Ephesians

Lesson 8

**Intro**

In the second half of Ephesians, Paul urges the Ephesians to walk worthy of the spiritual calling described in chapters 1-3. In Eph. 4:17-32, Paul exhorts the Ephesians to put off behaviors consistent with fleshly desires and a secular Greco-Roman worldview and to put on a new person, with practices consistent with God’s holy and righteous character. Paul gives 5 concrete examples of these practices beginning with speaking truth and managing anger in a godly manner.

**Eph. 4:25-32 Walking in holiness part 2: Five important practices, stated positively and negatively, with a rationale**

“Let the stealer no longer steal, but rather let him labor working with his own hands that which is good, in order that he might share with the one who has need.” Paul exhorts anyone still practicing theft to stop stealing. Commentators’ best guess is that Paul is referring to unemployed people who resorted to theft to meet their needs. The Roman Empire had a large number of slaves. Because their masters were responsible for providing them with food, clothing, and housing, the first layer of jobs would have gone to slaves. Former slaves (“freedmen”) and non-wealthy citizens who did not own a business would have competed for any work that could not be done by slaves. This type of work tended to be temporary and cyclical:

In general, the life of the lower-class urban worker was harsh. Wages were low, prices were high, and jobs were only temporary. Free workers had no job security, no retirement benefits, no medical plans, and no unemployment insurance. Indeed, free workers led harsher lives than some slaves, who were fed, clothed, and given medical care by their masters.

As the Romans Did at 132. One can understand the temptation during times of unemployment to resort to theft, but any victim was likely to be needy himself. Paul exhorted the Ephesians to seek out legitimate work, even if meant exhausting manual labor—which upper classes viewed with disdain and requires more effort than theft—and to be prepared to share when other believers experienced real need. This indicates Paul expected churches to function as a social safety net by working whenever individual believers could work so that the community could provide for those who could not work for whatever reasons. (Acts 6:1; 1 Tim. 5:8-15.) It is much closer to socialism than the rugged individualism popular in America.

“Let no unwholesome word come out of your mouths, but whatever is beneficial for the building up of that which is lacking, in order that it might give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” Paul exhorts the Ephesian not to speak any unwholesome or useless word. “Unwholesome” in this context means not fit for consumption or rotten. Instead, believers should speak words that are good or beneficial for helping others grow spiritually (i.e., build up areas that are lacking). The purpose or rationale is so that our words may be a means of grace used by the Holy Spirit to help other church members grow. Paul add another contrast: do not grieve the Holy Spirit, implying that the Holy Spirit is grieved when our words are unwholesome or unproductive, rather than something the Holy Spirit can use as a means of grace.

“Let every kind of bitterness and anger and wrath and shouting and abusive speech together with every kind of malice be put away from you. But become kind to one another, compassionate, being gracious to one another, just as also God in Christ was gracious to us.” Paul exhorts the Ephesians to put away every form of (1) bitterness (resentment), (2) anger and wrath, (3) shouting and abusive speech, and (4) malice (an all-inclusive word for badness or ill will). Commentators suggest that malice is meant to color or modify the first three categories, i.e., Paul is telling them to put away malicious bitterness, malicious anger, malicious shouting and abusive speech. This does not mean there is a category of non-malicious abusive speech that would be good; rather Paul is highlighting and condemning the ill-will or malice toward another human being(s) involved in bitterness or abusive speech. Instead, they should become good in the sense of kind toward others, compassionate, and extending grace toward others (here emphasizing unmerited favor). “just as also God in Christ was gracious to us.” The rational/motive is the incredible grace God the Father has provided to believers through Jesus Christ, which was extended to us when we were thoroughly underserving—dead in trespasses and sins. This rationale indicates the common thread is how to react when other people are offensive or wrong us. The old man reacts to such offenses by focusing on our own injury and becoming bitter or taking the offensive in self-righteous anger or even fighting-fire-with-fire by unleashing abusive speech. The new person, however, should extend grace to an offender by focusing on the offender’s poor state and reacting with kindness, compassion, and mercy.

Five New Person/Church Life Principles:

1. Practice truth-telling/listening
2. Godly anger management—do not harbor anger against each other
3. Work hard and help those in need
4. Speak words that spiritually benefit others
5. Respond to offenses with kindness and grace

Note how 1 & 4 both require us to work on our speech, and 2 & 5 both require us to work on our emotional responses to things that provoke anger. This underscores the importance of healthy speech and reactions to wrongdoing are to maintaining healthy Christian community. The principle of working hard so that we can share with those in need shows that our faith is meant to impact our daily lives in very practical ways.

