

Exhortation to Be Imitators of God

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Ephesians 5:1–9 · Church Postil

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Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour. But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks. For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be not ye therefore partakers with them. For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light: (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;)

1. This is a letter of admonition, instructing Christians, according to the plan underlying Paul's epistles, not to become sluggish and careless, but by their deeds to evince their faith, and honor and proclaim the Word he has taught them; for the sake of the gentiles and unbelievers, that these may not take offense at the doctrine of Christ.
2. To begin with, having shown that we were made children of God through Christ, he admonishes us to be followers, or imitators, of the Father, as beloved children. He employs the most endearing of terms – "beloved children" – to persuade us by the Father's love to love even as we are loved. But what manner of love has God manifested toward us? It was not simply that love manifest in the fact that he gives temporal support to us unworthy beings in common with all the wicked on earth; that he permits his sun to rise on the just and on the unjust and sends rain on the grateful and on the ungrateful, as Christ mentions (Mt 5, 45) in connection with his command to be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect. Not only thus did God love us, but in a special way: he has

given his Son for us. In addition to showering upon us both temporal and eternal blessings he has given his own self; he has completely poured out himself for us, with all he is, with all he has, with all he does, – and we were nothing but sinners, unworthy creatures, enemies and servants of the devil. More than this would be beyond even his grace and power. He who despises such glow of love, which fills all heaven and earth and is beyond all power to comprehend it; who does not permit this love to kindle and incite in him love for his neighbor whether enemy or friend – such a one is not likely ever to become godly or loving by such measures as laws or commandments, instruction, constraint or compulsion.

3. "Walk in love," counsels the apostle. He would have our external life all love. But not the world's love is to be our pattern, which seeks only its own advantage, and loves only so long as it is the gainer thereby; we must love even as Christ loved, who sought neither pleasure nor gain from us but gave himself for us, not to mention the other blessings he bestows daily – gave himself as a sacrifice and offering to reconcile God unto ourselves, so that he should be our God and we his children. Thus likewise should we give, thus should we lend, or even surrender our goods, no matter whether friends claim them or enemies. Nor are we to stop there; we must be ready to give our lives for both friends and enemies, and must be occupied with no other thought than how we can serve others, and how both our life and property can be made to minister to them in this life, and this because we know that Christ is ours and has given us all things.

"To God for an odor of a sweet smell [for a sweet-smelling savor]."

4. This expression Paul takes from the Old Testament. There the temporal sacrifices are described as being "a sweet-smelling savor" unto God: that is, they were acceptable and well-pleasing to him; but not, as the Jews imagined, because of the value of the work or of the sacrifices in themselves. For such thoughts they were chastised by the prophets often enough. They were acceptable on the ground of the true sacrifice which they foreshadowed and encircled. Paul's thought is this: The sacrifices of the Old Testament have passed. Now all sacrifices are powerless but that of Christ himself; he is the sweetsmelling savor. This sacrifice is pleasing to God. He gladly accepts it and would have us be confident it is an acceptable offering in our stead. Moreover, there is no other sacrifice the Christian Church can offer for us. The once-offered Christ alone avails. Although, following his example, we present our bodies a sacrifice, as taught in Romans 12, 1, yet we do not do so in behalf of ourselves or others; that is the function of

the one sacrifice alone-Christ. Therefore, all sacrifices offered in the mistaken notion that they avail for us, or even secure forgiveness of sin, are wicked and unsavory. But more of this elsewhere.

SINS NOT TO BE NAMED AMONG CHRISTIANS.

"But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as becometh saints."

5. In naming uncleanness in addition to fornication, the reference is to all sensual affections in distinction from wedded love. They are too unsavory for him to mention by name, though in Romans 1, 24 he finds it expedient to speak of them without disguise.

However, also wedded love must be characterized by moderation among Christians. While there is a conjugal duty to be required by necessity, it is for the very purpose of avoiding unchastity and uncleanness. The ideal and perfect condition, it is true, would be cohabitation with a sole view to procreation; however, that is too high for attainment by all.

6. Paul declares that the sin he indicates should not be named of the Ephesians.

Unquestionably, among Christians there will always be some infirm one to fall; but we must labor diligently, correcting, amending and restraining. We must not suffer the offense to go unchallenged, but curtail and remedy it, lest, as remarked in the preceding lesson, the heathen stumble, saying: "Christians tolerate such vices themselves; their conduct is not different from our own." An occasional fall among Christians must be borne with so long as right prevails in general, and such things are neither tolerated nor taught, but reprov'd and amended. Paul gives the counsel (Gal 6, 1) that the brethren restore the fallen in a spirit of meekness; and he blames the Corinthians for not reprov'ing them who sin. I Cor 5, 2. A sin, once punished, is as if the sin did not exist; it is no longer a matter of reproach.

