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LIVING IN SYNC WITH REALITY

PART ELEVEN

THE CULTURE OF THE KINGDOM



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Part Eleven: *The Culture of the Kingdom*

By Pastor David Fields

Ephesians 5:1-6

I. The King Defines the Kingdom-Culture

“Be, therefore, imitators of God.” – **Ephesians 5:1a**

“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”

– **1 Peter 1:15-16**

Jesus himself, in the greatest sermon ever, tells us “... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven...” then he concludes with: “Be perfect [or mature], therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

– **Matthew 5:48**

How do we “mimic” or “imitate” God?

“Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” – **Ephesians 5:1-2**

Imitating God, in and of myself, is impossible. I cannot love like that. Not on my own. Even if it appears that I am so sacrificial, my intentions, my motives would almost certainly be mixed up in some way self-serving impulses too.

The key to all this is wrapped up in the phrase “... therefore, as dearly loved children.”

Through Jesus death and resurrection, God has done everything necessary to make you his very own children forever: to adopt you, forgive and free you, save you by his grace, fill and empower you with the Spirit, putting the very life of the Living God in you. Now, because of all that, as “dearly loved children, be like your dad.” Imitate his way of love.

Jesus “gave himself up.”

1. Jesus “gave himself” in our place. He goes to the cross to pay the debt my sin had incurred. There is a “substitution” that happens. His life in exchange for ours. And God the Father receives what Jesus has done as a “fragrant offering and sacrifice”, as sufficient for us to be forgiven and made “new.”

2. Jesus gives himself “for us” in the sense of “for our benefit.” Like, he’s actually serving our best interests.

So...

- We can love because we are being loved.
- We can serve others interest because Jesus is serving ours.
- We can give deeply, freely, sacrificially because he gave “for us.”
- We love because we *are* the beloved.

Maybe for you it’s time to take that very *first step* of opening your life to One who has loved you? To take that step of giving your whole-life “yes” to his great “yes” over you?

Maybe if you're not all the way there believing the news of Jesus, well, remember that Jesus invited his first disciples with the simple words "follow me." They didn't really understand all of who Jesus was at the time, but they took the steps with him. What if you just begin to put into practice some of this? Maybe you start living like it's true and you meet him in the process?

For others, maybe we ask ourselves: in what ways is God nudging me to more truly reflect him? His character?

II. The Contours of Kingdom-Culture

3 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. **4** Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk, or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving."

Love Vs. Anti-Love

"But among you..." What's the contrast between? Between "love" and, well, "anti-love." Everything Paul lists next are not just "vice and virtue", or a list of what's "good and evil", though that's true as well. He contrasts Jesus' ways of "love" with "anti-love." Things that disintegrate community, that dehumanize others, that destroy what God intended to build. These are "anti-Kingdom-culture" patterns.

Sexual immorality: (pornea) "*sexuality expressed outside God's good design.*"

Impurity: typically refers to sexual sin as well.

Paul is "doubling-up" the emphasis of the command here and saying our sexuality is to be expressed within the committed covenant of marriage, between one man and one woman. Anything outside of this isn't fitting for kingdom people.

Jesus says in Matthew 5, that even looking at someone with the intent of lusting after them – with the intent of fantasizing about that person in a sexual manner – is akin to adultery.

Lust is profoundly damaging, not only because it fuels an industry that misuses sex and human bodies, but also, since it dehumanizes others. It makes people objects to be used rather than recognizing their God-given dignity.

"I protect the image of God in myself when I respect the image of God in others."

The opposite is also true: "I dehumanize myself when I don't honour the image of God in others."

God's story tells us something different about what real love is, and what our bodies are for.

Fundamental to the Christian worldview is the belief that God exists and has put boundaries around our sexuality because he loves us.

"God cares who we sleep with because he cares deeply about the people who are doing the sleeping. He cares because sex was his idea, not ours. He cares because misusing sex can cause profound hurt and damage. He cares because he regards us as worthy of his care. And, in fact, that care is not only seen in telling us how we should use sex, but also in how he makes forgiveness and healing available when we mess this up."

