

DEALING WITH ANGER AND IMMORALITY

Ephesians 5:1–17

Dr. George O. Wood

We'll be in Ephesians 5:1–17 today. Because it's been several weeks we've been in Ephesians, it might be well to get us all caught up regarding where we are in the context of this letter of Paul's.

Someone has said that the letter of Paul to the Ephesians unfolds in three stages: the wealth of the Christian (chapters 1–3), the walk of the Christian (chapters 4–5 and the first nine verses of chapter 6), and the warfare of the Christian (chapter 6:10 to the end of the chapter). I think that's a very helpful division of the letter.

We're in the section now on the walk of the Christian. I've been reading letters from the early church fathers. I was reading a letter from an unnamed disciple. He writes approximately in the year 130 A.D. His reflection on what the Christians are to be in the world is very similar to what Paul is telling us in Ephesians that we're to be. He compares the relationship of the soul and the body with the relationship of the Christians to the world. He says, "To sum it up all in one word, what the soul is to the body, Christians are to the world. The soul is dispersed through, also the members of the body. And Christians are scattered through all cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body. Christians dwell in the world and yet are not of the world. The invisible soul is guarded by the visible body. Christians are known indeed to be in the world, but their godliness remains invisible. The flesh hates the soul and wars against it through itself, suffering no injury, because it is prevented from enjoying wrongful passions. The world also hates the Christians, though in no way injured because they forsake wrongful passions. The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and loves also the members as Christians, who likewise love

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those who hate them. The soul is imprisoned in the body and preserves the very body. Christians are confined to the world as in a prison, yet they are the preservers in the world. The immortal soul dwells in a mortal tabernacle. Christians dwell as sojourners with corruptible bodies looking for an incorruptible dwelling in the heavens. The soul, when ill-provided with food and drink becomes better. In like manner, the Christians, though subjected day by day to punishment, increase the more in number. God has assigned them this illustrious position, which it would be unlawful for them to forsake.” That’s a beautiful analogy.

We’re currently in the middle of our “walk” section in Ephesians. Unfortunately, the New International Version replaces the Greek verb “walk” with the word “live.” Let me show you how the word “walk” is used in the chapters 4 and 5.

In 4:1, “As a prisoner of the Lord then I urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received.” In 4:17, “So I tell you this and insist on it in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do.” In 5:2, “Walk in love.” In 5:8, “Walk as children of light.” In 5:15, “Be very careful how you walk, making the most of every opportunity.”

The word “walk” is very appropriate to the Christian life. For when you compare spiritual walking with physical walking, it’s easy to see the analogy. Walking is a learned behavior. You don’t suddenly flop out of the crib one day onto the floor when you’re a little baby, pick yourself up and start running across the room. It’s a trial and error procedure, which when the first step occurs, brings such unimaginable joy to the beholder, the parents. You parents can all remember when your children took their first step and what a delight it was. That child did not learn to walk automatically.

Sometimes, we falsely presume that simply because you’ve come to Christ, you automatically know what to believe and what to do. That’s not the case either. We’re born again through the

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Spirit of God, with God's Spirit dwelling in us, but then we learn what it is that we should know and how it is that we should act. That's why we're given letters like Ephesians—to guide us, to show us that the Christian walk is a learned dimension.

As you begin walking for a while, you discover another thing about walking. Walking is a rather commonplace behavior once you learn to do it. You're not really conscious of it. I suspect that probably most of you in this room have never even thought about all the steps you've taken today. You just took them, because you're in the habit of taking them. So walking in the Christian life is to be something of regularity, as well. We do things as Christians and realize that a great deal of our Christian life is lived out in normalcy, that we don't have our life interrupted every day or every month, or even every year, by something unexpected or totally life-shattering and changing. There's a normalcy to our walk.

Walking must also be a constant experience. If you decide to go to bed today and not get up for a year, when you try to get out of bed a year from now, you're going to have a really rough time standing up. I don't think you can. I understand that the muscles will atrophy if you just lie in bed for a year and don't do a thing with them.

The same way with our Christian walk. If we don't continually exercise as Christians, we'll atrophy.