7. Likewise with covetousness: we are to understand it is not to be named of Christians.

That is, should one be covetous, should one defraud another or contend with him about temporal advantage, as evidently was true of the Corinthians (I Cor 6, 1), the offense must not be suffered to go unrep'oved and uncorrected. The Gospel must be carefully upheld and preserved among the multitude, "that our ministration be not blamed." 2 Cor 6, 3. I make this point for the sake of those who, so soon as they observe that all Christians are not perfectly holy, but will occasionally stumble and fall, imagine there is no such thing

as a Christian and the Gospel is impotent and fruit-less. Just as if to be a Christian meant the mountain already climbed and complete, triumphant victory over sin! The fact is, it is rather a contest, a battle. Wherever there is a contest, or a battle, some of the combatants will flee, some will be wounded, some will fall and some even be slain. For warfare is not unaccompanied by disaster if it be real warfare.

8. The writer of the epistle goes on to assign the reason why it does not sound well to hear such things concerning Christians – because they are saints and it behooves saints to be chaste and moderate, and to practice and teach these virtues. Note, he calls Christians "saints," notwithstanding that in this life they are clothed with sinful flesh and blood. Doubtless the term is not applied in consequence of their good works, but because of the holy blood of Christ. For Paul says (1 Cor 6, 11): "But ye were washed, but ye were sanctified, but ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God." Being holy, we should manifest our holiness by our deeds. Though we are still weak, yet we ought duly to strive to become chaste and free from covetousness, to the glory and honor of God and the edifying of unbelievers.

"Nor filthiness, nor foolish talking, or jesting, which are not befitting."

9. "Filthiness" – scandalous talk – is unchaste language suggestive of fornication, uncleanness and carnal sins. It is common in taverns and generally found as accompaniment of gluttony, drunkenness and gambling. Especially were the Greeks frivolous and adepts in this respect, as their poets and other writers attest. What Paul refers to in particular is the lewd conversation uttered in public without fear and selfrestraint. This will excite wicked thoughts and give rise to serious offenses, especially with the young. As he states elsewhere (I Cor 15, 33), "Evil companionships [communications] corrupt good morals." Should there be any Christians forgetful enough to so transgress, the offense must be reproofed; otherwise it will become general and give the congregation an ill repute, as if Christians taught and tolerated it the same as the heathen.

FOOLISH TALKING AND JESTING

10. By "foolish talking" is indicated the fables and tales and other lore in which the Greeks particularly abound – a people who possess a special faculty for fiction of this sort. Similar are the tales commonly related by our women and maidens while spinning at the

distaff, also those which knaves are fond of relating. Here belong also worldly songs which either relate lewd matters or turn upon slippery, frivolous themes. Such are "The Priest of Kalenburg," "Dietrich of Berne" and innumerable others.

11. Particularly unchristian is every kind of such buffoonery in the church when men are gathered to hear and learn the Word of God. But the practice is common where many come together. Even where at first things of a serious nature are discussed, men soon pass to frivolous, wanton, foolish talk, resulting in a waste of time and the neglect of better things. For instance, on the festival of Easter, foolish, ridiculous stories have been introduced into the sermon to arouse the drowsy. And at the Christmas services, the absurd pantomime of rocking a babe, and silly declamations in rhyme, have found vogue. Similarly the festivals commemorating the three holy kings, the passion of Christ, Dorothy and other saints were characterized.
12. In this category should also be classed the legends of the saints and the confused mass of lies concerning miracles, pilgrimages, masses, worship of saints, indulgences, and so on, which once dominated the pulpit. Yet these falsehoods are too gross to be called merely foolish. They are not just frivolous lies merely destructive of good morals, such as Paul refers to here, but they completely overthrow faith and the Word of God, making sainthood impossible. Such kind of jesting is altogether too serious. Those, however, who have seen into them treat them as lies of the same frivolous and abominable character as the fables or old women's tales mentioned by Paul 1 Tim 4, 7. But while the latter are mere human tales which nobody believes, which no one will place reliance on, serving as mere occasion of merriment, without becoming a source of general moral corruption, an obstacle to improvement and a cause of cold, indolent Christianity, the falsehoods of the pulpit are diabolical tales held as truth in all seriousness, but a comedy for the devil and his angels.
13. "Jesting" has reference to those conversational expedients which pander to gaiety in the form of scandal; they are called among us banter and badinage. Laughter, mirth and gaiety is their purpose, and we meet with them generally in society and high life. Among the heathen, jesting was counted a virtue, and therefore received the title "eutrapelia" by Aristotle. But Paul calls it a vice among Christians, who certainly may find conversational expedients of a different kind, such as will inspire a cheerful and joyous spirit in Christ. True, Christians are not all so pure but that some may err in this matter;

