

## Living in Ephesus, But Living for God

*Ephesians 5:3-7*

**A**s we read this passage from Ephesians today, there is a very real danger in front of us. It is a danger to which every one of us is susceptible, one which hides and creeps along in the shadows, suddenly pouncing when we least expect it. It is the danger that any one of us, or all of us, might look at this passage, or hear it read, and think, “Well, that certainly doesn’t apply to me! I’m not guilty of any of that!” But let us remind ourselves of 2 Timothy 3:16, which reads, “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*” Let us remind ourselves of Hebrews 4:12, which tells us that “*the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*” Let’s recall the words in Psalm 119:130, “*The unfolding of your words gives light.*” And let us remember the words of the psalmist when he prayed, “*Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law*” (Psalm 119:18). And with those verses in mind, and humbleness of heart, let’s turn now to the reading of God’s Word found in Ephesians 5:1-7.

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul has told us that we are to imitate God in what we do, taking as our ultimate pattern the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, as He gave Himself on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins. He showed us what love looks like. But beginning in verse 3, Paul shows us what love does *not* look like. Paul warns us that there are plenty of substitutes out there, a lot of things which would pull us away from that example Jesus gave us. He shows us what love looks like when it has been perverted and distorted. He pointed to six specific examples of things that the Ephesian Christians were facing in their day, things that were only imitations of the kind of lifestyle a child of God should have. When we read them for ourselves, we notice that they are not unlike the things going on in our world and society.

Here are the six: in verse three, we find words which describe our actions: sexual immorality, any kind of impurity, and greed. In verse four, we find words which describe our talk: obscenity, foolish talk and coarse joking. Verse three begins with the word “but,” which marks a very strong contrast with vv. 1-2. Paul says that we are not to engage ourselves in things like that—instead, he says at the end of verse four, we are to offer thanksgiving. Every one of these things affects our relationship with God, but Paul didn’t just pull them out of the air. As he wrote these words, he was definitely writing as he was inspired by the Holy Spirit, but these are things that were affecting the people in Ephesus at the time. They also affect us in our day.

But to unlock the meaning of this passage, we need to take a little trip back through time to the ancient city of Ephesus. Ephesus was a magnificent city of 300,000 people in Paul’s day. There

was a great harbor at Ephesus, bringing ships and wealth from all over the known world. It has filled in with silt since then, and Ephesus is now nearly four miles from the old harbor. Four major highways criss-crossed in Ephesus, bringing a great deal of commerce and trade. There were public baths, theaters, libraries, and even paved streets! But the most amazing structure of all was the temple of Artemis, also known as Diana. Artemis was the Greek goddess of fertility, and she was worshipped by engaging in immoral behavior with a temple prostitute, male or female. One worship ritual involved a public parade of the idols down to the river to dip them in the water to “restore” the virginity of the goddess, then regathering back at the temple to engage in an orgy involving thousands of temple prostitutes.

The temple of Artemis was made of glittering Persian marble, the first of its kind. It took 120 years to build, and had been built about 500 years before Paul came on the scene. It was four hundred and twenty-five feet long (a football field is only 360 feet long, counting the end zones!), and two hundred and sixty feet wide (a football field is only 160 feet wide!). It was a massive structure! The one hundred and thirty hand-carved columns stood sixty feet high. Thirty-seven of them were studded with jewels and gold. It was said that the altar within the temple of Artemis was beautiful beyond words. There were thousands of people employed there in worshipping and serving their false god Artemis. Collections of great works of art had been brought from all over the known world, and were stored there.

A poet named Antipater of Sidon is credited with the original list of what we call “The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.” Here is a paraphrase of what he said in one of his poems:

“I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots. I’ve seen the great statue of Zeus, the hanging gardens of Babylon, the huge labor of the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus. But when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy, and I said, “The Sun never looked on anything so grand.” *(paraphrased from Antipater, Greek Anthology [IX.58]).*

It was pretty impressive! Such amazing commitment and immense cost to worship a false goddess by practicing immorality with temple priests and priestesses! ***There are two points which need to be made here. One*** is that the people of that day spared no expense whatsoever in building this enormous, glittering structure to worship their false god. The temple of Artemis reflected what they believed about their god, just as our church buildings in our day reflect what we believe about our God. The ***second*** point is that they became like that which they worshipped, just as we become like that which we worship in our day. We either become more and more like the world, or more and more like Christ. The immorality which was such a large part of their worship spread quite rapidly beyond the walls of the temple.

