

All Saints Talk for Sunday 09 February 2025

Walking in the Way of Love Rose Patterson-Veira.

Ephesians 5-1-20 Living as children of light

So we're part way through our series on Ephesians and those of you who were here last week will remember that lovely image that Tom gave us of Paul in chapters 1 to 3 leading us up onto this mountaintop to take in this glorious view of what God has done for us in Jesus and of what that means for our new identity as members of his family.

So now we're in the second half of the letter where Paul has shifted his attention onto what it means to inhabit this new identity and we're going to be thinking a little bit more about that this morning and we're also going to spend, we're also going to be looking at how we can become, how we can become people who inhabit this identity more fully.

Just a quick trigger warning for anyone who really doesn't like creepy crawlies, you're about to see one in glorious detail...



This is the exoskeleton of a cicada. You might remember from your biology days that insects have these hard exoskeletons, these sort of hard outer layers or shells and because they're hard they don't grow with the insect. So, they have to be shed in order for the insect to continue growing and developing. The official term for this outer shell is 'exuvia' which I believe comes from the Latin word that literally means 'take off' or 'cast off', but I say that tentatively because I know we have some Latin scholars.

So I think this image captures something of what Paul is saying in this section of the letter. In chapter 4 verses 22 to 24 he says, "You were taught with regard to your former way of life to put off your old self which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires to be made new in the attitude of your minds and to put on the new self created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." So, this new identity is not just sort of slight improvement, sort of upgrade to fix a few bugs in our operating systems.



This is total and utter transformation. Paul literally says in Chapter 2 - "You were dead in your transgressions and sins but because of his great love for us God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ." And it's exactly that which we recognize and celebrate in baptism. That when we give our lives to Jesus we are made new.

So, chapter 5 begins, "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." And then in verses 3 and 4 Paul gives some specific examples of the sorts of things that God's people need to shed or take off.

And it's easy for our attention to immediately settle on things like sexual immorality or obscenity and think, "I'm doing alright, I'm pretty good." But *any* kind of impurity, greed, foolish talk? I don't know, I'm not feeling quite so squeaky clean now.

It's also sometimes easy to read Paul's writings and think that he just enjoys a bit of finger wagging. But at the core of his teaching is this recognition that our behaviour is just the peripheral stuff. It's the stuff that flows out of our core identity, out of who we believe ourselves to be.

And if our identity as dearly loved children of the Almighty God sits at the core of who we are, and if we understand that it cost Jesus everything to give us this identity, then that will naturally flow out and permeate every aspect of our lives.

It will utterly transform us and our behaviour.

A wonderful poem by William Cooper ends with this, "To see the law by Christ fulfilled and hear his pardoning voice changes a slave into a child, and duty into choice."

Now it's important for us to notice the order that Paul has put things in this letter.

- 1) The first half of the letter focused on God's action in Jesus and the new identity that we've been given.
- 2) The second half gives character to this new identity by giving instructions and guidelines for living.

And the hinge between the two is this word "therefore". Let's just think about that for a second. This is not a call to live well, in order to somehow earn our place in the family of God. God, in his infinite love, mercy and grace, has declared that we are his children and is therefore calling us to respond, inhabiting that reality in the way that we live our lives.

And the fact that Paul is urging his audience to live a life worthy of their calling suggests that we do have a proactive part to play, a responsibility to respond to what God has done for us.

We're rightly wary of being legalistic or of slipping into thinking that we can somehow earn our place in God's family. But I think we also need to be careful that we don't allow our focus on God's love and grace to make us forget that God calls us to be holy as I am holy. God calls us to discipleship and if discipleship means following in the footsteps of Jesus, then we should expect it to cost us something.

"I *beg* you", Paul says in the NRSV translation - it's the word "beg". "I beg you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." It is precisely because of our new identity that how we live really matters.

And something that I think Paul is drawing our attention to in this passage is the fact that the path that Jesus is calling us to, more often than not, runs against the grain of the world around us. How we treat sex, what we do with our bodies, the language we use, the way we talk, what we do with our money, it all matters. It all falls under this new identity and God cares about all of it.

Now I'm sure you're all very familiar with the story of the prodigal son. Have you ever given any thought to what a sequel might look like? To what sort of happens after the feast is over? If I told you that the son, having had his fill of roast beef and a few good nights sleep, then said to his Dad, "Thanks for that Dad. I'm off back to the city. Any chance a bit more money?"

We might rightly think, "Well hang on a minute, you really haven't got this. You haven't understood what's happened here." Because if he did, then his life would be utterly transformed by it, both as a natural overflow and as an intentional active response to what his father has done for him.

"For once you were darkness but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light." The first time I read that I thought I'd read it wrong. Surely it should say, "Now you are in the light." But no, it says, "You are the light." *You are the light*. That's an incredible statement. As followers of Jesus we share in the light of the one who declares himself to be the light of the world.

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." And here Jesus is pointing us to the fact that it's not just about what we are but about the impact that we're having on the world around us.

Are we reflecting the light of God's love into the world? Are we at times keeping it hidden under a bowl or perhaps even just reflecting the darkness of the world back onto itself? Just as we have been transformed by the light of Jesus, we can have a transformative effect on the world around us if we faithfully reflect that light, pointing others to Jesus and glorifying our Father in heaven.

