

Building Biblical
COMMUNITY *in* CHRIST

Choose Love Not Lust
Ephesians 5:1-7

Introduction

Stephen Covey, in his well-known book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, talks about seven key habits that characterize all highly effective people. The second habit that he addresses is this: “begin with the end in mind.”¹

He suggests that you imagine that you are driving to the funeral of a loved one. You enter the funeral home where you find numerous flowers and friends. An aura of sorrow and grief permeates the air. When you walk down the aisle and look into the casket, you gasp...*for you see yourself*. All these people are there for you...*for your* funeral, which will take place three years from today.

In your stunned state of mind, you take your seat on the front row. Looking at the program, you see that there will be four speakers. The first speaker is from your family. The second is your best friend. The third is from your workplace. And finally there is an elder from your church.

Think about the scene. What would you want each of these speakers to say about your life? How would each one describe you as a husband, mother, employee, and Christian? In his book, Covey encourages us to take a few minutes and jot down the answers to these questions.

“To begin with the end in mind” is to ask how all of life – my life – can best be lived in light the ultimate end.

Throughout the Bible, you and I are exhorted to do just that – to begin with the end in mind, to see all of life in light of our final accountability before God. And throughout the Bible, the “end” is often described as coming into our inheritance. Our life in the present is to be lived in light of our future inheritance.

This is also the case in the passage we are looking at this morning. It is found in Ephesians 5:1-6. Let’s read these verses together.

5:1 Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children 2 and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

3 But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. 4 Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. 5 For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. 7 Therefore do not be partners with them. Ephesians 5:1-7

And so “begin with the end in mind.” Paul puts it this way in verse 5, “For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.”

We’ve been away from Ephesians for several weeks, so it would be good to remind ourselves of the context. Remember, the theme of this book is *Building Biblical Community in Christ*. In chapters 1-3 Paul focuses on our *calling*, first *to spiritual blessings*, then *by reconciliation* to God and to one another, and all of this *according to God’s purpose*. But then in chapter 4 we come to a crucial turning point in the letter. It is marked by the word “therefore” in 4:1. In other words, in light of our *calling*, we are to *conduct* ourselves in a certain way. Our *conduct* should reflect our *calling*. We are to live in *unity*, in *newness*, and in *submission* to one another. Beginning in chapter 5, Paul describes this newness of life as:

- Living in the love of God (1-6)
- Living in the light of God (7-14),
- Living according to the will of God and by the Spirit of God (15-21).

Choose Sacrificial Love

Paul begins this chapter with an amazing command: “Therefore, be imitators of God...”ⁱⁱ Now that is a remarkable statement. In fact, this is the only time this command is found in the entire Bible. How in the world do you “imitate” God? The word in English sounds much like the Greek word, *mimites*, to imitate or to mimic. The New English Bible translates it “you must try to be like him.” The New Living Translation states it like this: “follow God’s example...”

This really is the essence of the Christian life. When all is said and done, it comes down to asking the question, “What would God do?” And because you and I have a very difficult time answering that question, God has given us a specific example to follow which is found in verse 2: “...and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us.”

If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. John tells us, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known” (John 1:18). And Jesus tells Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). So if you desire to be an imitator of God, be an imitator of Jesus.

You and I are called to be imitators of God. We are not called to *be* gods (as in certain religions or cults like Mormonism), but to *be like* God. How do we do that? We look at Jesus. We follow his example. We ask, “What would Jesus do?”

During our family vacation, my brother-in-law and I got into quite an argument over a rather controversial topic – gun control. I won't tell you the specifics or what my own position on the topic is. But after a lengthy, rather heated discussion, our daughter Mary Lynne intervenes with these words, so simple and yet so wise, “It all comes down to what would Jesus do.”

How do we best summarize what Jesus would do in every situation? Paul gives us the answer in verses 1-2. Jesus chose sacrificial love. “Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...” So Paul's exhortation to you and me in verses 1-2 is simple and straightforward. In every situation of life, we are to choose sacrificial love, and in doing so be imitators of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ.

