

- Follow God's example (1)

This is the big headline of this passage from Ephesians 5. Follow God's example. It's not a subtle message, or small thing to try and do. God is the perfect, almighty, creator God. He always gets it right. We're told to follow God's example.

But why? Why should we try and do this seemingly impossible thing? Look at verse 1. "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children." We're God's children, he is our Father, we've been made part of God's own family. So, the call to follow God's example, is a call to reflect our true family identity.

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter from his prison cell to the Christians in Ephesus. And in the 1st 3 chapters he clearly explained all that God has done to make us part of his family. Then, from chapter 4, Paul explains what it should look like to be part of that family. Look at Ephesians 4:1, "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." Live a life that reflects all that God has done to call you into his family. And he repeats that urgent call here in chapter 5. "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children."

Physically I was very different from my dad. He was only 5 foot 5 and I'm 6 foot 2. When I was at uni the first time my best mate met dad he couldn't help himself but he burst out laughing at the size differential between us. However, even though I didn't look like him, we had very similar characters. People could tell that he was my dad through the way we thought, the things we did, the stuff we liked. I followed my dad's example. That's the same idea here. We belong to God, we've been made part of his family, therefore reflect your family likeness.

Paul then goes on, from verse 2, to spell out exactly what it looks like to follow God's example. You might look at this and simply see a long list of things Christians aren't allowed to do. Don't do this, don't speak like that, stop doing the other. But, that's not what Paul is saying here. He wrote this to give us a wonderful positive description of what it looks like to follow God's example. There are things he tells us to avoid and stop doing, but they are all balanced by positive descriptions of what we should be doing instead. The reason to tell us this is so that we'd live the best life possible, the life that reflects our membership of God's family. And a life that shows others how much more fulfilling, how much better it is for us to live as God created us to live.

And, remember, we don't live like this to try and be good enough to earn a place in God's family. We try and live like this because we're already part of it. If you're not yet a Christian, if you're not

yet a member of God's family, please do look carefully and see the wonderful description of what it means to be a Christian. But, please also see the stark warnings in this passage of what it means to reject the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Walk in the way of love (2-7)

Look down at verse 2. "walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." To follow God's example is to walk in the way of love. And love isn't an airy fairy, difficult to define, out there concept. Walking in the way of love is to love just as Christ did. He gave himself up for us. Christ sacrificed himself for our sake. Jesus died so we could be part of God's family. He put us before his own needs. We need to walk in the way of love and live for others. It's to live with each other in the same way as we were told in chapter 4 verse 2. It's to walk, to live, as Christ did.

To follow God's example and to walk in the way of love are huge statements that encompass every aspect of our lives, from the big things to the little things. To be in God's family is a wholehearted, whole of life, whole of identity way of life. It's like when I married Nicki, in the vows I committed to her with all that I am and all that I have. It's not a piecemeal commitment, it's complete. So, with our membership of God's family. It's all consuming.

But, Paul does drill down on a couple of specific areas to show what exactly it means to walk in the way of love. Firstly, in verse 3, he tells us there must be not even a hint of sexual immorality. Or of any kind of impurity, or of greed." Think of these 3 areas. All of them relate to idolatry. Paul tells us that in verse 5. Idolatry is putting something in the place of God. It's seeking fulfilment somewhere other than God. It's doubting God has given you what you most need so you look elsewhere for it.

Sexual immorality is trying to find satisfaction in a place God says you shouldn't. It's saying I need something different, something new because what I've got isn't enough for me. It's doubting God's goodness and ignoring him and going off and doing your own thing.

Ignoring God and seeking sexual satisfaction in a place that God tells us we shouldn't is the equivalent of putting a step ladder up next to the cross of Jesus, climbing up that step ladder and slapping Jesus around the face whilst he is dying for your sins. Isn't that a horrible image? But, that's exactly like what we're doing if we're sexually immoral, or impure or greedy.

If you're a married man it's looking at someone who isn't your wife and desiring them. That could be someone you know, someone on telly, porn via the computer. But, among you there must not be even a hint. If you're a married woman it's seeking intimacy with someone who isn't your husband. But among you there must not be even a hint.

For all of us, single or married, it's feeling discontent with our current circumstances and doing something ungodly to try and change them. It's thinking God hasn't given me what I need to be happy and so I'll go out and get it myself in the way that feels best to me. It's thinking I just need this little bit more money, or this way of expressing my sexual desires. It's seeking identity and fulfillment away from Christ.

For the young people amongst us the pressure you're under to resist sexual immorality is huge. The pressure of sexting, of cyber bullying, of living in a culture which tells you to do what feels right to you is obviously right. But, here the Bible tells us there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality. Now, every generation that has ever lived has faced pressure to be pure, but I think it is harder for you than it ever was for me. The existence of smart phones and the easy access to porn and camera phones has changed our culture, particularly our youth culture.

But, following our culture, giving in to the pressure of simply fitting in with your mates at school falls far short of what God wants for us. Look at the end of verse 3, "These are improper for God's holy people." You need to support and encourage each other to reflect your true Christian identity. You need to be willing to talk to your parents about the pressures you face and other trusted Christian adults. You need to ask God to help you to reflect your true identity.

But, of course this is a challenge for each of us, regardless of age or sex. Watch out for work relationships that go beyond the normal boundaries. Are you having lunch with the same person frequently? Is there someone you're developing a reliant relationship which could be taking the place of your spouse? Are you watching telly late in the evening just to get a glimpse of a beautiful actress? Are you justifying yourself by saying, it's not porn, it'll be alright?

But amongst you there must not be even a hint. Why? Because these are improper for God's holy people.

