

First Love

Ephesians 5:1-2, 21

Dr. Paul Cannings

A. Walk In It (vs. 1):

1. Therefore be imitators of God — Relationships can be difficult because, even though we are saved, we can choose to live in the flesh when we don't determinatively put off the old man (4:22-23) by committing ourselves to walk in truth (4:15, 24). When we fail to do this, we open ourselves to the influence of the devil (4:25-26). As a result, what appears to be merely a battle in the flesh – tongues flying, emotions escalating, and conflicts intensifying – can actually involve spiritual warfare, where the enemy seeks to influence us (6:12-13) to tear one another down (4:26-32) rather than build one another up. This is why denying ourselves is an imperative decision for the picking up of the cross to follow Christ (Luke 14:25-27). *“His yoke is easier and His burden (the cross) is lighter”* (Matt. 11:28-30).
 - a) Paul warned against causing the Holy Spirit pain and sorrow through sin and a refusal to follow his leading (4:30). Christians grieve the Spirit when they do not “encourage” (4:29) themselves or others. Although the Spirit can be grieved by believers' sins, he will never abandon those who belong to him (Rom. 8:9).¹

2. Therefore be imitators of God – We are commanded to make a decisive commitment not to allow the devil to influence our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. Instead, we must intentionally devote ourselves to living in a manner that reflects the very nature and character of God. Being imitators of God requires deliberate effort spiritual discipline, and a willingness to deny the flesh so that our conduct increasingly mirrors His love, holiness, truth, and grace.
 - a) Just as little children learn to do things by imitating their parents, so we are to be imitators of God.²

3. Therefore be imitators of God – We are able to invest the necessary effort to imitate God because He has already equipped us with “every spiritual blessing” in Christ (1:3), Christ is actively at work within us because we are His “workmanship” (2:10) continually transforming us into the fullness of God (3:19). Furthermore, we have all the Holy Spirit living in us (3:16), who strengthens us with divine power to live according to God's will. Therefore, we are able to take of the *“old man and put on the*

¹ Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). *Tyndale concise Bible commentary* (p. 595). Tyndale House Publishers.

² Pfeiffer, C. F., & Harrison, E. F., eds. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: New Testament*. Moody Press.

new man." (4:22-23) However, this transformation requires a decisive daily commitment as we continually present our bodies to God as a living and holy sacrifice, refusing conformity to the world and allowing our minds to be renewed according to His truth. (Rom. 12:2)

- a) One way of imitating God is to maintain a forgiving spirit (4:32). We imitate our Lord by acting "*just as*" He did (5:2; 4:32). Christ's sacrificial expression of love toward us is not only the basis of our salvation, as emphasized in Ephesians 2, but it is also the pattern for how we are to live in relationship to others.
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4. Beloved children – Paul reminds us that everything he commands is possible because we are dearly loved by God. This is, however, a love we experience when we abide in Him (John 15:8-10; 17:23).
 - a) Having been born again through faith in Christ, he is therefore one of the "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4); and since "God is love" it is logical that God's children will walk in love. When Paul encouraged his readers to "walk in love," he was not asking them to do something that was foreign to the Christian life; for we have received a new nature that wants to express itself in love. The old nature is basically selfish, and for this reason builds walls and declares war. But the new nature is loving, and therefore builds bridges and proclaims peace.³
 5. Walk in love – God by His very nature, is love (1 John 4:7). We experience His love when we purposefully abide in His Word (John 15:8-10; 1 John 2:5). Therefore, to walk in His love is to make loving obedience a consistent way of life. Regardless of how intense our emotions may become, we are called to respond according to God's will rather than according to the flesh (Eph. 4:26, 29, 31-32; 5:4). It is in our obedience we love one another (1 John 4:7-11).
 6. Walk in love – The Lord expects His love to become our lifestyle because He fully lives in us, through the ministry of the Holy (1:3; 3:16), Christ is actively at work in us (2:10; 3:17), and through the ministries of the church, believers are equipped to grow into the fullness of God (4:12-13). As we mature, we are joined and strengthened together in His love (4:16). This is why a person who does not walk in God's love lives in spiritual darkness (1 John 2:9-10). They often cannot clearly see their way through relationship struggles.
 7. Just as Christ also loved you – The pattern of love we mimic or mirror ourselves by is not determined by how others love, treat, or respond to us. Rather, our love must reflect the way Christ willingly sacrificed Himself to compassionately serve us from Calvary to today as He sits at the right hand of God, especially since Satan is going to heaven day and night to accuse, oppose and destroy believers. (1 John 3:16-18; Hebr. 8:1-2; Rev. 3:9-10) He definitively defines love.

³ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [*The Bible exposition commentary*](#) (Vol. 2, p. 44). Victor Books.

- a) The high point and foundation of all Christian ethics is love, patterned on the example of Christ's sacrificial death. While it is true that the Greek word *agapaō* is used in this passage (versus *eroō* or *phileō*) there is no example of this magnitude of love in all of Greek literature. It is not the word that is important, it is the example.⁴
- b) Gave Himself up for us - Because "*God so loved the world*," (John 3:16) Christ willingly handed Himself over to suffer on our behalf. The object of His sacrificial love is us.
- c) An offering – No one forced Christ to the cross. After Christ's agonizing surrender to the Father's will in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 27:36-45), Christ willingly delivered Himself to be sacrificed for us (Hebrews 10:5-18).
- d) Sacrifice to God – Christ was a burnt offering. As a perfect burnt offering He was accepted by God because He was without blemish. He is totally dedicated and surrendered to God for us.
- e) Fragrant aroma – When Christ's sacrificial death was presented to God, it was like a pleasing fragrance ascending before Him, similar to the sweet aroma of perfume filling a room. God did not merely find Christ's sacrifice acceptable; He found it deeply pleasing and fully satisfying. The sacrifice of Christ remained before God as a beautiful expression of perfect obedience, love, and worship.
 - This offering was a fragrance pleasing (and thus acceptable) to God (cf. Lev. 1:17; 3:16; Isa. 53:10). (The idea of fragrant offerings is also spoken of in 2 Cor. 2:15–16; Phil. 4:18.) Christians can imitate God by loving others, even to the point of death if necessary (1 John 3:16).⁵

B. Grow it (vs. 21):

1. Subject to one another – Relationships function well when we our lives operate under the authority of God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is a discipline that the Holy Spirit shapes us into.
 - a) In the first occurrence, Paul takes the dramatic step of enjoining a mutual submission. This flows out of the teaching of Jesus, who calls his disciples to serve one another and resist the temptation to "lord it over" each other (Mark 10:42–45). Elsewhere, Paul encourages believers to defer to the needs and interests of others by considering fellow believers even more highly than they consider themselves (Phil. 2:2–3). This involves subduing pride and self-oriented pursuits.⁶

⁴ Arnold, C. E. (2002). *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon*. (Vol. 3, p. 329). Zondervan.

⁵ Hoehner, H. W. (1985). *Ephesians*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 637–638). Victor Books.

⁶ Arnold, C. E. (2002). *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon*. (Vol. 3, p. 333). Zondervan.

