

Ephesians 5 (3) – Sex isn't just a private issue

Read vs.1-5: This message will touch on many truths that are related to sex, relationships, and idolatry, it will have many applications, and we will look at quite a few, and so a simple synopsis really isn't possible. We are going to address many current and ongoing issues regarding sex, salvation, and the means of sanctification, and we will think through these issues from several different angles. The truth is that sinful lifestyles are not just personal issues.

Before we “break down” this list of sins and types of sin, let's look at the big picture first. Vs.1-2 teaches us that our lives as Christians are to mimic the walk of the Lord. This is vital to pleasing God, and it is also important because we need to model a born again lifestyle to unbelievers. We need to be a true and faithful witness to the ministry of the Word, the power of the Gospel, and the reality of the Holy Spirit through our actions and our attitudes. The pattern of our lives must mirror the truths of the Bible, and the life of Christ, or we are presenting a poor picture to the unbelieving world. How we live before the world matters.

In order to do this, Paul told us that we need to demonstrate a sacrificial love (vs.1-2), and now he expands upon that and tells us that we must abandon impurity (vs.3-5). Walking in love means walking in holiness, and to not do so means that we are not walking in love towards unbelievers, we are not edifying God's children, and we are failing to do as God commands.

It isn't just a private issue. It is far more serious than many professing Christians realize. There are certain things which are totally incompatible with godly living, and with someone who is in spiritual union with Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. A sinful lifestyle isn't just a personal issue. It is a matter of living against our highest call, which is to imitate God by walking in love. How we live before the world matters to God. When God commands us to walk in sacrificial love, He isn't asking us to make a sacrifice, He is asking us to *be* a sacrifice.

Notice that Paul doesn't just talk about the positive aspects of “walking in love”. He points out the negatives of specific sins. Part of “walking in love” is striving against sin. This goes against the grain of our modern and most popular notions of church and Christian living. But if you are going to grow according to the method of the Scriptures, you have to do it this way.

Faithful teaching and proper discipleship focuses on God's love and grace, yes, but it also points out particular sins. It teaches against them, trains us to avoid them, and denounces those sins as against God's will. People might wonder about this sort of preaching, what is the point, but there are at least three reasons why we need to preach for the conviction of sin. 1) For the conversion of sinners to the truth of Christ. 2) For the conforming of the saints to the image of Christ. 3) For the comfort of weary souls by clinging to Christ. But you can't really do #3 without #'s 1 & 2. Faithful teaching and proper discipleship emphasizes our position (the truth of who we are in Christ), but also our practice (how to live in light of that truth). This is the indicative / imperative construct that the New Testament continually uses. This is the biblical pattern. The only way to have a revival of the power of God is to have a reawakening to the holy presence of God.

People will protest this method of “pointing out sin” by pointing to “results”, and say that this or that church or teacher only focuses on God's love and grace, and look how “successful” they are,

and how happy their people are, etc. And yes, it is true that if we focus only on the positive aspects, it will produce “happy” people, a bigger church, more money coming in, and fewer problems with problem people, in a sense. But this is not in the biblical, godly, faithful sense.

The truth is that walking in love means walking in holiness, set apart from the world in our actions and attitudes. And it means that we must live purposefully. Of course we must show love, compassion, mercy, grace, and understanding to those who are struggling with these sins. We need to strengthen our brothers and sisters in Christ. But that is the point; the fullness of love and grace is that it leads us from sin. Sometimes it happens without our immediate notice or concerted effort. But it usually occurs as those sins are being identified, and as we cooperate with God’s leading. To leave talk of sin out of the equation is unbalanced, and unbiblical.

If our highest desire is to please God (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:9), then it follows that we will desire to know and to avoid what displeases Him. Striving against sin is part of striving to please God. It is not faithful, wise, or pleasing to God to deviate from the biblical pattern for the sake of pragmatism and popularity. Faithfulness and holiness are the goals, not happiness and results. However, if we are God’s children, when we are faithful and holy, then happiness will result.

Our highest calling is to imitate the character of God by walking in love, and this love is a holy love. Think about it; it was the sinless life of Jesus that made Him worthy to be sacrificed for our sins. God was pleased with the sacrifice of Jesus because He was holy. Walking in love must include a love for God, and if we are to please God, this means that our loving actions and attitudes must be saturated in holiness. Otherwise, our “love” is not what we think it is, it is a counterfeit, and it is not the love that God is calling us to live.

Look at how Paul places these things together. We are to walk in love (vs.1-2)...but not walk in these other things (vs.3-5). In other words, to be doing these other things means that we are not walking in love. We could say it this way, that walking in love means not walking in (lust).

