

Becoming Who We Are – The Book of Ephesians

Walk in Love
Ephesians 5:1-6

Mark Vroegop

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Eph. 5:1-5, ESV).

Last week I suggested to you that **identity without action is an illusion**. I don’t know about you, but I’ve been thinking about that idea off and on all week.

I love that the book of Ephesians highlights big, eternal, and theological truths. Chapters 1-3 have some of the best material in all of the Bible about who we are in Christ and what it means to be a child of God. But there’s a very important connection between identity and actions.

Who you are informs what you do and that reinforces who you are.

James Clear, in his runaway best-seller *Atomic Habits*, emphasizes this from a secular standpoint. Here’s what he says: "Your habits are how you embody your identity. The process of building habits is actually the process of becoming yourself."¹

Now, James Clear has no gospel or spiritual goal. His aim is to help people change and embrace new habits. He’s close. I think he unknowingly touches on a biblical concept that identity and action are linked. We see this in many places in Ephesians, but it’s really clear in 2:8-10.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10).

Christian identity creates life change. Now, when you hear that, I hope your heart leaps for joy! Because that means the gospel (the good news of “God is holy, I am not, Jesus saves, and Christ is my life”) can

¹<https://www.thegrowthfaculty.com/blog/topquotesatomic Habits#:~:text=%22Your%20identity%20emerges%20out%20of,this%20is%20who%20I%20am.>

change you. Actually, that's not strong enough. It means the gospel **will** change you. Let me say that even stronger: the gospel **must** change you.

Let me pause here to remind us that it doesn't mean Christians are perfect. Until Jesus returns, we will struggle and fight against temptation and sin. But something can happen over time where you begin to believe in a false identity because your actions don't line up with what you say. You can become so discouraged with your choices that you begin to believe your sin **is** who you are.

The gospel invites you to a spiritual transformation that really works. **Christian identity creates life change.**

Ephesians 5:1-6 continues Paul's focus that he started in chapter 4—"to walk in a manner worthy of your calling." Last week we looked at six marks of Christian identity. Relationships and speech were the main points. In verses 1-6, Paul pushes deeper—to our morality. Not only does the gospel affect our emotions and responses, but it also transforms our sexuality. Christian identity shapes the most intimate aspect of who you are.

Paul provides three considerations for life change: (1) the goal, (2) the contrast, and (3) the warning.

1) The Goal

In verses 1-2, Paul inserts a helpful and refreshing expansion of where we concluded last week. If you remember, chapter 4 highlighted some regrettable behaviors that we Christians should resist: bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander with all malice (4:31). And the affirmation was to "become kind, tenderhearted, forgiving one another..." (4:32).

Chapter 5 expands this and deepens it. I suspect that Paul knows that he's going to address the issue of morality, so he pulls the pastoral lens back a bit in order to put a spotlight on the goal. A friend of mine says, "The power of no is in a stronger yes." That's what Paul does here.

Notice the word "therefore." What follows is connected to the previous commands. It's a summary, a goal, or the target: "Be imitators of God as beloved children." Oh, this is an important phrase. The word "be" doesn't indicate a single, one-time decision. Rather, it's a command that means to enter into a state of being. I wish the translators would have chosen the word "become." That's the sense.

"Imitators of God" is the next phrase. Our English word "mimic" is derived from the Greek word used here. It has the idea of someone who patterns their actions or behavior after another. It's the way that one person can affect how others do things. Often, we think of this negatively, because to mimic someone is usually to do so in a mocking way. But Paul has in mind something really positive.

You see, in a moment he's going to talk about some moral issues that can be directly affected by the culture and people you are around. We'll talk about this more, but just consider how much easier it is to compromise your morals when you are around people who are also compromising. Peer pressure doesn't end when you leave the teen years, right? When that happens, it's not only easier to act in ways

that we know are wrong, but it's also easy to lower our standards by comparison. We can feel righteous when the goal is lowered.

