

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“Be Careful How you Live & Repentance”

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Ephesians 5:15-21

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A long time ago someone tried to explain to me that the Christian life is like walking on a very narrow road, maybe even a tightrope, except that there are forks all along the road, each of which leads to destruction. When a person becomes a Christian, their Christianity is about taking every step on that very narrow road. And if you take a wrong step, if you mess up and choose a wrong fork, you will be out of God's will. So the Christian's mission is to be sure to remain in God's narrow will for his life every single step of the way: What career should I choose? There's a right answer and many wrong ones. Whom should I marry? There's a right answer and many wrong ones. Even down to what clothes should I wear today? There's a right answer and many wrong ones. The Christian's life then is spent figuring out what the right answer is for every question to avoid making mistakes. By mistakes, we mean of course sin. Avoid sin. That's the whole of the Christian life. Accept Jesus as your savior. Be baptized. Now don't mess up. Avoid sin and mistakes and you'll be a good Christian.

Maybe I'm not the only one who has heard and perhaps absorbed this version of the Christian life. If you've heard the Christian life in terms of rights and wrongs, do's and don'ts, shalt's and shall not's, you've heard it, too. You've heard the Christian life described as an ordering and organizing of life into categories that are clean and neat and black and white. Is this true?

It has merit. The rabbis of old who studied the law and taught it to the people gave their lives to the cause of helping people avoid transgressing God's commandments to honor the Sabbath, not commit adultery, not use the Lord's name in vain, and so forth. What developed over time was a lengthy and detailed set of rules for living to ensure that people didn't violate the Law. They regarded their rules as a fence erected around God's law. So if you don't cross the fence, you are in no danger of violating the law. Get it? So because the Law says, “honor the Sabbath and keep it holy” they set out to create a fence around that Law. The modern day practice for orthodox Jews then prohibits turning the ignition or driving a car—that's work, but you can ride as a passenger for a short distance. And it means you can ride in an elevator, but you can't push the button because that's work. Each of those rules is a plank in a fence to keep you a safe distance from violating the Law.

You see? The Baptists had rabbis too. Why do you think there's a Baptist tradition, “don't dance”? That's not biblical, we say mocking it. Yes, but, scripture teaches that people shouldn't sleep with people they aren't married to. What's the best way to keep that from happening: “Don't dance with each other.” Getting drunk? Same idea. If you want to be sure to follow the biblical proscription not to get drunk, what's the easiest way to ensure you'll never get drunk? You got it, don't drink at all.

The problem with all these rules is that some people tend to replace the intent with the minutiae. That's what Jesus found when he blistered the Pharisees with critiques of their rules. You are whitewashed tombs, he said. Clean on the outside, but corrupt on the inside. Following the rules or even the law, no matter how precisely and consistently, does not ensure that your heart is pure and that's what Jesus is interested in—the purity of your heart. Jesus observed this and called us to a higher obedience, beyond the rules, an obedience of the heart to the things of God.

And yet, Christians quickly discovered that there is wisdom in the ordering of life. For freedom Christ has set us free says Galatians, but Ephesians 5:15 admonishes us to “be careful how you live.” This verse is right in the middle of a longer section from 4:17 through 5:20 about Christian living, which is anchored in two places. In 4:17, it reads, “You (meaning Christians) must no longer walk as the Gentiles (meaning non-Christians) do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardness of heart.” This is an anchor to this section of Ephesians. It’s a negative picture. You see what those people are like—people who are not enlightened, ignorant, hard of heart, calloused, debased, greedy, corrupt, deceitful—don’t be like them.

A second anchor is in 5:1. This is a positive picture, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” That’s an anchor too. It asks us to imagine what God is like and then imitate that. To walk in love and give ourselves over to God as Christ gave himself to us. With these two anchors, Ephesians shows a stick and a carrot. The stick—don’t be like those people. The carrot—be like Jesus.

Around and following the stick and the carrot is a collection of moral behavioral proscriptions for the Christian life:

Speak the truth.

Don’t let the sun go down on your anger.

Don’t steal.

Share with people in need.

Don’t talk with corrupting language, but build people up with your talk. And don’t talk filthy, or foolish, or crudely.

Put away bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted. Forgive one another.

Don’t be sexually immoral or impure.

Don’t be deceived by empty words.

Don’t take part in the stuff of darkness; walk in the light.

Don’t get drunk.

There is something that rings true about what our grandparents called ‘clean living.’ And this list in Ephesians, and others like it in scripture, reinforce that notion. Even more so, this list and others like it exist in scripture because Christians were a distinct and persecuted minority in their day and time. They could not afford to have members compromising their tenuous witness before an increasingly watching world. In an odd similarity, I was struck this week by the clarity and force of the words of the NFL commissioner to a player who was drunk and driving when he hit and killed a pedestrian a few months ago. The NFL commissioner sent him a letter suspending him for this upcoming season saying, “The NFL and NFL players must live with the stain that you have placed on their reputations.” Taking full responsibility for his actions and accepting the hard judgment laid on him, the player responded, “I urge NFL fans not to judge NFL players or me based on my tragic lapse in judgment. I am a good person who did a bad

thing. I will use the period of my suspension to reflect, fulfill my obligations, and use this experience to make a positive impact on the lives of those who look up to NFL players.”