Love and holiness, these two truths are like two best friends who are never apart (1 Timothy 1:5 – *The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith*). If you want to talk truly about the love of God, then you must talk about sin, for to love God we must desire to put away sin, because it displeases and dishonors Him (2 Timothy 2:19 – *But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: “The Lord knows those who are his,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity”*). The goal of God’s work in your life is to make you holy, like Him (Hebrews 12:10 – *he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness*). To walk in love means to walk in holiness. The only way to have a revival of the power of God is to have a reawakening to the holy presence of God.

In vs.5 Paul says that we can know something for certain, that the person who is walking in the sins of vs.3 is not saved. This isn’t something we can explain away, it is something we can be sure of, that the people who are not purposefully walking in holiness are not walking in love, and they are not on their way to heaven (cf.1 John 3:10 – *By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother*). Vs.6 reiterates vs.5 – Don’t be deceived; saved people don’t live like vs.3, and to live like vs.3 means that you are a lost person.

Now this might cause you to wonder about someone else you know or knew, how that you knew that they professed Christ at some point, but never really lived it out. Well, judgment is God's business. But maybe you question your own life, how that you thought you were saved but you hadn't actually surrendered to God, and for some time you were living like this. The point is that we must interpret our experience by the Bible, not interpret the Bible by our experience. Perhaps God was at work in our lives, preparing us for salvation, but we hadn't actually surrendered to Jesus as Lord yet. Maybe we weren't actually converted as early as we once thought we were. However, if your life is now characterized by a purposeful walk with God, then this is not something you need to worry about; it is something that you can rejoice in, that you are walking in the truth now, instead of just having a mental assent to the gospel.

Let's be clear about this. Paul isn't trying to use scare tactics on us, or saying that we must be sinless. We can't be sinless in this life, and Paul is not talking about people who are new to the faith and learning to live in holiness, or those who are struggling with sin, trying to stop it, or those who fall into certain grievous sins for a time. He is not talking about people who want to get out of their sins. He is talking about people who intend to stay there, people who are purposefully living in an immoral, impure, idolatrous lifestyle, with no confession, no shame, no struggle, no remorse, and no repentance. They are living for their pursuit of ungodly pleasure. Someone who lives a lifestyle of sin is someone who doesn't know Christ.

Now we don't really know how long of a time it takes before living this way constitutes a "lifestyle". The Bible doesn't give us a timeframe but rather a frame of reference. It becomes a "lifestyle" when the one living it is intent on staying in it. They might think about loving God, but they are running away from holiness, and that isn't the mark of the godly (Hebrews 12:14 – *Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord*). This is the "love of holiness"; God teaches us that there is a holiness aspect to real, godly love.

Of course the world and much of the modern visible church rebels against this; they think that love and holiness are incompatible. They talk of how "we just want to love people" or redefine what it means to demonstrate the love of God. They aren't actually doing that, because they are focusing on only one facet of love, at the expense of truth.

must not even be named among you – When Paul says that these negative things must not be named, he isn't saying that we aren't supposed to *talk* about them, he is saying that we aren't supposed to *participate* in them. Paul isn't teaching us that we shouldn't talk about sin from the pulpit, rebuke sin publically, or warn unrepentant rebels and defiant sinners in our midst. Yes, having to deal with these things is distasteful, and yes, we do need to follow a proper process in dealing with private sin, but we have to have a love for holiness, and insist that people who claim Jesus live purposefully to the glory of God. We help one another, yes, we have hope for one another, yes, we are gracious, merciful, and patient with one another, yes, but we are also fully committed to struggling, striving, teaching, and training against sin. Yes.

For example, the trouble isn't with people who struggle with gay desires, because they can genuinely be part of the family of God. The trouble is with insisting that homosexuality hits the mark of God's intention. We all have plenty of places that miss the mark of God's intention. But true Christians struggle with those things, and want to be rid of those things, and don't try and

say that those things are somehow Our Father's intention for us as His born again children. Of course, many people today hold firm to the flawed notion that our daily walk with Jesus is just a private matter. This "me and Jesus got our own thing going" seems like such an attractive notion, especially to those who have not matured in the faith, and those who want the promises of God but wish to live in rebellion to His will. However, the NT speaks directly against that.

While our hearts and minds are an entirely private matter and under the full knowledge of the God who both sees and hears, our daily walk is a very public matter. I do not live in a bubble so remote that I affect only myself. Even my most benign and littlest of actions affect something and someone outside myself. No, my walk is not private at all and I don't even have to believe Jesus is Messiah and Lord to know that.

