

Walking in Love Ephesians 5: 1-10

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**January 7, AD 2024
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Here's the conundrum in handling a text like this one. How do you teach about morality without being *moralistic*? How do we allow the Scripture to be *convicting* without the preacher sounding *condemning*? As I thought about this, another story from days at Princeton Seminary bubbled up.



You're look at the quad, the beautiful green space at the center of the older part of campus. It's enclosed by the chapel, the administration building and some dormitories. I loved living along this miniature park. It was like walking around in a rich heritage of faith.

I also loved being just a 75-minute train ride into New York. We could go after class and get back on the late train by about midnight. One night, after a rather large time in the city, I felt a little wobbly when our train got in. I handed my keys to Freddy who drove us competently from the station back to campus. Except. Except instead of entering the parking lot, he said, "Let's drive around the quad." OK. Then he said, "Hey, let's drive *across* the quad!" No Freddy! But it was too late. He peeled across the hallowed ground, churning up pristine grass. The next day, I woke in the late morning to the sound of a crisp piece of paper being slid under my door. The letterhead told me it was from Dr. David Crawford, Dean of Students. Dean Crawford was the very embodiment of all the tradition of the seminary. The single sentence was hand written. "Please see me at your earliest convenience." This could not be good.

"Last night, someone drove a car across the quad," he said calmly. "We found mud on the tires of a car registered to you. What can you tell me about that?" Well, I wasn't driving. Dean Crawford said, "I know you weren't. I wouldn't have thought you'd have done that. Can you tell me who was driving?" I answered, "No sir, I can't tell you who drove. But I can go talk to him and ask him to come see you." He said, "That will be fine." And it was over. Never mentioned again. A grounds crew had repaired our damage by the afternoon.

Decades later, I'm still thinking about that 5 minutes with Dean Crawford. He had me dead to rights. I very well could have been the one who drove across the quad. But he chose to speak better of me. We had a code of honor. Dean Crawford treated me as an honorable man. "I would not have expected that from you." It was more effective than a hundred lectures or hours of punishment. He never once threatened me. But the implication was clear. I'm going to treat you as a man of honor. Men of honor make mistakes. But if you do this again, you will signal that you reject your honor and make a choice that you are not worthy to be here. So go live like you're called to Presbyterian ministry.

Convicted. Not condemned. Called to a higher identity. Privileged to be part of a noble community. Reminded not to throw it away by living like a reprobate. That, of course, would not be the last of my stupid mistakes. But it would remain a powerful incentive to choose to live as someone who wants to enhance, not tarnish, a higher cause.

This is what's going on in our passage today. We can hear Paul's words as merely condemning. "Sexual immorality and all impurity and covetousness must not even be named among you...Let there be no filthiness or foolish talk or coarse joking...Everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ." Wow Paul. What a prude. This is just what people hate about Christianity. Judging. Excluding. Restricting. Who wants it?

But hearing only condemnation in this passage is to miss the point entirely. Let's listen to how he frames it, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...Once you were darkness, now you are light in the Lord." He calls them to their deeper identity. You are beloved children. Christ loved you so much he gave his life for you. You have passed from darkness to light. You don't belong to the darkness in which people are stumbling. I wouldn't think that of you. So go on and live like who you are in Christ.

It's really helpful here to recall what kind of culture these young Christians in Ephesus experienced. Ephesus was a cosmopolitan city. The many gods worshipped in the Roman empire shared something in common: you had to give yourself over to them in order, maybe, to get something from them. Humans exist to serve the gods. Humans strive to survive the gods. Humans sacrifice to overcome the indifference of the gods. This news of Christ was radically different. Here is a God who loves us. More, here is a God who came to be one of us. Here is a God who came to give himself for us. To sacrifice himself that we might be

reconnected to him and live forever in a communion of love. There was no other god like this.

What's more, in the Roman culture, life was cheap and cruel. The poor were openly exploited. Women were terribly used. A high-born man, though married, could have relations with any woman or man he wanted, if they were of a lower class. Sex was appetite men were permitted to satisfy. Women, slaves, boys got used and discarded. Prostitution, abortion and infanticide were rampant. If you had power, those beneath existed to be consumed, then dispensed with. It was, after all, just a bodily function.

