

Live as children of light. Ephesians 5.8.

Chap 5 of *Eph* opens with an extraordinary idea: that we can imitate God himself! 'Be imitators of God', 5.1-2... Love is not a naturally occurring substance. It is not natural to us to love; what is natural is selfishness and self-preservation. But when we live a life of love we are imitating God, because he, and he alone, is love.

Why should we keep the 10 Commandments? Because they are the best laws ever written and they keep society from collapsing? (Aren't we watching society falling apart now that we have abandoned the 10 Commandments?) Of course, we honour our marriage vows, don't tell lies, kill or steal from each other to keep society together. But it is about more than that. When we live according to the 10 Commandments we are actually imitating the character of God himself. The reason we are faithful to our marriage partners is that *God* is faithful. The reason we don't tell lies about each other is that *God* is truth. We don't kill each other, because *God* is the *life-giver*. We don't steal, because *God gives* to us; he doesn't *take* from us. We rest on the Sabbath, because *God* himself rested on the first Sabbath. In *Leviticus* (11.44) *God* gives this stupendous call to his people: 'be holy, for I am holy'.

What does it mean to be 'holy'? The root meaning is 'different'. *God* is holy, because he is different from everything else. 'Keep the Sabbath day *holy*', ie keep it *different* from the other six days. So if *God's* people are called to be holy, what is it that they are to be different *from*? The children of Israel, *God's* chosen and holy people, are

to be different from the surrounding pagan people who worship Baal and the other false gods; who practise child sacrifice and temple prostitution; who live immoral lives. Israel is to be different from all this and to be a light in the darkness.

Of course, as we know from the OT, it didn't work out like this because of that little thing called 'sin'. The Israelites became just like everyone else. The only *true* Israelite who lived up the call to be holy was Jesus Christ.

But God did not give up on calling a people to be different. Jesus called 12 disciples to be a *new* Israel, a new *new* 12 tribes of Israel. The Church would be God's new society, his light shining in the darkness of this godless world; holy, *different* from the world and its greedy, godless culture.

In the light of what I have just said, may we read again on p1176 *Eph* 5.1-3... and vv8-10...? These first Christians didn't just drift into the church. The change in their lifestyle was very dramatic: once in darkness, now in light; once pagans, now Christians; once in the world, now under the Word. So they must not slide back, compromise with their old ways. They must be absolutely *different* from their old pagan life-style. They must be *holy*, and a light to other pagans.

And, do you know what? nothing has changed! 2000 years later, we followers of the Lord Jesus Christ must *also* be different from the way of the world in our attitude, values, priorities and behaviour. We must *also* be light to the world.

The natural direction of everything in the world is *downwards*, not upwards. It's the force of gravity. Sin is the force of gravity which pulls us down. We so much want to do the

right thing, but sin, our lower nature, our weakness, all pull us down. Isn't the general complaint that standards are all going *down*. TV just gets dirtier and more vulgar. Speech becomes cruder. Politics descends into the gutter. It's all *down* to the lowest common denominator, everything appealing to our lower nature, to what is easiest. I wouldn't mind, if people were happier, safer, and more fulfilled as a result, but they are not. We want to be lifted *up*, to be inspired, to achieve something really worthwhile. And this is where God has always wanted to lift us up out of the gutter of selfishness, cheating and self-degradation. He knows what we all *can be*. And that's why he called Israel to be holy, to be different, to be a light that would shew the world the way. That's why he called the Church to shew the world God's life-giving way which gives people dignity and joins them together.

But what have we Christians done? Yes, you've guessed it, we've just ended up like everyone else, no different from the world. Vicars run off with the organist's wife, or make a fortune doing scores of sham marriages. Priests abuse children. Clergymen scramble up the greasy pole of careerism to become the Dean of this or the Bishop of that. Congregations are ripped apart by rows and squabbles. Visitors come to church for the first time and they would probably get a better welcome in their local pub. So how are we different from the world?

Of course, there are bad apples in all barrels, but we must be *extra* careful, because the world is looking for any excuse to write us off. Actually, the world does not like Christianity at its very best, because it makes them morally

uncomfortable. People *know* they should be doing more to help the disadvantaged. They *know* they shouldn't be taking drugs and cheating on their partners. That's why they murdered Jesus. He exposed them, pricked their consciences, but they couldn't get anything on him, this sinless man, vv9-11... Why is Richard Dawkins getting so hysterical about the Pope's visit? Of course there has been the most dreadful clerical abuse of children, but that's not every priest. Did Dawkins get on his high horse when the President of China made a State visit to Britain recently? I don't remember him complaining about China's record of systematic human rights' abuse. Schools have always had abusers. Do we attack all schools and all teachers? Are all doctors like Dr Harold Shipman? Of course not. No, the world needs to have a good excuse to ignore what God is saying through the Church, because they know that what the Church is saying is right. And that's why there mustn't even be a *hint* of immorality among us Christians, v3...

The fact is that Christianity is not a life-style option which you can ignore if you like. I know it is not fashionable to say it, but God does not and will not tolerate sin and immorality. The unrepentant will go to hell. *I'm* not saying this; it's here in God's Word, vv5-7... But again, it's only because we Christians have lost our calling to be holy, to be *different* from the world, that we are now desperate to blend in with the world. As a result we have rewritten scripture to make it palatable to the world. That's why churches are closing. We're no different from the rest, and we've nothing to say. But live *Christ's* way, and you've *everything* to say.