

Ephesians 5:1-7

What you gain in Christ is far more valuable than what you surrender to him.

I don't fully understand the science of it, but I have come to rely heavily on the ability of batteries to power the gadgets and equipment that have become essential to daily living. When they run out of juice they have to be replaced, but everything is perfect when they are charged.

Upon changing the batteries you may discover that they have a "plus" and "minus" symbol to signify that batteries have both a negative and positive polarity...

I think that gives us a picture of real life. Good and bad. Balance. Ups and downs.

Christianity likewise has positives and negatives. Rescued, made new, but also surrender and saying no; death to self. Gaining and giving up.

There is a negative and a positive to the Christian faith. There has to be a saying no as well as a saying yes, or you don't have the biblical, historic Christian faith.

Sometimes churches tend to emphasize one or the other. *Jesus for me*, or *me for Jesus*. One says: grace is so amazing, he loves you, and there is nothing you can do yourself to be saved. Justification insecure, transformation phobic.

The other says, he saved me and now I live for him, behavior is vitally important, being good, achieving, checking all the boxes of spirituality. Never get your hand caught in the cookie jar. Those gifted with working hard to prove themselves. Prone to self-righteousness.

Both are in danger of abuse, but both are in the gospel - rescue and living, righteousness given and exercised.

We have come to a text this morning that has the charge of both polarities. Negative and positive.

It's for our good. New life in Christ lived untainted by that which spoils and leads to death.

What you gain in Christ is far more valuable than what you surrender to him.

Taking our text a bit backwards we start with the bad news.

Understand, this is a weighty topic - sexuality is serious. We all come in the room with different histories, some that include trauma, mistreatment. We all come into the room with different current realities, adolescence, single, married, widowed, or divorced; happy, dissatisfied... No matter where we have been or where we are, we want to submit it all to the word of God.

Sensitivity reveals significance. Let's see how the Lord will care for us.

1. Sexual immorality, impurity, and idolatry are opposed to Christ.

Paul is writing to churches in Asia, the one in Ephesus he founded and ministered to for years among the people, shoulder to shoulder. So far he has been reminding them into the new life they have in Christ.

I think it is hard for us to recognize the significance of what he is calling them to given our modern experience.

Come to Christ while living in north county San Diego and it's not that dramatic of a change outwardly. Surely there will be significant inward change, but Christianity, certainly culturally, is still normative even in our ever increasingly secular society.

The experience in the Roman world would have been vastly different. More akin to realities elsewhere. Specifically thinking of our dear friends in North Africa; there when someone converts to Christ there is often immediate and devastating separation from family, cutting ties with their whole previous experience, economic loss, even physical danger and the potential for violence. Utterly different.

The first century was unrivaled as an era where money and power ruled everything (certainly the Roman world). Sex was a commodity to be exploited by those with power.

Roman men of status could “use” anyone of lower status sexually. Children, men, women... There was a law against adultery but only if you infringed on the privilege of another man of status by having sex with his wife.

In Ephesus, the Roman hub in Asia, these verses were addressed to Christians who had come to Christ while living in the notoriously sinful port city. In that wicked metropolis the dominant religion was the worship of the multi-breasted goddess Diana, and ritual prostitution was a way of life. Moreover, there was cultural acceptance of sexual perversion as a valid, and even exalted, way of life. Only it wasn't called “perversion” it was normal.

We honestly can't fully understand the context because our culture has so much agency, protection against abuse, at the least we see these things as harmful and wrong.

We only see some of these things this way because of the Christian sexual revolution of the first century.

[Historians will tell you there were two ways in which the early Christians completely stuck out like sore thumbs in ancient Greco-Roman society. There were two ways in which they utterly were distinct. One is they only had sex inside of marriage. The early Greco-Roman community thought that was the weirdest thing they'd ever heard. Secondly, they were incredibly and promiscuously generous with their money, both in dealing with each other's needs and also in their care for the poor.]

The Christian sexual ethic is what Paul is calling the church to here.

Humans are sexual creatures, and sex is for our good. But, rather than chasing every impulse or desire, sex is reserved for marriage.

"We believe in the historically Christian view of marriage and sexual expression; namely, that marriage is a one-flesh covenant union between two sexually

different persons (male and female), from different families, and that all sexual relationships outside the marriage covenant are sin.”

Not ignoring desire, or orientation, individuality, but recognizing those things must come under the reign of Christ. When we come to him in faith, what he calls us to go to, our whole lives are surrendered to him, even in the most intimate and personal parts of us.

Ephesians 5:3 “But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.” (ESV)

Sex is not dirty. Immorality requires there to be morality. Paul is building toward the discussion of marriage and how the mystery and beauty of that one flesh union of man and woman shows Christ’s relationship with the church.