but the Christian Church does not command jesting, nor suffer any member to abandon himself to the practice. It reprove and prohibits it, particularly in religious assemblies, and in teaching and preaching. For Christ says (Mt 12, 36) that at the last day men must give account of every idle, unprofitable word they have spoken. Christians should be a very firm, though courteous, people. Courtesy should be coupled with seriousness, and seriousness with courtesy, according to the pattern of the life of Christ supplied in the Gospel.

"Which are not befitting."

14. Paul apparently would include in the catalog all unprofitable language of whatever name. I would call those words unprofitable which serve not to further the faith nor to supply the wants of the body and preserve it. We have enough else to talk about during this short lifetime, if we desire to speak, enough that is profitable and pleasant, if we talk only of Christ, of love and of other essential things. The apostle mentions the giving of thanks. It should be our daily and constant employment to praise and thank God, privately and publicly, for the great and inexpressible treasures he has given us in Christ. But it appears that what is needful is relegated to the rear, while objects of indifference are brought to the fore. Now, mark you, if Paul will not tolerate banter and suggestive conversation among Christians, what would he say of the shameful backbiting which is heard whenever people meet, though but two individuals? Yes, what would be his judgment of those who in public preaching clinch and claw, attack and calumniate each other?

FRUITLESS CHRISTIANS ARE HEATHEN.

"For this ye know of a surety, that no fornicator, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God."

15. Hereby he declares in dry words that the man who does not exhibit the fruits of faith is a heathen under the name of a Christian. Here is absolute condemnation in a word. The whoremonger is a denier of the faith; the unclean person is a denier of the faith; the covetous individual is a denier of the faith: all are rebellious, perjured and faithless toward God. Paul tells Timothy (I Tim 5, 8): "But if any provideth not for his own, and specially his own household, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever." How could he utter anything more severe, more terrifying? He begins, "For this ye

know." In other words: Doubt not; do not find vain comfort in the thought that this is a jest or an aspersion. A Christian name, and association with Christians, will count for nothing. It will profit you as little as it profits the Jews to be Abraham's seed and

disciples of Moses. Christ's words (Mt 7, 21) concern every man: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven." There must be performance; faith must be manifested by works.

16. If the great fire of divine love which he uses as his first argument will not draw us, then may the terrible threat of hell fire prove a sufficient incentive. In other words, if men follow not God, walking in love and showing their faith by their deeds, let them know they are not God's children, not heirs in his kingdom, and therefore are unquestionably heirs of the evil one in hell. He who is unmoved by the threats of hell fire must truly be a stick or a stone; indeed, he must have a heart like an anvil, as Job says.
17. The writer of the epistle passes unusually severe sentence upon the covetous man, for he calls him an idolater, or a worshiper of a false God. Plainly, Paul entertained special enmity against the covetous, for in Colossians 3, 5 he defines this sin in a similar manner. His reasoning, I judge, is this: All other sinners turn to use what they have and make it subservient to their lusts. Fornicators and the unclean make their bodies serve their pleasure. The haughty employ property, art, reputation and men to secure honor to themselves. The unhappy idolater alone is servant to his possessions; his sin is to save, guard and preserve property. He dare not make use of it either for himself or for others, but worships it as his god. Rather than touch his money, he would suffer both the kingdom of God and of the world to perish. He will not give a farthing to the support of a preacher or a schoolmaster for the sake of advancing God's kingdom. Because he places his confidence, his trust, in his money rather than in the living God, whose promises concerning ample support are abundant, his real God is his money, and to call him an idolater is entirely just. And, in addition, he must renounce heaven! A shameful vice, indeed! O contemptible Unbelief! what a dangerous vice art thou!

DECEPTION BY EMPTY WORDS.

"Let no man deceive you with empty words."