And it had been going on for a long time. Five hundred years before Paul wrote this letter a philosopher who lived in Ephesus by the name of Heraclitus said with tears in his eyes that “no

one could live in Ephesus without weeping over the immorality which he must see on every side.”

The temple was considered so sacred that people from all over the region stored their riches and jewels there, so it became a banking center, not just for Ephesus itself, but for the entire area. Many people made fortunes there selling little charms and spells called "Ephesian Letters" that were guaranteed to bring protection on journeys, children to childless, and success in love or business. People came from all over the world to buy these magic parchments, which they wore as amulets and charms. In addition to that, there was a powerful artisan's guild of silversmiths who made little statutes of Artemis that they could sell to tourists to take back home with them. Immense amounts of money flowed through there! When Paul came into town, and people began turning to Christ, the livelihood of the silversmiths was so threatened that they even started a riot to stop it. We can read about that in Acts 19.

Such an atmosphere attracted a lot of people, including criminals. The walls of the temple offered asylum to anyone who had committed any kind of crime. Soon there were so many criminals there that they extended the boundaries to outside the walls of the temple, as far as an arrow could fly. So many more came that the entire district of Ephesus was offered as asylum for those who had committed any kind of crime.

It was into that kind of atmosphere that Almighty God, the Lord God of the Universe, sent Paul the Apostle. Tradition says that Paul was a small man, not very attractive, with poor eyesight. He walks into Ephesus with a burning desire to see people in that moral cesspool come to know Christ. Right in the middle of all this immorality was a small group of Jews. We don't know how many, but there had to be at least ten adult males for there to be a synagogue there. That's where Paul went to tell them about Jesus. And it wasn't long before some of the inhabitants there, who had grown up in this spiritual darkness of immorality and black magic, but who knew there had to be something better, came not only to know Jesus, but to fall madly in love with Him.

Can you see it? God sent Paul right into the devil's very backyard! Paul walked into the city and began to tell them about Jesus. When he met with opposition, he rented a lecture hall, and met with Jew and Gentile alike every day for two years, telling them about Jesus and the new life, the pure life, the full and meaningful life they could have through Him. He stayed in Ephesus longer than anywhere else. And he told them that the life Christ offered them was the exact opposite of what they had known all their lives.

Put yourself there in their sandals. You've grown up around this immorality all your life. You've even participated in it. The foul stench of what had been going on in Ephesus for centuries was deeply entrenched in the society and culture, and in you, too. It's all you've ever

known. But deep inside, you sense a gnawing hunger and pain for something else. You realize this does not offer you peace and hope. Now you've come to Christ, and your whole life changes! So Paul writes you a letter, describing what a life lived for Christ should be like.

The sexual immorality and impurity going on at the temple of Artemis? Not for you. Turn from it. The greed associated with so much money and wealth flowing through here? Not for you. Turn from it. The obscenity, the foolish talk and coarse joking which so often accompany lifestyles like that are to be forsaken also. The reason he gave was that those things are out of place in the life of a Christ-follower. You've come to Christ, and you suddenly find yourself completely surrounded by the old temptations and lifestyles that are so foreign to what you're learning in Christ. In your quest to be like your Heavenly Father, don't be distracted by all the sideshows you see around you.

We are still living in Ephesus. In our day, there are a lot of sideshows, too. In our day, we are completely surrounded as well. The word Paul used here for "sexual immorality" is the root of our English word "pornography," but it goes way beyond that. It is an important word that includes every immoral act with another person that could be named, referring to any sexual activity outside the bounds of marriage. The life outside Christ regards the sexual appetite as a thing to be gratified, rather than controlled. The person following Christ understands that the sexual relationship is so sacred that it should only be experienced inside the boundaries of marriage. We are living in Ephesus, but we should be living for God.

The word for "greed" or "covetousness" as in the KJV basically means to never be able to get enough. That could refer to the constant quest for physical gratification, but it certainly extends to other areas of life as well. The ancient philosopher Socrates once compared the desires of the wicked to those souls in hell who carry water in vessels full of holes, to a larger vessel also full of holes. They never get enough. J. B. Phillips defined greed as "the itch to get your hands on what belongs to other people."

