be." Amen.