In these chapters on walking, Paul deals with the major areas of thought and walking in terms of finding our place in the body of Christ (chapter 4:1–16), putting on the new nature (4:17–5:17) and living the Spirit-filled life (5:18–6:9).

Today in the walk section he especially, in chapter 5:1–17, is dealing with two important problems that beset us as believers. The problems are the problems of anger and the problem of immorality. I would like to say, right at the outset, that I don't think it's an accident that these

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two are linked together in the text. It seems to me, as an observer of human nature, that there is a great deal of relation between anger and immorality.

I think, for example, of a person I know who's in their middle to late twenties who has been at this point in their life through two divorces, who has a problem with promiscuity. Knowing a little of that person's life, and realizing that there is a real rejection by her father in their background, real problems at an early stage of life of handling the kind of anger that was dished out to her in her life—it is no wonder that, as you look at that person unfolding in their life now, you see a pattern of promiscuity and immorality. At the very bottom of that probably is a whole lot of unresolved anger and rejection that she felt from her father, which never got dealt with and, as a result, life is being lived out looking for some close relationship somewhere. The person doesn't even realizing that in the promiscuity they are trying to reach out and reconcile all the anger that is in their life. I almost have a proverb: "Show me an immoral person and I'll show you an angry person." I'm not sure that would be the case in every person's situation, but I think there's a tremendous degree of truth to that statement.

Paul talks about anger. The first two verses of chapter 5 are linked with the last two verses of chapter 4, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 4:31–5:2, NIV).

Anger. Anger is like cancer. In its early stages, cancer is rather easy to cure, but very difficult to detect. In its later stages, it is rather easy to detect but very difficult to cure.

Anger, likewise, in its early stages, when it first happens to us, is not so easy at times to detect,

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but rather simple to cure. But if we let it grow in our lives, it becomes easy to detect and very difficult to cure. How do you know if you're wrestling with the problem of anger?

Let me ask you questions basically in five areas. Are you frequently depressed? Frequent depression is often a sign of anger. Not always but many times it is.

Do you have a low boiling point? That is, do you quickly go off in the event that something happens to you that is not pleasing to you?

Do you have unsettled grievances with people? Outstanding kinds of disagreements that have never been reconciled, which rile you up as you consider them?

Are you an excessively argumentative person? Notice I said "excessively argumentative."

Do you have a desire to retaliate? If someone does something to you, is your immediate response to come back at them?

All of these are symptoms of anger dwelling in our life. How do we deal with anger? A complex question. There are two very simple principles in Paul's statements in Ephesians 4:31 to 5:2.

Basically, he says that the two chief things to do in response to anger are: First, to forgive. "Get rid of all bitterness, be kind, forgiving each other. Be imitators of God." All those are linked together. Forgive. Obviously the word "forgiving" comes right out of Jesus himself, who on the cross taught us to forgive. His first word on the cross is "forgive" and it comes after He had received tremendous physical and verbal abuse—all the hostility that could be dumped out upon Him. Yet it did no harm to Him, because it never got inside of Him. And all the hostility that we may encounter cannot harm us, unless somehow it gets inside of us. Jesus kept it at the door by having a forgiving heart. "Father, forgive them."

You may say, "That's my problem. Jesus is the Son of God and I'm a human being. It may be easier for Him than for me." I grant that because of His sinless nature He was able to do some

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things. But was He not of like nature with us? Do we not also have a human example in the life of Stephen, in Acts 7, when they brought him out to the edge of the city and took stones and began throwing them at him. His face was transformed as he looked at them. He said, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” Don’t hold this sin against them.

I think of Stephen at that point, as he faces his accusers, his face was different from theirs. Their face was knotted up with anger. They were gritting their teeth at him. Many times, our reaction to people is like our face is a mirror of the person’s face that is against us. If another person’s face is happy, our face is a mirror of happiness. If they’re frowning, we’re frowning. If they have their gritted teeth, we have our teeth gritted. Yet there’s something about the nature of Christ dwelling in us that is designed to keep us from being a mirror reflecting other people’s expression. When I look in the mirror in the morning, I see whatever is there. There’s something unique in us, because of the indwelling of Christ, that when we are being frowned upon, when anger is being directed against us, there’s a unique thing that God wants to take place. That is, our faces are not to mirror the faces of others. But instead, they are to mirror the face of the Lord Jesus Christ—full of forgiveness and kindness and compassion.

