

EPH. 5:3-24

By Ashby L. Camp

Copyright © 2009 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

XI. Light to replace darkness (5:3-14) – ³*But do not let sexual immorality and any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is fitting for saints,* ⁴*nor obscene speech, foolish talk, or coarse joking, which are not proper, but rather thanksgiving.* ⁵*For this you must know for sure: No sexually immoral or impure or greedy person (who is an idolater) has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*

⁶*Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on the sons of disobedience.* ⁷*Therefore, do not be sharers with them;* ⁸*for you were once darkness, but now [you are] light in the Lord; walk as children of light –* ⁹*for the fruit of the light [consists] in all goodness, righteousness, and truth –* ¹⁰*ascertaining what is pleasing to the Lord,* ¹¹*and do not participate in the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even expose [them].* ¹²*For it is shameful even to mention the things being done by them in secret.* ¹³*But everything exposed is made visible by the light,* ¹⁴*for everything that makes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, sleeping one, and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."*

A. They are to live in love, but that is a self-giving, sacrificial love. There is absolutely no place in the Christian life for illicit or impure love, for self-indulgent sensuality. Paul says that sexual immorality, any impurity, and greed (covetousness) are not "even to be named" among them (5:3).

1. With NIV, ESV, and TNIV, I translate πορνεία as "sexual immorality" because, as Best states (p. 475), it "has a wide range of meanings in relation to sexual behaviour including fornication, adultery, homosexuality, prostitution, incest; 'fornication' is therefore too narrow a translation."

2. "Impurity" is associated with sexual immorality in 2 Cor. 12:21, Gal. 5:19, 1 Thess. 4:3, 4:7, and Col. 3:5. I think in this context its focus is on unrestrained sexual behavior. Paul includes it with sexual immorality to cover the broadest possible spectrum of sexual misconduct.

3. Even "greed" probably has some sexual connotations here, referring to an excessive desire for self gratification. The 10th commandment prohibits "coveting" one's neighbor's wife, and several Jewish writings combined the ideas of covetousness and sexual immorality. The cognate verb in 1 Thess. 4:6 has sexual connotations, and in Eph. 4:19 the word is used in the sense of being "greedy" for impurity (i.e., having a lust for more) (Lincoln, 322).

4. That these sins are not "even to be named" among them means either that they should not occur even once or that they should not become acceptable subjects of conversation. In support of the latter is the comment in 5:12 "that it is shameful even

to speak of the things being done in secret" by the disobedient. Casual discussion of "sexual sins creates an atmosphere in which they are tolerated and which can indirectly even promote their practice" (Lincoln, 322). Paul obviously does not mean one cannot identify the sin to rebuke it or teach against it; he is mentioning it in that sense. He means, as Bruce writes (p. 370), that "such unholy things should not be acceptable subjects of conversation among people whom God has called to be holy."

a. The world understands quite well the principle that mainstreaming talk about sexual sins reduces resistance to it. This was part of the strategy of homosexual activists to promote acceptance of their sinful conduct within our society.

b. In 1987, two homosexual political strategists, Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen, wrote an article titled "The Overhauling of Straight America," and two years later published a book titled *After the Ball*. They laid out a six-point strategy for changing America's perception of homosexual behavior, and number 1 on that list was "Talk about gays and gayness as loudly and often as possible." They state, "The principle behind this advice is simple: almost all behavior begins to look normal if you are exposed to enough of it at close quarters and among your acquaintances." From Alan Sears and Craig Osten, *The Homosexual Agenda* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 18.

B. Nor is there to be (or is their conversation to contain) obscene speech, foolish talk, or coarse joking. These things are not proper in the life of a Christian (5:4).

1. Obscene speech is what we know as talking dirty. Foolish talk is more general. It is the unrestrained or unguarded speech (such as that of a drunken man), and in this context probably refers to talk about sex. Coarse joking refers here to the use of suggestive language and allusions to impure matters. O'Brien states (p. 361), "All three terms refer to a dirty mind expressing itself in vulgar conversation."

2. Instead of these things, Christian speech should be characterized by thanksgiving to God. Thanksgiving is the opposite of the self-indulgent sensuality of the preceding verses; it is recognition and appreciation of God's generous *giving*.

