



# THE HOLY LIFE

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The quest for holiness has always been more urgent than the quest for unity. It has taken on an edge of desperation, even fanaticism, that the ideal of unity seldom inspires. Men have climbed poles and exposed themselves to the elements for years. They have lived in caves and in the wilderness. They have beaten themselves and worn hair shirts. In the attempt to "mortify the flesh," they have deprived, mutilated, and even murdered themselves.

In these present times of easy virtue and casual vice, it is hard for us to understand what people of former times were so excited about. Having cut our teeth on a laid-back God who rarely gets excited about anything, we find it difficult to take the notion of sin too seriously. Our attitude is similar to that which the philosopher Rousseau expressed on his death bed, after a lifetime of blasphemy and immorality — "God will forgive me. That is his business."

*For you were once darkness,  
but now you are light in the  
Lord. Live as children of light  
(for the fruit of the light  
consists in all goodness,  
righteousness, and truth) and  
find out what pleases the Lord.  
Have nothing to do with the  
fruitless deeds of darkness, but  
rather expose them.*

*Eph 5:8-11*

It is tempting for Christians to take the call to holiness and cheapen it into a call to live just above the morality of our times . . . to measure our own lives not by the Holy God but by the guy next door . . . to excuse sin or absolve sin or band-aid sin but never actually root out sin and replace it with a passion for holiness.

We may not take holiness seriously, but God does. He gets excited about purity and angry over the lack of it. He is not casual about our transgressions. Sin is neither an understandable mistake nor justified by circumstances. It is — in Paul's words — "improper," "darkness," "shameful," and "evil." And, in the end, God took sin so seriously that he sent his Son to die.

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## THINK ABOUT IT:

- ♦ Oxymorons: Military intelligence; ethical politician; short sermon; unholy Christian.
- ♦ God may be more patient with the fanatic who uses extreme measures in an attempt to be holy than with the disciple who fails to take holiness very seriously at all. Hair shirts may be more acceptable than cheap grace.



**LET THE CHURCH  
BE THE CHURCH**

SERMON 25

- ◆ *When the mind is on heaven, the body is less likely to stray. The body will not go where the mind has not been first.*
- ◆ *In our topsy-turvy world, the very sins which Paul discusses as absolutely deadly are treated with increasing casualness. The world may think that sexual immorality and the like are matters of little consequence, but Christians cannot afford to do so.*

Life before God is lived on two planes. There is the horizontal plane, involving our relationship with each other. Paul has spent chapter four discussing such things.

There is also a vertical plane, however, involving our relationship with God. The issue here is not harmony but holiness . . . purity rather than politics. In this fifth chapter, Paul's attention has shifted to how we live out our personal lives before God.

The behaviors Paul discusses in *Eph 5:3-20* are of the more private and personal sort, taking place in the heart or behind closed doors—sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity, coarse joking, drunkenness and debauchery. These are not sins which (like lying, unwholesome talk, and bitterness—4:25-32) work primarily to undermine unity or create discord. Rather, they are sins which undermine purity and impact our individual survival as Christians. The problems Paul talks about in chapter four are like a virus, attacking the entire body. The sins Paul discusses now, however, are blunt traumas, mangling members and separating them from the blood which gives them life.

How are we to “put off” or avoid such sins? Thankfully, Paul doesn't simply list vices . . . he gives solutions. First, Paul tells us to *pursue the good* (vss 8-10). Sin—even condemnation of it—must not become our focus. We are light. We must concentrate on bearing the fruit of the light. “Find out what pleases the Lord.” The surest way to avoid vice is to pursue virtue.

Second, *practice confession* (vss 11-14). Recognize that there is real power to overcome sin when we are courageous enough to confess it and bring it into the light.

Third, *live wisely* (vss 15-18). Care, wisdom, understanding, and the Spirit are required for living in this sinful world. You cannot “bop” through life without serious thought and introspective evaluation. Christians *think* about how they live.

Finally, *encourage each other* (vss 19-20). Do it with words. Do it with songs. Do it with thanksgiving. But do it.





