

**“The Impossible Standard”**  
**Ephesians 5:1-20**  
**January 13, 2002**

**Text Comment**

- v.1 Remember, in v. 24 above we are to put on the new self, created to be like God. Here the same point is made in a different way. We are to imitate God.
- v.2 Here is our verb “walk” once more, which, again, the NIV has translated as live. God saved us to “walk in good works” Paul said in 2:10; now he is commanding us to do that very thing. He has made this point in different ways and makes it again here: the Christian life is *our* outworking of *God’s* salvation.
- v.3 Once again, as we saw last week, there is a pattern to Paul’s ethical teaching: we are told what not to do, we are told what we ought to do instead, and we are told why. Put off the old, put on the new, for some reason that arises from our salvation, in this case, that we have been brought into the household of God and numbered among his holy people. For people who belong to the holy God there is an inappropriate way of life and an appropriate way of life.

Here he returns again to his earlier contrast between the Christian’s life and that of the unbeliever. In fact, two of the terms in v. 3 are found earlier in 4:19 (impurity and greed).

The NIV’s “there must not be even a hint” is literally “should not even be mentioned among you.” That is probably Paul’s real meaning. He wants there to be such a reserve even about speaking of such sins that the conscience of Christian people is kept very sensitive and tender and nothing is permitted to create an atmosphere of tolerance. An obvious application of this principle would be to take great care about what we watch on television or in movies; what we become willing to laugh about or to overlook in what we watch.

- v.4 This verse is a variant of what Paul has already said in 4:29.

Interestingly, Aristotle classifies the last of the three sins, what is translated here as “coarse joking” as a virtue. Aristotle’s wittiness, skill at suggestive language or double entendre, is not what is appropriate for a Christian. We are reminded that our behavior is to be different not only from the coarser and cruder pagan, but from the sophisticate as well. Neither of them is trying to imitate God.

“Thanksgiving” says one commentator, “appears like an oasis in a desert of negatives.” [Lincoln, WBC, 324] What is ultimate in your world view – God or some pleasure of this world – will determine your behavior. Thanksgiving is the practical acknowledgement of the ultimacy of God.

- v.5 You don't have to bow down to wood or stone to be an idolater. You have only to offer yourself in worship and loyal service to some person or thing instead of to the living God. The human heart is an idol factory.
- v.7 Another of Paul's *reasons*, in this case a negative reason, a warning.
- v.8 Continuing and resuming the main theme, Paul uses "walk" once more: walk as children of the light.
- v.10 If your intention is to please the Lord, you will care to find out what you ought to do in each situation you face. Paul assumes that you *can* find this out if you want to.
- v.11 Insofar as we have already been told not to speak about the sins of the world in v. 3 and will be again in v. 12, it is probable that Paul means that Christians are to expose the fruitless deeds of darkness by their way of life, which casts true light upon the surrounding society and shows up that life for what it really is. [Lincoln, *WBC*, 330]
- v.14 The connection of Paul's thoughts in these verses has puzzled many readers of this section. What seems most probable is that he moves from exposing darkness by the light, to illumination by the same light, to the light itself, namely Christ, from whom our lives take their light and their power to illuminate the darkness around them.

The widespread assumption is that the citation is of a early Christian baptismal hymn. That seems an even more likely suggestion in light of the fact that Paul will mention hymns just a few verses later. In that case these Christians would be reminded of the transformation of their lives that has taken place and was signalized at their baptism.

- v.15 We have "walk" once again here. Be careful how you walk.
- v.16 Clearly, Paul is summoning us to make something of our lives, to make them count, to fill them with that which serves the interests of the Lord and our own souls. Cornelius Plantinga describes the contrary life this way: "Making a career of nothing – wandering through malls, killing time, making small talk, watching television programs until we know their characters better than our own children – robs the community of our gifts and energies and shapes life into a yawn at the God and savior of the world. The person who will not bestir [himself], the person who hands herself over to nothing, in effect says to God: you have made nothing of interest and redeemed no one of consequence, including me." [*Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 188]
- v.19 In the first sentence, Christian singing is viewed in its function as edification and encouragement for the believers (you know how much help you have received from singing with the people of God), in the second, the vertical dimension, singing to God, is the subject.
- v.20 Thanksgiving returns to Paul's thought from v. 4 Once again, at the end of this section we have Paul's Trinitarian thought. We are to be filled with the Spirit – a way of saying

that we are to live that life the Holy Spirit approves and depend upon the Holy Spirit for the strength to do so every step of the way – we sing songs to one another that come from the Holy Spirit – the sense of “spiritual songs” – and we sing to the Lord, that is to Christ, giving thanks to God in Christ’s name. As so often before in Ephesians, here too, all three persons of the Triune God making their appearance in Paul’s description of the Christian life.