You say, “That’s tough to do.” I grant it’s very difficult to do. That’s why it’s a matter of walking as a learned behavior. It may not be something you learn to do automatically, but as you begin to work with the concept and the teaching that you are not a mirror of those around you, you mirror Jesus Christ to them instead.

Catherine Marshall tells the story in one of her books, I think *Something More*. She tells about when she married Leonard LeSourd. He had a sixth grader, a daughter about twelve. This girl never took to Catherine Marshall and caused her grief to no end. The girl was totally irregular in her school work. She joined the dropout generation when she went to college. She came as a kid

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from the sixties, one who participated in their lifestyle, with all of its protest and immorality.

Catherine Marshall felt more and more bitterness toward the girl. In fact, Linda was an embarrassment to her. After all, she, Catherine Marshall, a very famous Christian writer and person, had this godless heathen step-daughter whom she couldn't do anything with. She resented her very much and the daughter resented Catherine Marshall very much.

One day, while reading Mark 11:25, Catherine Marshall found these words of the Lord “If you hold anything against anyone, forgive him.” She began to think about all the things she held against her step-daughter. As her practice, she sat down with her journal and began to write down specific things that she held against her daughter, Linda, in their approximately ten years together. After hours of writing, she had filled three or four pages in her journal, single-spaced line items where she remembered she'd held something against Linda. She was astounded at the amount of anger in her life against her daughter. Then she did what the Lord tells us to do, release a person from their sins. She went through that list and prayed, one by one, over every item. When she was done, she had released that anger against Linda in her heart and granted her forgiveness before the Lord.

Within a few weeks, Linda had returned home and suddenly a tremendous healing took place in their relationship. How did the healing happen? First, there were some streams of forgiveness that began to be released in Catherine Marshall's life, which began to dissipate some of the anger that was there.

That's why the Scriptures say, in Ephesians 5:1, “Be imitators of God.” If you take that Scripture out of its context, it seems like an impossibility. How could anyone ever imitate righteousness and the character of God? But that statement is directly in the middle a short teaching on

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forgiveness. The way we are most likely to be imitators of God is exercising the forgiving spirit that the Lord himself patterns before us. Imitating has to do with forgiveness.

The second step in dealing with anger moves beyond forgiveness to exercising love. “As Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Ephesians 5:2). When I am loved, how easy it is to love.

“We are God’s dearly loved children,” Paul says. And therefore, as we grow in consciousness of being dearly loved, we in turn can love.

I don’t know if you’ve had difficulty getting a hold of the love of God on a personal basis where, experientially, you know and feel that God loves you personally. You know it intellectually, you know it’s in the Bible, but personally realizing it has been a problem. It’s been a problem for me. In the churches I grew up in, to go to a motion picture show was considered a sin. I had this view of the second coming of the Lord that I had picked up (it’s not that anybody ever said this, but in my teenage mind I’d picked it up), I really didn’t think the Lord loved me. I thought what was going to happen was this: The Lord was going to wait until someday I sneaked off to a motion picture show, and right in the middle of the movie, he was going to come again so I’d stay on the ground—my feet in cement. I had the phobia. I just knew that the Lord was dating His whole return based on if I ever went to a picture show.

In my adult life, the Lord gave me a dream that He had come again. He was coming in the clouds, and I suddenly started to rise. I got about five feet off the ground and waited to drop back as His divine trick to give me this hope. I hovered there for a moment and then continued to go.

When I was thousands of feet in the air, I could sense myself looking back and I had the enormous sensation and said, “I made it!” It was a marvelous affirmation to me that God, after all, was not plotting to leave me behind.

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The witness of Scripture is that God does love us. I think I began to understand the personal love of God toward me best of all now that I am a father myself. I realize that it is in the character of parenting to love people. A wholesome parent is going to have love for their children. And we serve a wholesome God. It's perfectly natural for Him to love His children. It is in the sense of proceeding out of the love of God that we live. We are loved by Him and we are to turn around and love others. And even learn in difficulties. Jesus taught us that we're to bless instead of curse. That's a way of giving love. Someone chews us out or runs us down, and instead of turning back to them and doing the same thing, we speak well of them, bless them. We do good instead of doing evil. We pray for those who treat us wrongly. And we return a double portion of good for every portion of evil that we receive. Forgiving and loving are two vital ways of dealing with anger.

