

SUNDAY, MARCH 20, 2022 – LENT III – EPHESIANS 5:1-9

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. <sup>2</sup> And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. <sup>3</sup> But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. <sup>4</sup> Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. <sup>7</sup> Therefore do not become partners with them; <sup>8</sup> for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light <sup>9</sup> (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)... Thus far our text.

During the season of Lent, we often focus on our sins and our sinfulness. We remember that it is our sinful nature that caused God to send Jesus to die in our place, because it was the only way for our sins to be forgiven and forgotten by God. In preparation for the joys of Easter, we have to spend some time contemplating why He had to come in the first place, and just what a humongous sacrifice His earthly ministry was. He came to make us imitators of Himself once again, to restore us to the perfection that God created us to be in the Garden of Eden, to make us beacons of light to a world that is so accustomed to darkness that it doesn't even know what light is anymore. Now, some might argue that this focus on sin, darkness and guilt is depressing, and I'd agree that it can be. When we look inside

ourselves, the only thing that we see is the beating heart of a convicted, guilty sinner. We often try to justify ourselves, and point to the “good works” that we do for others and, we think, for God. But the Scriptures tell us that without the motivation of the Holy Spirit, and faith in Christ as our Redeemer, these “good works” are nothing more than filthy rags.

There is Gospel here, however, even though it might seem to be a passage that is occupied with presenting the Law. We might hear only the Law if we’re involved in the sins that Paul points out, that were particular problems for the Ephesian Christians. Or, if we secretly are tempted by these things, even if we don’t follow through with actions associated with them. If we’re tempted by sexual sin, which the Word tells us is a sin against our own body, then we’re probably not going to keep on listening to the rest of the pericope before us. Maybe that’s why the Three-Year Lectionary, written in much more modern times than the Historic One-Year Lectionary, doesn’t include verses 3-5 in any portion chosen for public reading on Sunday. It’s just too controversial; move on to a subject that doesn’t raise the hackles of the folks in the pew. After all, you don’t want to turn people off, and drive them further into their rebellion against God – we in the church need to be more understanding, focus on things that are more uplifting and positive and, dare I say, popular.

Let’s delve into this text, by first giving a little context before and after the particular chunk that we’re considering this morning. Far from trying to “motivate” folks to good works, Paul is actually pointing to Christ and what He has done. He wants us to wrap ourselves up in the warm blanket that Christ has done everything for our salvation. Because of this glorious Good News, we are then moved to respond by doing what God loves, and avoiding what He hates. We need to have this perspective on the passage before us, so that it doesn’t become just another list of do’s and don’ts for living the Christian life. Some might turn this passage into “10 great ways to live a redeemed life in Christ”, for example. We must be clear that that is not Paul’s purpose whatsoever.

Paul makes it clear in Ephesians that Christ has redeemed us from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and SERVE HIM in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness...this quote continues from Luther's Small Catechism. We must understand this context, in order not to come away from Chapter 5 as merely a to-do list of things that are pleasing to God, and a laundry list of things to avoid. If we try to serve God, and keep His Law, on our own, we will fail every day. Luther tells us that works righteousness, or what he calls the theology of glory, leads to one of two different extremes, both of which are dreadfully harmful. Arrogance – just like the rich young ruler, believing and saying in our hearts that, "All these things I've done since I was a boy," when asked by Jesus what the 10 Commandments meant to him. Despair – the 2<sup>nd</sup> Use of the Law brought to its logical conclusion (without the Gospel being applied), that I don't even measure up to a small number of the commandments of God, and there's no hope for me

Paul sets this up as a contrast between the ways of living of the Gentiles, and the ways of living of the children of God – they are completely different, not because the children of God are any more virtuous than the Gentiles, but because they live their lives in view of what Christ has done, not what they attempt to do themselves. It's about what Jesus has done, not our puny efforts to do "good works" in the sight of men. The Gentiles are the way that they are because *"They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!"* (4:18-20). Living another way, because of faith in Christ and what He has done, and through the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we therefore strive to be imitators of God, not because we think that we're going to gain admittance into heaven because of it, but because it's what God wants, and because He wants it, we want it, out of the love that He has created and sustained for Him within us

Following this passage, in chapter 5, Paul gives an illustration of what this spotless, pure, chaste life looks like – the image of marriage, which in turn is a depiction of the relationship between Christ and His bride, the church. Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians that this view of marriage is not something that will be achieved this side of heaven – because of our sinful nature, we will never be able to embody it. However, because of the love of God for His church, He takes away our stain, our sin, and restores us to Himself in righteousness and purity and truth. First, Paul sets out the difference between the Christian people and the Gentiles surrounding them, then he gives examples of what is taboo in the sight of God, and then finally wraps it up with a description (a case study or example) of what this new focus will look like. If you see this as a unified whole, one complete thought in a letter to the church that Paul set up in Ephesus, it's easier to understand his purpose in spelling things out so clearly, instead of being distracted to thinking that he's merely a motivational speaker or encourager of the people