C. Paul strongly warns them about the danger of practicing sexual sin (5:5).

1. He flatly declares that no sexually immoral or (sexually) impure or (sexually) greedy person has an inheritance the kingdom of Christ and of God. The sexually immoral must repent to be included in that inheritance (see Gal. 5:19-21; 1 Cor. 6:9-10).

2. Greed, the excessive desire for something, in this case sexual experiences, is a form of idolatry because it elevates the desired thing over God; it is an idolatrous obsession.

D. Paul urges them not to let anyone deceive them into thinking that they can live in sexual sin and avoid the wrath of God (the flip side of life in the kingdom) (5:6). Every society has those voices. Because of the dire consequences, they must not join in with the disobedient (5:7).

E. In addition, they must not join in with the disobedient because they have been changed by becoming Christians. They have passed from darkness into the light of being in the Lord and should act accordingly (5:8). Living as children of light involves:

1. exhibiting goodness, righteousness, and truth (5:9)
2. ascertaining what is pleasing to the Lord (5:10)
3. not participating in the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather exposing them as evil (5:11)

F. Indeed, it is shameful even to mention the things (the sexual sins) being done by the godless in secret (5:12).

G. It is light in the form of the godly living just described that exposes, makes visible, works of darkness by presenting a righteous standard for comparison (5:13).

H. The meaning of 5:14a is notoriously difficult.¹ I think Paul is supporting his statement that it is light that makes visible the works of darkness (v. 13) by noting indirectly that making things visible is the essence of light. Everything that makes things visible "is light" in the sense that is light's essence.

I. That revealing function of light is what is behind ("Therefore it says") the probable baptismal hymn quoted in 14b: "Awake, sleeping one, and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Those who are baptized into Christ pass from spiritual death to spiritual life, from alienation to reconciliation, and will have the Lord's light constantly revealing the truth to them, especially the truth about themselves. The new life is lived in the exposing light of Christ.

XII. So be careful how you live (5:15-20) – ¹⁵*Watch carefully, therefore, how you walk, not as unwise people but as wise,* ¹⁶*making the most of the time, because the days are evil.* ¹⁷*Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord [is].* ¹⁸*And do not get drunk with wine, in which there is debauchery, but be filled with [the] Spirit,* ¹⁹*speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music to the Lord with your hearts,* ²⁰*always giving thanks to God the Father for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

A. Because of the importance of holy living and the danger of deception, Paul urges them to take care to conduct themselves as wise people, as those who have insight

¹ Against nearly all modern commentators and with the KJV and NKJV, I take φανερούμενον as a middle rather than passive voice.

into the true nature of things, especially God's gracious purposes in Christ. The wise are those who walk worthily of the calling to which they were called (4:1). To do so, of course, requires insight into the Lord's will (5:15).

B. Living wisely includes having a right attitude toward the opportunities time offers. Because we live in the midst of evil, it is even more important that we take every opportunity to let our light shine. Light is precious in this world, and our ray may be the only one someone sees (5:16).

C. Because wise or godly living is so important, for us and for others, Christians cannot afford to be foolish; rather, we must understand what the will of the Lord is. That is the heart of genuine wisdom. It is not right for a Christian to be apathetic toward the will of Christ (5:17).

D. Instead of the foolish pagan practice of getting drunk on wine, something that leads to debauchery, they are to engage in the wise counterpart of being filled with or by the Spirit.

1. Note that being filled with or by the Spirit is something one can be commanded to do. One can surrender one's will to what the Spirit wants done in one's life; one can increasingly give oneself over to his desires.

2. Whether one understands the preposition as "with" or "by," I think O'Brien (p. 393-394) captures the meaning of Spirit filling:

Believers are the recipients of the exhortation at 5:18, for, although we do not fill ourselves, we are to be receptive to the Spirit's transforming work, making us into the likeness (i.e., fulness) of God and Christ. We are to be subject to the Spirit's control (cf. 1:17; 3:16), which is tantamount to letting Christ's word rule in our lives (Col. 3:16), so that we may walk wisely (Eph. 5:15) and understand more fully the Lord's will (v. 17). The goal is to attain to what in principle we already have in Christ – fulness and spiritual maturity.