Now I had considered slowing down at this point and taking these ethical exhortations one by one. There is so much of importance that could be said about sexual purity and sexual sin, about purity of speech, about the various forms of idolatry to which we are all tempted, about making the most of opportunities and the like. That is what Lloyd-Jones does, for example, in his eight volumes of sermons on Ephesians.

But I concluded at the last that I should continue as before, taking Paul’s argument paragraph by paragraph. This is the better way, I am sure, to get the force of Paul’s argument as he wrote it down and as it was heard by those to whom the letter was first read. After all, they did not stop to say, line by line, all that might be said about sexual immorality or idolatry or Christian song. They heard this as Paul wrote it.

And when we take the paragraph as a whole, a very interesting and very important question emerges. What are we to think of this description of the Christian life? How are we to apply these standards to ourselves? For, the fact is, no Christian with a sensitive conscience can read Paul here and not come away with a measure of disquiet and concern.

*We are to imitate God!* That is the standard set for our behavior. That is what Christians do. Imitate God in his holiness. Is that not impossible? Has any of us ever come near to that impossibly high standard? But Paul is not done. There is not to be even *a hint* of sexual immorality – or, better, it is not *even to be mentioned* among us, nor is there to be *any* greed. Our speech must be pure with nothing coarse in it. He goes on; we must live in light. And that means we must live in *all* goodness, righteousness and truth. Notice that *all*. Paul is not leaving us any room for half-measures. We must be very careful how we live, must make the most of every opportunity, must be filled with the Holy Spirit, and must give thanks to God *always, for everything*.

Now, be honest. Don’t we think in the back of our mind that Paul is rhetorical here, exaggerating to make a point; that he has run away with himself, that he has overspoken? Does Paul really mean that people like us, weak as we are, surrounded by temptations as we are, with a past like our past, can actually imitate God in the lives we live each day? And does he really expect that we will miss no opportunity to do good, that we will never fail to thank God for everything, that we will live lives that are completely pure and good and content? Impossible. We have never come close to this. The unbeliever may well think that Christians are hypocrites, that they think they are so much better than others. In fact, it is the reverse. Serious Christians read the Bible and they think they are worse than others! They are constantly discouraged with themselves over failures unbelievers never once thought of. They look at the standard set for them in the Word of God and think they have utterly failed to meet it at every turn. But perhaps they are only being unrealistic. Perhaps Paul didn’t mean that we *were actually* to live *like God*

*himself!* I mean, how many times have you said of some fellow Christian, “why that fellow, or that gal, is just like God?” What believer among us here have you thought was god-like?”

Well, this much we can say: whatever Paul means, he means what the rest of the biblical writers mean when they use the same kind of language and he means what our Lord Jesus meant when he used the same kind of language to describe the life his people must live. Remember, in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord summed up our duty as Christians by saying, “Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.” [Matt. 5:48] Paul says in Colossians 1:28 that it is his aim to present every Christian *perfect* in Christ.

And think of the ways in which the Bible describes the true Christian. He is said to be “worthy” of God’s salvation in a number of places. He is described as “blameless” in a number of places, or as “righteous,” or “holy.” And times without number we are told that we should be *always joyful, praying without ceasing, giving thanks in every circumstance.*

That is the true Christian life in the Bible. It is this life of selflessness, purity, goodness, piety, zeal, devotion, and obedience to all, to everyone, of God’s commandments all of the time.

But, then, we look at ourselves and wonder if we can possibly be Christians at all! For we admit it openly: “perfect as the heavenly father is perfect” does not describe us! One way round the problem is taken by those who interpret all of these exacting descriptions of the Christian life in terms of imputed righteousness. Whether or not we actually live this way and rise to this high standard, we are all these things in Christ who *did* live this way and gave his righteousness to us. That is, we are these things only in the sense that we are *counted or considered as being all these things* because Christ was for us.

