

LEARNING TO LOVE LIKE JESUS

SERIES: EPHESIANS: THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST



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Ephesians 5:1-21
Tenth Message
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Ephesians 5:1-21

This morning, we are continuing our study in the Book of Ephesians. We have already covered the first four chapters, and today we come to chapter 5. We are now in the “application” part of the book. The book’s first half is heavy on theology, and the second half is heavy on application. We will find a lot of commands, a lot of instructions, in this passage. These instructions are meant to help us experience more of the Lord and the life that he has for us.

Ephesians 5:1-2:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Paul begins by giving a lofty command of “Be imitators of God.” He fleshes that out a little bit in the second command: Love people like Jesus loves you.” I would love to imitate the love of Jesus. But how?

I watched a bit of the Olympics when they were on a few weeks ago. I am always fascinated by the downhill ski races. Watching these skiers fly down the mountain so gracefully at such high speeds is incredible. I went skiing last weekend for the second time in fifteen years, and let’s just say I was not nearly as graceful.

Now, if you were to say to me, Dan, just imitate the Olympic skiers. Watch what they do, and just do the same thing, I would say, *Yes, right. I would love to imitate those incredible skiers, but the truth is I don’t have the first clue about how to actually do what they are doing.* It doesn’t matter how much I watch them! If I am going to become a halfway decent skier, I need something more than “Watch them and do what they are doing.”

When Paul tells us to imitate God, wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could just decide to do that? Just look at Jesus and do what he does? That, basically, is the Christian life. It’s simple, but it’s not so easy. We need more detailed instructions. It’s not enough to just watch and then do. Paul understands this, and so he gives us

more. Specifically, he helps us identify a few obstacles that keep us from embodying the love of Jesus.

The obstacles to Christlike love

Ephesians 5:3-4:

But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. 4 Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.

Here, we have a long list of things that we are not supposed to do. This list is held together mainly by the theme of sexual immorality. Paul is telling us that sexual sin “is not proper” among followers of Jesus. Literally, sexual sin “is not fitting.” Think about that pair of pants that’s a bit tight around the waist, but you promise yourself that one day you will fit into them again. It’s similar to that. It doesn’t fit. It’s not right. Sexual sin is not fitting for followers of Jesus.

One other item in this list is covetousness (or greed, which is an unhealthy desire for something that someone else has). Like sexual sin, greed is not fitting for followers of Jesus.

Then Paul expands on this in the next few verses.

Ephesians 5:5-7:

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. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. 7 Therefore do not become partners with them.

We could easily spend an entire sermon on these first seven verses. In fact, I actually wrote that sermon while I was writing this sermon. As I was getting ready for this

sermon, I spent so much time thinking and writing about these verses that I basically wrote a whole sermon on them. Then God was like, *That's not the sermon you are supposed to preach today*. So I am going to move way too quickly through this because I think God has something more for us at the end of this passage.

But I will say this. At first glance, it is quite strange that Paul moves from telling us to imitate the love of Jesus to tell us to avoid sexual sin and greed. Why does Paul make this jump? The connection becomes clear when we think about the nature of greed and sexual immorality. Both of these sinful habits are, by nature, selfish and self-serving. They are about what I want for me. With greed, this is obvious. Greed is about an unhealthy desire to possess something. If I am greedy, I want to take something for myself. It is selfish.

Sexual sin in all of its forms is also, at its core, a selfish act. It takes what God has created to be enjoyed in the context of a loving marriage between a husband and a wife and says, I want to have this on my terms. That attitude is completely contrary to the selfless love of Christ, which is all about what I can give rather than what I can take. So sexual sin and greed are obstacles that hinder us from embodying the love of Jesus because they are by nature selfish practices. We can't truly love if we are consumed with our own selfish desires.

There is so much more that could (and probably should) be said here, but that is all I will say for now. Let's grab coffee sometime if you want to chat more about that.

As Paul continues, he identifies one more thing that gets in the way of us embodying the love of Jesus. We find this in verses 8-14.