As Jesus “gave himself up” for us, so we should give ourselves up for others. This is how we imitate God. And in so imitating God by following the example of Christ, we worship God. Notice what Paul says. Christ's demonstration of sacrificial love for you and me was a “*fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*” That is worship! The phrase is used over forty times in the Old Testament and means literally “the odor of a sweet smell.”ⁱⁱⁱ It describes that which is pleasing to God. Paul uses the same term in Philippians 4:18 where he describes the monetary gift given by the Phillippians as “a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.”

This is the essence of worship. Worship is *not* merely reading your Bible, coming to the church service, singing some songs, or placing your money in the offering. Worship is giving yourself up for another. Worship takes place in the tough, everyday kinds of decisions to give up your desires for the sake of another.

When you sacrificially love your wife, and so follow the example of Christ, that is worship! When you sacrifice your personal desires for the sake of a brother or sister in Christ, that is worship. When you ask the question, “What would Jesus do?”...and then do that, that is worship.

I would dare say that for many of us, we know in our *heads* much more doctrine about Christ’s sacrificial death than we experience in our *hearts* this same sacrificial love for others in the Body of Christ. Full heads, but empty hearts...that is the dilemma of evangelical Christianity in modern day America.

By the way, this underscores just how paradoxical it is when in the church there are heated arguments about how best to “worship” God. For in demanding *my* way of expressing worship over the needs or preferences of another member of the family, I am compromising the very meaning of worship itself which is best defined as sacrificial love.

Thomas a Kempis says the same thing in his classic work *The Imitation of Christ*. In speaking of unloving arguments over the Trinity, he says: “What will it avail thee to dispute profoundly of the Trinity, if thou be void of humility, and art thereby displeasing to the Trinity?” You can take those same words and apply them appropriately to any aspect of disagreement among believers. Let’s apply them to expression of our worship in song and music. “What will it profit you to have bitter disputes about worship, if all the while you lack love and humility and by this compromise the very meaning of worship itself?”

By the way, have you noticed that we could actually have entitled this message “True Worship?” The sacrificial love described in verses 1-2 is just that, authentic worship. But then in verses 3-6 Paul moves on to false worship. Love is authentic worship. Lust is idolatrous worship. We’ll look at the implications of this in a few minutes.

God’s dearly loved children

But why are we do this? What is the motivation that we have to follow God’s example? Notice what Paul says, “...as dearly love children.” We are to be imitators of God, our heavenly Father, and of Jesus, our elder brother, because we are God’s children. We belong to His family. And as members of his family, we are to show forth the family likeness.

Once again, Paul here falls back on our identity as believers as the primary motivation for obedience. “Be who you really are!” Paul says. You are God’s children, now act like it.

On May 28, 1972, the Duke of Windsor, the uncrowned King Edward VIII, died in Paris. On the same evening, a television program recounted the

main events of his life. Viewers watched film footage in which the duke answered questions about his upbringing, his brief reign, and his eventual abdication. Recalling his boyhood as Prince of Wales, he said: "My father [King George V] was a strict disciplinarian. Sometimes when I had done something wrong, he would admonish me, saying, 'My dear boy, you must always remember who you are.'"^{iv}

Probably all of us have had, at one time or another, a situation where our parents referred to the "family name" as a motivation for our actions. Though in some situations the motivation for such a reference may not be the best – as when there is wrong sense of family pride – there is nevertheless the important truth of reflecting our family's likeness. That is what Paul is saying here. We are children of God and we are to live like it. How contradictory to be children of God, but live like children of the Devil.

But notice, in this verse we are described not simply as the children of God, but as *dearly loved* children of God. A few weeks ago, we looked at the metaphor of the church as the family of God. Our key passage that Sunday was 1 John 3:1-2 – "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

Stuart Townsend in his contemporary hymn puts it so well when he writes: "How deep the Father's love for us, How vast beyond all measure; that He would give His only Son, To make a wretch His treasure."

