

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Ephesians 5:1-14

It is safe to say that all of us have done something or said something that we regret, that we're embarrassed about, perhaps even ashamed of. What do we do with that? Let's explore some options. We could deny it, hide it, cover it up, make excuses, or blame someone else. We could admit it, and make any necessary reparations. Hopefully we learn and grow from regrettable, embarrassing, and shameful experiences, and don't keep repeating them.

Often our regrets, embarrassments, and the things we are ashamed of, we bring upon ourselves. Sometimes, however, other people do things to us that are painful, and we are legitimately a victim through no fault of our own. Regardless, what might Scripture teach us in how to handle such things? Let's keep these thoughts/questions at the forefront of our minds as we dive into this passage.

The first two verses nicely encapsulate the Christian life, *"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."* (5:1-2 NIV) This would be a good passage to commit to memory. It covers all the basics.

- We are dearly love children of God. If we don't start here, we are not likely to progress much further, at least not in a healthy way. This also harkens back to chapter 1 which outlines the spiritual blessings we have in Christ.
- As such, we ought to do what children naturally do...imitate their parents. As cliché as it may be, I distinctly recall "shaving" with my dad (not with a real blade) while he shaved. Likewise, as someone who recently taught a teenager how to drive, it was amazing how I defaulted to how my dad taught me to drive. Children are naturally inclined to imitate their parents. Now it might be tempting to think something like, "How are we supposed to 'imitate' someone we cannot see? This leads to the beauty, power, and ingenuity of the incarnation.
- We can just as easily and accurately translate "be imitators of God" as "be imitators of Jesus". We see in Scripture someone we can, in fact, imitate. This is exactly what Paul had in mind as he elaborates that Jesus loved us and gave Himself up for us. The Scriptures testify to this. Following the model/example of Jesus is how we best live into what it means to be human...living a life of love.

Of course, we know that this is easier said than done. We could view verses 3-7 as the Cliff Notes of human history—sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity, etc.—out of which God is calling, nay saving, us from (namely from ourselves). The vast majority of human history demonstrates what happens to humanity when we drift from God and don't live into the purpose and design God has for us.

In the final section of this week's passage (verses 8-14) Paul highlights the inconsistency of all the sins and shameful behavior mentioned in verses 3-7 by bringing it back to our true identity as "children of light" (5:8b). But notice that Paul did not appeal to rules or laws, but rather to

relationship. For the second time in this passage he described our relationship to God as “children”. And notice verse 10, *“And find out what pleases the Lord.”* (NIV) To get technical for a moment, the word translated “find” here is a present active participle that can also be translated as “testing” or “proving”. I bring this up to say that the Christian life is one of active exploration and discovery, not a static appealing to a set of laws/rules, as we learn to live in real-time connection with the Holy Spirit (more on that in an upcoming passage/sermon).

A common metaphor throughout Scripture is darkness and light (it’s a particularly pervasive metaphor in the Gospel of John, for example). The powerful choice that we have is the option, the free-will choice, to live in light or live in darkness; to live in step with the Spirit or out of harmony with Him; to live obediently or disobediently. The former leads to life, the latter to wrath, shame, and death.

Unfortunately, the choice isn’t always so clear. Experientially, we often don’t see things so clearly “black and white”, but rather more like “shades of gray”. We even come to see that as “normal”, maybe even preferred. But make no mistake, that’s acquiescing to the darkness (or becoming “lukewarm”—to change the metaphor—as Jesus said in Revelation.)

As was beautifully and powerfully brought up in the sermon yesterday, we are not the source of light, be merely reflectors of it. As such, we don’t evaluate matters of right and wrong by our own light and judgement, but rather must subject such questions/matters to the light and judgement of God...and then respond accordingly.

The human tendency is, out of pride, to display/promote all that we think is good and right about ourselves for all to see (or to use the metaphor, to bring the positive about us into the light); while, out of fear and shame, to hide and cover up all that we think is bad or wrong about ourselves. This is not how God wants us to live—in pride, fear, or shame. In fact, this is exactly what He has saved/delivered us from. He wants us to live in the safe, secure protection and acceptance of His forgiveness and grace. He wants us to come out of the darkness of our disgrace and experience the light of His love.