So, what is Paul saying in the “controversial” verses 3-5? Why is it difficult to speak in today's world? Why does Paul care so much about the sixth commandment, to the exclusion (or at least minimizing) of the others? Paul is saying that the surest way to destroy society is to attack the family. The easiest way to attack the family is to destroy the “one flesh union” that exists between husband and wife. If the vows of chastity and faithfulness at the wedding ceremony are broken, it's very difficult to repair them. We know that the world in which we live has declared war on the nuclear family that God has ordained. Without going into details (which I'm sure you're familiar with), we've become the laughing stock of those who think that they know better than God what is best for us. What often causes the vows to be broken, and affairs to be entered into, and choosing one which is the same rather than one which is complementary? A desire for what is pleasing to oneself, rather than desiring to serve the other, in a God-pleasing way. Phrases such as, “I'm not getting my needs met,” or “I'm going to do whatever feels good to me,” are characteristic of this changed focus. Rather than the husband

sacrificing for and protecting the wife, and the wife obeying and serving the husband, a selfishness sets in, which destroys the fabric of the “one-flesh” union that God has created and blessed.

This is not limited to actual cases of stepping out on one’s spouse. Pornography, crude jokes, even covetousness (named twice in this passage) are equally damaging, polluting, and disgusting to God. All of these things lead to even greater and greater sin – which is the purpose of the devil, by the way – the great accuser – lead us into sin, and then use that very sin to alienate us further from God through guilt. I could go into detail about all of these manifestations of sin, but suffice it to say that each of them destroy us from within – we’re steadily destroying the Temple of the Holy Spirit that God has created, committing abominations against it every time we violate the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment – that’s why this is so crucial to understand – these are sins against one’s very own body, created, redeemed and sanctified by God Himself

Because we’re wired to not take it very well when we’re reminded of our sin, specifically the sin that is nearest and dearest to us, we often stop reading right here, think that Paul is just stuck in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, and doesn’t understand the temptations and problems of 21<sup>st</sup> century America. We immediately deem him irrelevant, prudish and stepping on our desire to enjoy life to the fullest. We don’t get to the Gospel, because we won’t accept the Law as applying to our lives and souls.

So, where’s the Good News? How do we come away from this having hope for ourselves, for our families, for our nation, for our church? We all fall short of the glory of God, and fail to keep His Law in our thoughts, words and deeds every day. Keep reading the pericope – it comes about in verses 8-9. *“At one time, you were darkness, but now you are light IN THE LORD.”* (v. 8). Notice the emphasis here – IN THE LORD, we are light and salt and a blessing through the actions that the Holy Spirit brings about through us. We were darkness, but we are redeemed by Christ, the light of the world, Who has come to enlighten a world darkened by sin. We are called to bring light to a situation, a society, that doesn’t even know what light is anymore – they’ve traded the purity of what God has created into a sham, a

copy, a much lesser thing, mainly because they think that the greater gift isn't going to happen for them. We're groping around, looking for the light switch to lighten up the room, when the real problem is that we've squinted our eyes shut, refusing to believe that it's only through Christ and His work among us that we can be cleansed, made pure, in the blood of the Lamb. *"Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true."* (vv. 8-9). I'm not going to expound on this, because Paul is self-explanatory in his exposition here. The Good News is that Christ is pure and chaste and good, and perfectly kept the Law of God throughout His earthly ministry. Because of this, and because He died and rose again as a fragrant offering for sin (the death that paid the price that was necessary to be paid), we have hope and a future.

One of the reasons, I think, that people get their hackles up when we start talking about sexual sin, and how damaging and truly destructive it really is, is because we're all to some extent caught up in it, if not by deed, then by at least thought. We're surrounded with sex and temptation in the world in which we live – watch a little television, surf the web a bit, and you'll see that even children's programming is not exempt from showing things that are opposed to God's will for men and women to relate to one another. It should be no surprise that the things that bombard us in our daily lives see their fruition in the disintegration of the family, because if we hear and see something often enough and in enough places, eventually we'll subconsciously start to identify with the lie, rather than the truth. Paul's klaxon horn of repentance and forgiveness flies in the face of the common culture, which emphasizes legalism, acceptance of failure, and ultimately, despair and dejectedness.

But, condemning people to the fires of hell is not the purpose of Paul's writing to the Ephesians. He writes to remind them of the Gospel of God, the Good News that when we confess our sins, God, Who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. He, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wants us to realize that we are beacons of light to a world that is stuck in darkness. Yes, he has to be harsh at times, to break through the protective barrier that we erect, so that

we don't have to be confronted with our sins and our sinful natures. But, the reason that he is so stern with the people is that they must repent in order to receive the forgiveness of God. While articular confession (confessing each sin aloud) is not necessary, and is in fact impossible, the fact remains that we must be brought to sorrow for our sin in order to be healed from it.

Thanks be to God that He has delivered us from sin, and restored us to being reckoned righteous in His sight. Thanks be to Him for loving us so much that He was not content to leave us in the condemnation that our sins deserve, but for saving us and making us pure in the blood of the Lamb. He has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.