

Ephesians 5:3-5

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[0 : 00] Life is full of choices. I acknowledge that that's not a particularly insightful observation.

I think we all knew that already. But how about this for a choice, bad sex or good manners? There's a choice for you, bad sex or good manners.

And let's be honest, just having the word sex in the question catches your attention. The choice or contrast may seem somewhat bizarre, but it's one that Paul makes in the passage that we've read, particularly in verses 3 and 4.

So, let's read verses 3 and 4 again, particularly wanting to note the contrast that he draws between two things, for want of a better word.

So, verses 3 and 4 of Ephesians chapter 5. But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality.

[1 : 07] And so, focusing there on the first thing that he says, sexual immorality, he goes on to speak of other aspects of that, but that's at the heart of the contrast. 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, nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk, or coarse joking, which are out of place.

But rather, so here we have the contrast. On the one side, sexual immorality and different expressions of it. But rather, thanksgiving. So, you have the two sides there that he's presenting. Not this, but this. Not sexual immorality, but rather thanksgiving. And I want to spend a little time thinking about these two verses, verses 3 and 4.

We'll also move into verse 5, and especially that contrast that Paul makes. Now, these verses that we've focused in on are very much part of a bigger picture that Paul is painting to describe our new life in Christ.

Verses 3 and 4 are just a few brushstrokes of the whole portrait. So, we need to maybe very briefly explain a little bit the bigger picture.

[2 : 23] And the bigger picture concerns our new life in Christ, and how that life involves putting off and putting on.

The very language there is used explicitly by Paul. There in verses 22 to 24 of the previous chapter of chapter 4.

You were taught with regard to your former way of life to put off your old self, which has been corrupted by its deceitful desires, to be made new in the attitude of your minds, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

So, this is the big picture. This is the big contrast, if you wish. And what follows through the remainder of chapter 4 and right through a good part of chapter 5 are a series of these contrasts, what we are to put off and what we are to put on.

You can maybe just check out one or two of them with me. Verses 25 and 26. Put off lying and put on truth. In verse 28.

[3 : 32] Put off stealing and put on work. Verses 29 and 30. Put off harmful words and put on helpful words. Even if Paul doesn't always use the precise language of putting off and putting on, it's very clear that that's what's going on.

Into chapter 5 or the end of 4 and into 5. Put off bitterness. Put on love. Verse 8 of chapter 5. Put off darkness and put on light.

And further on in chapter 5 and verse 15. Put off folly and put on wisdom. So, I think, you know, we get the picture. The point of all the examples there that I've given very fleeting is that all of these examples, all of these contrasts make sense.

There's a symmetry to them that is immediately obvious. Light and darkness. Harmful words, helpful words. Lying or truth.

We can see the contrast. It's so clear. It's very evident. As I say, there's almost a symmetry of opposites in the examples that Paul is giving.

[4 : 42] But what about the example that we're going to be thinking about? This contrast between sexual immorality and thanksgiving. I don't think there the contrast is so immediately obvious.

There isn't seemingly that obvious symmetry in the contrast being painted. But I think there is a symmetry of opposites.

We might call it that that we can identify. And I think the contrast essentially that we find in these verses, verses 3 and 4, is the contrast between greed and gratitude.

And actually, I think the words greed and gratitude do better justice to the contrast than the words that I began with. You know, bad sex and good manners. That was just to catch your attention. But the contrast really can be better captured with these two words, greed and gratitude. Now, it's true if you're following carefully with me and you're looking at the verses and saying, well, you know, is that fair?

[5 : 46] Is that really the contrast there? It is true that the word greed, though found in these verses, appears to be one of a list of different conducts or attitudes that Paul is indicating we ought to avoid.

But I do think that it's legitimate to give greed a place of prominence or particular significance in the contrast, to such an extent that it would be fair to say that the contrast is between greed and gratitude.

And let me explain why I think that is legitimate. One hint that points in the direction of giving greed that place of greater significance is what Paul goes on to say about greed in verse 5.

We read there in verse 5, And you'll remember how Paul makes that same identification of greed with idolatry even more explicitly in his letter to the Colossians.