Even given the way Scripture talks of God’s people being his bride, like Christ and the church, there is a glimpse of our future in the sexual pleasure to be had in marriage, a brief taste of seeing God face to face, the fullness of which we could barely handle now but is to be ours in Christ.

Sex is not dirty. But it does have limits.

“Is sex, therefore, a delightful and fun thing? Of course it’s supposed to be, but therefore, because it’s such a positive thing, there are limits. Can you imagine God giving his intimacy to you in any other context but a fully and permanently committed relationship? You think God says, “I’m going to pour out my love into your heart, but you don’t have to commit yourself to me fully and finally and completely and permanently. You don’t have to do that.” Does God do that? No! God says, “If you want to have emotional oneness with me, it has to be total oneness.”

Sexuality is to be expressed in the same way, exclusively between a man and a woman, committed to one another in marriage. Scripture is saying anything else is opposed to walking in a manner worthy of your call in Christ.

No sexual immorality - Act with others (sexual immorality. Greek porneia; refers broadly to all illicit sexual acts outside marriage, such as premarital sex, sex with prostitutes, homosexual activity, incest, and adultery.)

Impurity - the thoughts of it, attitudes, thinking that leads to immorality. Porn. Lust that lingers. Emotional wandering.

Covetousness - Also translated as greed but related, obsession that is idolatry (seeking God, settling for lesser things).

Changing the ethic for those that follow Jesus. For example, the way he elevated the significance of adultery in the sermon on the mount.

Matthew 5:27–28 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ [28] But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Immorality, impurity, and idolatry are not to be named among you as is proper among the saints. Nor is joking about it appropriate. Opposed to Christ.

[Broadly speaking, the Western, secular sexual ethic has heaped unimaginable pressure on one’s drive for individualized sexual identity, expression, and self-determination—a journey that almost resembles a form of secular sainthood. The person who has “arrived” in the Western world is the one who claims to have discovered their “true” sexual self. But, as West contends, this search inevitably fails us. The temporal (sexuality in this case) cannot sate our need for the eternal. And as a temporal good, sex can’t bear the weight of our desire for God. Nor can it replace God.]

Hidden behind all sexual immorality is a secret search for sexual immortality.

Dallas Willard describes this reality in modern terms: Desire is infinite partly because we were made by God, made for God, made to need God, and made to run on God. We can be satisfied only by the one who is infinite, eternal, and able to supply all our needs; we are only at home in God. When we fall away from God, the desire for the infinite remains, but it is displaced upon things that will certainly lead to destruction.

This is not the only place it comes up. Jesus calls us to it, Paul, John, Peter, all of Scripture points to this different life.

1 Thessalonians 4:3–8 “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; [4] that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, [5] not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; [6] that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. [7] For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. [8] Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.” (ESV)

Why?

Ephesians 5:5 “For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.” (ESV)

This should make us uncomfortable. If not, I wonder if we are in danger of self-righteousness.

You may fail but what you do next matters. Paul is referring not to believers who might fall into such sin but to those who persistently and unrepentantly give themselves over to such a lifestyle. To impulse, impurity, immorality.

“Only God himself is infinite Beauty. No created thing can compare. And it is the beauty that all of our love, longing, desire—and even erotic impulses—is intended to point toward. When humans cut themselves off from living Godward and seeking expression in him, the human spirit must try to turn to lesser realities to find its sustaining meaning.” A.J. Swoboda

Following Jesus will require saying no. Surrendering. Because of the significance and formational reality of sexuality we must be all the more diligent to not even let it be named among us. It will take our effort.

It would be like me saying I want to get strong arms so I pray for strong arms but I refuse to do bicep curls because it's too hard.

Behavior consistent with your new identity will cost you.

Avoiding sexual immorality, impurity, and idolatry will require abstinence, fidelity, and for some chastity.

I don't for one second want to minimize the significance of this. It will mean for some of us, saying no to what feels natural, even the deepest part of who we are. Jesus says there is something deeper, truer of you.

A danger in our day is the redefinition of immorality. If we make it mean something else we are in the clear, goes the thinking.

Even this last week I saw from a friend on facebook and invitation to an event at his church for all those looking for "a more expansive reading of Scripture"

Ephesians 5:6 "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience." (ESV)

Don't partake with them. There is not a prohibition here of friendship or social connection with unbelievers but a clear call to not participate with them in these things.

The call is to set aside that which is unfruitful, harmful, opposed to Christ.

2. The love of Christ is worth our lives.

Back to the positive. We were anchored in it last week as well.

Ephesians 5:1-2 "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. [2] And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (ESV)

Jesus our fragrant offering. The sacrifice we needed to stand before God.

