

Ephesians 5

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love

My Dad was a Methodist local preacher and one thing that he used to do which annoyed me

- Was to quote pop songs that were 20 years out of date
- So by the time we were in the 80s my Dad seemed to be quoting songs from the 60s
- I want to carry on the family tradition by quoting some song lyrics
- From the largely American band, Foreigner, and their only number one hit single
- 'I want to know what love is', maintaining the family tradition, it was no. 1 in 1985
- Here's the last verse and chorus

I'm gonna take a little time
A little time to look around me
I've got nowhere left to hide
It looks like love has finally found me

In my life there's been heartache and pain
I don't know if I can face it again
I can't stop now, I've travelled so far
To change this lonely life

I wanna know what love is
I want you to show me
I wanna feel what love is
I know you can show me

I want to know what love is – I want you to show me – I want to feel what love is

- What greater call to proclaim the Christian message can there be than that?
- What I don't understand is that I have known that song for 20 years or more
- And not heard that plaintive cry before
- To find the answer we need look no further than Ephesians 5

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children 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.

(Ephesians 5:1-2)

Many people have a number of family photographs in their home

- I always take an interest in family photographs
- One lady showed me a picture of her son
- I remarked, quite sincerely, 'he looks like you'
- 'A lot of people say that,' she replied. 'Strange really because he is adopted'
- The New Testament gives us two pictures of being children of God
- The believer is both born again and adopted into the family of God
- And the command is to 'be imitators of God, as dearly loved children'
- In a sense that command means nothing more than do what comes naturally
- But if we are to live a life of love – we need to know what love is
- The Apostle Paul wastes no time in explaining to us very clearly what love is
- Christ loved us and gave himself up for us a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God

I LIVE A LIFE OF LOVE

We all seek to emulate the heroes in our life

- Many a teenager has dressed in the style of a pop star
- And stood in front of the mirror, miming to the latest record
- With a hairbrush as a microphone
- As someone has said, 'imitation is the sincerest form of flattery'

The two imperatives of these opening verses of Chapter 5

- 'Be imitators of God' and 'live a life of love'
- seem to me to be saying the same thing
- we know that children imitate their parents
- so God's precious children will be eager to copy him
- because love is the essence of God's nature, it is essential to the Christian character
- and the supreme display of love is given by God in the Lord Jesus Christ
- and the laying down of his life upon the cross, loving others to the point of sacrifice
- in this context, sacrifice inevitably means that the victim gave up his life
- yet Christ's horrific death upon the cross is described as a 'fragrant offering'

Often in the Old Testament a sacrificial offering was described as 'sweet smelling'

- the phrase occurs 40 times in the first five books of the Bible
- we can deduce from this that our Lord's self-sacrifice was pleasing to his Father
- and was accepted as a means of reconciling sinful people to a holy God

Although it is not a popular view, the Bible is clear that the human plight is desperate

- and that if we were to get what we deserved from God it would be his wrath
- in Jesus, God identified with human plight and took on that plight and its punishment
- The pattern of sacrifice describes God's way of taking away his own anger
- The allegation that God is far away, remote from the human condition and suffering
- Is simply unfounded – God cares for us and identifies with us in Jesus
- His loving, self-giving sacrifice upon the cross is pleasing to God
- Not only because of his obedience but also because it restores a broken relationship
- God in Christ has accomplished for us what we could never accomplish for ourselves

It is easy, in our enthusiasm to explore what the expression 'fragrant offering' might mean

- to skate over two smaller words, 'for us'
- this certainly implies that when Jesus died for us, he did so in our place
- that is that he died as a substitute
- Christ's death for us always covers two ideas: for our benefit and in our place
- Although his self-giving sacrifice is an example for our lives
- It is never merely an example – he is our representative, sacrifice and substitute
- Whereas without the cross we are alienated and separated from God
- By this death on the cross, Christ removed the sin and guilt that alienate and separate
- He was made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him
- Christ took upon himself the sin and guilt, the condemnation and the curse
- Of those on whose behalf he died – God himself in his own Son has met our need
- And as his children we are now called to live a life of love (cf. John Murray)

Love is probably the most abused and misused word in modern English

- The call to live a life of love will often bring us into stark contrast with the world
- Sexual immorality, impurity and greed are not the 'life of love'
- The inconsistency of worldly standards reducing sexual relations to the physical
- When most people could easily deduce that it is nigh on impossible
- To separate the profoundly physical from the profoundly psychological
- In our acquisitive society, a distorted desire for possessions is commonplace
- Yet as John Paul Getty reminds us, 'How much money do you need to be happy?'
- 'Just a little more'
- While it was recently reported that a footballer was being paid £11,000/day
- Our society is struggling to fund the National Health Service
- Who could fail to conclude that there is something wrong somewhere?