Ephesians 5:8-14:

for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light 9 (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), 10 and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. 13 But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, 14 for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says,

**“Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”**

This section is dominated by the image of light and darkness, and he is speaking to both our identity and our function. We used to be darkness, but now we are light. And as light, we must expose the “unfruitful works of darkness.”

Sin that is kept in the dark that remains hidden has the power to be incredibly destructive. All too common are the stories of Christian leaders who appear to be shining examples of what it looks like to love like Jesus, only to have their lives and ministries come crashing down when the world discovers that they had a whole secret life of sin that had been running unchecked in the darkness.

Ravi Zacharias was one such story. Ravi was a Christian apologist who ran a large organization devoted to defending the Christian faith and worldview. For many of us, Ravi Zacharias was a household name, one that we admired for both his incredible intellect and his love for the Lord. Ravi died two years ago, and shortly after, it was discovered that he had sexually and spiritually abused a number of different women for many, many years. Not only that, but he also manipulated those around him to look the other way, keeping this truth hidden for years longer than it should have been.

I imagine those around Ravi who saw what was happening and decided to look the other way thought that they were being loving. If we expose this, Ravi and his ministry will be destroyed. Thousands of people who may hear the gospel through his ministry will never have the chance to hear it. We love him too much to betray him in this way.

That's not love. That is certainly not what Jesus would have done. Love looks to bring sin into the light rather than keeping it in the darkness. Love looks to expose sin in our lives and the lives of our brothers and sisters so that the love and grace of God can break the chains that are keeping us in bondage to that sin.

If we are going to love like Jesus, we must bring sin to the light. Keeping sin in the darkness is a huge obstacle to actually loving like Jesus.

The key to Christlike love

At this point, our passage takes a turn. Instead of looking at more obstacles that keep us from imitating the love of Jesus, Paul wants to give us one final command that will help us actually embody this love. In this command, we find the key to imitating the love of Christ. This key is really where I felt the Lord saying we needed

to camp out together this morning, so let's take a look, starting in verse 15.

Ephesians 5:15-18:

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.

Be filled with the Spirit. Be filled with the Spirit. Be filled with the Spirit. That's the command. That is the key to learning to love like Jesus. Be filled with the Spirit.

This is so counter-intuitive, isn't it? Our human nature, for most of us, dictates that when we hear the command, "Imitate the love of Jesus," our response is to throw in the towel (*Oh, that is way too hard. I could never do that.*), or we muscle up and we try. Really. Hard. Maybe it works for a while, but eventually, the wheels fall off, and we crash and burn.

There is a better way. Be filled with the Spirit.

Here is another way to put it: If you want to be filled with the love of God, you must first be filled with the life of God. If you want to be filled with the love of God, you must first be filled with the life of God. If you want to learn to love like Jesus loves, you must first have the Spirit of God, the very life of God, living inside of you.

What comes to mind when I ask you, "What is the biggest obstacle keeping you from growing in faith?" I bet that it is some kind of sin for many of us. It's my anger. If I could only learn to control my temper. Or it's my addiction to pornography. I hear that one a lot. In fact, that's the way I felt when I was struggling with pornography through college and into my early 20s. If I could only stop looking at pornography, I could live a life honoring to God.

Here is the reality: No amount of rooting out sin in our lives is going to help us grow in our faith. God is not primarily interested in us sinning less. He is primarily interested in being in a relationship with us. He is primarily interested in living inside of us by his Spirit. As that happens, as the Spirit fills us, then we will become more loving. We will become less angry. The Spirit will help us overcome our addictions and sinful habits and practices. Our job is not to make ourselves

less sinful. Our job is to be filled with the Spirit so that he can transform us into the image of Jesus.

If you want to be filled with the love of God, you must first be filled with the life of God.

Let me be clear. If you have put your faith in Jesus, you already have the Holy Spirit living inside of you. But there is a sense in which we need more of the Spirit in our lives. Not so much more of his presence. He is already fully present with us. But we need a greater awareness of his presence, as we sang earlier, "Let us become more aware of your presence." And we need to learn to depend on the Spirit more. This is what it means to be filled with the Spirit.