Christ gave all of himself so that we could experience life - light, as children of God. Citizens of the kingdom of Christ and God.

"This is what it's saying: Jesus Christ offered himself up and fulfilled all of the obligations we owe God so he has completely satisfied God. Do you know what it means to satisfy God? I mean, you think you're hard to satisfy; this is God, with a

heart of God, with the purity of God. This is God, whose eyes are too pure to behold iniquity. Do you know what it means to satisfy God? Therefore, whenever God turns to you, if you believe in him, all he sees when he looks at you, all he smells when he looks over at you, all he hears, all he tastes is complete sweetness. When he sees you, all he sees, all he smells, all he tastes, all he hears is just beauty and sweetness. Jesus is a sweet-smelling savor. That means he has satisfied God for you. You are satisfying to God. God sees nothing and senses nothing but sweetness when he regards you.” Timothy J. Keller

We then put off the old self, darkness of sin, sexual immorality, and put on the new self of faithfulness, satisfaction, thanksgiving.

Instead of foolish talk we let there be thanksgiving... An acknowledgment of our dependence on God and our grateful response to God’s gift of redemption, recognizing that he is the source of every blessing. Such an attitude corrects the self-serving focus found in the preceding vices of sexual immorality, greed, and obscene speech.

His grace is too good to go on sinning.

Romans 6:1–2 “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? [2] By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (ESV)

‘The gospel connects to our present identity because it is the good news of our changed allegiance; the gospel connects to future judgment because it gives a gracious warning for those who profess the lordship of Christ with their mouths but deny him by their works. Grace covers all the sin of those who trust in the finished work of Jesus upon the cross. Judgment does not await those who are united to Christ, but an unrepentant life turned from God has no assurance of that union.’

“Such behavior must be avoided because believers have a new identity in Christ. But this is not only the reason we must change; it is also the reason we can change. Apart from the life-giving work of the Spirit, we would have no power (and no sustaining desire) to overcome sin.”

And it requires effort, surrender, sacrifice, will power and resolve. It might feel like we will never get freedom from it, but we live repentant and keep going, submitting to this call in Scripture. If there is struggle, it says something to us.

“Lamentably, far too many Christians fall prey to the idea that their battle against “desires of the flesh” after years of faithful discipleship and spiritual pursuit represents a failure in their Christian life. Or we interpret the ongoing presence of the flesh in our lives as a failure. But is struggling with the flesh a sign we are failing in our pursuit of God? The answer is surprising. The ongoing presence of the war of desire between the flesh and Spirit is, in reality, a sign of the Spirit’s presence. How can we say this? Because before we followed Jesus and were indwelt with the Spirit of God, there was no conflict with the flesh. We unthinkingly followed the flesh. There simply was no conflict. Now, the Spirit is giving birth to godly desires. The battle itself, ironically, is the sign that we’re walking in the Spirit. The absence of a battle is the concern. As Edward Welch wrote, “The battle is good. . . . It is a sign the Spirit is on the move.” A.J. Swoboda

It’s how the church lived in the first century and changed the world. It is how we are called today for the remaking of the world yet again. Repentant, living new, lives of fidelity to Christ.

Hebrews 12:1–2 “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, [2] looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (ESV)

The more I rest in who I am in Christ, the more I’m able to deal with the negative, with saying no. The more honest I’m able to be about my sin. And the quicker I am to turn from it.

There are places where there was pain that when you become a Christian, now there is peace. But there are places where there was peace, and now when you become a Christian, there’s pain.

Christianity comforts places you were disturbed but it also disturbs places you were comfortable. It’s worth it in Christ.

It's Jesus who came to us and said we have to lose ourselves to find ourselves.

No one is beyond hope. This sacrifice of Jesus gives you space to return to him. In Christ, we can live pleasing the Lord, faithful to him, surrendering that which attempts to separate us, and experience his grace all the way home.

What you gain in Christ is far more valuable than what you surrender to him.

Don't let it be named among you - Trust Jesus for rescue, say no to that which is opposed to him. Christian, live a life of repentance and temperance, but the grace Christ gives you and the power his Spirit fills you with.

Not only did Christ obey the Law for you, but now when the Spirit comes into your life bit by bit, gradually and gradually, you're no longer just legally righteous, but you're becoming actually righteous in stages. You're becoming a person who can walk in accordance with the Law. Praise God.

Walk in love - It's worth it, it is the life you were meant for. Hold each other up as we turn from immorality, impurity and idolatry.

May the Lord, by his Spirit, empower our perseverance for his glory and our good.

Father, we pray you would comfort us. Those of us who are confused, clarify. Those of us who feel guilty, forgive. Those of us who are weak, strengthen and empower. We pray it in Jesus' name, amen.