

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(June 30, 2019)

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Under Construction**

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus)

### **The "WHY?" and "HOW?" of Next Steps**

(Ephesians 5:3-14)

Study #8

#### **Introduction: Questions to ask before a next step...**

George Mallory, a British mountain climber who died on his third attempt to climb Mount Everest at age 37, was asked, *"Why do you want to climb Everest?"* right before his fateful, final climb.

His quick answer gave us the three most famous words of mountaineering: *"Because it's there."*

A lot of us see Everest, right *"there"* where it's always been, and are quite satisfied to let it stay there, unclimbed. Most of us would need a better reason to risk life and limb on a brutal trek to what is called "the death zone"<sup>1</sup> than, *"Because it's there."*<sup>2</sup>

Although, that's not to say we wouldn't take a life-threatening trip IF the reason for launching out was sufficiently compelling.

I'm sure you can imagine a scenario in which you would choose to embark on a dangerous journey.

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<sup>1</sup> The term used to describe any elevation higher than 26,000 ft. above sea level.

<sup>2</sup> Jon Krakauer has written in an entertaining and philosophical way about the pathological human hunger to scale impossible-looking and overly dangerous peaks in [Eiger Dreams](#). It's a great read! Nothing terribly spiritual about it... :-)

You would venture out in a storm to help a loved one in trouble or to assist a child in need.

If something precious to you was at risk you would walk across a desert, push all your chips to the middle of the table, right?

We're looking for the answer to the question that was posed to George Mallory, *"Why?"* And we're all willing to climb Everest if the reason for doing so is something more than *"Because it's there."*

Today, we want to know, with compelling clarity, *"Why follow Jesus?"*

Of all Sundays, a day when we remember Christians who have followed Jesus into martyrdom, we're asking the *"Why?"* question. Why were they willing to live so sacrificially? Why follow so faithfully?

Jesus challenges us to radical discipleship with calls to deny self and follow Him. He calls us to love God so much that our affections for family and close friends pales to seeming hatred.

Taken seriously, climbing Everest looks like a walk in the park next to giving up all our possessions and hating our own life and taking up our cross to be Jesus' disciple.

But, just like the martyrs, we'll go there IF we can get a sincere, serious, meaty answer to the question, *"Why?"*

And if we get a great answer to *"Why?"* and agree to take those risks and take on the adventure of taking next steps with Jesus, we're also going to be asking a second question: *"How?"*

*Review of Jeff's message...*

Last Sunday, Jeff led you through an exploration of growth and change in Christ. And, after last week's message, I know we're all eager to go with Jeff to a coffee shop soon. (Great story about grace!).

Jeff highlighted the importance of “others-centered living” - especially as it relates to how we speak, how we deal with conflict, how we pursue honesty, how we imitate Jesus’ great love.

Well, today, the Apostle Paul is again urging us to change and to grow. He does it by providing a great answer to the “*WHY follow Jesus?*” question, along with some extremely helpful counsel on the follow-up question, “*HOW do I follow Jesus?*”

His first interest is to address “*Why?*” and his first words have to do with lifestyle.

### **A Sobering Warning (vv. 3-6)**

#### **The Issue of Lifestyle (vv. 3-4)**

*Stay away from these behaviors (v. 3)*

***[3] But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints***

Paul mentions *immorality* and *impurity*, both of which, of course, are directly related to sexuality.

It could be tempting to read this and think, “*Well, there goes the Bible again, lashing out against sex!*”, as if all the Bible did was say, “*No!*” to sex.

Well, that’s not all the Bible says about sex, and it would be a tremendous misrepresentation of the Bible’s to say it did.

In my own Bible reading recently, I have moved through the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and have just begun the Song of Solomon.

These books all contain passages that highlight the beauty of the sexual relationship between a husband and a wife, sometimes in refreshingly honest detail.

God was the One who thought up sexual intimacy in the first place and He is definitely not anti-sex.

Here’s the thing, though. Fire is a wonderful thing in a fireplace. But it’s terribly destructive on the loose in a forest.

And sexual intimacy between a man and a woman is a wonderful thing in the confines of the covenant relationship of marriage. But - as many will testify - it’s confusing and complicating, disruptive and destructive outside of marriage.