So how then do we get filled with the Spirit? I have here with me a glass and a pitcher of water. How does this glass get filled with water from this pitcher?

On the one hand, a glass cannot do anything to get filled with water. It's just a glass. And to "be filled" is a passive thing. A glass cannot do anything to "be filled." The water from the pitcher does the filling. The same thing is true with the Spirit and us. To be filled with the Spirit is a passive command. There is nothing that we can do to make that happen. That is something that God does.

What happens if I turn this glass upside down? Can the water fill it? Or what if I place this lid on the glass? If I pour water on it, will the glass be filled? Or what if I filled this glass with a can of Coke? How, then, could this glass be filled with water? It can't be. There is nothing that the glass can do to be filled, but there are plenty of things that the glass can do not to be filled.

It is the same way with us. It is not in our own power to be filled with the Spirit. That is the work of God. But it is certainly in our power to do things that keep the Spirit from being able to fill us in the way that he wants to. We can orient our lives away from him. We can close ourselves off to him. We can fill ourselves with other things, leaving no room for him. There are plenty of things that we can do to keep ourselves from being filled with the Spirit.

What is our responsibility, then? What is in our power to do? It is in our power to open ourselves up—to orient ourselves to the Lord. To take the lid off and to look at what is inside. There is a bunch of junk inside. It's nasty in there. We can't get the junk out, but we can open ourselves up to the Lord and invite the Spirit in to begin working on that junk in love.

These ways of opening ourselves to the Spirit are called spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices. Spiritual disciplines are not ways to change ourselves. They are ways to open ourselves to the Spirit so that he can come in and change us.

When you hear of spiritual disciplines, perhaps you think of things like prayer, Bible study, and fasting. These are all spiritual disciplines. They are great disciplines! But these are not the spiritual disciplines that Paul mentions in this passage. Instead, he gives us a list of four other disciplines—four ways of opening ourselves up so that we might be filled with the Spirit. The interesting thing about these disciplines is that they all have to do with the corporate gathering of God's people for worship and fellowship. They all have to do with the corporate gathering of God's people for worship and fellowship.

These disciplines come in verses 19-21, and they come in the form of participles, those words that end in "ing," if you remember that from 8th-grade grammar. There are four of them in verses 19-21. Let's look at them one at a time.

Here is the first one: "Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (verse 19). The first discipline, the first way of opening ourselves to the Spirit, is to sing worship songs to one another. To address one another in psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs. Did you know that was a spiritual discipline? Maybe fasting intimidates you a little bit, but singing worship songs to one another—that's pretty cool.

There is no substantive difference in these three types of songs in how Paul is using them. Psalm, hymns, and spiritual songs all refer to corporate worship songs.

To address one another in worship songs does not mean that we worship each other. Rather, we worship God with each other in mind. As we gather for worship, as we sing songs of praise to God, we do so knowing that our songs are being heard by others in the room. And we hear each other sing truths about God, as we listen to one another pour our souls in worship, that opens us open to the work of the Spirit in our lives.

We started our service today with the song "10,000 Reasons." We sang, "You're rich in love and you're slow to anger. Your name is great and your heart is kind."¹

If you came in this morning full of regret over some kind of mistake you made this week—a fight with your spouse, a foolish decision at work, a lack of compassion

for a friend—and you hear your brothers and sisters in Christ singing, "You're rich in love and you're slow to anger. Your name is great and your heart is kind," you have put yourself in a place for the Spirit to work. The Spirit now has an opportunity to take the words of those songs—truths straight from Scripture—and implant them more deeply in your soul so that your regret is replaced with an awe at the love and kindness of Jesus. You have been filled with the Spirit.

That's why we have to come. That's why we have to show up. That's why we have to sing together. We need each others' worship to help us open to the Spirit. Singing together is a spiritual discipline.