In chapter 3 and verse 5, And you couldn't get clearer than there, Greed, which is idolatry. So there the identification of greed and idolatry is just absolute almost, you might say.

[7 : 12] In what sense is greed equivalent to idolatry? Now we might immediately think of greed as the worship of money. And so in that sense, idolatry.

In that scenario, the god or idol is money or stuff. And it is true that the Bible speaks of money or mammon as an idol.

You cannot worship God and mammon. But I think that greed is here identified with idolatry for the fundamental reason that greed involves the worship of self.

Money or stuff or sex, as we'll discover, is just a means of self-gratification or self-worship. Now having identified greed as the key contrast with gratitude, put off greed, put on gratitude, and having seen that greed is identified with idolatry, we can now express the contrast in verses 3 to 4 in another way, another complementary way, as the contrast between a self-centered life and a God-centered life.

I think that also does justice to the contrast that Paul is painting here. What Paul is presenting really in the whole section of the letter, but also in microcosm in verses 3 and 4, is two ways of living.

[8 : 37] A self-centered life or a God-centered life. It is that fundamental. It's not just a series of things that Paul says, well, they're not really nice things to do. You really shouldn't do these.

And, hey, these are really nice things to do. Do these. He's saying, no, you have two ways of living. Your life can be self-centered or your life can be God-centered. And you have to choose one or other.

And even at this point, we're going to think about these two ways of living now. But even at this point, I would ask you the question, which of these two ways of life describe you? Describe your life. Greed or gratitude? A self-centered life or a God-centered life? Let's explore a little these two ways of living with the use of just the passage or the two verses that we're thinking about, not everything that Paul says.

And in our text, in the verses 3 and 4 in particular, much more is said of the first way, greed, sexual immorality, and all the other things that are said, than about Thanksgiving.

[9 : 41] And so, we'll probably spend a little bit more time as a result on that because that's where you have more material in our passage. So, first of all, let's think about the self-centered life.

I think there are three things we can draw out about the self-centered life as it's described here in these verses. First of all, what it looks like.

Then why it's to be shunned. And finally, where it leads. So, first of all, what does it look like? This self-centered life, this life characterized by greed.

What does a self-centered life look like? Well, this could take a while, but we're going to limit ourselves to the one expression of self-centeredness or greed that Paul chooses to highlight on this occasion, namely, sexual immorality.

Sexual immorality is the key conduct or sin identified by Paul as an expression of greed or of a self-centered life. All the other words in verses 3 and 4 relate to sexual immorality in one way or another, be that the actual practice of sexual immorality.

[10:51] So, the expression there, all kinds of impurity, or the trivializing of the seriousness of sexual immorality, obscenity, coarse joking, innuendo.

So, all of these words relate to this core sin that is to be avoided, sexual immorality. But why is sexual immorality an expression of greed, which is idolatry or self-centeredness?

I think we can identify two reasons, but before we do, we have a problem or a challenge of definition. And the challenge of definition is, well, what is sexual immorality?

Paul says there ought not to be a hint of it in your communities, in your lives. Okay, fair enough, but what is it? What is sexual immorality? Now, if we limit ourselves to sexual intercourse or sex between consenting adults, is such conduct not morally neutral?

How can we describe that as immoral? If I can quote one of the most inane and meaningless mantras of our age, is it not the case that love is love?

[12:05] How can we speak of consenting practice between two adults as in any way or form immoral? Well, if we're going to categorize certain sexual conduct or behavior as immoral, we really need a standard, or more precisely, a standard giver.

The crucial question is, who decides what is immoral? Now, in our society, and no doubt it's often been so, it's not necessarily a modern phenomena, but in our society, the answer given to that question, who decides, especially in the realm of sexual ethics, is, I decide.

It's my body, and I'll do what I please with my body. Or the ever-popular one that you hear being often said, it's nobody else's business what I do in my bedroom.

So, I decide. You know, in the realm of sexual ethics, I decide what is okay and what is not okay, what is moral, what is immoral, it's my decision.

To which God, who created us and is likely to have a view on the matter, responds, well, actually, no. I decide. God decides what is moral or immoral, and in the matter of sexual ethics, He has told us what constitutes sexual immorality.

[13:31] The very word here translated sexual immorality is a catch-all word that includes all sexual intercourse outside of marriage between one man and one woman.

