

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

## Walking In Love Ephesians 5:3-7

**Intro:** 6a, “Let no one deceive you with empty words...” By way of introduction, I’ll be taking this phrase completely out of context. Yes, the context indicates a completely different meaning but this phrase is also still extremely appropriate for the season we are currently in. We have just gone through another election cycle for governor and other offices here in Louisiana with another smaller election coming up next month. Then, after all the holidays are over and the New Year begins, the real hog-wash will begin to be spread far and wide, from seas to shining sea. So, brace yourselves for the coming onslaught and remember 6a.

Don’t get me wrong. I love my country and I thank God for the freedoms we’ve been granted and the opportunities/ responsibilities we possess to freely determine the direction of our country through the voting process. This blessing has been given to us freely but it wasn’t freely acquired. It cost many an individual dearly to win this freedom for us – from the founding fathers to every veteran who has taken up arms and hazarded their lives in defense of it. We have these rights as Americans and we should use them whenever possible to advance our Christian values and morals in American society. While it is a known fact that you cannot legislate morality, every law that has ever been passed is an attempt to do just that. Still, not everyone gets their morals from Scripture, clearly.

But this is what we need to keep in mind in every election cycle – no matter who we elect (or fail to elect); no matter who we send to Capitol Hill; no matter who resides in the white House – we must always remember, as Charles Colson once famously said, “that the kingdom of God is not going to arrive on Air Force One.”

Now, we have a new Speaker of the House, Mike Johnson of Louisiana, and by all accounts, he’s a believer in Jesus Christ and has no qualms about referencing God or talking about his faith in relation to his new position. This is nothing short of amazing, seeing he works in an environment that is almost completely anti-God, certainly anti-religion and is, by and large, anti-common sense as well. It literally is a miracle that he’s been elected by the

House of Representatives to be the new Speaker. As such, I believe he really needs our prayers because the other side is going to bring everything to bear against him soon. And by “other side” I mean the forces of darkness.

Just being a legislator is a difficult assignment, especially if you go to Washington with the idea that you’re going to make a real difference. If nothing else, you have set yourself up for disillusionment. Clearly, the intentions of most freshmen legislators are really good – they’re going to bring real change and help their constituents. But sooner or later, whether they stand on the political right with their conservative programs or on the left with their liberal programs, they eventually come to the sad realization that neither side is able to solve our country’s problems. “Not only don’t we solve the problems,” one senator has said, “our legislation actually makes the problems worse.”

In their minds, the perceived difficulty is a flaw in human nature, most notably: greed and lust. These aren’t just Republican vices or Democratic vices. They’re not vices of only Western countries any more than they are of any other country. These vices are present across the board in all purely human relationships. Economist John Kenneth Galbraith made the same cynical assessment. He said, “Under communism man exploits man. Under capitalism the situation is exactly the reverse.”

But, in Christianity there really is a reverse, because in Christianity the man who once exploited others becomes a new man. That’s what Paul’s writing about in this Book. He’s writing about God’s work of making a spiritually alive Christian out of a spiritually dead pagan, and of combining all those newly made people into a new society (the Church). According to Paul (and to Christianity), the hope of the world is not in new programs but new people. And new people become new only by the work of that One who alone is ultimately our hope, Jesus Christ.

The difference, of course, is regeneration and not just morality, because just teaching a new or higher morality never changes anybody. Not everyone understands Christian morality, but everybody knows they should do better than they actually do. The problem is not with the standard. The problem is ourselves. Paul’s prescription for a higher standard of living is actually quite profound, as a careful reading of [Eph 4-5](#) shows. It involves 3 things: 1) what we are, 2) how we think, and 3) the way we act. Each is necessary.