The two terms Paul uses here most often refer to involvement prostitution, adultery, or any sexual involvement - actual or virtual - with someone to whom you are not married.

The addition of *greed* to the short list here is striking and may relate to greediness for money, power, or position. Given the context, though, it may be aimed at a greediness to take, sexually, what is not rightfully ours.

Whichever is in view, *greed* is certainly the opposite of love. And *greed*, along with *immorality* and *impurity* are to have no place in the life of someone who believes in Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

These practices are to be so far removed from our lives that we don’t even talk about them. Or, as Paul says, “***let them not even be named among you...***”

Of course, if pressed to extreme literalness, we have just violated Paul’s command by mentioning them. (But then, so has he, by writing about them.)

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<sup>3</sup> Check out *Be Broken Ministries* (John Daugherty) for tools to help battle sexual addictions. Also *Eternal Perspectives Ministries* (Randy Alcorn) for help in the pursuit of purity, especially “Detering Immorality by Counting Its Cost.” In addition, good books abound (I’d be happy to recommend some) and honest friendships with Jesus at the center are of tremendous help. Meditating on Scripture is a great protection. And, when we cry out to God for help, He will help.

What I believe Paul means here is that our lives are to be so set apart for God, we are to be so giving-not-greedy, so sexually pure, that no accusation of involvement in such things as he mentions here would ever be leveled against us.

In what Paul goes on to say, let's remember that he is writing to a church much like ours, filled with those who believe in Jesus.

*Stay away from these speech patterns (v. 4a)*

### Filthiness and silly talk

#### **[4a] and there must be no filthiness and silly talk**

This is the kind of talk we would generally refer to as cussing and swearing. They are the first century words for profanity or obscenity.

Have you ever tried to think deeply about cussing?

Cuss words are interesting, and I can remember challenging conversations with my teenage sons about words that should and should not be used.

Part of the problem is that I can think of no verse in the Bible that lists what words are and are not allowed (except for the Name of God in a "vain" way), or what topics we are not to ever address.

But in each culture, there are certain words and certain topics that at least in certain contexts are taboo.

They are not spoken because to do so would be to violate propriety. We are not to speak in ways that our audience would either find offensive OR would consider to be **filthy**.

### Coarse jesting

#### **[4] and there must be no ...coarse jesting, which is not fitting**

The word we translate "**coarse jesting**" is a fascinating word in the original Greek. Literally, it means "*versatility*."

It describes a person who can be equally at home in every phase of a conversation, turning naturally from topic to topic.

In our context, though, the idea is of a speaker who turns every conversation to an unbecoming topic. He is versatile in that way. He is the master of the double entendre and is able to turn anything wholesome into something dirty.

Followers of Jesus are not to use speech in this way. To do so is to speak **coarsely**. Paul says that there is a better way.

*Embrace gratitude (v. 4b)*

#### **[4b]...but rather giving of thanks.**

It isn't that we should never utter anything but thanksgiving to God. He's telling us what to do when we're tempted to speak **coarsely** or to curse and swear. When you're so tempted, substitute a word of thanks. Instead of profanity, praise God.

Instead of telling that dirty story, tell about something that the Lord has done for you. Instead of coarse jesting, give thanks.

That's a great strategy. Simply refuse to say what is inappropriate and substitute for that what is always appropriate.

All that we've seen to this point is the "*What?*" of the lifestyle to which we are called as followers of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Now, we finally come to the "*Why?*"

Paul's next words consist of two sober warnings. They each have a specific audience in view. And I'm going to go "out of order" here and address his second warning first.

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<sup>4</sup> It consists of a refusal to speak in ways that don't build others up, and a refusal to give in to the temptation to satisfy legitimate desires in inappropriate ways.

## The Issue is Eternal (vv. 5-6)

*Certain wrath for those who don't believe (v. 6)*

***[6] Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.***

The “***these things***” he refers to are the sinful practices he has just listed. They are exactly the kinds of things that bring God’s wrath against people who don’t know Jesus (whom he calls here, “***the sons of disobedience.***”)<sup>5</sup>

Some people will experience, after this life is over, not the grace and love of God, but the wrath of God. In my view, this is the most sobering truth of the Bible.