- b) Paul then gave four results of being filled with the Spirit. First is communication with one another with psalms (*psalmois*, OT psalms sung with stringed instruments such as harps), hymns (*hymnois*, praises composed by Christians), and spiritual songs (a general term). Second is communication with the Lord by singing and making melody (*psallontes*, singing with a stringed instrument) in the heart. Church music, then, should be a means of believers' ministering to each other, and singing should be a means of worshiping the Lord. Third is thanking God the Father (cf. 1:2–3, 17; 3:14) continually for all things (cf. Col. 3:17; 1 Thes. 5:18). Fourth, Spirit-controlled believers are to submit to one another, willingly serving others and being under them rather than dominating them and exalting themselves. But basic to Christians' attitudes toward others is their reverence for Christ. Paul next elaborated on this subject of submission (Eph. 5:22–6:9).⁷
- c) In this verse Paul speaks of yet another way in which the Spirit-filled life should express itself. "Submitting" is *hypotassō* (ὑποτάσσω). The simple verb *tassō* (τάσσω) was used in classical Greek in a military meaning, "to draw up in order of battle, to form, array, marshal" both troops or ships. It speaks of soldiers marshalled in military order under a commanding officer. Thus, it speaks of the subjection of one individual under or to another.⁸
2. Subject to one another – When we love as Christ loves us (explained in 5:1-2) the Spirit of God strengthens us inwardly to do what we cannot do in the flesh (3:16). In this Spirit-empowered life, we overcome the sinful influences of the flesh (4:15, 17-20, 25-32). As we are increasingly filled and directed by the Holy Spirit (5:15-18), we are enabled to put off the old man so that in the new man "*which is in the likeness of God*" He establishes us in "*righteousness and holiness of the truth.*" (4:22-24) Because of this transformation, we are able subject ourselves to one another in humility and love, recognizing that we are all under the authority of Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit empowers us, we can continually work well together.
- a) Paul showed the way God brought believing Jews and Gentiles together into a new relationship in Christ. In 4:1-6 he stressed the importance of unity. Now he shows how believers, filled with the Spirit, can live together in a practical way in various human relationships. This list of mutual responsibilities is similar to the pattern found in Col. 3:18-4:1; 1 Pe. 2:13-3:12; Ro. 13:1-10.
- b) In contrast to the word "obey" (*hypakouō*), "submit" implies a voluntary yielding to one who has authority in a leadership structure. Submission is thus used in contexts where soldiers follow their commanders, members of the church yield to their

⁷ Hoehner, H. W. (1985). [Ephesians](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 640). Victor Books.

⁸ Wuest, K. S. (1997). [Wuest's word studies from the Greek New Testament: for the English reader](#) (Vol. 4, p. 129). Eerdmans.

- leaders (see 1 Peter 3:5), and all people to the governing authorities of the state (see Rom. 13:1).⁹
- c) Subjecting one's self to another is the opposite of self assertion, the opposite of an independent, autocratic spirit. It is the desire to get along with one another, being satisfied with less than one's due, a sweet reasonableness of attitude. The best texts have "Christ" instead of "God."¹⁰
 - d) The mutual submission required depends on all parties' having this attitude to Christ, and the specific relationships within marriage that are set out are also to flow from and be an expression of such fear (cf. also the later references to the wife's fear and to slaves' fear and trembling in 5:33 and 6:5).¹¹
3. Fear of Christ – phobias – Relationships remain healthy and harmonious when we maintain a continual awareness of our responsibility to please God above ourselves or others. This reverent "fear of Christ" is not a spirit of terror, but a deep respect for His authority, holiness, and justice. It keeps us grounded when emotions rise and temptation pulls us back toward the flesh, reminding us that all our actions are ultimately accountable to Him.
 4. Fear of Christ – phobias – Relationships become powerful and transformative when we daily "*work out our salvation in fear and trembling*" (Phil. 2:12-13). This posture reflects a continual dependence on God, recognizing that it is He who is at work within us, both to will and to do according to His good pleasure. As we remain committed to this inner work of God, His transforming power progressively overcomes the influence of the flesh and produces Christlike maturity in our relationships.

⁹ Arnold, C. E. (2002). *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Romans to Philemon*. (Vol. 3, p. 332). Zondervan.

¹⁰ Wuest, K. S. (1997). *Wuest's word studies from the Greek New Testament: for the English reader* (Vol. 4, p. 129). Eerdmans.

¹¹ Lincoln, A. T. (1990). *Ephesians* (Vol. 42, pp. 366–367). Word, Incorporated.