3. Their being Spirit-filled leads not to debauchery, as does the pagans' being filled with wine, but to their speaking to each other in religious songs when in their gatherings they sing and make music to the Lord from their hearts, giving thanks then and always to God the Father for all things in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. (Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are synonymous, being the three most common terms for religious songs in the LXX.)

a. O'Brien notes (p 394), "the apostle is not referring to two separate responses of speaking in songs (v. 19a) and singing (v. 19b), but is describing the same activity from different perspectives." And since that activity clearly is corporate in that they speak to each another, its primary referent undoubtedly is the community gathered for worship.

b. Lincoln writes (p. 347): "This Spirit-filled living will manifest itself in their corporate worship, as they address and edify one another by means of all the types of songs the Spirit inspires, as they sing their praise of Christ from the heart, and as they in Christ's name offer thanksgiving to their God and Father for all the blessings he has bestowed upon them."

c. As the church offers heartfelt praise and thanks to God in song, we also communicate to each other through that praise and thanksgiving and build each other up as a result. Our gatherings are not alcohol-fueled exercises in debasement but expressions of Spirit-transformed hearts to the glory of God.

XIII. Being Spirit-filled and submission in household relationships (5:21 – 6:9)

A. Wives submit to your husbands (5:21-24) – ²¹*Submit to one another in fear of Christ.* ²²*Wives, [submit] to your own husbands as to the Lord,* ²³*for a husband is head of the wife as Christ also [is] head of the church, he himself [being] Savior of the body.* ²⁴*But as the church submits to Christ, so also the wives [are to submit] to the husbands in everything.*

1. Verse 21 is a transition to the discussion of relationships in the ancient household. It could be understood as a continuation of the sentence begun in 5:18, but the standard editions of the Greek text (NA27 and UBS4) place a period at the end of v. 20 and begin a new paragraph at v. 21. John Muddiman states regarding v. 21 (p. 256):

The verb is a participle (lit. 'submitting') used in place of an imperative, a not uncommon idiom in a series of ethical exhortations (see Rom. 12.9-13; 1 Pet. 3.1, cf. 1 Pet. 2.18). It is grammatically possible, in the absence of any particle indicating the beginning of a new sentence, to see this verse as the completion of the series of participles in the preceding sentence: 'speaking, singing, chanting and giving thanks'. However, the doxological phrase at the end of verse 20 makes a satisfactory closure and would surely force the reader to draw a breath for a new paragraph. And in terms of content, 5:21 changes the subject and forms an introduction to the section that follows.

2. The command to submit to one another often is understood as a command for mutual or reciprocal submission, a command for person A to submit to person B and person B to submit to person A. With a number of commentators, I think that is a misunderstanding. Paul is urging Christians to submit to those to whom they owe submission, the specific focus being on the need for wives to submit to their husbands, children to submit to their parents, and slaves to submit to their masters.

a. The verb rendered "submit" does not mean to be humble or to act in a thoughtful, considerate, or serving way; it means to yield to the leadership right of another. As O'Brien states (p. 401-402):

[It] regularly functions to describe the submission of someone in an ordered array to another who was above the first, that is, in authority over that person. Further, none of the relationships where this verb appears is reversed: husbands are not told to be subject to their wives, nor parents to children, nor the government to citizens, nor disciples to demons. The word does not describe a 'symmetrical' relationship since it always has to do with an ordered relationship in which one person is 'over' and another 'under'. In this sense the term is not mutual in its force.

b. So the ethical duties owed by husbands, parents, and masters to their wives, children, and slaves, respectively, however important they are, should not be construed as a duty to submit. That is not what submission means.

c. You say, "Well how can it be called submitting *to one another* if the duties owed by husbands, parents, and masters do not constitute submitting?" The answer is that the phrase "to one another" need not mean that the submission is mutual or reciprocal. It can mean some within the group submitting to others within the group. For example:

(1) Lk. 2:15 reports that "the shepherds said to *one another*, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.'" That means that some of the shepherds suggested this to the others, not that each said the same thing to the other.