Now, people can protest that definition. They can think it's homophobic or heterophobic or any kind of phobic that you care to mention.

But that is the definition that God gives. He is the one who has established what constitutes sexual immorality, of which there is not to be a hint among us as believers.

It's God's call, and He has called it. And let me get very personal here. If you are having sex, any kind of sex, outside of marriage, you are sinning.

You are guilty of sexual immorality. It's very clear. Okay, but why is sexual immorality an expression of greed or a self-centered life?

[14:35] And I said we would give two answers or two reasons why we can say that. The first has a lot to do with what we've just been touching on, and it has to do with our definition of sexual immorality.

For many, engaging in what God defines as sexually immoral conduct is to boldly or foolishly declare, I decide. I rebel against or refuse to acknowledge God's authority in this matter.

And what is that? Well, that is self-worship. That is to say, I'm in charge. God is not in charge. I decide. He doesn't decide. I rule. He doesn't rule.

And so to engage in sexually immoral conduct is self-worship. It is declaring in a very clear and vivid way, I'm in charge and I'll decide, not God.

The second reason why sexual immorality is an expression of greed relates to the manner in which sexual immorality ordinarily is grounded in or motivated by the desire for self-gratification.

[15:46] We are greedy for pleasure and fun and excitement and conquest. We are greedy for the pleasure that somebody else's body can give us. And so it's all about me.

It's all about me. And so it is very clear how this conduct, sexually immoral conduct, is grounded in greed. It's grounded in a self-centered life.

It's an expression of a self-centered philosophy of life. Sex, for many, has become a commodity to be consumed for personal and selfish gratification.

It is a recreational activity whose worth is determined by how much fun it generates for the practitioner, for me. What's love got to do with it?

Well, very little. This is what a self-centered life looks like in the field of sex. That's what it looks like.

[16:45] Why is it to be shunned? Why does Paul urge believers to shun this conduct? That there not be even a hint of sexual immorality?

Well, Paul very clearly says why it is to be shunned. He uses two expressions that both really complement each other. There in verse 3, he says, And then in verse 4, where he goes on to speak of other sins related to the same core sin, he says, Sexual immorality, rebelling against God's authority and behaving greedily, is a denial of our very identity as a people set apart by God for holiness.

And so, for that reason, it's not surprising that Paul describes it as improper, as out of place. You might say he's being very gentle in the language that he uses, but he's being accurate.

It is simply improper. It is simply inappropriate. It is out of place, given who you are, given your identity as God's holy people.

That's why it's to be shunned. But Paul also hints at, or more than hints at, he points to where it leads. This sexual immorality, where does it lead? Well, it leads far from God.

[18:22] Verse 5, notice what Paul goes on to say. For of this you can be sure. You know, those of you who think I'm being overly, you know, Paul, if Paul is addressing those who think, oh, Paul, is he so strict?

And he's just, you know, he says to them, he says to us, He's saying this is where it leads.

This is where sexual immorality leads, far from God. And notice that Paul doesn't use the language that we might have expected him to use. He doesn't use the language of punishment.

He doesn't use the language of eviction from the kingdom of God. The logic, rather, is one of necessary consequence. What Paul is saying to us is, if you choose to live your life by your own rules and ignore the rules of King Jesus, then obviously you have no place in the kingdom of Jesus. And it's just logical. If you're going to be part of his kingdom, then you have to acknowledge his authority. And if you're going to say in this important area of your life, well, in this area of my life, King Jesus doesn't have authority.

[19:40] I'm going to establish my own rules. Then Jesus says, well, you've no part in my kingdom. You're in a different kingdom. You're in your own kingdom. You know, build your own kingdom. Do your own thing if you want, but you're not in my kingdom.

He's not throwing anybody out. He's simply describing that the reality of a life lived in this way, where these decisions are taken in this realm of our life.

This is where it leads. Well, what about you? Are you habitually, as a matter of lifestyle, guilty of sexual immorality? What do you need to do?

Well, you need to repent. It is sinful conduct. It is rebellion against God's authority in your life. And you need to stop. You need to repent. You need to turn around.

And you need to shun that conduct. But among you, there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality. A self-centered life.