This is my conversation with folks who want to call themselves Christians but who want to live in a sinful lifestyle and think we aren't walking in love for pointing that out. "Ok, so let's say that for a moment that it isn't a matter of salvation, but let me ask you this. If you say that you are saved, then why aren't you serving the Lord? Why aren't you pursuing maturity? You aren't living like a new creation". The reply might be something like, "Well, excuse me, but is *your* life perfect?" The answer is no, it is not, but that is not the issue. The issue is when you are saying that you love the Lord, and that you want to serve the Lord, but you are openly in rebellion, going against the will of God in defiance. As Christians we won't live perfectly but we will live purposefully, and you are avoiding God's will and purposefully pursuing a sinful course.

This leads to people who say, "I love God, I worship God, I want to serve God, but I don't want to be around the people at church, I don't think God cares about that". That is not the work of the Holy Spirit. You can't actively love the Lord without actively loving His people. If you are avoiding the people of God, you are avoiding the Spirit of God. Some people realize that, and they do want to be a part of a community of faith. But they want a community where everyone just lets everyone else be. They want to call that love and grace but it isn't, it is pride (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:2). This is not an authentic Christian community; it is a community of rebels who want the remission of sins without repentance from sins. This is what leads to universalism and a hodgepodge faith, with the Bible being used like wax nose, with a Jesus that is molded into the image of the community, instead of the community being shaped by the Bible and molded into the image of Jesus. They might even demonstrate extreme kindness, but they have a Jesus who pays for sin but who says it's ok to sin. That's not the Jesus of the Bible. Yes Jesus walked among the unrepentant, and He was a friend of sinners, but He saves them from their sin, and leads them to new life. He didn't tell them it was okay to stay in sin. He taught that we are to do as He commands, to follow Him, and to leave our life of sin.

This is what Paul has been teaching us. We have been converted from our former darkness (Ephesians 4:17-24), therefore we are to live in light of that reality (Ephesians 4:25-32). To remain in our former ungodly patterns and fail to develop the new godly patterns is to grieve the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30). We've been brought into the light so we are to walk as children of light (Ephesians 5:8). Holiness is the *mark* of eternal life because holiness is *produced* by eternal life.

A church is supposed to help each other in our struggles with sin, and that means we must hold each other accountable. No we aren't supposed to be the "sin police", but we aren't supposed to

be a “sin factory” either. That means we are to have people who know us closely, personally, and privately. This is important because “People fall in private, long before they fall in public” (J.C. Ryle). Honest Christian relationships are an important part in our battle against personal sin.

If we are to please God, to imitate God, and walk in love, we must strive against sin, both personally and corporately. The most authentic thing we can do is to faithfully pursue holiness and obediently follow after Christ. Yes, everyone is broken, but authenticity comes when we collectively push each other, with mercy, and by grace, in the direction of Christlikeness. To do otherwise is not walking in love towards God, other Christians, or unbelievers. Walking in love means walking in holiness; a sinful lifestyle isn’t just a personal, private issue. The only way to have a revival of the power of God is to have a reawakening to the holy presence of God.

as is proper among saints – a saint is not someone who has been set apart and designated as so by the church, it is anyone who knows Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. These kinds of sins, immorality, impurity, and idolatry, are not proper among God’s people. We need to talk about them in the sense of understanding what they are so as to avoid them, but these things should not be a part of our regular conversations or associations. Paul says that such things are *out of place* (vs.4) and *shameful* (vs.12). The first step in protecting ourselves from these types of sins is to eliminate them from our mouths and our minds.

Having looked at the big picture, now we will look more specifically at the types of sins Paul is pointing out here. These things are fairly straightforward, but they have deep and sweeping implications. They are vital to our walk with God and witness for God as individuals, and our witness and ministry for God as a church. If we are to be faithful to Scripture and pleasing to God we must be teaching against them, warning others about them, training people to avoid them, and denouncing those sins as against God’s will.

sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness – to walk in love means we must reject the counterfeit loves that we might be enticed with. Vs.3 mentions three terms filled with meaning, and in this context, these three terms are all linked, as we will see. The world feeds it, the devil enflames it, and the flesh indulges it, but the new man denies it and embraces the cross instead. He makes it his purpose to avoid these perversions of true, godly love. He walks the other way.

The first term, *sexual immorality*, refers to all sexual acts that are sinful. Of course this would include fornication (a sexual act or relationship with someone you aren’t married to), adultery (a sexual act or relationship with someone who is married to someone other than you), and homosexuality (a sexual act or relationship with someone who is the same gender as you), but it would also include any other sexual activity that is declared to be sinful according to the Word of God. This would include our thought life as well as other related, sexually lustful desires and acts. If something sexual is not sanctioned by Scripture, it is to be put away. And Scripture goes much further than just the acts; it covers the attitudes, as we see in this passage.