What more could be asked of him? That interchange strikes me as the kind of work that truth telling and personal responsibility do when practiced. Wrong has been done. Wrong has been named as wrong, not as anything less than sin. The consequences of the sin are experienced. And repentance and corrective behavior begin to take shape. This is what our Anabaptist forefathers hoped when they shunned church members who were wayward and unrepentant and threatened the witness of the community.

There’s something important about living right for Christians. When we are more or less living right, we can take it for granted. We don’t think about it, and we can think of rules and restrictions as arbitrary. It’s when our lives are falling apart, when we are suffering the consequences of the disorder of the sin in our hearts and the pain we cause to ourselves and others, that we understand the wisdom and find the life-giving power of both the carrot and the stick. “Be careful how you live,” we are admonished.

When we haven’t been careful and are experiencing the consequences, we have fresh understanding of why God says be careful. Life can hurt. Deeply. And in just this list here in Ephesians, not to mention admonitions in James or 1 Corinthians, the Sermon on the Mount or the 10 commandments, there’s something for everyone. Romans says it most succinctly, “For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Every DaySpringer has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

We all stand under the condemnation that we have not been careful at some point in our lives and the consequences of that un-carefulness, of that lack of wisdom, haunt everyone—or at least everyone that I’ve ever met.

If Christianity were just as it were explained to me by that one person, I believe I would give up today out of hopelessness. If this were all about a narrow road or a tightrope on which one wrong step meant total failure and if my discovering and living in God’s will for my life was dependent on an uninterrupted series of right steps at every turn, I would be as lost as a traveler in the dark. I appreciate what one of you at lectionary breakfast noted about King Solomon and the text we read this morning. Solomon asks God for discernment and God pledges to make Solomon the wisest person on earth that ever was or ever will be. We were contrasting this pledge from God with the dumb things that Solomon did after this and trying to understand the discrepancy. One of you noted, “If the wisest person on earth was so dumb, what chance do any of us have?”

I know something about being dumb and about being lost. Years ago, everything I owned along with my bride of two months pulled out of Ft. Worth, Texas on our way to North Carolina via Alabama. We were riding high in our 20-foot Uhaul trailer, pulling our poor little car with 220,000 miles on it behind. We were headed to Alabama to stay with my granddad a few days before making our way north. I had made that trip a dozen times, that long drive on I-20 from Ft. Worth through Dallas to Shreveport and Monroe, stopping for a free coke at the Mississippi Welcome station overlooking the mighty Mississippi River, through Meridian, Jackson, through Demopolis, Selma, and Montgomery into Lannett right on the Georgia border late at night. I knew this road. It was the road very much traveled in my life, and I knew where we were supposed to go. It was laid out in front of us as clearly as it had always been and always would be. Our adventure in life was beginning. The path was clear. I didn’t need a map. Texas to Louisiana to Mississippi to Alabama and beyond. We hit the road and drove our little lives across the great plains of our imaginations along the well-worn paths toward the future that

awaited us there. So why was it that several hours outside of Dallas, we passed green road signs counting down the miles to Texarkana? Why did we see billboards advertising the hot springs and cool streams of the Ozarks?

These signs, much like the admonitions in scripture were warning signs that I had missed a road sign somewhere along the way and was headed the wrong direction. I was going the wrong way. And I ignored them. Nah, that can't be right. I know where I'm going. I don't need a map. I don't need instructions. I don't believe the warning signs. I'll keep going down this path despite all that I see. I won't accept it. If I'd been going the wrong direction, I'd see signs for El Paso and see the sun dropping toward the horizon. That would be easy. This was more subtle.

Despite a growing, gnawing sense that something wasn't right I kept right on going, dragging everything and everyone involved down the road with me, not wanting to admit that I was lost. Being lost in a foreign country where you don't speak the language is one thing. Being lost in your own backyard—in the place you are supposed to know well—is humiliating. But I kept on going right on, not believing it until we crossed the sign that said, "Welcome to Arkansas." Any Texan knows when you see that sign, you are already in big trouble. Somewhere back there I-30 split from I-20 and I missed the sign and took the wrong way and then ignored every warning signal along the way until I was farther and farther away from where I was supposed to be—away from the road that took me toward the life I wanted to live and the path I wanted to be on.

And this, of course, is a spiritual parable about forks in the road, and detours, and paying attention to the signs in the road, and not being dumb, or blind, and avoiding sin. But it's really about what happens when you've already done all of that and find yourself, you know, in Arkansas. What then? What then when you've made the wrong turn, ignored the signs, ended up where you don't want to be, and it's too late to go back again? What do you do when you've crossed the line?

There's two kinds of people. One kind of person when he finds himself in a hole digs in. The other kind digs out. When you are on the wrong road, you either keep going toward whatever end is out there, or you get off the road. I found a map, got some advice, found a road, and took a hard right through windy, potholed country roads until we found the path we needed that took us forward to where we were supposed to go.

Wisdom is making the right decisions and following the right path to start with. But knowing when to make a change in your life when you've messed up is wisdom, too. Harder won, more painful, but wisdom. When you've done dumb, don't keep doing it. Turn. Turn hard. Go back. Go right. Go left. Get some advice from someone who's been there before. Find the road you are supposed to be on and get there as fast as you can, whatever detours and pain it causes. Not surprisingly, the Bible has a word for the wayward traveler in life: repentance. It's the first step on the road of salvation.