Verses 11 and 12 go on to say, "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret." I think there can be a bit of a danger in taking these verses as some sort of responsibility to point out the failings of others. But that doesn't seem to be what this is about. This isn't condemnation or finger-pointing. This is about allowing the light of God to shine in and through us and penetrate the darkness. That's not to say that it's never right to speak up against anything. There are times when we're called to do exactly that. But I think we should feel challenged to check ourselves and see how brightly our light is shining in the darkness.

So, Paul has told us to follow God's example, walk in the way of love, live as children of light, and he's fleshed that out with some specifics. Now in verses 15 to 20 he moves into the *how*.

How do we become people who walk in the footsteps of Jesus and reflect God's love into the world? In verse 16 he describes the days as evil. I don't know about you, but I found that a bit jarring - a bit bleak. Yes, we know that there is evil at work in the world, but "the days are evil"? It seems a bit strong.

But what Paul seems to be doing here is recognising the dark reality of the world that we live in, the sinfulness of our own daily lives and the immense darkness we see at work in the world through our news feeds. Paul, more than anyone, knows that these powers have ultimately been defeated, and that they won't have final say.

But we are living in the now and not yet. The war is won but the battle rages on.

So, what he's doing here is recognizing the enormity of the challenge that we're faced with. How can we possibly hope to live lives worthy of the calling we have received when sin and evil are so clearly at work within us and the world around us?

Paul offers three things. Firstly, **wisdom**.

And here he specifically talks about wisdom in terms of time. Be very careful then how you live, not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity.

Now the phrase 'making the most' comes from a single Greek word that literally means 'redeem' or 'ransom'. And the word translated 'opportunity' more literally means 'time'.

So, if we swap those words out, the verse now reads 'be very careful then how you live, not as unwise but as wise, redeeming the time'. Interesting...

So, where we would talk about “spending our time”, Paul, having just told us that the days are evil, talks of *redeeming* the time. And isn't that an interesting way to think about it? An interesting way to reframe how we think about time.

In our consumer brains we tend to think of it as a sort of commodity or something to be spent. I wonder how that would change if we thought about it as something to be redeemed - to be brought into the light. And I wonder what would happen to our to-do lists if we looked at them through that lens.

The second thing Paul offers is **discerning God's will**. We tend to think of this in very specific terms, whether to move to this place, take this job, those sorts of things.

But I think verse 10 gives us an insight into what Paul means when he talks of discerning God's will. He says 'find out what pleases the Lord'. So, he seems to be saying that discerning God's will is more about setting our hearts and minds on figuring out how to live in a way that pleases God. It's *active*, it's *continual*, it's *intentional*.

You could summarize the message of this chapter so far as this...

Be holy by

a) being wise

and

b) understanding God's will.

Simple, right? But now in verse 18 Paul says “do not get drunk on wine which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit”.

So, thirdly, **be filled**.

After all the instructions, all the 'do this, don't do that, be on guard against this', now he says 'be filled'. It's a verb, but it's a passive verb. Something needs to be done that we can't do ourselves.

Be still and open yourself up to the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, it matters how we live. Yes, we need to take responsibility and resolve to live in a way that pleases God. But if we try to do all that through sheer willpower, we will self-destruct. This is not a question of simply 'I must try harder'. So, it's a passive verb, in the present tense.

Being filled with the Spirit is not a once-and-done: it's continual.

We need to be in a constant state of receptivity, opening ourselves up to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit to inspire and enable us to live obediently in a way that pleases God and to shape us in the likeness of the one in whose footsteps we follow.

Now the comparison with getting drunk is an interesting one which has led to all sorts of interpretations. I think I can fairly confidently say that Paul isn't suggesting that we try to replicate the effect of too much alcohol by being filled with the Spirit. I also don't think he's telling us not to drink alcohol at all.

I think the question that he's really drawing our attention to is 'what are you under the influence of? What fuel are you putting in your engine?' He uses the example of alcohol here, but I think for us it could be any number of things. What are the things in our lives that have a hold of us, that shape us, our behaviour, our lives, our thoughts? Instead, Paul says, “be filled with the Spirit”.

I want to recognise that there might be some who, like the prodigal son returning to his father, are feeling unworthy of this new identity, unworthy of being called a child of God.

Paul knows something of how this feels. In 1 Corinthians 15 verse 9 he says, 'For I am the least of the Apostles, and I do not even deserve to be called an Apostle because I persecuted the Church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am and his grace to me was not without effect.'

'By the grace of God I am what I am.' By the grace of God we are what we are. We are dearly loved children of God. We receive the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out by God in his infinite love and grace. We open ourselves up to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. We resolve to live in a way that pleases God and yet we know that not if, but when we fail, we are no less God's children. The prodigal son was no less of a son to his father when he was off in the city. He just experienced his sonship more powerfully and more intimately when he was in his father's arms. In spite of all our weaknesses and failings, God looks at us and he sees Jesus. He runs to meet us and he wraps us in his love and compassion.

So let me end using Paul's own prayer for the Ephesians from chapter 3 –

For this reason I kneel before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the Lord's holy people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever.

Amen.