- Sam Allberry

Greed: It may have a sense of overlap with these sexual sins in this context, in the sense of lust for more and more. At the heart of greed is a heart that says, "I'm dissatisfied with God's good gifts – I must have something else, something more, to fill my heart, to give me a "fullness."



And whenever we find ourselves saying that about anything – even good things, a relationship, financial stability, success – when we make a good thing into an ultimate thing it becomes a god-thing. An idol. This is why, when Paul restates who belongs in the kingdom, he links sexual sin and greed with idolatry.

“Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.”
– **Ephesians 5:4**

Obscenity: taking the goodness of God’s design for human bodies and sex, and “making a world” with our words that demeans or cheapens God’s good gift.

Foolish talk and course jesting: this probably translates in our setting to things like sexist jokes. Racist jokes. Jokes that dehumanize others, that don’t “respect the image of God in others.”



The Antidote?

Thanksgiving: using our lips to praise that which is good and true and beautiful. That starts with God and spills out into thanksgiving to those around us.

III. Living In-Sync with the Kingdom-Culture

5 For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient.

The Warning: Following Jesus in the way of love, and resisting the ways of anti-love, of darkness, are no mere matters of preference. What we do with these sets your life on a trajectory toward the kingdom, or away from it.

God’s wrath: His settled opposition to anything that distorts or destroys his good creation. And, as Paul argues in Romans 1, God’s wrath is even expressed in the present, with God giving people over to their “anti-love”, “anti-God” ways of life.

God honours our freely chosen trajectory. God gives people over to the dark of the darkness. That happens in the now – and will be eternally so for those who persist in rejecting Jesus and the way of love he invites us into.

Paul does not mean, if you’ve struggled with lust or greed, or you used foul language, you are excluded from the kingdom. He does mean, those who persistently reject God and God’s ways, and do not repent of it, do not turn back to God – well – God will give them over to that way of being...forever.

But for anyone who turns back to Jesus, there is forgiveness. There is hope. Greed, lust, sexual immorality – all of that is what Jesus gives his life to forgive and free us from.

Jesus spells it out like this: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” – **Matthew 5:8**

I think C.S. Lewis gets it right when he comments: “It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to.”

— C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

Do you want to see God? Do you long for closeness with him? That indicates the condition of your heart, your posture, the reality of the new life in you.

So, we practice keeping close to Jesus, open to Spirit, doing regular “heart-checks”, that leads to a regular turning-back toward the One who loves us. The One who gave himself for us. That’s a regular part of my rhythm.

Maybe that's the place you are in today? Maybe today is a day for realigning your heart, your life, with the King?

We *do* imitate God. Like father, like daughter and son. We *do* put on the new clothes – the beautiful way of life that's fitting of the kingdom-culture. We *do* put away all ways that dehumanize others and ourselves or that make God out to be less beautiful than he is.



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LIVING IN SYNC WITH REALITY DISCUSSION

Open Up

Have you been a part of a business, team, or community-group culture that was really great? What made it great?

One that wasn't so great (maybe don't name the name if you use a negative example!)?

Dig In

Read Ephesians 5:1-6.

1. What's your first impression of Paul's command to "imitate God"? Why do you think your mind goes there?
2. How does looking at the way Jesus loved us help "put flesh on" this command for you?
3. Can you think of examples of people who you've seen walk in this way of love? In what ways might they be 'concrete examples' for you to follow (Paul describes following people we see these features of "Christlikeness" in as a key practice in Philippians 3:17 and 1 Corinthians 11:1)?

4. Look at the negative commands – the things to avoid. How, in your experience, do these "anti-love" behaviours destroy community? How do they negatively impact the life and witness of a church community?

5. Notice the warning of Ephesians 5:5-6. How might we, in our present context, need to hear that warning as well?

Prayer

Go back to Ephesians 5:1-2. Slowly read this section again as a way to lead your group into prayer. Ask that God give you joy and strength as you follow Jesus and walk in the way of love. Ask for God's help to discern how best to work this out.