If people start thinking foolishly – it is not a big step to speaking foolishly

- While I personally enjoy football very much
- For anyone to describe winning a football match as 'The greatest day of my life'
- Shows how hollow and vacuous our modern society has become
- Paul's injunction to avoid obscenity, foolish talk and coarse joking
- Is not a rejection of humour – but a rejection of the talk of fools
- There is no meaningful comparison between the humour of great British comedy
- *Dad's Army* and *Fawlty Towers* being two of my personal favourites
- And some of the pathetic attempts at humour on offer today
- Immorality, impurity and greed are as much idols today as they were in Ephesus

It is easy to protest that Christian standards are too demanding

- But there are only two choices, to live as children of God
- Or to live as 'sons of disobedience' (v. 6)
- What becomes clear from the Bible passage is that judgment is to be taken seriously
- If there is no judgment, no one needs salvation, and we do not really matter
- But what kind of God would God be if he were not angry at the state of the world?
- A God who did not get angry would not care – but God cares and judgment is real

With the cloud of impending judgment hanging over those who are disobedient

- No wonder that Paul commands, 'do not be partners with them' (v. 7)
- This is not a command to separate in the sense of locking ourselves away
- Or even separate in the sense of 'having nothing to do with'
- There is a world of difference between not *mixing* with people
- And not getting *mixed up* with them
- By his incarnation, we find God in Jesus mixing with people
- Jesus mixed with people that the religious people thought he should not mix with
- His company was often swindlers, deceivers, drinkers and fallen women, outcasts
- But he did not get *mixed up* with them

Maintaining this balance is hard – mixing with unbelievers but not get mixed up with them

- The Christians at Ephesus had to live among the pagans but not worship their gods
- That's the same tough call for us – to live in an immoral, impure and greedy world
- And yet not to worship the same self-gratifying goals as those around us

II LIVE AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.
Live as children of light

(Ephesians 5:8)

The darkness to which Paul refers is the darkness of unbelief

- As unbelievers the Ephesians were darkened in their understanding (4:18)
- So that, in a sense, not only did they live in darkness – they were darkness
- But because of Jesus Christ, the light of God has shined in their hearts
- So that they have been rescued from the dominion of darkness to the kingdom of light
- It is something of a mixed metaphor for Paul to talk of the fruit of the light
- But the light brings goodness, righteousness and truth
- This is so different from the barren or fruitless deeds of darkness
- But though the believers are told to have nothing to do with the deeds of darkness
- They are not told to have nothing to do with those who do them
- Instead, believers have constantly to be weighing and testing things
- To ensure that they continue to live as children of the light

It probably was not easy in New Testament times to live as children of the light

- And I don't want to pretend that it is harder to be a Christian today than ever before
- But I do have a hunch that it might be harder today than ever before
- Though I sometimes think my life would be better without a TV set
- There are still enough programmes on that I enjoy for me to conclude I would miss it
- But many people would accept that TV shows set for family hours
- Are now widely filled with murder, adultery, promiscuity, homosexuality
- Children and teenagers who are truculent and disrespectful to parents
- Greed, covetousness, materialism, robbery, theft
- The ethical and philosophical views of rock stars, actors and talk show hosts
- That often are do not merit being heard are given pride of place
- The so-called 9 o'clock watershed is there so that children cannot watch certain things
- But if it is harmless, why are children being prevented from watching it?
- And standards of modest and decency in speech and dress have all but evaporated

Take the recent news about the Prime Minister's future retirement from office

- This is not a matter of party politics – but the duly elected leader of our nation
- Should at least be accorded the respect of being called Mr Blair or Prime Minister
- And not, with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, merely referred to as Blair and Brown
- It seems that hardly anyone agrees with me about modesty and decency in dress
- It is far from politically correct to say
- that many a lot of women dress and behave in a way that is asking for trouble
- but a lot of women dress and behave in a way that is asking for trouble
- I am not suggesting for one moment that we need to return to the Victorian era
- But neither am I endorsing the notion that anything goes
- Like preachers when they get carried away Paul seems to quote a hymn
- Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you
- Christians are to live a life of love; to live as children of the light

III LIVE NOT AS UNWISE BUT WISE

Be very careful, then, how you live - not as unwise but as wise.
(Ephesians 5:15)

The metaphorical contrast between light and darkness

- is now replaced by the contrast between wisdom and folly
- the command, 'Be very careful, then, how you live' is explained by three contrasts
- not as unwise but as wise
- not foolish but understanding
- not drunk on wine, but filled with the Spirit

'Not as unwise but as wise' is not about replacing feeling by thinking or thinking by feeling

- it is of course profoundly wrong to say that emotions and feelings have no place
- As John MacKay points out, "nothing great ever takes place without emotion"
- But it is equally wrong to say that knowledge and careful thought have no place

Not foolish but understanding

- This is a call for spiritual discernment and a practical skill in making decisions
- There are people who make decisions and you wonder where their faith was
- But there are others who make decisions and you wonder where their brain was
- The call is literally 'to redeem the time', to make the most of every opportunity
- How many of us waste so much time on what is trivial – making this so relevant
- The call is not to be foolish but to understand what the Lord's will is

Not drunk on wine but filled with the Spirit

- The contrast between drunkenness and being filled with the Spirit is a surprising one
- And yet on the day of Pentecost, God's blessing was mistaken for drunkenness
- There is no such thing as a complete experience of permanent filling with the Spirit
- Rather there is the command to 'go on being filled with the Spirit'
- The believer, therefore, is not to be controlled not by wine but by the Spirit
- People often speak (in my opinion wrongly) of blessing as being Spirit-filled
- When it seems to me that the real hallmark of being Spirit-filled is obedience
- Which is a life of worship and service, characterised by an inner melody of the heart
- That spills over into speaking to one another and singing, Psalms, hymns and songs

Someone has wisely said – you are what you have been becoming

- Therefore, be careful whom you follow – because where they end up so will you
- This passage teaches us that life is not aimless – we must watch how we live
- Live a life of love, live as children of light, live as wise not unwise
- We need to be attentive and self-analytical
- Not looking in the mirror, walking away and forgetting what we look like
- Many people in our society spent four or five hours a day watching TV
- But how much time do we give to life with God and learning how to live that life?
- Perhaps we would not have so much trouble discerning God's will for big decisions
- If we began by practising on some small ones
- The hallmarks of the true Christian life are obedience and thanksgiving