For example, when in Psalm 26:1, David says, “Vindicate me, O Lord, for I am a blameless man,” Augustine comments, “Not my merits, but your mercy [,O Lord,] is before my eyes.” That is, I am blameless because I am forgiven all my sins. But, as is perfectly obvious in the psalm itself, David is not talking about the forgiveness of his sins and the righteous standing he has been given before God as a free gift, he is talking about the quality of his living day by day. He is not talking about *God’s* mercy but about *his own* obedience. “I walk continually in your truth. I do not sit with deceitful men, nor do I consort with hypocrites... I lead a blameless life.” He is talking there, as Paul is here in Ephesians 5 of what Christians *do*, of how they *live*. Nevertheless, he speaks about his being blameless. The same high-flying language is used of Christian people in the New Testament.

What are we to make of this? Paul seems so matter-of-fact in setting a standard for our behavior that no one meets, that we know we have not met and will not meet, not while we remain in this world. Well, given the fact that this is the way the Bible *always* speaks of the Christian life – always in these extravagant terms of perfection – clearly there is something important for us to understand here and something important for us to embrace. And it is this: **that the Christian, for Christ’s sake and for thanksgivings sake and for love’s sake and for the sake of his own soul and the souls of others, must be committed to perfection and nothing less.**

It may be true, it certainly is true, as James tells us, “that we all stumble in many ways.” But that does not mean that the standard according to which we are to measure our lives is relaxed in any

way, to any degree. It may be that, in his mercy, God accepts our little for a lot – for how else could we ever be called righteous or blameless in our living – but the standard to which we are summoned remains high as ever. We are commanded to be perfect, to obey every commandment of God in heart, in speech, and in behavior; to love as we have been loved; to forsake ourselves for God and others; to be thankful always for everything, to be pure and chaste. We are to be nothing less than God-like in our living: as righteous, as pure, as holy as he is. Every failure to be so is just that, a failure, another dismal sin.

What are we, after all? We are beings made in the image of God. What is God's commandment? Surely a reasonable one: be like God. Sin may make that commandment difficult to keep, even for a Christian, but surely it is impossible to change that law. It derives from our very nature as bearers of God's image. We are to be what we have been made to be.

What is more, we are to be what we have been saved to be. Those who once lived in this world by faith in Christ are now, in heaven, as we read in Hebrews 12:23, "just men made perfect." Man was perfect before the fall. He is being made perfect again by the grace of God. No wonder we should be called upon to be perfect while we live in this world as believers in Christ. What else would God ask of us? What else would be worthy of our effort? What else would true thankfulness and love strive to achieve? Do we think that God would have us loiter on our way to heaven, to make our peace along the way with the very sins our Redeemer suffered and died to take away?

No one can read the Bible and think that any author of a biblical book ever thought that Christian folk in this world actually lived perfect lives. The reality of Christian sin and Christian shortcoming is far too often and honestly faced for that. But, at the same time, no one can read the Bible and think that any author ever thought that any true Christian would content himself or herself with anything less than everything that Christ deserved for him or her to become, with anything less than that life that was an imitation of God's. If that places us in a state of constant tension, even discouragement, if we must live always reckoning with our failure to rise to the standard that Christ has set for us, well so be it. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus said; "Happy are they who mourn."

As Rabbi Duncan, the Scot Presbyterian missionary and scholar, wisely observed: the fact that everyone is a sinner is the hypocrite's bed of ease but it is the believer's bed of thorns. The fact that no one reaches this standard of godliness most turn into an excuse to stop trying. Sure I sin, but everyone else does too! They become what Duncan calls "effective" or "practical" antinomians, that is, people who think that God's grace means they don't have to strive to keep the law of God. It is painful to try hard, at every point, to be perfectly good and never succeed. And so, at last, the person stops trying. Duncan describes this kind of person as someone "with a conscience *very partially alive* to the holiness of God, the sinfulness of sin, and the unchangeable demands of [God's] law." [*Just a Talker*, xxxviii] The real believer, on the contrary, grieves over his constant failure to imitate God, repents of his failure for the umpteenth time, looks again to God for help and tries again.

The one thing we are not going to do, the one thing no loyal Christian can do, the one thing no thankful recipient of God's saving grace can do, is gain comfort for himself or herself by

lowering the standard! No the standard must be kept where it is – God-like-ness and nothing less – because that is his will and that is what he deserves from us, nothing less. In a moral universe with a looming last judgment, it is also the only safe course. Real Christians do not sniff or yawn when they hear Paul say that “the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient.” And men and women who know that and feel that, are the wisest and the safest men and women of all. They are also the ones who keep looking and longing for heaven and never content themselves with this world, never can make their peace with the world or grow very comfortable here, because they are always grasping for more than they know they will ever obtain here.