Here is the highest motivation for loving others. This is the source out of which our sacrificial love for others flows. Only as I am secure in God's love can I move boldly into the lives of my spiritual siblings. I like how Brennan Manning puts it. It sums up well what Paul is saying here:

To me, it's more important to be loved than to love. When I have not had the experience of being loved by God, just as I am and not as I should be, then loving others becomes a duty, a responsibility, a chore. But if I let myself be loved as I am, with the love of God poured into my heart by the Holy Spirit, then I can reach out to others in a more effortless way.^v

Refuse Idolatrous Lust

Just as we are to choose sacrificial love, we are also to refuse its opposite: idolatrous lust. Paul moves now in verses 3-6 from self-sacrifice to self-indulgence; from sacrificial love to its counterfeit, idolatrous lust. He goes into specifics in these verses, naming the precise sins he is thinking of. They are: sexual immorality, any kind of impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish

talk, and coarse joking. In other words, our lives as believers should be free of the sexually corrupt behavior and speech of non-believers.

But more specifically, what do these words mean?

- *Sexual immorality* comes from the word in Paul's language *porneia*. It's the word from which we get the English word pornography. It is a general term for any form of illicit sexual activity.
- *Impurity* is often connected to "sexual immorality" and refers to any moral uncleanness which defiles the soul.^{vi} This would include lustful thoughts. Jesus states it this way: "Whoever looks on a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery in his heart" (Matthew 5:28).
- *Greed* means the lust to have more and more and which is never satisfied. The word often refers to material possessions, but in this context seems to have sexual overtones.^{vii}
- *Obscenity*. Paul now moves from lustful behavior to offensive speech. Obscenity refers to shameful, impure speech.
- *Foolish talk* can be translated as "silly, stupid talk."
- *Coarse joking* means just that...vulgar jokes often with sexual overtones.

Paul says that there must not be even a hint of any of this among us as believers. This is easier said than done in a society which has undergone a major shift in worldview. During our family vacation, I read Nancy Pearcey's monumental work *Total Truth* (by the way, it's on my top ten list and I highly recommend it!)^{viii} She states that in a recent poll, 75% of American college students said that their professors teach that there is no such thing as right and wrong. According to these professors, "what is right and wrong depends on differences in individual values and cultural diversity." In our postmodern world, where values are viewed as a mere product of personal opinion, just about anything goes. This of course is seen particularly in the realm of sexuality.

A few years ago, *The Boston Globe* reported that college students have a new way of making the grade – they watch pornographic movies. In fact, many colleges even offer courses where students analyze hard-core pornography and shoot their own footage that they show in class. This really only makes sense. If we are nothing but the product of evolution, then our human identity is wrapped up in the biological, particularly in our sexual instincts. When interviewed, one of these professors said in defense of these

“porn studies”: “Sex is now seen as the motive force of our beings...our ultimate identity.”

All of us have heard of Planned Parenthood. But probably few of us know that Margaret Sanger, the founder of the organization, was also an author who wrote several books expounding the world view behind the organization. Sanger was a committed Darwinist and set for herself the goal of constructing a “scientific” approach to sexuality based on Darwinism. In one of her books, she portrays history as a struggle to free our bodies and minds from the constraints of morality – what she termed “the cruel morality of self-denial and sin.” She argues that sexual liberation is the only way to find inner peace and beauty. She even offers an amazing promise: “Through sex, mankind will attain the great spiritual illumination which will transform the world, and light up the only path to an earthly paradise.”^{ix}

This carries over to popular culture as we all know too well. When Madonna was asked in a recent interview why she published her sexually explicit book *Sex* back in 1992, she said, “I thought I was doing a service to mankind...”^x

One of the areas in which we see such a prolific influence of immorality is on the web. There are now more than 4.2 million Internet port sites and more than 40 million people visit an Internet porn site each day. About 60% of the web sites are sexual in nature. Americans spend an estimated \$8-\$10 billion annually on pornography –more than the combined gross revenues of ABC, CBS and NBC television networks. And get this: nine out of ten kids, ages 8-16, have viewed pornography online, mostly accidentally while doing homework.