The Ephesians discovered that Christ Jesus came to rescue people out of this degrading, denigrating society. The ethic of Jesus elevated the relationship between men and women like nothing before, or since. Sex was not just for gratification, or merely for procreation of heirs. Sex was for "giving one's whole life in a consensual marriage covenant."¹ The Christian ethic guarded women, elevating both partners to cherishing one another in lifelong commitment.

What's more, Christ Jesus came to rescue people out of rigid class lines and ethnic strife. By brothering us, all of us, Jesus stops us from "othering" people not like us. He calls us to be united to himself, to the one new humanity he has created. That gives us an identity that is higher, deeper than sex, gender, race, social class, level of wealth, or even which school you went to. When Christ is our brother in a redeemed humanity, these "others" become fellow members of Jesus with us. Of course we have to stop the crude and cruel jesting about other groups, other kinds, the other sex. We are connected through a deeper, higher bond.

The Ephesian Christians knew they had walked in darkness. They had been drowning in a cesspool of using, abusing, consuming, and dispensing. They had been eaten up with envy, power struggles, greediness for having more of everything. Now they were free, lifted into a community of sacrifice and giving and valuing and love.

But the culture all around them was always pulling them back. Old habits die hard. Their default way of living always wanted to restart and reassert itself. They had the joy of new life in Christ and with one another. But they also had the struggle of swimming against the tide of the old life.

Psychiatrist Curt Thompson has spent his career helping people work through past trauma and overcome its effects through Christ. People begin to live

from the story of a God who loves them, who suffers alongside them and even suffers for them. They live from the God who brings new life out of death. A God who is committed to remaking the whole world and giving each of us a part in that. Thompson notes, however, that living in this new way involves a new kind of suffering. Not the suffering of what people have done to us, nor the suffering of stupid stuff we have done, but the suffering of no longer being like everyone else in a degrading, disintegrating world. He writes of one patient who was

...suffering from the resistance she encountered upon turning to swim against a current of life that had been carrying her to disaster. Only now, she found that the very turning revealed a weakness in her swim stroke, given how long she had been swimming in agreement with the old narrative. To swim against that current was to suffer. Suffering as one who is practicing living in the age to come while the present age is passing away trying to take her with it.²

The old life always exerts a pull on us. The way a whirlpool draws everything into its downward spin, the darkness pulls us back even as we swim hard for the light of Jesus.

Think of how this works. A thousand times a day we see images offering themselves for our eyes to consume. Look at me, want me, pay me to have a part of me. A woman on the screen, a shiny car in a driveway, a remodeled home, a plan to get rich. We teach our children to become people that other people want. Dozens of times a day, we are invited to partake of denigrating others. Our news sources slam “those people” so they we can feel good about our side. We objectify, quantify, relegate whole groups of people in our conversations. We take for granted that saving face, getting even, and making others pay is necessary for survival. All day long we swim against an entire economy that runs on the power of coveting. I want more, I need more, it is right and good to have more, I will find a way to get it.

It takes enormous effort to lift our heads out of the water as the rapids hurry us along. To look up and know all this consuming and using and slamming is killing us. It’s exhausting to live intentionally for love and sacrifice.

I could run through dozens of examples and put our faces in the ways we slip back into sexual immorality, destructive talk and rampant greed. But a moment’s reflection has already revealed to you where this is so. What’s going to motivate us to keep swimming against the tide of our own instincts and the

culture's insistence has to be more than just a sharp No! We need a higher, more energizing, long term calling.

Dean Crawford dropped a time-released capsule inside my life. "I know you didn't drive the car across the quad. I wouldn't have expected that of you." That seemed ridiculous in the moment. I was just as guilty as Freddy. But he called me to more. Think of the tradition in which you stand. Think of the future to which you are called. Be a man that honors that heritage and passes it along.

Paul gives such an ennobling, empowering word to the Ephesians. You are beloved children. Christ gave himself up for you. You are now light in the Lord. I would not expect you to fall back into the darkness. You don't need to sell yourself cheap. You are a son, a daughter of the king. You don't need to consume others. You are a giver. You don't need to denigrate others. You build people up. You don't need to crave more and more. Thanksgiving and faith and trust is the joy of your life. That's what I would expect of you. That's who you are. So walk in love!

¹ Timothy Keller, *How to Reach the West Again* (New York: Redeemer City to City, 2020), pp. 28-9, 35-37. See also Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016). Pp. 154-168.

² Curt Thompson, *The Deepest Place: Suffering and the Formation of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2023) p. 99.