18. This applies to those who gloss their unchastity over, as if it were but a trivial sin. And some have been even such vulgar teachers as to consider no unchastity evil except

adultery, and to accept it as a normal function, like eating and drinking. The Greek philosophers and poets were of this class. And Terence says, "It is neither a sin nor a shame for a youth to commit fornication." To obey such doctrine would be to know nothing of God and to live in the lust of concupiscence, like the gentiles who know not God, of whom we heard in the preceding lesson. All arguments of this character are vain words; they may fascinate the reason after a fashion; yet they are vain and futile, unable to profit their authors. Covetousness likewise has much false show and glitter. When one defrauds another or seeks his own advantage to the injury of others, his act is not at all called sin, but cleverness, economy and sagacity, though meanwhile the poor must suffer want and even die of hunger. Such arguments are merely the specious and blind utterances of heathen, contrary to Christian love.

19. But we have additional light upon this subject, showing that because of such practices the wrath of God comes upon the unbelieving. In First Corinthians 10, 8 are cited numerous examples of punishment for the sin of fornication. See also Num 25. Again, because of wantonness, covetousness and unchastity, the entire world was destroyed by the flood. This is a severe utterance but true and indubitable. "For because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience." "Sons of disobedience" – in other words, they who have fallen from the faith. Thus we see that he who does not show his faith by his deeds, is accounted practically an infidel. In fact, he is worse than an infidel; he is an apostate Christian, or an apostate from the faith. Therefore comes the wrath of God upon such, even here on earth. This is why we Germans must suffer so much famine, pestilence, war and bloodshed to come upon us.
20. Among these idle chatterers and misleading teachers the sluggards and drones should beware of being classified, who, with better light than the heathen, know full well that covetousness and unchastity are sin. While they teach nothing to controvert this, they notwithstanding trust for salvation in a faith barren of works, on the ground that works cannot effect salvation. They know full well that a faith barren of works is nothing, is a false faith; that fruit and good works must follow a genuine faith of necessity. Nevertheless they go on in carnal security, without fear of the wrath and judgment of God, who wants the old Adam to be crucified, and to find good fruit on good trees. It is possible that St. Paul does not refer in this passage to those who, like the heathen, teach and maintain by specious arguments that unchastity is no sin; nevertheless there is reason to apprehend that the reward of the heathen will be meted out to them likewise;

for they live like the heathen, being strangers to both chastity and kindness. And our apprehension is so much more justified because they have a better knowledge of the wrong they commit. This is Paul's standpoint when he asks (Rom 2, 3): "And reckonest thou this, O man, who judgest them that practice such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?" "After thy hardness and impenitent heart," he adds, thou "treasurest up for thyself wrath."

"Be not ye therefore partakers with them; for ye were once darkness, but are now light in the Lord."

21. Peter similarly counsels (I Pet 4, 3) to let the time past of our lives suffice us to have wrought the will of the gentiles, and no longer be partakers with them, but live the rest of our time to the will of God. While we were gentiles we knew not that all those things were sin, because of the darkness of unbelief, which prevented our knowing God. But now we have become a light in the Lord. That is, we have been so amply enlightened through Christ that we not only know God and what he desires, and understand what sin and wrong are, but we are also able to light others, to teach them what we know. Paul commends the Philippians for being a light in the world, among an evil and untoward generation. Phil. 2, 15. And, similarly, when we were gentiles we not only were darkened, not only were ignorant and went astray, but we were darkness itself, leading others into the same condition by our words and deeds. We have reason, then, to be

thankful unto him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (I Pet 2, 9), and to "walk as children of light."

"For the fruit of the light [Spirit] is in all goodness and righteousness and truth."

22. Since Paul is speaking of light, it would have been more to the point had he said "fruit of the light," in accordance with the Latin version, than "fruit of the Spirit," the Greek rendering. And who knows but it may, in the Greek, have been altered to harmonize with Galatians 5, 22, where Paul speaks of the "fruit of the Spirit"? It matters little, however; evidently "Spirit" and "light" are synonymous in this place. "Goodness" is the fruit of light, or of the Spirit, as opposed to covetousness. The Christian is to be good; that is, useful, gladly working his neighbor's good. "Righteousness," as fruit of the Spirit among men – for the Spirit also "is righteous before God – is opposed to covetousness. The Christian must not take another's possessions by force, trickery or fraud, but must

give to each his due, his own, even to the heathen authorities. See Rom 13, 1. "Truth" is the fruit of the Spirit as opposed to hypocrisy and lies. A Christian is not only to be truthful in word, but honest in life. He should not bear the name without the works; he cannot be a Christian and yet live a heathenish life, a life of un-chastity, covetousness and other vices.

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