And it's not just areas of morality. See verse 4. What we say is important. Swearing, sexual innuendo, foolishness, rude jokes are inappropriate for a Christian. Why? Because they are out of place. They are taking something beautiful that God has created and make it dirty, debasing

love and sexual intimacy and godly relationships. Instead of negative, destructive language our tongue should be full of thanksgiving.

How we live really matters. We're told to follow God's example and walk in the way of love. Why? Because Jesus died to save us to make us part of his perfect family for eternity. He died to give us the best life that is possible. Ignoring God and living however you want is literally playing with fire. Look at verse 5. "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person-- such a person is an idolater-- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God."

Please remember we are saved by God not by how we live. God has rescued us and if we're in his family we are, as chapter 1 put it, holy and blameless in his sight. God looks at his children and he sees God's perfection. So, walking in the way of love doesn't save us, but striving to live this way does reveal that we are saved.

Sin really matters to God, it cost him the life of his one and only Son. Don't treat sin lightly and say it doesn't really matter. Don't ignore what God says and think that if it feels right to me it must be right. Which is what so much of our culture thinks today.

And sadly, I've heard exactly that from within the church today. Sin and judgement are downplayed as a little bit of a medieval throwback. God is a God of love so if no one else is hurt by what you do he'll want you to be happy. Just do what feels right to you, who am I to tell you that you're wrong. Those are empty and vacuous words. Look what Paul says about that in verse 6. "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. ⁷ Therefore do not be partners with them."

The word 'partners' is interesting. It does have application to how we relate to other churches who have stopped teaching what the Bible says, particularly in the area of sexual morality. But, it's key meaning and application is personal to each of us. Don't copy them, don't partake in their folly of speaking empty words and participating in this kind of immorality. But amongst you there must not be even a hint. Don't live dark lives. Instead, live a life that reflects your true identity as part of God's glorious, wonderful and abundant family. Walk in the way of love.

2. Live as children of light (8-14)

Look at verse 8. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light." Notice Paul doesn't say you were once IN darkness and now you are IN the light. You

were darkness and now you are light. Someone who doesn't belong to God's family is darkness. Their actions may be kind and generous but they are automatically sinful because they are not doing them for the glory of God. They are dark. And when someone becomes a Christian they become light. They become part of God's family, they are transformed from darkness to light. So, live as children of light. Literally, reflect your true identity.

Look at verse 9 and see the fruit of this life. Wouldn't you want your life to be described like that? Goodness, righteousness and truth. You live this life by, verse 10, finding out what pleases the Lord. How do we do that? We listen to what God says in the Bible. We follow God's example, we look to Christ, we change our life to fit in with what we read.

If we live like this, we will expose the fruitless deeds of darkness. See verse 11. This isn't an instruction for us to go around telling other people they've got it wrong. This isn't calling us to point out everyone else's mistakes. No, look at verse 12, "it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret." So, clearly, we're not supposed to talk about them.

To expose the fruitless deeds of darkness directly relates to our walk as a child of light. As we live a godly life the deeds of darkness will be exposed as a contrast to our lifestyle. People will see how we behave and recognise we're different. As we reflect our identity as a member of God's family, others will see that their lifestyle doesn't match up. We don't need to point that out to them, they'll see it.

Not joining in with gossip or coarse jokes will be noticed. Not, ogling the secretary at work, will be noticed. Not sexting, or sharing nude photos will be noticed. As we live as a child of light the fruitless deeds of darkness will be exposed.

Not everyone who sees this will become a Christian. Some will react negatively and call us a prude, or think we're holier than thou. But, some will want to find out why we're different. Some who are asleep in their sin will wake up to eternal life as they ask us why we're different and we can tell them about Jesus. See verse 13, "But everything exposed by the light becomes visible-- and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. ¹⁴ This is why it is said: "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

My mate who laughed at the height differential between me and my dad had a serious chat with me a while after I became a Christian in my mid-20s. He was concerned about how I'd changed. He saw this as a bad thing, but because my priorities and what I did had changed caused him to

question things. Sadly, he still hasn't become a Christian yet, but he did recognise there was a difference.

3. Be careful how you live (15-20)

Verse 15, "Be very careful, then, how you live-- not as unwise but as wise." This is a summary statement of all that Paul has said in chapter 5. Be wise, make the most of every opportunity. Verse 17, "don't be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is." How do you know what the Lord's will is? Look in the Bible. Study the Bible. Meditate on the Bible. Listen to what God has to say and then do it. Be controlled by God the Holy Spirit guiding you, teaching you, directing you as he puts into practice what you've learnt through God's word, the Bible.

In verse 18 Paul paints a stark picture of the 2 options facing us. Either be controlled by the Holy Spirit or be controlled by something else. He picks on alcohol as a direct contrast with the Holy Spirit, but it could be anything, drugs, popularity, career, sex, greed. Any of those things that drive our actions and our decision making are taking the place that is God's. That is idolatry. The alternative is so much better, so much more beautiful, so much more satisfying and fulfilling, so much more like following God's example. The end of verse 18. Instead of whatever else might drive us, instead, be filled with the Spirit.

And the result is glorious. Verse 19. "Instead be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord"

Be overwhelmed with love and gratitude to the God who has saved us. Be motivated that your identity as part of God's family is secure forever and that reflects your true and real identity. If we are secure in that then we can, verse 20, "always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Are you able to always give thanks to God for everything? Are you so secure in your identity that whatever health of circumstances you are facing, whether good or bad, you can give thanks to God? Contentment, security, assurance, value, beauty, life, all ours because we are a member of God's family.

Follow God's example, walk in the way of love, live as children of light, be careful how you live and always give thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.