This passage today goes on to talk about immorality as well. How do we deal with immorality? A lot of immorality would not happen if our anger had been dealt with. But here are some responses that believers are to take in respect to immorality.

We corporately agree that immorality is improper for God's people. "But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people" (Ephesians 5:3, NIV). We agree together that immorality is improper for God's people.

How tragic it is to hear of the moral fall of a Christian leader or pastor. It is a tragedy to see this happen in the Christian community. I think a distinction must be made between a Christian leader who sins and repents and one who justifies his action. Joseph, when he faced "Mrs. Potiphar," denied her invitation. He understood that immorality was not just a sin people commit with other people.

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I. Ultimately, immorality is a sin against God himself.

Joseph refuses with these words, “How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?” (Genesis 39:9). Why is immorality seen as a sin against God? Because God is a God who makes and keeps a covenant with His people. God, when He makes a covenant with you, does not turn around and strike up an illicit relationship behind your back. God will always be true to His Word. God will always be true to His name. God will always be true to His character. The very essence of immorality is that it involves consent, an allegiance that breaks a covenant which has been made. Therefore, Paul is saying here that among the believers immorality is not proper. It is a tragedy to watch the Christian scene today and see persons who have walked with the Lord and, for one reason or the other in their life, immorality has entered and they continue to try to carry on their ministry. Yet they’re out of fellowship with God in this respect. We agree that relationships are critical and that morality is what the Lord calls for.

So we agree together. That’s a consensus among us. We build a consensus of morality.

II. The second thing that Paul says, in regard to dealing with immorality, is that we guard our speech (verse 4).

“Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving” (NIV). Obscenity here means filthiness or shameful speech. It’s the kind of talk from a drunken man. It makes no sense. Coarse joking, crude and degrading stories and humor are to be replaced by thanksgiving.

Our talk can be a way of creating a looseness that can enter us into relationships that are in and of themselves immoral. Christians are to be advised in their speech, even with one another, even with close friends. Most of the temptation and coarse joking occurs with people who are close to

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one another. Guard the area of speech in our lives, that our speech reflect that Christ is present in our conversation.

III. Third, Paul says we are to counter immorality by living in God's will.

It's a lengthy section, "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them. 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. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: 'Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.' Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is" (Ephesians 5:5–17, NIV).

We are to live in God's will. That's the whole focus of this passage. God's will is that no immoral person will have a place in His kingdom.

Several weeks ago, I was doing a teaching on how to deal with reoccurring sin in our lives. I presented a study of ten different Greek New Testament words, which showed different manifestations of sin. One word was *anomia*. A Greek word which means "lawlessness." It's most common occurrence is in 2 Thessalonians 2, where the Antichrist is referred to as the "man of lawlessness," the person who rejects all the rules. Who rejects God's rules, rejects society's rules and brings about their own rules. He is the man of lawlessness.

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But I was astounded when I found this word *anomia* in an unexpected place. It occurs in Matthew 7, when Jesus was teaching about the end times, where there come before Him those who have carried on ministry in His name. He says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers [‘you who work *anomia*, who work lawlessness’]!” (Matthew 7:21–23, NIV).

Who’s this passage directed to? It’s not being directed to non-charismatic fundamentalists. Why would I say that? Because these are people who cast out demons and did works of healing. And non-charismatic fundamentalists, many of them believe that the age of miracles ended with the apostles, so it couldn’t be that wing of the church. The only thing that I can find is that here is a charismatic leader, teacher, through whom the Word of God has come powerfully, through whose hands miracles of healing have happened, through whose voice demons have been exorcized. This person comes to the Lord in that day, because he’s been so familiar, saying it in all of his ministry, “Lord, Lord,” and the Lord says, “I didn’t know you!” and the surprise and the shock. Why wouldn’t the Lord know the charismatic leader? Because he or she was a man of *anomia*, a man of lawlessness.