Become imitators of God! That's out there. Mimic a holy, righteous, gracious, pure, and faithful God. Paul aims for a reset in what kind of actions our identity produces. Set your behavior compass on mimicking God. But notice that this isn't a goal without a context. We've got to get the right image! This pattern is to reflect the very best of the parent-child relationship. We're to mimic God in the same way that a child mimics his or her parent.

This is an instructive context. Parents teach their kids how to talk by encouraging mimicking ("Mama, Dadda"). And kids pick up certain behaviors simply by parental presence. Repetition, environment, and relationship have a deep effect on what you imitate. For some of us, one of the reasons that our actions are in trouble is because of the voices and sources that are shaping our understanding of our identity and the goal. You can't mimic God if you don't know what he's like or if you've watched more Netflix shows than you've read the Scriptures. The goal is to be an imitator of God.

But there's also a very specific command that captures the heart of God: "walk in love." You may know that the word "walk" in the Bible is a way of describing a person's life and his or her conduct. Loving God and loving one's neighbor is how Jesus summarized the entire law. A heartfelt concern and actions that fit is what Paul has in mind here.

We see that expressed in personal sacrifice. Jesus's example in the selfless giving of himself is what Paul appeals to. What's more, he uses temple sacrifice language to reinforce how pleasing and good this is to God. A fragrant offering and sacrifice to God are those things that bless the heart of God and meet with his approval.

What's the goal? Let your life be shaped by who God is and the example of Jesus. That's what is pleasing to him.

To embrace Christian identity, we need to fix our attention on the right goal. What are you striving for? Who are the examples of Christian faithfulness that you are looking to? Are you putting yourself in environments where you are encouraged to grow deeper in your walk with Christ? Who are your heroes?

Let's not assume that we have the right goal. Let's allow the Word to shape us today. "Become imitators of God." That's the goal.

2) The Contrast

Verse 3 starts with the word "but," which indicates a contrast. What follows is a longer section that extends through verse 21. This section of Scripture identifies two contrasting ways to live. It highlights the calling for Christians to live out their identity through their morality.

It's important to recognize that while society and culture have changed since the first century, human beings are still human beings. During our trip to Israel, I was struck how not much has changed in earthly

culture. The ancient world had stadiums with concession stands and boxed seats. There were gyms, saunas, and spas. And there were events that were sexualized to make them well attended. Nothing's new except the expression. Paul is calling God's people to be a countercultural group as it relates to their behavior and morals.

Paul highlights three areas: sexual immorality, impurity, and covetousness.

- Sexual immorality is not merely adultery. Paul uses the Greek word "porneia," which is a much broader term. One commentator described it this way, "Fornication and sexual perversion of almost any kind might be included under the word . . . any sexual indulgence outside the permanent relationship of marriage, in circumstances where the sexual appetites are used merely as a means of pleasure without any sense of responsibility or care for the {marriage} partner."²
- Impurity is another broad term to describe missing the mark of God's design. It's not unique from immorality. It's addressing the spiritual aspects of what Paul has in mind. You might think of this as things that are defiling.
- Covetousness is listed and notice the "or." Paul isn't making a distinction here. Rather, he's clarifying that immorality has elements of greed in it. Immorality uses people and turns them into objects of pleasure. Rather than sexuality being used as a covenant-affirming gift of love, immorality facilitates greed. Behind every kind of immorality there's an "I want..." statement.

Now, remember how this passage started. "Be imitators of God . . . walk in love." We're a long way from that instruction with these words. And that is Paul's point. In fact, the rest of the text bears this out. Notice that it says, "It must not even be named among you as is proper among saints."

This statement is connected to identity. Paul is arguing for a kind of righteousness that fits with what it means to be a saint or holy. And he says that they are to live in such a way that these things don't characterize them or aren't a topic of conversation. He's not talking about avoiding hard topics. Rather, he's saying that a Christian's life is to be marked by a contrast to the rampant immorality that plagues our culture and society.

You see, it's very likely that we can start to be shaped by the ambient sexualized culture around us and forget the biblical standard. There's an easy and subtle shift that happens when you live in an immoral world, hear about immoral acts, and see impure things. You become inoculated to the shock and the danger of immorality.

Tim Keller helps us see the difference.