Practically speaking, how do we do this? No doubt it takes trust (which is another word for faith or belief). Doesn’t everything about the Christian life come back to faith/trust? One chief way we bring ourselves into the Light is through confession. Confession is a lost practice for many Christians. This includes confessing/admitting wrong to God...but also to another human being. Theologically, one of the powerful and beautiful aspects of the Church (the Body of Christ) is to experience forgiveness and acceptance from fellow believers as representatives of forgiveness and acceptance from Christ Himself. (It is also why it can be so painful and damaging should that forgiveness and acceptance be withheld.) We represent Christ to one another. That is a high calling and responsibility.

Confession need not be in front of a whole congregation, or even a whole Home Group (unless directed by the Holy Spirit or perhaps if the sin involves leadership that has gone astray, or if the damaging repercussions are so widespread). Often a trusted friend or two will suffice.

Sometimes a trained counselor might be in order. But the point is, confession should be a normal part of the culture of a community of Christ-followers. As we regularly expose things to the light, the darkness (which is often within us) will scatter.

As mentioned at the outset, sometimes the deeds of darkness are done to us (as opposed to by us) and we become victims of someone else's shameful acts. Sadly, this too is part of the human condition. What we need to understand is that while we can be victimized, we do not have to be defined by it. Very bad things can happen to us, can impact us, can hurt and scar us...but they need not define us. Only God has the right to define us, and He identifies us as dearly loved children. And only He can bring the healing and restoration to our brokenness that we need. So, we take our brokenness to Him...which is another form of exposing the darkness to light. His love and healing touch is so powerful, we can even be brought to the point of being able to forgive those who hurt us. But this can only happen as we bask in the light of His love, immerse ourselves in it, in Him.

- Q. What has been your experience with confession?**
- Q. If we hope for the church to be a place that has a culture of confession, then that first must mean we are a safe place/people in which to confess to. In your experience, would you consider the church a safe place/people? If not, what steps do you believe can be taken to make it so?**
- Q. Do you have people in your life in which you can be vulnerable and transparent with, people you can get "soul-naked" with? If you're willing to, describe how such relationships developed.**
- Q. When you think about your identity, your self-concept, how would you describe yourself? (Where do the "dearly loved child of God" and "follower of Jesus" fit in your self-understanding?)**
- Q. As dearly loved children of God, we are called to "live a life of love", following the example of Jesus. Such a life of love, then, looks like humble, sacrificial, service. What does that look like in your life? (Or what would you like that to look like in your life?)**
- Q. Contextually speaking, this week's passage can/should be seen as a continuation of thought that began in 4:17...and especially seen as further elaboration of what it means to put off the old self and put on the new self (4:22-24). Furthermore, all of this is predicated first upon everything that Paul says is true of us "in Christ" (see chapters 1-3), and how we live consistently with that truth. All that said—and, yes, there is a question coming—what do you find most difficult/challenging about the Christian life, and what do you find relatively easy, pretty much second-nature?**
- Q. Paul offers a relatively short list (by Paul's standards) of things that are "improper for God's holy people" (5:3) As a group brainstorm 2 lists (as specifically/detailed as**

possible): the first is a fuller list of things—characteristics or behaviors—that are improper/inconsistent for Christians; the second list being of things that are proper/consistent for Christians. (This could cause interesting conversation as not everyone may agree on some things...so have fun, but be careful...be sure to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace☺)

- Q. Verse 11 says, “*have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.*” Other versions say have no fellowship or partnership with the fruitless deeds of darkness. That can get kind of tricky. For example, if we spend money on something that supports a business/organization that harms/oppresses other people, are we complicit? Are we having fellowship/partnership with the deeds of darkness? (Christians throughout the centuries have wrestled with such ideas. I suspect it’s better to wrestle—even if we don’t end up agreeing—then to never even consider how we might be partnering with evil.) How do we determine if we’re partnering with evil? How do we follow this exhortation with being complete separatists?
- Q. Verse 4 mentions obscenity, foolish talk, and coarse joking. How do we determine when we’re crossing the line to inappropriateness? And the counter-question, how do we avoid legalism and not just creating rules for such matters?