# CHILDREN OF LIGHT

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## Small Group Member's Guide

### ICE BREAKER

Because of the easy accessibility we have to artificial light, the dark of night no longer holds the terrors for us that it did for the ancients. Yet, darkness can still be a fearful place. Relate an experience you have had that was made frightening or difficult simply because of the darkness.

### IN PURSUIT OF THE HOLY LIFE

Her honesty caught me so off guard it burned itself indelibly into my mind. Now, many years later, I can still reconstruct the entire scene in my mind. My wife and I were in our second home-Bible study with a woman in her early thirties. She had been enthusiastic the first week as we spoke about the grace of God and the forgiveness available in Christ. Clearly she was anxious to learn more about this loving God, but she did seem to have a lot of questions about what was expected of her.

So I started off this study by slowly walking through Ephesians. I could not have hoped for a more attentive pupil as I spoke about the spiritual blessings given us in Christ and read aloud about being made alive with Jesus. Interestingly though, I began to notice a change in her countenance when we began to read about "living in the light."

Just as I finished reading "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed..." she blurted out "Stop!" All three of us were startled, but our student soon regained her composure and in the most considerate but dismissive voice she said, "I don't think you understand. I want God's forgiveness, but I don't want him interfering with my lifestyle."

We've never studied with anyone before or since that has had a clearer picture of exactly what was wanted in a deity—

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or a more honest approach as they shopped for a god who wouldn't interfere in their chosen lifestyle.

We may marvel at such self-centeredness and ignorance, but the reality is that many Christians live just as if they have found the god of that woman's desires. We are glad to know a God so ready to forgive, because we are not about to stop doing exactly what we want.

But this must be an old problem. For Paul seems to have seen the same attitude in his converts at Ephesus. Though they should have known better, he is having to remind them in the strongest possible language that *no immoral, impure or greedy person has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ*. Odd, isn't it, that anyone would think otherwise?

When Paul began with "walk worthy of your calling," he first spoke of attitudes and actions that are essential to maintaining the *unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*. Here Paul speaks of characteristics vital to harmony and fellowship. But as every Christian recognizes, his list of do's and don'ts describe behavioral changes that one can only slowly mature into. They remain always ideals that we strive for.

But when Paul begins speaking about personal ethics his tone changes. For now he is talking about sins that can simply have no place in the Christian's life: *But among you there must not be even a hint of. . .* The behaviors he describes here in chapter 5 do not simply inhibit our growth—they disqualify us from even calling ourselves Christian.

Interestingly, all six of the things that Paul says must not even be hinted at among Christians have to do with our sexuality. The first three have to do with perversions of God's intent for sexual behavior: sex outside of marriage, impure sexual attitudes and behaviors, and "greed" (while this can refer to more general sins, the context suggests the idea that Paul is speaking of a sexual greed for others). The last three relate more particularly to vulgarity—a general cheapening of the respect due our God-given sexual natures.

One should not think Paul is simply especially prudish or that Christianity is somehow anti-sex. Paul knows God has created us sexual beings and that there is a Godly way to express our sexual nature. But he also recognizes what we may not: nothing destroys a passion for things spiritual so quickly or completely as a lust for things sexual. And a passion for holiness is the very mark of one dedicated to imitating our holy God.

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## To Discuss

- ♦ *Beginning in vs 3, Paul warns his readers especially about sexual sins. In vs 5 he sums up these sins by equating them with idolatry. How is the sexually immoral an idolater? Why can such a person have no place in the Kingdom?*
- ♦ *Note the several ways vs 3-7 stand in contrast to vs 1-2. For example: Christ's selfless love contrasted with the sexually impure as greedy. What other contrasts do you find in these verses?*
- ♦ *In vs 8 Paul characterizes the life of the non-Christian as darkness—not in darkness, but darkness itself. What is significant about this wording? He also says the Christian is light, not simply in the light. What does this difference say to you?*
- ♦ *Why is personal holiness such an integral part of the Christian's walk? Why isn't it sufficient to simply be religious?*

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