As Wordsworth put it:

A man’s reach should exceed his grasp,  
Else what is heaven for?

This was Paul’s own view of life and the principle by which he lived. He was always pressing on toward perfection; he was content with nothing less. And the man who presses for perfection and is content with nothing less is always the man who gets far closer to it than others. Just think of Paul himself. Near the end of his life and 30 years into his apostleship he cries out against himself in Romans 7: “wretched man that I am; the very thing I shouldn’t do, I do; the very thing I should do I do not do; I’m a bondslave of sin!” But we look at that man – at his life of prayer and ministry; at his noble suffering for the cause of the gospel; at the extraordinary personal sacrifices he made for the salvation of multitudes of people, at his goodness and love, and we say to ourselves, “Where does such a life come from? How could a man rise so high?”

As a wise man said, “He is not a good man who does not wish to be better.” We might better say, he is not a Christian man or Christian woman who does not wish to be, and long to be, and who is not willing to struggle and strive to be better until he is like God in righteousness and holiness. His Heavenly Father and Savior deserve nothing less!

We believe and must believe absolutely that we are right before God and have entrance into heaven on the basis of Christ’s righteousness alone, a perfect righteousness imputed to all who believe in him, a righteousness that makes us as righteous, immediately and forever, as Christ was righteous for us.

Paul certainly believed that. He said of himself, “I consider everything [in which I might be tempted to boast, all of my achievements, all of my supposed goodness] a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.... I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own...but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

Paul would have known precisely what David Dickson, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Scot, meant when he was asked, on his deathbed, “What are you doing, brother?” “I am taking all of my good deeds and all of my bad deeds and throwing them into one bundle, and fleeing from both to Christ.” And he would have known precisely what Rabbi Duncan meant when, referring to Dickson’s deathbed statement, he said, “But the difference with me is this – I have been casting about, and cannot find any good deeds to put into the bundle.” [Brown, *Life of Duncan*, 501]

In terms of our standing before God, the exquisitely and exactingly holy God, we must have a perfect righteousness and that only Christ can supply.

But, all of that confessed from the heart, it still remains for us to say, as Paul also said and in the very same passage, “I want to become like Christ... Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...” We may be perfect already in the judgment of God through the righteousness we have from Christ, but we cannot rest until we are perfect in our living too: thoughts, words, and behavior.

And Paul knew very well what Francis Ridley Havergal meant when she said that she wished “to crowd into her life all she could possibly do for Jesus.”

This is New Testament Christianity always and everywhere. It is not a formal, polite, correct, simply orthodox kind of faith and belief. It is everywhere and always a great love and a great passion and a great consecration of mind, heart, and life. What characterizes it in Paul and in every other biblical author is this drive, this searing commitment. A commitment to Jesus Christ as our righteousness *and* a commitment to living for him even at the impossibly high standard set for still sinful human beings in the Word of God.

That we are summoned to be God-like, to live in all goodness, righteousness, and truth, to be thankful always for everything, are not demands against which we chafe; they are entirely reasonable and proper demands that we consent to with all our hearts. Our failure to meet them is the standing frustration of our lives, but the summons to meet them is, at the same time, the great enthusiasm, the nobility, the high purpose of our lives.

When Paul lays this out for us, when he tells us that this is our summons and this our calling and that we are walk in this way and no other, we say, with Augustine, “command what you will, O Lord, but give what you command.” And then we strive, by prayer, by putting off the old man and putting on the new, to imitate God. God deserves nothing less from us and we are determined that he shall have nothing less.

William Williams, the Welsh Great Awakening man, once summarized what he called “true religion” this way.

“I have come to see that true religion consists in three parts. First, true light respecting the plan of salvation; God’s eternal covenant with His Son to pay the debt of believing sinners, all the truths of the New Covenant by which He becomes all in all in... creation, in all-embracing providence, and in redemption.... The [second]...being in intimate communion with God in all our dealings.... Lastly...life and conduct, such as would reveal to the ungodly that there is a great difference between us and them.” [Evans, *Daniel Rowland*, 362]

Paul is talking here about the third part of true religion. And that is just what he says. The honor of God’s name, the honor and the welfare of his family, the honor of his Son our Lord Jesus, is in

our hands. By God's grace, we have the power to shine the light of Christ into the darkness of this world by the lives we live. Now *there* is something worth doing with your life!