

Become Imitators of God (5:1–6)

The audacity of Paul's statement that believers are to imitate God (TNIV: "follow God's example") leads many to write off this verse as an impossible goal. But Paul has a specific focus in mind that he thinks is completely within the believer's capability. In 4:32, believers are enjoined to forgive each other as God forgave them in Christ. Paul focuses on this attitude of forgiveness in his encouragement that believers become imitators of God. The verb implies continuing behavior repeated so as to become habit. This sentiment of forgiveness matches the Lord's Prayer, wherein Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt 6:12). In 1 Cor 4:16, Paul uses the same verb and noun (become imitators), but there he asks the Corinthians to imitate him. The context is the Corinthians' failure to appreciate Paul's apostolic authority, and also their disregard of his role as their father in the Lord. In both cases, the audience is understood as dear and beloved children. One reason, then, that Paul asks believers in Ephesians to imitate *God* is [p 122](#) the connection between God the Father and his children, the church. A second possible reason is that Paul will go on to emphasize walking as *Christ* walked. Finally Paul might be reflecting the charge in Lev 19:2, "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." Jesus speaks similarly in Matt 5:48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect."

Paul's second command follows closely on the first, and also imagines a daily commitment to act in line with God's truth and love. Believers are to walk in love; this image is found throughout the Old Testament as the manner in which a faithful follower of God lives obediently each day. Everyone can visualize walking; it implies a goal and a gait. The goal is the kingdom of God (5:5). The gait is a pace whose rhythm is love, so one travels as fast or slow as is needed to display charity similar to the self-giving love of Christ. Paul uses this verb repeatedly in ch. 4 as a word picture of the Christian life. Both in 4:1 and now in 5:2, Paul stresses that the believer is to walk in love. As explained in 4:2 and 5:2, this love involves the decision to act humbly, self-sacrificially, and patiently. Christ's love is expressed as a sacrifice on our behalf to God.

Believers are described in this section as dearly loved children (5:1) and as the Lord's people ("holy ones" 5:3), those who will inherit the kingdom of Christ and of God (5:5). Because of their standing before God and their new nature in Christ, the injunctions to love and the warnings against idolatry are possible to live out. The expectation is that just as children imitate their parents because they want to grow up to be just like them, so too children of God will desire to emulate the character of their Father and their Brother. In other words, the moral obligations outlined by Paul are given to those who have been made new so as to fulfill those imperatives.

Walking in love is antithetical to acting with base motives, greed, sexual impropriety, or moral bankruptcy. Walking in love cannot countenance impure language, loud-mouth braggarts, and jokes that shame others. Said positively, believers are distinguished by their moral honor and sexual propriety, by their generosity in speech and action, and by their contentment. In sum, they act in character with the God they worship. This is why Paul can say that greed, fornication, rude jokes, and moral impurity are examples of idolatry—these deeds reflect the character of [p 123](#) false gods. These are acts of disobedience, done, not by children of God, but by "those who are disobedient" (5:6).

The call to walk in love comes with a warning not to be deceived (5:6). What is this deception and who is promoting it? Paul does not reveal who might be arguing that sexual and moral impurity, avarice, and covetousness are of no concern to God. But the deception seems to be centered on a wrong belief about the kingdom of God. Several times in his letters, Paul warns his readers that the immoral person will not inherit God's kingdom. For example, in 1 Cor 6:1–11, the Corinthians are chastised for cheating each other, and for failing to resolve such issues within the church. Paul continues with an extensive list of defining behaviors that expose those who will not inherit God's kingdom. He adds that among the Corinthians, some of them were indeed the drunkards and thieves who had no claim to the kingdom. But, Paul assures them, they now stand washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of Christ and by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:11, see also Gal 5:21). Perhaps it is true in every generation that believers presume on God's love and assume that their behavior has no significance. Paul clearly thought otherwise. Believers—beloved children—simply do not live out their redeemed life in a debauched manner.

Become Wise, Be Filled with the Holy Spirit (5:7–16)

In this section Paul issues eight commands as he distinguishes darkness and light, truth and foolishness, and drunkenness and Spirit-filled living. The call to walk is given again, this time to walk in light. In total, Paul offers four calls to walk as a believer in chs. 4 and 5: walk worthily (4:1), walk in holiness, not as the Gentiles (4:17), walk in love (5:2), and walk in light (5:8). Moreover, Paul will again use the verb “be/become” (5:7, 17) as he further encourages the believers to live out their new reality in Christ. Paul uses a familiar metaphor of fruit to describe deeds both good and bad. He emphasizes light and darkness as stark contrasts of behavior that serve to define character. Three times he cautions the Ephesians not to act one way, but to live in light, understanding, and truth (5:11, 17, 18). Overall, Paul is concerned that the church (being light) presents a sharp contrast to the idolatrous darkness of the wider society.