Of course, all of us have sinned. We have all fallen short of God’s holiness. And, as sinners, we can’t “*do life*” with Him forever - unless we have placed our faith in Jesus, the One who died on the cross for us and rose from the dead for us.

Those who have trusted in Christ will not experience the wrath of God for their sins. They are forgiven because they accepted the gift of grace Jesus has offered them.

Those who have not trusted in Jesus, though, are not forgiven. They stand before God without the protection of a Savior.

So, at the end of the day, it isn’t that some have sinned, and others have not.

We have all sinned. We are all guilty and are all stricken with the same deadly virus - sin - which, if left untreated by the remedy of faith in Jesus Christ, will kill us eternally.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “***The sons of disobedience***” is a term Paul used several times to refer to people who don’t know Jesus. See Ephesians 2:2, here at 5:6; Colossians 3:6.

<sup>6</sup> A person who dies of cancer does not die because of a lack of a cure. He dies because he has cancer. The person who has not placed his/her trust in Jesus is not condemned for not trusting in Christ. He is condemned because he/she has sinned.

The difference is that those who have trusted in Christ have taken the only medicine that will heal from the disease of sin. Those who have not trusted in Christ will face God naked and exposed and will experience God’s wrath for their sin.

If, this morning, you recognize that you have the disease - sin - AND have never taken the cure - you have never placed the treasure of your trust in Jesus - He stands as your only hope.

You can escape wrath and find forgiveness and grace by relying on the Jesus who died for you and rose again from the dead for you.

The sobering warning and the gracious invitation to anyone who is far from God is to flee to Jesus, trust in Jesus, and find L-I-F-E!

Now, we move backwards in the passage, turning to the sobering warning Paul issues to those who have already believed in Jesus.

*Potential loss of inheritance for those who do believe (v. 5)*

***[5] For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.***

What can Paul mean by this? He says, “*Nobody who is characterized by the exact kinds of sinfulness I have just told you to avoid has an inheritance in God’s kingdom?*”

### Paul’s audience

Well, let’s remember that he is writing to Christians. He has already identified his audience as those who have been:

- blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ (1:3);
- redeemed through Jesus’ blood (1:7);
- sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (1:13);
- made alive with Christ (2:5);
- saved by grace through faith (2:8);
- brought near by the blood of Christ (2:13);
- made a part of God’s household/family (2:19).

Plus, he has just explicitly identified these to whom he is writing as *saints* (5:3), people who are set apart for God's purposes.<sup>7</sup>

### When a warning is a warning

To these Christians, Paul is issuing a warning. For a warning to be a legitimate warning, the one being warned needs to be genuinely in danger of suffering the consequences warned against by the one doing the warning.

If you go to Padre Island and see signs warning of recent shark sightings at your beach, you take them seriously. If you see the same signs at Canyon Lake or on the banks of the Guadalupe River, you think, "Who are they trying to kid?" That's a "warning" with no teeth.

So, what is this warning all about? Does Paul's warning to believers in Jesus have teeth?

Is he saying that Christians who sin in the ways described in this passage don't go to heaven? Is he saying that they lose eternal life?

That would be a warning without teeth because there are dozens of New Testament texts that assure us that eternal life can never be lost. No, if God's gift of eternal life is something we can lose, it never was very "eternal", was it?

Or maybe he's saying that people who sin are proving by their sinning that they must not be Christians in the first place.

To that I ask, "How much sin is enough sin to prove that someone isn't saved?" and "Of what variety must the sin consist to say, 'Not a Christian!'"

Again, no teeth, because all people - saved and unsaved alike - sin regularly.<sup>8</sup> Paul is not saying that people who lead impure lives are, of necessity, NOT Christians.

### Great (or not) is your reward

The point of so much of what we read in this letter is that believers in Jesus have eternal life.

Their sins are forgiven...AND that if these believers persist in *immorality* and *impurity* and *greed*, they will not receive a rich inheritance when they get to heaven.