That means that that person had a split personality, a dichotomy between what they did and what they were. They thought that because the gifts of the Lord were present in their ministry, He exempted them from the moral requirements. “How could the Lord not be with us? Look at the thousands of people who have been saved in our ministry, who have read our books, watched our TV programs.” You see the subtle thing happening in the body of Christ, persons who have had,

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in some cases, great ministries, who all of a sudden you see are cracking up morally. What has happened is that the person behind the pulpit begins to think that God has a different standard for them than for the person in the pew. The person in the pew should be moral and hardworking. All of a sudden, you find persons who set aside following Christ. Are miracles still happening? Are people still getting saved? Yes. The Word of God is true, even if the messenger is made out of clay.

But it behooves us that it is a matter of doing the will of God in our individual life. You as a Christian, you may be a young Christian, you may not be a Christian at all, but you will always be able to find examples of persons who are in a high place of visibility in the Christian community, who do not live what they say. Leave it to Christ to take care of them. But as for you, follow Him. Live for Him and be in His will. We are children of light, and we're not to be partakers of the darkness. God's will for us is that we are careful with how we live.

IV. The fourth dimension for dealing with immorality comes next week, when we look at Paul's great statement on how to live the Spirit-filled life.

"Human life," someone has said, "is like a pond in the woods." Imagine this, it's fall and leaves are falling on the pond, one at a time. The leaves come quietly, silently, on the surface of the pond. Let the leaves be a manifestation of sins in life. One leaf represents a little bit of vanity. Another, a little bit of envy. Another, some false pride. Another, unkindness. An unlovely word, a lie. An impurity, egotism. These leaves are constantly falling upon the pond of our life. We think, when they come one at a time, that they're passing realities. They sink to the bottom of the pond and are forgotten. But they are still there. They lie and rot. Soon, in the deep subconscious part of our lives, there comes a fullness and rottenness and anxiety we don't understand. Fear and dread arise with us. In the quiet moments of our life, we seem to be able to handle our emotion.

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But when the pool of water is stirred up, all that is on the bottom begins to float up and cloud the water. The Holy Spirit must dredge our lives and remove that which is at the bottom of the pond. This is why the Scripture speaks to us today about dealing with anger and immorality. The Spirit wants to thoroughly dredge our lives so that we are pure in His presence.

In the fifteen works of the flesh described in Galatians 6, I found that four of them have to do with sexual sin. Eight of them have to do with anger. Twelve out of the fifteen have to do with anger and sex. If you can solve the problems of anger and immorality, you have solved about 80 percent of the temptations that face you as a believer. The Spirit wants to come and dredge us. How does He do this? He gets us to begin considering forgiveness and forgiving and then turning around and beginning to really love rightly. Then, holding on to a standard and a power which gives us the ability to walk in His will in our life.

Closing Prayer

Lord, in a size of auditorium such as we have here and with this many people as are present, there is no way that we can ascertain for whom this message was a personal special-delivery letter from God to. But it has been that for some here this morning. It has been a word from You to our hearts and to some especially. To no longer delay dealing with the anger and immorality, but to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Teach us, Lord, how to do that. We know that it begins with repentance and forgiveness. We know that it continues, as we open our lives to the real operation of the gift of the Spirit. I want to pray for those in this room who have been injured by the poor example of a Christian. There is nothing more devastating in our lives than to have placed trust in a man or a woman of God and to see that trust turn to something very bitter because that person has acted in a totally ungodly and unchristlike way. We are disillusioned and hurting. Lord, I pray for that person who has struggled with that in their life. That You will develop in

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their own hearts a releasing forgiveness towards that person and that You would be able to transfer their eyes from that person to Yourself, and also to recognize that for every Christian leader who has fallen and disappointed, there are a hundred who stand true and faithful to You. Lord Jesus, don't let our own spiritual life fall away by having in our own heart the convenient cop-out that we trusted in somebody and they failed. Rather, Lord, let us forget that, put it behind us, and fix our eyes upon Jesus. And run the race that He has set before us; being this very moment released from those angers and hurts we felt toward a fallen leader. Help us, Lord, in this church body to know the balance between standing against immorality and standing in grace towards that person who has been caught and now seeks to restore relationship with You. Lord, let us always be, on the one hand, upholding Your law. And on the other hand, supporting Your forgiveness to all who come. Create in us, O Lord, a clean heart, we pray. In the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.