The second discipline—the second way of opening to the Spirit—that we find is "Singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart," (v. 19). This discipline is also about worship. But here, instead of addressing one another in songs or worship, the emphasis is on singing to God.

Notice that we are singing and making melody with our hearts, not in our hearts. "In our hearts" might mean that we are standing here silently worshipping the Lord internally. That is not at all what Paul is saying. Singing and making melody is always eternal. It's always with our voice. Notice that he doesn't give any qualifiers for those of us that weren't in the school choir. I'm not singing into a microphone, but I am going to sing. And I am going to sing loudly because I am worshipping with my heart. That is, I am worshipping whole-heartedly with all of myself and holding nothing back.

When we are able to worship God with our whole heart and with our whole voice, and with our whole bodies, we are actually opening up to the Lord. That's why I put my hands up in worship sometimes. I want to express with my body and voice what is happening (or what I hope is happening) with my soul, which is that I am opening up to the Lord—opening up to the Spirit. Spirit, come fill me. May I be open to you, and may I be filled with you.

Now, the last two years have made this discipline really difficult. Let's face it: it's a bit awkward to sit at home in our living room and sing along while watching online. It's a bit uncomfortable to sing with a mask on—it keeps falling down or fogging up your glasses. And some of us have fallen into the practice of just standing here and listening. Or we are maybe worshipping internally. But let me tell you, there is something about actually singing—opening our mouths and vocalizing

our worship in song—that cracks the soul open so that we can be filled with the Spirit. Singing is a spiritual discipline.

Next comes the third discipline: “giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” We open ourselves up to the Spirit of God by practicing gratitude.

Gratitude is such a powerful discipline. The discipline of gratitude is about noticing all of the blessings that the Lord has given us. Gratitude takes our attention, which is usually so fixated on what I can take, and asks, What has God already given to me?

Yesterday morning, our backyard was filled with 30 members of our worship and production team, gathered together for brunch and some fun together. Last night, I reflected with the Lord on that experience, and my heart was full of gratitude. I was thankful for the men and women that gave so much of their time and talents to help lead us in worship. I was thankful for the home that the Lord provided for our family 18 months ago through X245, PBC’s pastoral housing foundation that is trying to help our pastors afford to live here in the Bay Area. I was thankful for the sunshine. For the green grass. For the great food. For the chance to connect with a few folks I hadn’t seen for a while and the opportunity to meet a few new friends as well.

As I took some time to reflect on this with the Lord, it was as if my soul was cracked open a little bit, and there was a new space for the Spirit of God to come in and fill me up.

The final discipline in this passage comes right at the end, “Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

To submit to someone is to place yourself beneath them. It is to prioritize their wants and needs above your own. Submission is an act of humility, and it is the posture that we are all called to have towards one another—you submitting to me and me submitting to you.

Dallas Willard, a writer in spiritual formation and an absolute gift to the church, was also a philosophy professor at USC. One day in class, one of his students

challenged him in both an offensive and incorrect way. At that moment, Dallas paused and said, “I think that is a good place to end our class today.” Later, someone asked him why he didn’t correct this student, as he easily could have. Dallas said, “I am practicing the discipline of not having the last word.”²

So often, we are looking to have the last word. We are looking for a way to put ourselves above others instead of below them. But that is not the way of Jesus. When we submit ourselves to one another out of reverence for Jesus, we put ourselves in a place where we can be filled with the Spirit.

Conclusion

So that is our task: Be filled with the Spirit. If you want to learn to love like Jesus, you must first be filled with the Spirit. And the place where that starts is right here, in the corporate gathering of God’s people for worship and fellowship. So I want to invite you to stand as we get ready to sing together again. Let’s use this as an opportunity to open ourselves up to the Lord. Listen to those around you and be encouraged by their singing. Worship the Lord with your whole heart, your whole voice, and your whole body.

Open up your arms with me as you open to the Lord.

Endnotes

1. Jonas Myrin and Matt Redman, “10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord),” recorded July 2011 on 10,000 Reasons, Kingsway Music.
2. Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ’s Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Books, 2017), 41-42.