(2) Lk. 12:1 tells of a crowd that was so large that "they were trampling on *one another*." That means that some in the crowd trampled on others in the crowd, not that each person who was trampled on also trampled on the one who trampled on him.

(3) Paul's command in Gal. 6:2 to "bear *one another's* burdens" does not mean that a person whose burdens were born by another must then bear the burdens of that person. Rather, it means that *some* who were more able should help bear the burdens of *others* who were less able.

(4) When James commanded in Jas. 4:11 that they not "speak against *one another*" he was not forbidding *mutual* slander but evil speech by any one of them against any other.

(5) Rev. 6:4 says "men slay *one another*," meaning that some men kill others, not that those being killed also kill those who are killing them.

d. O'Brien concludes (p. 403): "In the present context, then, given that 'submit' is one-directional in its reference to submission to authority, and that the pronoun does not always indicate a symmetrical relationship, it is preferable to

understand the clause 'submitting to one another' to refer to submission to appropriate authorities, not mutual submission."

e. Now, if you disagree with that and think mutual submission is in view, you still must recognize that what a parent, for example, owes a child differs from what a child owes a parent. So the lack of mutuality or reciprocity in the duties comes in through distinguishing between different forms of submission.

3. Before discussing the submission of wives to husbands, certain truths need to be understood.

a. Men and women are created equally in the image of God and together comprise mankind (Gen. 1:26-27, 5:1-2). In 1 Cor. 11:11-12 Paul points out that men and women are dependent on each other. In 1 Cor. 12:12-27, he makes clear that all who are in Christ are part of Christ's body and are equally precious; there are no second-class citizens in the kingdom. Peter describes husbands and wives as "co-heirs of the gracious gift of life" (1 Pet. 3:7). In terms of one's standing before God, Paul says in Gal. 3:28 that there is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus.

b. In the marriage partnership of two spiritually equal human beings, a man and a woman, the man bears the primary responsibility to lead the partnership in a God-glorifying direction. He is head of the wife as Christ also [is] head of the church. God in his sovereignty has bestowed on the husband the responsibility of headship or leadership.

(1) In doing so, and in calling the wife to accept her husband's leadership, God is not saying that the wife is inferior to, less worthy, or less capable than her husband. Husbands and wives simply have different roles or functions.

(2) We ask, "*Why* did God place the leadership responsibility exclusively on the husband (and the men in the spiritual family) rather than letting the wife lead where she is the more (or equally) capable partner?" Ultimately the answer is that God is sovereign (Ps. 103:19; 1 Tim. 6:15) and that he chose to do it that way.

(a) One could just as well ask why God gave the tribe of Levi the exclusive responsibility to care for the Tabernacle, or why he gave the family of Aaron the exclusive responsibility of serving as priests. Why limit these roles to people who happen to be born in a certain lineage rather than allowing everyone equal access to the roles?

(b) And that is precisely what led to Korah's rebellion in Numbers 16. Korah, a Levite, and 250 community leaders opposed Moses and Aaron on the basis that they should have equal access to God. All Israel was holy, so no one family line should be exalted to the priestly function. It was a challenge to God's right to choose select groups for specific roles. And, as you know, Korah, Dathan, and

Abiram were swallowed by the earth, and the 250 community leaders were incinerated by God. The spirit of Korah is alive and well in those who deny the leadership role of men in the family and the church. As is usually the case, they have masked their rebellion with claims of insight and enlightenment, but it is still rebellion.

c. Understand that a submissive or nonleading role does not mean an inferior status.

(1) Jesus is God; he is one in nature, being, and essence with God the Father. So the Son is not inferior to or less worthy than the Father, yet he is functionally subordinate to the Father; he willingly submits to the Father's authority. This is made explicit in 1 Cor. 11:3, 15:27-28 and is demonstrated by a number of facts:

(a) He was sent by the Father (Mat. 10:40, 15:24, 21:3-7; Mk. 9:37, 12:6; Lk. 4:43, 9:48, 10:16, 20:13; Jn. 3:34, 4:34, 5:23, 5:30, 5:36-38, 6:29, 6:38-39, 6:44, 6:57, 7:16, 7:28-29, 7:33, 8:16, 8:18, 8:26, 8:29, 8:42, 9:41, 10:36, 11:42, 12:44-45, 12:49, 13:20, 14:24, 15:21, 16:5, 17:3, 17:8, 17:18, 17:21, 17:23, 17:25, 20:21; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 3:2; 1 Jn. 4:9-10, 4:14).