Here's how John Stott puts it: "Their theme [ch 4-5] is the integration of Christian experience (what we are), Christian theology (what we believe) and Christian ethics (how we behave). They emphasize that being, thought and action belong together and must never be separated. For what we are governs how we think, and how we think determines how we act. We are God's new society; a people who have put off the old life and put on the new; that is what He has made us. So we need to recall this by the daily renewal of our minds, remembering how we 'learned Christ . . . as the truth is in Jesus,' and thinking Christianly about ourselves and our new status. Then we must actively cultivate a Christian life." Holiness is not a condition we just drift into but rather an active working out of what has already been worked into us. This new life is neither automatic nor easy, but it is the only hope for society.

**Ch5** began with an exhortation for believers to be imitators of God (**1**) and the 1<sup>st</sup> way we do that is to walk in love (**2a**). Walking in love is the 1<sup>st</sup> expression of what it means to be an imitator of God and the specific example that is offered to us is the love of Christ. Jesus' self-sacrifice for us is the example of love that believers are to emulate as they walk in love. Sure, we'll never be able to duplicate His self-sacrifice since we can't die an atoning death for the sins of others. But, we can still imitate His example as we exercise love that is self-sacrificial, costly, and offered for the sake of others' well-being.

**3** – Whoa! Well, that took a turn! After the strongly positive exhortations to be imitators of God and walk in love, the negativity of our text seems rather abrupt! In each of the 1<sup>st</sup> 2 verses, 3 vices are listed, followed by a correction. In **v3**, the vices of fornication (sexual immorality), uncleanness (impurity) and covetousness (greed) are targeted. Paul goes on to say that these should not even be named among believers, as is fitting for saints. The abruptness in the shift in tone and content may explain why several translations insert a paragraph break between **v2** and **v3** but is that really warranted? If we consider the walking metaphor Paul employs in **v2**, we can see how **v3** relates directly to **v2**. The **vices** listed in **v3** simply illustrate the kind of things that are contrary to walking in love. As such, these vices shouldn't be seen just as abstract sins that are inappropriate for God's people; they undermine the principle of love.

fornication (sexual immorality) – refers to any kind of unsanctioned sexual intercourse, which, considering Paul's Jewish heritage, means any kind of intercourse outside of marriage. Any such activity could be seen as contrary to walking in love in that sex outside the covenant of marriage doesn't properly respect the other person. Without the proper commitment, sex merely uses and abuses the other party. And, if one or both parties are already married to someone else, the marriage partner is the victim of their sin.

uncleanness (impurity) – is much broader; it literally refers to something filthy or dirty and figuratively refers to a state of moral corruption. This moral corruption might involve sexual sins but is not limited to them. The pagan Greeks in Ephesus openly approved of such practices as prostitution and homosexuality. In fact, many a Greek temple was funded through these practices and it was not the least bit strange to them. Of course, a morally corrupt person needn't engage in such things, they can just approve of and support them. Our own modern society often views prostitution as a victimless crime but tell that to the spouse who has been cheated on and many times is saddled with an STD through no fault of their own.

The context points to the consequences of impurity to the detriment of others. It's obvious that morally corrupt people bring hurt and destruction into the lives of others. It's in this sense that moral corruption (impurity) work directly against the principle of love. Paul says that what was perfectly acceptable in the surrounding society was not even to be hinted at among Christians.

covetousness (greed) – is clearly opposed to the principle of love. It's thought that greed here refers to sexual greed (considering the context) but it doesn't need to be that narrow. A greedy person rarely considers that their greed will deprive others of their due, although it usually does. Those who hoard goods for themselves generally don't share with others. And, greedy people often deliberately steal from others. Ultimately, greed is a form of idolatry (v5) in which wealth and material goods are valued and even treasured above God and above the welfare of others. Thus, greed is incompatible with love.

Paul says these sins shouldn't even be named among believers. Christians should be so far removed from these vices that it's not possible even to

suggest their presence among them. Purity from these sins is fitting (proper) for saints, of God's holy people. The use of holiness language (saints) emphasizes the purity in view since holy people are set apart for God's purposes. Saints are to avoid actions and characteristics that don't align with God's character. As imitators of God, the saints are to be free from such vices.