[20:41] But of course, here Paul is contrasting the self-centered life with a God-centered life. This is the contrast. But rather thanksgiving.

Shun greed. Shun greed. Shun greed. Shun greed. Shun greed. And be grateful. And we want to think about this other life that he presents to us. We'll do so more briefly.

What does that look like? This life that is God-centered, that is characterized by gratitude. Now, Paul doesn't, in this little section, give us much to work with.

He simply says these words, but rather thanksgiving. But having zoomed in to verses 3 to 5, we now need to zoom out. And as we do and see the bigger picture, discover what this thanksgiving looks like as a way of life.

And I think there are two things to say very briefly about this God-centered life characterized by gratitude. What we are to be grateful for and how we are to be grateful.

[21 : 49] How we are to express that gratitude. First of all, what are we to be grateful for? I think there we, it's helpful to go back to almost the beginning of this section.

Or at least the start of the section, if not the very beginning. In verse 24, where we have identified in this amazing language, God's amazing purpose for us.

We noted it, I think, even in the reading. In verse 24, in the second half of the verse, we're told that we have been created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Now just pause and let that sink in. What an amazing purpose that God has determined for your life. Created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Do we even begin to grasp what an enormous privilege that is? That you were created to be like God in righteousness and holiness.

[22 : 59] How could any reasonable person not be grateful for that? You know, what are we grateful for? We're grateful for this amazing purpose for which we have been created.

But we're grateful also for God's amazing love for us. Then in verse 5, be imitators of God, therefore as dearly loved children, and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

You know, we messed up big time. We sinned. We chucked a big spanner in the works of God's amazing purpose. But God so loved us that He sent Jesus to deal with our sin by His death and so recover the situation and make His amazing purpose possible once again.

That we might be like God in righteousness and holiness. And we could say more about that, but we'll leave it there. I simply posed the same question I posed a moment ago.

How could any reasonable person not be grateful for that? But how are we to express our gratitude for God's amazing purpose for our life, for God's amazing love that found expression in Jesus?

[24 : 18] How are we to express our gratitude? And there's a simple symmetry to this. When we think of the purpose for which we were created, the life that we are to become, the people we are to become, and the love that we have experienced.

How do we express gratitude for that? Well, we express gratitude for these things by living the life God has created for us and loving in the manner that Christ has loved us.

And these two elements beautifully combine in the simple call that we have at the beginning of chapter 5 to live a life of love. Verse 2 of chapter 5, And live a life of love.

This is what marks a God-centered life. Living a life of love where others are not the means for greedy self-satisfaction, but precious human beings to be loved and served.

Such a grateful life is, like the life of Jesus, as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. It is a thing of beauty. And so we have these two contrasts, these two possibilities, these two ways of life that Paul presents for us.

[25 : 42] What's it to be? Is your life to be a life characterized by greed? A life that is driven by self-centered interest, that in the realm of sexual behavior, finds expression in sexual immorality, where you do your own thing, you satisfy your own whims and desires, you ignore God's authority.

Is it going to be a life of greed? A self-centered life? Or is it to be a God-centered life, where you are grateful for the amazing purpose that God has for you, created you to be like Him in righteousness and holiness, loved you with such an amazing love in the giving of His Son to rescue you and to put you back on track to be who you were created to be.

And as you acknowledge the magnitude of His purpose and of His love, so live a life expressing your gratitude, a life characterized by gratitude that is God-centered, concerned with serving others and not satisfying yourself.

What's the deal? Greed or gratitude? A self-centered life or a God-centered life? It's your call. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the Bible. We thank You for Your amazing purpose for us that we have been created to be like You in righteousness and holiness.

[27 : 20] We thank You for Your amazing love that found such radical expression in the giving of Your Son, Jesus, to be our Savior, to bear the punishment for our sin, to get us back on track, to make possible that the purpose for which we were created be realized, that the obstacles to that be removed, obstacles that we were quite incapable of removing.

We pray that as we dwell on and consider all that You are and all that You have done for us, that our response would be one of gratitude, but a gratitude that finds expression in a life of love, in a life

of service to others, in a life characterized by gratitude that revolves not around ourselves, but around You and pleasing You.
And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.