The second term, *all impurity*, is a more general yet sweeping term that refers to anything that is unclean, filthy, or defiled (Matthew 23:27 / Romans 1:24, 6:19 / 2 Corinthians 12:21 / Galatians 5:19 / Ephesians 4:19 / Colossians 3:5 / 1 Thessalonians 4:7). This is moral uncleanness and corruption, but it is not restricted to acts, and would include our desires and thoughts. This means

we need to be careful about what we are reading, watching, and listening to. A commitment to purity (Job 31:31) must encompass our lives (cf. Psalm 19:14 / 1 Peter 1:15). We are bombarded with impurity and we cannot expect to stay clean from sexual sin when we keep flirting with it. And just because we haven't "acted out" doesn't mean we aren't guilty of impurity.

The way we dress can fall into this category, and this applies to men as well as women, and even to how we dress our children or allow them to dress. To encourage others to think lustful thoughts by our provocative attire is impurity. In a sense it is true that we cannot be held responsible for someone else's thoughts, but short skirts, low cut shirts, and tight clothing are obviously inappropriate for a Christian in public. We might not think that we are trying to attract attention or elicit a response but we may indeed be doing just that. For the sake of others, and our witness, we ought to be careful. Love limits liberty. When it comes to what we wear, we must be concerned with humility, modesty, and godliness (1 Timothy 2:9-10 – *likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness – with good works*). This isn't legalism, this is love, and again, this applies to men as well.

This goes beyond our clothing, because you might not be wearing anything inappropriate, but you might be acting inappropriately, and it is still impurity. Of course, someone with a mind full of sin can think lustful thoughts about you no matter how you are dressed, or how you act, but we ought to do our part in not encouraging it through our dress, our speech, or our conduct. You are responsible for that. We shouldn't be known for feeding and fueling impurity.

Remember we are supposed to be walking in love, and remember that love and holiness go together. Godly love always seeks the purity of its object. To walk in love means that you don't want to do anything that would perversely affect another person's thoughts or testimony.

The third term, *covetousness*, in this context refers to greed. We might wonder what it is doing here in this passage. But it is connected to sexual sin here because sexual sin involves covetousness. Sexual sin is a greedy, illegitimate, lustful longing, and it often seeks to be satisfied at any cost, including other relationships and responsibilities. We are told in vs.5 that such a person is an idolater. This sort of sexual "greed" or covetousness is idolatry because the idol behind the sin is the self. In other words, this counterfeit love is based on what it does for me, it's a self-seeking thing. Sexual immorality is an expression of the greedy self. It doesn't reflect the love of Christ for us, and it doesn't represent a Christian walking in love.

Make no mistake about it; Paul is connecting sex, relationships, and idolatry here in this passage. Self is at the center of these perversions of love. Think about how the world thinks about love; their concept of love is selfish. The books, magazines, movies, television, songs and such all seem to foster this chase for the fantasy type of love, what is seen and sold as the ultimate love. In essence it is a perfect feeling of love and a perfect fulfillment with someone like me. In fact, it should come as no shock to realize that this is the impulse behind homosexuality. I want to "love on" a version of me. Even when it gives of itself, this kind of love is about serving its idol.

Now that isn't to say that this counterfeit, covetous love never has any real sense of self-giving. It is true that some people may be less self-centered and more self-sacrificing than others. But in

the basic sense and in the realm of sexuality it is still about what they think they are getting out of it, let alone the fact that is isn't done with a view to glorifying God.

Yes, some folks do indeed make it last, but many people give themselves over to one person for a while but then drain that person dry and then they go off to find another one they can drain. It is because their false, ungodly, fantasy says that love is what I get. However, God says love is what you give.

This is the "greedy" mindset, it is covetous, and it is driven for more. The soul is striving for its desire, "I want the hottest, I want the richest, I want this or I want that, I want it all, I want them all". This is why a man could be with the most beautiful and loving woman on earth, and yet he will still be enticed by another woman. He is setting himself up as an idol, he is his own god who desires (and may think he deserves) to be worshipped by women. Of course, it goes both ways, because women can take their desire to be desired to an unhealthy, unbiblical, ungodly place, too. People might not realize it, but it is true nonetheless. This isn't love, it is lust.