And what about you? Just as in verses 1-2 where Paul gives us a motivation for obeying his exhortation to sacrificial love, so also here we have the biblical motivation for avoiding any form of immorality in our lives. Actually, the motivation is twofold. It has to do with what immorality is. And secondly, it has to do with who we are and what God has prepared for us as his people. Let’s start with the former.

Immorality is Idolatry

Let’s look again at verse 5: “No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolater...” There you have it...immorality is idolatry. W. E. Vine writes, “Man is essentially constituted a worshipper. If he abandons the worship of God, some other object will be found to take the place of the Creator.” That too is what Paul says in Romans 1. Because man did not

worship God for who he is, God gave him over to all sorts of immorality which became a form of idolatry. Man conceives his own idols and then is deceived by the very idols he conceives. Friend, immorality is idolatry, for in immorality we are seeking a substitute for what God has graciously provided.

You and I need to recognize this. Whenever you allow even a hint of immorality into your life – whether it be in the form of lustful thoughts, pornography, fornication or adultery – you are engaging in a form of idolatry. You are worshipping something else, or someone else other than God alone.

We are God's Holy People

But let me move on to the second motivation that Paul gives in these verses to avoid even a hint of sexual impurity in our lives. He states it clearly in verse 3: “such things are improper for God's holy people.” That word “holy” is the word translated “saint.” At least eight times in this letter Paul refers to believers as “saints” (1:1, 15, 18; 2:19; 3:8, 18; 4:12; 6:18). It means “set apart for something,” in this case, set apart for God. As believers in Jesus, we have been set apart for holiness, not impurity.

It takes no papal decree to make one a saint. It takes rather God's decree, and *He has decreed that all believers in Jesus Christ are saints*. In other words, once again Paul says, “Know who you are and live like it!”

But then Paul adds something else that brings us full circle from where we began. Notice verse 5 – “No immoral, impure or greedy person-such a man is an idolater-*has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*” There it is; begin with the end in mind.

What does Paul mean? Does he mean you can lose you salvation if as a believer you commit an immoral act? No. Paul has just said in 1:14 that the Holy Spirit is given to each believer as a pledge *guarantying* our inheritance. So what does this warning mean? Let me put it this way. At the very least it means that by continuing in sin, you and I as believers forfeit our reward in heaven. At the very most it means that to continue to such sins demonstrates that we were not true believers to start with. But in both cases, the point is this: live your life with the end in mind.

ⁱ Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 96 as cited in Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Co. 1992), 43-44.

ⁱⁱ Paul begins this chapter by connecting what he is going to say with what has preceded, particularly with chapter 4:17-32. “Therefore, be imitators of God...” In chapter four Paul has spoken about the “change of clothes” that should characterize our lives as those who are part of the “new man.” Having been taken out of the old humanity, connected to Adam, and placed in the new humanity, connected to Christ, we should now put on a new moral attire. Clothes don’t make the person, but a person is often reflected in his or her clothes. As it is materially (with our material clothes), so it is spiritually (with our moral attire). Paul is now going to develop this truth in two specific ways. First, he exhorts us to choose love, not lust in verse 1-6. Then in verses 7-14 (which we’ll look at next week), he will focus on the importance of choosing light over darkness. In making the choice of love over lust and light over darkness, we are obeying the command found in the beginning of verse 1: “*Therefore, be imitators of God...*”

ⁱⁱⁱ Gen. 8:21; Ex. 29:18; 25:41; Lev. 1:9,13, 17; 2:2, 9.

^{iv} John Stott, *The Message of Romans* (InterVarsity);

^v www.preachingtoday.com citing Brennan Manning, "The Dick Staub Interview: Brennan Manning on Ruthless Trust," ChristianityToday.com (posted 12-10-02)

^{vi} TDNT, 3:427.

^{vii} BAGD, 667.

^{viii} The following statistics are gleaned from the book by Nancy R. Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 142-146.

^{ix} Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization* as cited by Nancy R. Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*, 143.

^x *Ibid*, 146.