The theme of "inheritance" - or what is often spoken of in terms of "rewards" - is a major New Testament theme.

In the four Gospels, Jesus speaks often of "laying up treasure" in heaven and of being "rewarded" by our heavenly Father for righteous living. And the theme surfaces throughout the writings of the apostles Paul, Peter, and John and in the letter to the Hebrews.

What becomes apparent from a careful reading of the New Testament is that some Christians will have a rich inheritance in glory, and some won't. Some will receive rewards from Jesus, and some won't.

And the means by which God will determine whether you, one who believes in Jesus, receive a rich inheritance is the life you have lived as a daughter or a son of God.

It's up to you.

Live for Jesus as a sold out disciple and you'll enjoy the abundant life He promised *now* and a rich inheritance *later*.

Live for the passing pleasures that sin provides and you'll pass up both the richness of a walk with God here and the rewards God wants to lavish on you later.

Back in the 1980's Pete Rose traded a spot in baseball's Hall of Fame for the quick thrill of betting on major league baseball while a player and a manager. That was a bad trade.

<sup>7</sup> In addition, Paul writes in 1:15 of their "*faith in the Lord Jesus*".

<sup>8</sup> See 1 John 1:6-10 and remember that John was writing to and about Christians.

Dave Ramsey has dedicated his life to helping us see what the Bible has said all along; that if we will delay material gratification - work hard, save money, invest wisely - we'll reap the benefits, financially. If we violate the wisdom of Scripture in this, well, we've made a bad trade.<sup>9</sup>

When we who have trusted in Christ for salvation give in to the temptation to *immorality* and *impurity* and *greed*, we forfeit rewards God wants to give us. We have traded a lasting, heavenly inheritance for fool's gold. That's a really bad trade.

Based on what I know of the Bible's teaching on this topic, it would be impossible to overstate how important it will be to us to receive that inheritance and to hear God say, "**Well done!**"<sup>10</sup>

So, **WHY** pursue purity for all we're worth? Because to do so is to know that we will receive an eternal inheritance that our Jesus wants to give us in the coming kingdom. That's why.

Now we move from the "*Why?*" to the "*How?*"

In what remains this morning, Paul gives us some really helpful advice about how to take a spiritual next step into a holiness that will honor God AND result in great reward from Jesus.

Paul doesn't say everything he might say, but what he does say is profound, provocative, and practical.

We're nearing the end of our time together this morning. And, as we wrap up, I'm going to highlight the most prominent themes of the final verses of today's passage in Ephesians.

Listen as I read all of what remains in our passage, paying special attention to words concerning *light*, *darkness*, and *exposure*.

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<sup>9</sup> The story of Jacob and Esau is the classic biblical example of a bad trade. Found in Genesis 25, the tale is told of Esau trading his birthright (a very valuable family blessing) for a pot of stew because he was hungry after coming in from hunting. The incident is recalled in Hebrew 12 in the New Testament as a warning to Christians to not trade our eternal inheritance for temporal pleasure.

<sup>10</sup> See Matthew 25:21, 23.

### An Enticing Invitation (vv. 7-14)

**[7] Therefore do not be partakers with them [8] for you were formerly DARKNESS, but now you are LIGHT<sup>11</sup> in the Lord; walk as children of LIGHT [9] (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), [10] trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.**

**[11] Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of DARKNESS,<sup>12</sup> but instead even EXPOSE them [12] for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret.**

**[13] But all things become VISIBLE when they are EXPOSED by the light, for everything that becomes VISIBLE is LIGHT.**

**[14] For this reason it says,  
"Awake, sleeper,  
And arise from the dead,  
And Christ will SHINE on you."**

My first observation from all of this is that we, together and individually, are not now - in Christ - what we were.

### **We Are Not NOW What We Were**

**[7] Therefore do not be partakers with them [8] for you were formerly DARKNESS, but now you are LIGHT in the Lord**

In other passages in this letter, Paul has all sorts of things to say about our condition prior to becoming Christians.

He has told us that we were **[2:1] dead in our trespasses and sins** and that we were **[2:3] children of wrath**.

Here, he says, "**you were formerly darkness**", but now, focusing on our new identity in Jesus, we ARE "**light in the Lord**"!