**Eph. 5:1-6 Walking in love**

“Therefore, become imitators of God as beloved children, and walk/live in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us as an offering and sacrifice to God for a fragrant aroma.” “Therefore” signals the beginning of another section linking back to 4:1 and the exhortation to live/walk worthy of their calling. Paul exhorts the Ephesians to become imitators or copiers of God as beloved children. The verb “become” acknowledges that imitating God is a process, or, restated, an ongoing effort that should produces better results over time. “Children” recalls the spiritual blessing of being adopted into God’s family (Eph. 1:5), and the tendency of children to imitate their human parents’ behavior. “Beloved” reminds the Ephesians that they are not being urged to imitate a stranger, but the God who genuinely loves them as shown by the blessings He has already provided and those He has promised to provide.

Fueled by God’s love toward them, believers are urged to imitate God by walking or living lives characterized by sacrificial love for others, just as Christ loved Paul and the Ephesians and handed himself over to the crowd, Jewish leaders, and Roman authorities, knowing they would torment and execute him. Paul says Christ did this “for us,” meaning believers, and “to God.” Paul describes Christ’s death with terms used for a Levitical sacrifice, including a “fragrant aroma.” In the OT, the phrase “pleasing aroma” indicates that an offering that was accepted by God (ex., Ex. 29:18; Lev. 3:16), whereas God takes no pleasure in sacrifices not offered with genuine faith. (Isaiah 1:11-17.) Paul’s language indicates Christ’s death was accepted by God the Father.

Paul then addresses several things that are not compatible with a lifestyle of imitating God’s sacrificial love. “But do not let sexual immorality and impurity of any kind or greed even be mentioned among you, as is appropriate for the holy ones/saints.” The word translated as “sexual immorality” is “porneia” and in the NT generally means sex outside of marriage, such adultery or prostitution. “impurity” is the same word used at Eph. 4:19 and can mean anything morally impure, i.e., contrary to God’s commands. “greed” was also used at Eph. 4:19 and means a selfish and unhealthy desire to have more of something than God permits, including money. Paul urges the Ephesians to stay far away from these practices that were common in the Roman empire by stating that they should not even be named or mentioned among believers because they are not appropriate for holy ones/saints, i.e., people devoted to God’s service.

“and [let there be no] obscenity and foolish talk nor sarcastic ridicule, which are inappropriate, but rather thanksgiving.” These injunctions primarily concern speech. Paul says obscenity or shameful speech (like dirty jokes or lewd comments), foolish or senseless talk (like bragging), and sarcastic ridicule or harmful humor, are all improper or not fitting. Instead, their speech should be characterized by thanksgiving or gratitude toward God, which is spiritually beneficial for others to hear. These are difficult commands to obey, as James acknowledges. James 3:2. But our speech has such a great impact on other people that we should push ourselves to improve. James 3:3-12.

“For you certainly know this, that no immoral or impure or greedy person, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words; for because of such things the wrath of God comes on the sons of disobedience.” The motive for striving to follow holy practices is the certain knowledge that no immoral or impure or a greedy person will have a place in Christ’s kingdom. Paul expresses a similar idea in other letters. (Gal. 5:19-21; 1 Cor. 6:9-10.) Paul describes greedy people as idolaters, indicating that focusing on one’s selfish desires is a form of self-worship or being devoted to something other than God, in this case one’s own self. Because we are ultimately powerless to avoid death, worshipping one’s own self is as futile and misguided as worshipping a ceramic idol. Paul’s strong warning against believing deceitful, empty words indicates that the absence of long-term consequences for following one’s selfish desires was a widespread idea in the first century. To the contrary, Paul asserts that those characterized by disobedience to God will experience divine wrath. Other NT writers also view sustained disobedience as indicating the absence of faith. (Heb. 4:6-11; 1 John 1:6; 2:3-6.) At same time, John recognized that all believers sin, (1 John 1:8), and Paul recognized that believers can even trapped by a particular sin. (Gal. 6:1.) Paul and John both viewed striving to obey God’s commands as not only consistent with, but part of, living a life of sacrificial love toward others. God’s commands are not meaningless. They tell us how to genuinely care for other people.

At first glance, this warning seems inconsistent with the earlier statement that salvation is by grace through faith, rather than works. I think, however, Paul is saying that people reveal their identity/faith by their lifestyles. If a person has experienced salvation by grace through faith, and become a child of God, then their conduct should be consistent with that identity. If a person is so habitually immoral, impure, or greedy that those things define their lifestyle or identity, that reveals that they do not have genuine faith. (James 2:18, 26.) Paul can therefore say that a “son of disobedience” is a person who lacks genuine faith. There is, however, a logical tension between Paul’s use of not having an inheritance in Christ’s kingdom as a motivator, and his assertion that the Ephesians are chosen, predestined, and sealed. (Eph. 1:4-5, 11-14.) This is why I say the NT presents salvation as 100% a work of God and requiring 100% faith/response by humans.