This counterfeit, covetous notion of love, this is one reason why fantasy romance books and fantasy sexual encounters on TV or movies or websites are so popular. In all of this counterfeit love, there is no real commitment and no real effort to gain and to grow in real intimacy. It is done on our own terms; it is about the fulfillment and pleasure of self. The counterfeit love avoids and tries to escape the messy reality of real intimacy, of having to make it work, often learning through pain, and the pain of having to "deny yourself, and take up your cross".

This counterfeit, covetous love doesn't grow in hope and maturity with someone who knows who you really are, and you know who they really are, and you both love each other anyway, and you are binding yourselves together in sexual union, strengthening yourselves for the fight of life. Instead, if you are the counterfeit, fantasy lover, you seek the pleasure of sexuality on your own terms, with you in control, like a god. It is a counterfeit love, and it ought not to be taking place in the life of a Christian.

This false, counterfeit, covetous love is why people are gone like the wind when they aren't "getting what they need". This might not happen all at once, but they "check out" of the relationship in steps before they move out and move on. Or they become an unrepentant, malicious traitor, and abuse someone to the point of forcing them out. They might then claim abandonment, when they are the ones who did the abandoning. Living like this isn't walking in love at all. Love isn't about somebody meeting your needs; it's about you meeting somebody else's needs. If we lived that out we would decimate the divorce rate among Christians.

The love of Christ is forgiving, unconditional, self-sacrificing, and it glorifies God. The counterfeit love is unforgiving, conditional, self-serving, and it glorifies a person. Think carefully about that last point; the counterfeit love glorifies a person. The counterfeit, covetous love is idolatry, because at its core it is a longing to be worshipped. Someone either wants to be worshipped or they want to worship someone else, because they want to be worshipped, too. It is relationship idolatry, with the false god of self at the center. It may not seem that deep or drastic in the person's mind, but sexual sin is most definitely a worship issue. Again, Paul is connecting sex, relationships, and idolatry here in this passage.

Having explored this in depth, we can see how these sins can affect our lives in so many ways. There will be things that we learned about today that should affect how we live tomorrow, what we do, what we think about, who we associate with, and what we allow ourselves to be entertained with, and so on and so forth. There may be areas where we have had some measure of victory, but we now realize that we need to fortify our position against these sins. The truth is that we can't just talk down on these sins; we need to rise above them. We must go from listening and learning to actually living. The only way to have a revival of the power of God is to have a reawakening to the holy presence of God. Oh how we need God's mercy and grace!

Now as we begin to close, let's apply this to some areas that may not strictly be "sexual issues", or perhaps even "salvation issues", but that are touched on by this notion of counterfeit, covetous love. Understanding this sin can help us root out all sorts of idolatry in our hearts.

This false, counterfeit, covetous love goes beyond sexuality. It is also what drives the celebrity culture. We "love" those that seem to be worthy. We wish we could be like them, and we identify with them because we idolize them. This type of counterfeit love spills over into hobbies, habits, and our choices, perhaps even our choice of churches. We want to identify with what we want to be identified as. This can be healthy, of course, and we are supposed to identify with Christ, but it can and often does reveal an idol in our hearts, something we are greedy for in an ungodly way. Our counterfeit love may even sacrifice for our counterfeit cause, but it is because it makes our counterfeit god (ourselves) feel good.

This failure to walk in real, godly love and walking in a counterfeit, false, greedy, covetous love may help to explain why some people have no close friendships, only physically distant friends and social media contacts. No one actually gets too close. Of course, people can keep their distance, emotionally speaking, even with many local relationships. And this is not to say all social media is bad, or that relationships forged and maintained through social media have no value. Rather, it is to say that when our only friends are of the physically distant variety, or media variety, and no one who is physically close to us can get close to us, then perhaps it is because we have a romanticized view of relationship, and we put up walls around our heart so as not to allow our god (ourselves) to be vulnerable. In all these areas of sin, we are "greedy" to gather and protect our own self-interest. It is all a "controlled commitment", and it doesn't reflect or represent what walking in love is all about.

How we live before the world matters to God. If you are living for your own lusts, repent, and place your faith in Jesus Christ. He can save you from the penalty of sin, and He can deliver you from the power of sin. If you know and trust Christ, but you are struggling with these sins, expose your darkness to the Light, confess, pray for mercy and grace, renew your mind, cling to your Savior, and know His love.

Weary soul, Jesus can heal your hurts, fill you with His Spirit, and satisfy the hunger of your heart. If you really want to root out your idols, to mimic the walk of the Lord, to please God, to model a born again lifestyle to unbelievers, to be a true and faithful witness to the ministry of the Word, the power of the Gospel, and the reality of the Holy Spirit through your actions and your attitudes, then you will take these truths to heart, and live them out in your life. No matter who you are, Jesus is your answer, because sex isn't just a private issue.