**4** – This 2<sup>nd</sup> list of vices focuses on speech, stating that filthiness (obscenity), foolish talking and coarse jesting (crude talking) are also not suitable for Christians who seek to walk in love. As in **v3**, these vices are inappropriate for those whose identity is shaped by belonging to God as His holy people. The vice-list doesn't just outlaw certain behaviors for God's people; rather it identifies what is and is not fitting for such people.

There's little need to go into specific detail as to what exactly each of these vices entail. It seems this part of the list was not intended to be so well-defined that it would be possible to skirt around it with sneaky definitions. Instead, as we've already seen (**4:29**), God's people must take care with their speech and make sure that it doesn't degrade into crudeness and unwholesome character. An obscene person is one who has no regard for standards. Nothing commands his respect. Therefore, his actions and his speech are consistently improper, offensive and disrespectful. This obscene, offensive and dirty speech is completely out of place among God's holy people who imitate Him.

Instead, we're to engage in thanksgiving. While crude and obscene talk reveals corrupted character, thanksgiving indicates and expresses an appropriate dependence on God. It acknowledges that He is the giver of all good things (**Jam 1:17**) and confesses His own goodness. As imitators of God, believers are to be oriented towards the good, turning away from all corruption and immorality – and this should, of course, be reflected in their speech.

**5** – Paul begins **v5** with a meta-comment, "For this you know..." This phrase signals that something significant is about to be addressed. This literary tool is used to prepare the reader to receive the following statement as seriously significant. Paul then issues a strong declaration that those who are characterized as sexually immoral, impure or greedy do not have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ. That should be a sobering statement



for anyone! Paul doesn't hem and haul around and say, "Well, maybe, possibly, you know...God is love!" He says "No...inheritance!"

Notice that the 3 vices mentioned in **v3** are repeated here but with a focus on people, not the vices themselves. The words Paul uses refer to those who embody these vices. The distinction between the vices and those who embody them is vital for understanding this verse. While the vices shouldn't even be hinted at among God's holy people, **v5** doesn't mean that a slip into 1 of these sins (or any) will disqualify the saints from the kingdom of Christ. People who are characterized as sexually immoral, impure or greedy are not fit for the kingdom of Christ because they reveal themselves not to be God's holy people. This is highlighted by the additional comment of the greedy person being an idolater. The one who worships wealth and material goods does not worship God (**Mt 6:24**). The verse focuses on identity. Only God's holy people will inherit the kingdom.

This understanding of **v5** is also reinforced by Paul's previous discussion inheritance and its connection to the saints (**1:14,18**). In **1:13-14**, the Holy Spirit is the down payment of the inheritance of those who are in Christ. His presence marks out (identifies) the saints as God's holy people. The saints are also marked by the Holy Spirit to share in God's inheritance (**1:18**). In light of this truth, **v5** is clearly speaking of people who are not saints, since they don't share in this inheritance. Genuine holy people need not fear this verse; if they happen to sin in these areas, they are not automatically disqualified from the inheritance. They may disqualify themselves from experiencing the intimacy of God's presence, the joy of fellowshiping with God's people or the encouragement that comes from God's Word. But here in **v5**, Paul's addressing people who are not saints in order to show that such vices are not proper for saints.

**6-7** – This verse underscores the seriousness of the vices listed in **v3-4** but the focus here is on how such sins identify a person's status or where they stand before God. Paul's reference to the sons of disobedience is in direct contrast to the dear children (or dearly loved) of **v1b** but precisely parallels the children of wrath of **2:3** and those who are still dead in trespasses and sins (**2:1**) before they were made alive...with Christ (**2:5**). Thus, the status of the sons of disobedience is that of those who are not yet made alive in Christ – the unrepentant and unredeemed. That's why Paul says the wrath of God is coming upon the vices of **v3-4**; they identify those who have not

been spared from the wrath of God through a union of faith with Christ. They're not part of God's holy people so they're not God's children.