**Eph. 5:7-14 Walking as children of the light**

“Therefore do not become fellow participants with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord;” Because people characterized by disobedience to God will experience divine wrath, Paul urges the Ephesians not to become fellow participants or accomplices with disobedient people in their disobedient acts. In Corinthians, Paul clarifies that he is not saying believers should have no contact with unbelievers who engage in disobedience. (1 Cor. 5:9-12.) Paul is commanding something more difficult: despite being around disobedient people, the Ephesians must not partner in disobedient acts. Paul acknowledges that the Ephesians—like all humans—used to be “darkness,” meaning spiritually dead citizens of the realm/system opposed to God. Paul uses the imagery of darkness in a similar way in other epistles. (Col. 1:13; 1 Thess. 5:4-5.) Darkness was associated with evil deeds and, to the NT writers, with the absence of divine revelation or relationship. Paul contends that the Ephesians are now “light in the Lord.” Here, “Lord” refers to Jesus Christ and this phrase identifies Jesus as the source of the light, and the phrase implies the Ephesians both are light and are in the realm of the light.

“walk as children of light; for the fruit of light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth; approving what is pleasing to God” while Paul warns against possibilities that could reveal an individual lacks genuine faith, he takes the Ephesians’ profession of faith at face value and exhorts them to live consistent with their new identity in Christ/as children of light. If God is light and believers are children of God, it follows that believers are children of light, and should display the characteristics of light. (Rom. 13:12; 1 Tim. 6:16.) Those characteristics, described as “fruit,” are every or all types of goodness (that which is morally beneficial for the individual and others), righteousness (that which is consistent with God’s standards), and truth (consistent with reality, which, from a believer’s perspective, begins with consistency with God’s revelation). Here, “approve” means to examine something and certify it, as in the phrase “FDA certified,” so Paul wants the Ephesians to discern and certify what is pleasing to Christ. If they do so, the Ephesians will be sources of light to those around them.

“and do not participate in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them; for the things done in secret by them are shameful even to mention; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light;” Paul now expands on being sources of light. He contrasts participating in unfruitful works of darkness with exposing them, i.e., revealing their true nature. Most people rationalize even their dark deeds. Paul says even Satan masquerades as an angel of light. (2 Cor. 11:13-15.) If believers’ deeds are consistent with their identity as children of light, then their deeds and words can expose the true nature of dark deeds through contrast. Paul does not identify what people’s dark deeds need to be exposed. Some commentators think Paul is thinking first and foremost of dark deeds committed by believers. Others argue for unbelievers. I think the context favors the dark deeds of unbelievers, because Paul assumes in verse 8 that his audience is believers, but I am not convinced that one has to choose. Paul could be concerned with exposing the true nature of dark deeds committed by anyone. In addition to rationalizing dark deeds, people often try to hide their worst deeds. Paul says that deeds so dark people want them to be secret are shameful even to talk about. If it is shameful even to talk about such deeds, then believers should certainly not join in such deeds. The NIV translation of the last verse is not all that helpful. Paul’s point is that, when deeds are placed in/exposed to light, their true nature becomes visible. The last phrase is difficult. It literally says, “for everything that becomes visible is light.” The NIV removes the difficulty by interpreting “light” as the subject, but I don’t see a grammatical basis for this approach. Perhaps Paul means that everything that “becomes enlightened” is light. In other words, if believers spread light by revealing the true nature of dark deeds, then perhaps some people will respond by accepting the light and everyone who accepts the light becomes light themselves.

The next verse may support that idea: “Therefore it says: ‘Wake up, O Sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’” Paul signals this is a quotation, but it is not clear what he is quoting. There is not an LXX Old Testament verse that seems close enough. Most commentators guess that the source was a NT era hymn. In 1 Thess. 5:6, Paul uses sleep as a metaphor for being spiritually dead, and says, in contrast, that believers should be spiritually alert. So, in this quotation, the sleeper appears to be someone spiritually dead who is commanded/exhorted to rouse himself from that spiritual condition. If he repents/awakens spiritually, then Christ will “shine” on him, i.e., shed light on him. This seems to pair the concepts of being spiritually enlightened with becoming light. Although some commentators argue that the person in this quote is a believer, I find it hard to believe Paul would use the phrase “rise from the dead” in conjunction with someone who is already a believer, so I agreed with the commentators who viewed the quote as an evangelistic/invitational hymn.

**Conclusion**

The Bible never portrays God as seeking to convince humans of God’s love for them, or that God is lovable, by joining humans in their sinful endeavors. To the contrary, God never participates in sin. When God appeals to humans, God does so only through acts and words that are pure and holy such as Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross. (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:4-5.)

In this section, Paul calls believers to reflect God’s character by refusing to join in sinful disobedience even if it seems temporarily advantageous. Believers’ role in salvation is to reveal God by reflecting His character through holiness and self-sacrificing love and sharing the good news about Jesus, i.e. being salt and light. We cannot be salt and light if our deeds are as dark as those of unbelievers. (Matt. 5:13.)