p 124 Paul begins 5:7 with “therefore,” which signals he has concluded his previous thought and is now drawing conclusions. He commands that they *not* become actively engaged with those who are disobedient (5:6), for that way is darkness. Paul does not say that the Gentiles are *in* darkness, but that such an existence *is* darkness. The Ephesians should know, Paul reminds them, because this is the life they once led. Perhaps Paul is calling to mind the ninth plague meted out to the Egyptians (Exod 10:21–24). This judgment was a darkness that could be felt, so dark that people could not see each other and had to remain in their homes for three days. This tangible darkness, so thick it had substance, is the thundercloud that encompassed the idolater. Such darkness, however, is not the last word. The Ephesians are now light. Again, they are not *in* light, but are light. Their very substance shines forth the truth of the gospel. This light is truth, holiness, integrity, and love. This light is the life of Jesus Christ, who declares “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12, see also 9:5, 12:35, 46). Paul makes a similar call to the Corinthians in 2 Cor 6:14, 16 when he asks, “what fellowship can light have with darkness?” and further explains his point so that there is no confusion: “what agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?” A similar point is made here: the Ephesians are the light, the witness of the gospel's reconciling power to a world darkened by sin.

A life of light produces rich fruit, all manner of goodness, righteousness, and truth. Paul uses the metaphor of fruit to describe deeds as well in Rom 6:21–22. To the Romans Paul contrasts

the fruit (TNIV: “benefit”) that is reaped from sin with that produce harvested from acts of righteousness. Fruit is the product of the natural growing cycle. An apple tree will produce apples, not peaches. A fig tree will produce figs, not pineapples. And a believer who is light will produce that which characterizes Christ’s life of love and kindness, charity and integrity. But works of darkness, Paul warns, are unfruitful (Eph 5:11).

Paul commands them *not* to participate in such dark works, but rather he urges them to expose such behavior (5:11, 13). This section has been understood in two general ways. One interpretation sees Paul mandating believers to expose by direct, verbal confrontation other believers’ sinful behaviors, and thus bring them to repentance. A second view [p 125](#) argues that Paul explains how the believers’ godly demeanor and attitude, their “light,” exposes the darkness, and transforms it. Verse 5:13 explains 5:11 by describing what happens when light shines on darkness, that is, those deeds done in secret. Light reveals darkness as evil; in so doing, people can see evil for what it really is, and be drawn to light. Isn’t this what happened to the Ephesians, as described by Paul in 5:8? Jesus uses similar language in John 3:19–21, while in 1 Cor 14:24–25 Paul applies comparable language when urging the Corinthians to prophesy rather than speak in tongues in their gatherings. The unbeliever will pass by, Paul says, and be convicted by hearing their prophecy. The rebuke here is an implicit one, as the truth of the gospel spoken in the church meeting makes manifest the hidden darkness of the unbeliever’s heart. Finally, Paul’s hymn in 5:14 brings to mind the call to salvation, reminding the Ephesians of their own conversion. The hymn draws from Isa 26:19 and 60:1–2. In Isa 60:1–2, 18–22, God’s redemptive acts restore Israel, for God is the Redeemer. Moreover, “nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (60:3) holds a promise of Gentiles being drawn into God’s people. In Christ, the redemption of Gentiles has been accomplished.

Another command continues the image of light, as Paul orders that the Ephesians *see* very carefully how they walk (5:15), for they must be wise. He follows with a pair of commands that they *not* become foolish, but rather understand the purposes of God. They must realize that the present age is one governed by evil, by attitudes and practices that are antithetical to God’s goodness, joy, and redemption. A third pair of commands enjoins the believer *not* to be drunk with wine, but to be filled with the Spirit. Paul contrasts the person wholly controlled by distorted mental and emotional capacities with the one who has completely surrendered to the leading of God’s Spirit. In the second case, the person has attained a [p 126](#) real and truthful view of the world along with the power to act justly in it (see also Rom 13:11–14; 1 Thess 5:4–11).

Accompanying the command to be filled with the Spirit are several participles that describe what such filling might involve. All these behaviors suppose a community context. A Spirit-filled life is characterized by such deep joy that songs, psalms, and melodies will spring forth. Thankfulness is the constant harmony that supports the daily praises. Paul declares boldly that a Spirit-filled person gives thanks always, and for all things. Since he has clearly acknowledged that the days are evil (5:16) Paul is certainly aware that bad things happen. Are we to be thankful for the bad things? No, but a thankful heart is a faithful one. We are to be thankful in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who has redeemed us, the one with whom we are raised and seated (2:5–6). We know with absolute assurance that all things are under Christ’s feet, and he is head

over all (1:22). Though the days are evil and darkness threatens, we walk as ones who see wisely, who know the end of the story, and thus can be thankful.¹

¹ Lynn H. Cohick, *Ephesians*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 121–126.