(b) He spoke the words of the Father (Jn. 7:16, 8:26-28, 8:38-40, 12:49-50, 14:24, 15:15).

(c) He came to do the Father's will (Jn. 4:34, 5:19, 6:38, 14:30; Heb. 10:5-9).

(d) He revealed the Father (Jn. 1:18, 12:45, 14:7-9, 17:6, 17:26; Heb. 1:1-4).

(e) He seeks to please, glorify, and honor the Father (Jn. 5:30, 8:29, 14:13, 17:1-5).

(f) He judges only as he hears from the Father (Jn. 5:30).

(2) If Jesus, being in very nature God, can submit to the Father's authority, then certainly a wife can submit to her husband's leadership without denying her equal dignity or value. She is acting like Christ! That parallel is specifically drawn in 1 Cor. 11:3.

4. Paul says that wives are to submit to their own husbands as to the Lord, but that does not mean that the wife is to submit to her husband *as though he were Christ*.

a. Submission to Christ is expressed in unquestioning obedience because he is God. He is the holy and infallible Creator and Savior. There can be no justification for questioning his will or attempting to enlighten him.

b. Husbands, on the other hand, are limited, sinful human beings. Unlike the Lord, they can make very foolish and even sinful choices.

(1) Submission to husbands is expressed in supporting their nonsinful decisions, not because of husbands' inherent qualities (who they are) but because God has given the responsibility of leadership in the family to the husband. The wife is to submit to the husband "as to the Lord" in that, when the husband has finally chosen a course of action, the wife willingly supports and follows that choice. She does not resent it and does not seek to sabotage or undermine it.

(2) Of course, if a husband chooses a sinful course of action, the wife cannot support it. The husband's authority is from the Lord, and he has no authority to push one of Christ's disciples into sin. To follow one's husband into sin is not a submission that is "fitting in the Lord," to use the words of Col. 3:18.

c. Unlike the situation in submitting to Christ, the wife must help her husband in the discharge of his leadership responsibility. This often requires her to inform, question, advise, and correct her husband. A wife's submission to her husband does not mean she cowers silently and occasionally utters "Oh yes great one." She is a nonleading partner and is called to use her abilities and gifts to bless her husband and the family.

d. In a healthy marriage, husbands and wives can almost always come to a consensus on what course of action should be taken, but occasionally they cannot. In those situations where a mutual decision cannot be reached, the wife is called by God to yield to her husband's decision. I think James Hurley captures very well the spirit in which such decisions should be made (*Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 151):

The manner in which such decisions are handled is crucial. The husband may not be high-handed and stubborn, knowing that she will finally have to give way. That is not the model of Christ's headship. Neither may the wife be grudging and resentful. That is not the manner of our response to Christ. In the last analysis, when the two can devote no more time to individual and joint seeking of the grace of God to permit them to come to one mind or to be willing to yield to the other, an exchange along the following lines is in order:

Husband: "Not because I am inherently wiser or more righteous, nor because I am right (although I do believe I am or I would not stand firm), but because it is finally my responsibility before God, we will take the course which I believe is right. If I am being sinfully stubborn, may God forgive me and give me the grace to yield to you."

Wife: "Not because I believe you are wiser in this matter (I don't) or more righteous, nor because I accept that you are right (because I don't or I

would not oppose you), but because I am a servant of God who has called me to honour your headship, I willingly yield to your decision. If I am wrong, may God show me. If you are wrong, may he give you grace to acknowledge it and to change."

5. It is true that Christ is Savior of the body, unlike the husband *vis-a-vis* his wife; but despite that difference, wives are to submit to their husbands in everything, just as the church does to Christ.