The future coming of God's wrath against the lost is an unpopular subject in many churches today. Instead, they desire to take a more loving approach to sin and sinners. Sadly, this approach is neither loving nor biblical. As unpopular as it may be, judgment is the central theme of Paul's expectation of the prophetic future. God's judgment cannot be escaped; His wrath and anger have been stored up for the disobedient while glory, honor and peace await those who do what is good ([Rom 2:1-11](#); [Col 3:5-7](#); [I Tim 5:24-25](#)). Judgment is seen as reaping what's been sown – either destruction reaped from sowing according to the flesh or eternal life reaped from sowing according to the Spirit ([Gal 6:7-9](#)). It takes into account the role of conscience as it exposes what is kept secret ([Rom 2:14-16](#); [I Cor 4:3-5](#)).

While all people begin as children under wrath by nature ([2:1-3](#)), believers are saved from God's wrath, since they have been declared righteous by the blood of Christ ([Rom 5:8-10](#); [I Thess 1:9-10](#); [5:9-10](#)) and they will be blameless in the day of Christ ([I Cor 1:6-8](#); [I Thess 3:13](#)). Refusing to acknowledge the sure coming of God's wrath against the disobedient is not a loving approach at all. It fails to warn the sinner about God's wrath and fails to prepare them to avoid it. Worse, it lulls them into a false sense of security which only serves to encourage them to persist in their sin, thus garnering even more wrath against them. This is probably why Paul begins this verse with a warning.

Clearly, Paul is concerned about offsetting any attempt to downplay the vices in [v3-4](#). Don't be fooled by empty words, these sins are serious enough to warrant the just wrath of God. Why would anyone want to downplay the seriousness of these sins? It could be that they were so common in the society of those Paul was writing to that some may have a hard time believing they would engender God's wrath. Or, just as likely, some people may have relied so heavily on the love, mercy and grace of God that they were willing to excuse such activities. They may even have claimed, as some do today, that those who have been made alive with Christ need no longer fear the wrath of God and thus, no longer need to be concerned about the sins that warrant it.

But Paul warns the Ephesians (and us) against buying into and believing

such deceptions. These sins are serious enough to not only warrant but even invite the wrath of God. While believers have been made alive with Christ and no longer need to fear God's wrath, this doesn't mean they can become cavalier about the sins that put them under wrath in the first place! These vices reveal the spiritual disposition of those who are still under wrath and as such, they must not be trifled with, unless you're just a glutton for divine punishment.

Paul concludes this section by warning believers again to not participate in any such activities. This doesn't mean we are not to associate with sinners at work or in public. Certainly, we cannot be a witness to the lost if we never expose ourselves to them. The point Paul reiterates here is that believers are not to share in the behaviors or spiritual dispositions of the sons of disobedience because the elements that characterize their way of life actually elicits the wrath of God against them and believers should obviously not partake in such things with them. Not only would our participation encourage them to remain in their sin but it will also bring correction from our Father who is holy and who expects and requires us to imitate Him.

What are Christians to do? We're to be thankful – acknowledging our dependence upon God. We're to be gracious; walking in love means to actively seek the benefit of others over our own selves. It might be painful, costly or time-consuming but so was the love Christ showed for us and ours pales greatly in the comparison.

We've also been blessed mightily with truth; we have God's own Word and we also have both the ability and the responsibility to express that truth by our own words. It's the ability of words to do this—particularly to communicate truth about God, ourselves, and salvation—that makes the cheapening of words through foolish talk and coarse joking so reprehensible. Again, a buoyant spirit or bright humor is not a bad thing. The God who made the duck-billed platypus and monkeys is not humorless. Instead, the problem lies in our making light of what is eternally important and of using jokes to avoid the commands and warnings of God. Thank God for truth and for the words by which the truth of God may be conveyed to people through preaching, through conversation and through living for Christ. 😊