One time, Jesus said, **[John 8:12] "I am the LIGHT of the world."**

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<sup>11</sup> For some reason, the translators of the New American Standard Bible have capitalized "Light" in this passage. There is no reason I can see for having done so.

<sup>12</sup> Lots of particular bad behaviors could well be in view as Paul mentions "**unfruitful deeds of darkness**", beyond the three mentioned in vv. 3-4.

He was claiming to be the beacon that leads people out of the waters of death to safe harbor. He was **L-I-G-H-T**. Now, Paul says that you and I are (lower case, small font) "*L-i-g-h-t*."<sup>13</sup>

We're lesser lights, sure. But we're lights. We are each a flashlight that directs others to Jesus, the Lighthouse. And together, we as a church, are a very bright flashlight shining for Jesus.

And there is a second observation to be made from these verses.

### **We Now Seek to Do What We Did Not Do**

**[8b]... walk as children of LIGHT [9] (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), [10] trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.**

We who are now light clearly shouldn't be doing the things that made the death of our Savior necessary - things like **immorality** and **impurity** and **greed**.

That phrase - **[10] trying to learn** - implies work.

- Like an athlete works hard to perform at elite levels, we are in training for **truthful** living. It's exercise for the soul.
- We don't easily glide into **goodness**.
- Learning to lead a **righteous** life isn't a casual stroll.

Effort is assumed in living as a Christian. It involves moving into some new, healthy behaviors and a move away from others.

Third, exposing dark deeds, bringing darkness into the light, and making sinful deeds visible is crucial if we want to grow in Jesus.

### **We Expose the Unfruitful Deeds of Darkness**

**[11] Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of DARKNESS, but instead even EXPOSE them...**

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<sup>13</sup> Other Bible texts teach that believers walk in the light of God (1 Peter 2:9; Matthew 5:14). Paul is saying something more impressive here. We ARE light.

**[13] But all things become VISIBLE when they are EXPOSED by the light, for everything that becomes VISIBLE is LIGHT.**

*What Paul is NOT saying*

It is possible to badly misread what Paul is urging here.

So let me be as clear as I can be to say that he is not assigning Christians the job of exposing the sins committed by people who have not yet come to know Jesus.

That is not now and has never been our job. That's God's job.

*Life in the Body of Christ*

Paul's writing to a church filled with Christians, telling them how to grow in Jesus. He is telling us how to take next steps into maturity and holiness and into lives that lead to a rich inheritance.

Here's what I believe Paul was saying to the Christians in Ephesus and what he would say to us, today, if he was with us.

*"Each of you be sure that there are some people in the church with whom you are in such an intimate and close friendship that you know each other's darknesses. Expose your darkness to your friend. Lovingly reprove and convict your friend of the darkness in his or her life. Lead each other into repentance and confession and into the light of obedience."*

What if that was the mindset you had as you came to church each Sunday or as you went to your ABF or Care Group, or as you met a friend for a meal or coffee?

What if you measured the fitness of your friendships here at the church based on the level of engagement you had about rooting out darkness and walking together into the light?

What if you came to value each connection here as a rich opportunity to help each other take next steps with Jesus?

Yes, it would change everything. And it can start today.

Finally, Paul gives us one more bit of counsel from what is believed to have been a 1st century Christian hymn.

*Life with Jesus*

***[14] For this reason it says,  
"Awake, sleeper,  
And arise from the dead,  
And Christ will SHINE on you."***

(I've always thought that, "***Awake, sleeper, arise from the dead!***" would be a great way to end a sermon.)

You've become sleepy and sloppy in your pursuit of purity? You've fallen asleep at the wheel of holiness? You might even say that you've got a bad case of "death" with respect to the vibrancy and effectiveness of your faith.

Wake up! Expose your darkness to Jesus. Confess your sin to your Savior and He will shine His light on you. He will cleanse you and set your feet back on the trail to take all the next steps He has for you to take.

Let this be our prayer today -

***[Psalm 139:23] Search me, O God, and know my heart  
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;  
[24] And see if there be any hurtful way in me,  
And lead me in the everlasting way.***