"Sex is sacred because it constitutes a covenant renewal ceremony. The original purpose of sex was to 'become one flesh,' meaning a complete personal union. Sex creates deep intimacy, oneness, and communion between two people (Gen. 2:24; 4:14). In the Bible oneness is not

² Francis Foulkes, [*Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 146.

simply a matter of emotion but is always the creation of a covenant. Romanticism considers emotional happiness to be the main condition . . . if there is interpersonal happiness, sex is warranted, and then comes marriage. But when love dies, it is also allowable to walk away from the marriage. In the biblical view, however, the main condition of marriage is a binding covenant. In the romantic view, sex is self-expression; in the biblical view, sex is self-giving.”³

Do you see the contrast? It’s really important to understand this because it runs against the philosophy and message of the world in which we live. In many respects we have to realize what is happening to us and to push the other direction.

That’s why Paul also talks about the contrast in our speech. In verse 4 he lists three other areas to consider: filthiness, foolish talk, and crude joking. It would seem that Paul has in mind the kind of conversation that is sexualized. He’s probably referring to talking inappropriately, dirty, or humor that is sexual. This kind of speech makes light of something sacred. It laughs at what should be mourned. And the effect is to normalize actions that should be embarrassing.

Paul calls this kind of talk “out of place.” It doesn’t fit with being an imitator of God. It doesn’t fit with Christian identity. Underneath immorality is a false promise about what you need and who you are. Immoral activity is merely the expression of a wrong understanding of Christian identity.

Remember last week I said that we live in a “outrage age”? There are massive incentives with making people mad or ticked off. Outrage creates cliques, followers, profit, and friends. Do you know what else does that? Sensuality. The objectification of people creates cliques, followers, profit, and friends.

I’d just like you to think with me about what your actions, speech, relationships, viewing habits, Internet surfing, and social media usage say about the state of your soul. Realize that what you think about, talk about, and post have an effect on you and the people around you.

Is there a contrast between your morals, your words, and your actions and someone who doesn’t claim to be a follower of Jesus?

I would imagine there are some listening to this sermon who feel convicted because the answer is “No.” Or maybe you are stuck in a pattern of life-dominating sin. My goal in this sermon is not to make you feel guilty about past failures. But I do want to remind you about something important: immorality doesn’t fit with who you are as a Christian.

Christian identity creates real life change, especially when it comes to important areas like morality.

3) The Warning

Paul ends this section with a sober caution. He warns the church at Ephesus about making the mistake of thinking that identity without actions is okay. Paul makes a firm point here that actions and identity

³ <https://www.christ2culture.com/resources/Ministry-Blog/The-Gospel-and-Sex-by-Tim-Keller.pdf>

are so linked together that if one's identity is immorality, impurity, or idolatry, then they don't have a Christian identity. Something's wrong.

"For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" (Eph. 5:5).

Paul wants to emphasize this. That's why he says, "you may be sure of this." Perhaps he said this simply to reinforce a point they already knew but needed to be reminded about. Or maybe there were some who were trying to convince people in the church that it wasn't a big deal. Some may have been making light of the implications of rampant immorality in the people's lives.

Whatever the reason, it's clear that Paul isn't pulling any punches. He wants his readers to take this seriously.

Paul essentially says that an unrepentant person whose life is marked by immorality, impurity, and covetousness doesn't have a part in the kingdom of Christ and God. In other words, an immoral lifestyle says something about your identity.

This doesn't mean that Christians are perfect. There are plenty of examples of sinful behavior on the part of Christians who turned from their sins. Paul knows this. But he still says it. Why?

Because one of the dangers with immorality is not taking it seriously. So, Paul offers this warning.

Christian identity creates real life change. That's the point of this text. Paul shows us the goal, the contrast, and the warning.

So, let me encourage you to consider that the gospel of Jesus is so powerful that it fundamentally changes who you are and what you do—at the most personal and intimate level. Becoming who we are is not just a nice way to summarize the book of Ephesians.

Becoming who you are in Christ is the path of freedom, righteousness, and hope.

Christian identity creates real life change.

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