Paul wrote that these things should not even be named among us, as being part of who we are. We take a look at our society and we realize that we are a long way from this, aren't we? ***The first reason Paul gave is that we are God's holy people, or saints, v. 3.*** We have been set apart for God's use. You've been born into this kind of atmosphere with all kinds of rampant immorality, impurity and greed, but now you've been "born again," and the new life doesn't include things from the old life. You are a saint of God.

***The second reason Paul gave for forsaking such things is that we are now kings, v. 5.*** He says there that "No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God." When we came to know Christ, we entered into the kingdom of God. Jesus told us "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God

*unless he is born again*” (John 3:3). Paul makes it very clear that those who persistently pursue a lifestyle that is immoral, impure or greedy cannot enter the kingdom of God. What it comes down to is the fact that you cannot confess your sins, come to Christ for forgiveness, and continue in the same habits and lifestyles you had before. You must forsake them, turn your back on them, and come bounding without reservation into the arms of Christ!

Notice something very, very important here. This is one of the gems in God’s Word that is lying right on the surface, and we have only to stoop over to pick it up. Verse five does not say that he **will not** have any inheritance in the kingdom, referring to some future event. It says that **he does not** now have any inheritance in the kingdom. He may have a lot of things, but not one little piece of the kingdom of God. He has lost everything worth having, and unless he repents, he will lose it eternally.

That old path is leading to hell, Paul says. And when someone comes to us and tries to convince us that those things are really not that bad, as we see in verse six, we should not be deceived, no matter how smooth their speech or convincing their words! We are to treat their advice as “empty” words. We are to understand that God takes this very seriously! There are eternal destinies at stake.

The original language of verse six is literally, “Stop being deceived by empty words.” What is an “empty word”? It is a word that “contains” nothing. It may be something you hear from a famous comedian, or hear in a movie, or whispered in your ear. You may see it in the general culture, read it in a book or hear it in a song. But it is still empty. Paul says that there are going to be people who will try to pull us into their lifestyle and way of thinking. They may say that it’s okay to commit adultery, to practice homosexuality, to have a sexual relationship outside of marriage. They will tell us that it is perfectly alright to gather as much “stuff” as we can, that it is our right and we worked hard for it. They will tell us that we shouldn’t be so uptight, that we should relax and live a little. Those are wrong words, empty words, deceptive words!

God’s Word says “Don’t be deceived by that, no matter how attractive it appears.” Verse six: *“Because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient.”* Understand this: God’s wrath is real, and it is coming. The word for “wrath” means “to swell,” and it refers to something swelling until it bursts. Imagine a balloon, and you are blowing into it, and it gets bigger and bigger and bigger. If you keep blowing into it, it will burst. If you keep living that way, one day the balloon will burst. God’s Word is saying to us that there will be consequences for living immoral, impure and greedy lives. To speak of God’s wrath is not to say that God is one day going to pitch a temper tantrum and have a fit with anyone who disobeys Him. It means that God has a holy hatred for anything that destroys you and keeps you from having a right relationship with Him.

I began this message today with these words:

As we read this passage from Ephesians today, there is a very real danger in front of us. It is a danger to which every one of us is susceptible, one which hides and creeps along in the shadows, suddenly pouncing when we least expect it. It is the danger that any one of us, or all of us, might look at this passage, or hear it read, and think, “Well, that certainly doesn’t apply to me! I’m not guilty of any of that!”

And as we have gone through the passage, perhaps those are the very words which have been in your mind. “I’m not affected by any of that, so this is not for me.” The problem is that we are still surrounded on every side by immorality and wickedness of every kind, and that if we are not careful, we will begin to be influenced by the subtle nuances of a society which thumbs its nose at Almighty God.

It is time to acknowledge that though we were born and raised in a God-rejecting society, and though we are totally surrounded by a culture that either hates or ignores God, we must choose the path that leads to holiness and citizenship in the Kingdom of God. If you have been following the path that leads to destruction, I plead with you today to turn around, to turn your heart back toward Christ, who loved you and gave Himself up for you, a fragrant offering for your many sins.

“For on this great spiritual transaction in your heart hangs the inheritance of heaven or the torments of hell. O how serious and earnest and heart-searching we should be to make our calling and election sure and to know that we are born of God!” (John Piper)