

## Sermon – 21/12/2008 pm

### Not Fitting for Saints

Study Text: Ephesians 5:3-5

To the saints in Ephesus. This is how Paul began this letter. The ones Paul calls saints are very different to those the Pope calls saints. 'Saint' simply means 'holy one'. Paul saints are made holy by the blood of Jesus Christ not by the number of miracles credited to them or by other good works. 'Holy one' is how Paul refers to you if you have confessed your sin and believed in Jesus Christ the Son of God.

What does it mean to be a saint? How are saints different to other people? Is it that they wear halos or special dress? Saints look just like other people on the outside, but inside they are totally different. You were not always a saint. When you believed in Jesus you became a new creation on the inside. You were given the Holy Spirit who lives in your heart.

You do not look different now that you have the Holy Spirit, now that you are a new person inside, but you will live in a different way. You will not walk in sin as you did before. You will think, speak and act in a new way. You will stop doing the things you did before. Paul has been focusing on the new way of speaking – no more lying, no more corrupt or evil speaking. Now he turns to actions, in particular coveting and fornication or sexual immorality.

### Covetousness

*You shall not covet you neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, nor his male servant nor his female servant nor his ox or his donkey nor anything that is your neighbours* (Exodus 20:17). This is the last of the Ten Commandments God gave his people through Moses. Paul has these commandments in mind as he teaches the church at Ephesus how to live the new life in Christ.

'Covet' is not a common word these days. It is literally the 'desire for more', a strong desire or a passionate desire. Some translate it as 'greed' but it is actually a stronger word than this. Some people use 'covet' in a good sense but in the Bible it always had bad connotations. It is akin to lust, or uncontrolled desire. It is of course the old nature controlled by the devil that is covetous.

The commandment refers to things that we cannot have. They are not things bad in themselves but wrong for us to be desiring. I suppose we can have our neighbour's servant or donkey if we buy it, but certainly not his wife. Still it is a sin to be desiring such things that belong to another. In expounding this commandment Paul calls covetousness idolatry. To lust after things of the flesh, or things of this world, is to make such things idols, things that are worshipped before God.

The old nature is bound by desires. Psychologists call them drives. Man is driven by the desire for food or for sex. Religions seek to deal with these drives in different ways. By mind control and asceticism some, like Buddhism, teach how to subdue such desires. Others, like humanistic materialism, say that these desires should be satisfied. Eat and drink as much as you can – vomit it up and eat more if you must. Get as much sex as you can from wherever you can – just satisfy that desire they say.

How is the saint to deal with these desires? Not by indulging them nor by asceticism or a stoic life, but by realising that we are a new person in Christ Jesus. We have put off the old man and put on the new man in Christ. The desires of the old man have been overcome by the desire for Christ, the desire to please our heavenly Father. We are no longer under the control of our sinful nature but are walking in the spirit. We are no longer slaves to the flesh but slaves to God.

## Fornication

Having just spoken about walking in love, the love of Jesus Christ, the apostle brings us back to earth as it were with this *but fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness* (5:3). I am sure he would prefer not to refer to these shameful matters but Christians are not immune from temptation.

These members of the church at Ephesus had once lived a life of shame, a life of indulging the flesh. Covetousness was very much part of their old life. Sexual immorality was probably an issue they had to deal with in their new life. Prostitution was widespread and even sanctioned in pagan worship.

Prostitution has been legalised in our city so it is not that different from the city of Ephesus in Paul's time. All manner of sexual immorality and perversion has become acceptable in our society. Indeed it is thrust at us from newspapers and magazines, from movies and the TV and now from the internet. What was once contained in a few bookshops and the red light district of the city is now available in most homes. Not a few succumb to the temptation of pornography on the internet – even Christians. The word for fornication in the Greek is the word from which we get the word pornography.

Paul was aware that the saints in Ephesus would face such temptation. As Jesus said 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak'. Paul goes on to speak about putting on the armour of God. That is why he is giving them this clear teaching. It is not just moral teaching – 'do not do this' and 'do not do that'. It is moral teaching based on doctrine. He reminds us of who we are in Christ and how we must live as the children of God. It is not just 'put off' but also 'put on'. On the other hand to put on Christ we must put off the old man.

Whenever we live in this world we live in this body, a body that is corrupted by the Fall. The flesh is never far from us, but in Christ we have overcome. Like Christ we can resist temptation. In Christ we are no longer slaves to sin. Therefore put to death your members that are on the earth (Colossians 3:5, Romans 6:12, 13).

Remember the context of this passage. Paul began with the positive – be imitators of God. He focussed on the positive in his letter to the Corinthians also. *You are the temple of the Holy Spirit* he told them. *You were bought with a price. Therefore honour God in your body* (I Corinthians 6).

Some think that Gnosticism was entering into the Ephesian church although Paul makes no reference to this. This is a doctrine that says the body does not matter. When we are saved we get a new heart and that is all that is important. But Paul does not allow such a division of body and spirit. We are a person, body, soul and spirit. Our new heart must be reflected in how we live, in what we do in this body we now live in.

Covetousness and sexual immorality is idolatry. While the people of old worshipped the golden calf, today we worship the golden body. The human body has never been so pampered

and worshipped as it is today. Millions, even billions of dollars are spent in trying to beautify the body because this is the object of worship. No longer are clothes and cosmetics sufficient. Now it is plastic surgery that is demanded as women and men seek perfect bodies. Such things are an offence to God who made us. Can we improve on the perfection of God?

### **Not Fitting**

Not only is it not fitting for children of God to be covetous or to sexually immoral, it is not fitting for them to condone such behaviour, to talk about such behaviour or even to listen to talk about such behaviour. Flee sexual immorality. Flee all forms of idolatry. Do not be part of obscene conversation or filthy joking. Turn away, close your ears and your eyes to any and every filthiness.

A friend of ours would not allow any talk of divorce in her home. It is all too common for people to joke about such a tragic thing as divorce. Similarly with sexual immorality which again is the subject of much conversation – crude and rude conversation. It is not fitting for saints of God to have any part in such conversation. Be careful with what you read. The world thrives on gossip. Popular magazines are full of gossip about the sins of celebrities. Millions are entertained by such reading, but not the children of God.

### **Giving Thanks**

God in Christ made all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible (Colossians 1:16). He made all things good. In fact Adam and Eve were both naked and without shame before sin entered the world. God made Eve to be a suitable partner for Adam, a partnership which included sex. They were to live together as husband and wife all their earthly life.

God put Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden and gave them all they needed for a fulfilling life, a life in communion with God. All that God made was good. Paul said that there is *nothing unclean in itself* (Romans 14:14). No food or drink that God created is evil in itself. Sex is not evil in itself. The Bible does not teach asceticism or abstinence but the proper use of all God's gifts. Everything has its rightful place in God's creation. It is just that sin has corrupted every thought and action of human beings.

But you who are a new creation in Christ Jesus have been given a new heart. Putting on the new man means putting off these old sinful and shameful ways. Putting on the new man means to be thankful to God *for every good and perfect gift ... that comes down from the Father of lights* (James 1:17). Your heavenly Father does not withhold any good from his children. Rather than coveting what you do not have you should be thankful for what you do have, for all that you have is the gift of God.

Above all let us be thankful for the most precious gift of all – new life in Christ. Focus your heart on things above not on things in this world. Let the word and the Spirit direct your thoughts to things that are invisible for such things are eternal. What ever you covet in this world, be it food, sex, fame or any material thing it will pass away. Only what you have in Christ will remain.

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