

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Sit, Stand, Walk and Run: Walking

For most of us walking is an everyday part of life. Health experts often tell us that we don't do it often enough. I'm writing this in the lead up to Christmas, and we are all being advised to take a walk on Christmas day to help counteract all the food we will have eaten! The Bible was written in the days before cars and bikes, when walking was an even more integral part of life. This is why the New Testament writers often used the word 'walk' to describe the whole conduct of our lives. More precisely, it refers to the ethical conduct of our lives. Some modern translations, such as the New international Version, translate the word as 'live' or 'live a life' to get this point across. This use of the word 'walk' occurs throughout the epistles of Paul and John, so we can't possibly look at all of them this morning. Instead, I will focus on the most extended passage in the New Testament to talk about our walk: Ephesians 4:1 to 5:21. In fact the passage extends on into Ephesians 6 but we only have twenty minutes!

In Ephesians 1 and 2 Paul has described the great position and blessings that all Christians enjoy. These two chapters contain some of the most wonderful truths about the Church in the whole of the New Testament. Chapter 3 is a digression to talk about Paul's own ministry and his prayers for the Ephesians. In 4:1 Paul starts to set out the implications for the Christian's everyday life of all the teaching in chapters 1 and 2.

I will break our passage down into five main sections:

- Walking Worthily 4:1-16
- Walking in Holiness 4:17-32
- Walking in Love 5:1-7
- Walking as Children of Light 5:8-14
- Walking in Wisdom 5:15-21

Walking Worthily (4:1-16)

"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called". So Paul starts to set out what the lives of such wonderfully blessed people should be like. When Paul uses the word call or calling he is not referring to someone's job or particular gift within the church. He means that God has spoken to them by the Spirit and called them to believe and follow Christ. So, when he exhorts them to walk worthy of this calling, he means that they must live the kind of life that is suitable for a person who has been called and saved by God Himself. Our first thought might be that something very grand and eye-catching would be most suitable, in which case Paul's description of this worthy walk in verse 2 will sound odd to us. "With all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love", sounds distinctly low key after the grandeur of chapters 1 and 2. We must remember that, although the blessings described earlier are very great, they derive from the work and glories of Christ, and not from anything we have done. The right response to such gracious blessing is not self-confidence and pride, but thankfulness, and a sense of our own smallness and unworthiness. We must also remember that the glorious Christ, with whom we are "seated in the heavenly places", was Himself marked by lowliness, gentleness and longsuffering. A worthy walk is bound to be a walk that shows the same characteristics that He did.

An alternative title for this section might have been 'Walking in Unity'. Verse 3 moves from the individual characteristics we have just thought about, to see how they are worked out, collectively, to maintain unity within the church. Christians are not commanded to create a unity among themselves. There is already a unity of the Spirit, based on the seven 'ones' of verses 4 and 5: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God and Father. This unity is an integral part of Christianity, that is created by the Spirit Himself and we must make sure that our walk does not damage it. More positively, our walk must maintain it. This unity is not the uniform sameness imposed by organisations like the army. In the army, all people of the same rank wear the same uniform, have the same haircut, march in exact step and all salute in unison. No doubt this serves a good purpose for the military, but this is not how Christ has ordered His church. In verses 7-16 we see that Christ has given a diversity of gifts to His church. But rather than creating divisions, this diversity is intended to foster unity. The list of gifts in verse 11 is far from being a complete list of all the gifts in the church. Instead, it focuses on those gifts that are connected with preaching and teaching God's word. Not because these are the only gifts that matter, but because they are most directly profitable, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we

all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (verses 12 and 13). It is the teaching of the word of God that will build up the church of God, and it is Christian maturity that will lead to the unity of the faith. This is a good description of the goal of our walk. Our walk is not an aimless wander. The Christian life is not about filling out time, as pleasantly as possible, until the Lord's return! The goal of our walk is to become as much like Christ as it is possible for a human being to be in this world. We will return to the idea of our walk being Christ-like and God-like at the start of chapter 5.

Verse 14 highlights the thought by stating the negative side – what we are not to be like. If we walk like Christ, we will not act like children, bounced from pillar to post by each new false teaching that we encounter. Rather, our walk is to be steady and resolute. Our security against every false teaching is the sound teaching we have just been thinking about. Also, in contrast to false teaching, we are to "speak the truth in love" (verse 15) and, in so doing, we will grow in every way. The number of times that the words 'all' and 'every' are used in this passage emphasise that this walk is something that embraces every aspect of living. It is not a distinct part of the Christian life, but a way of describing the whole thing. Nor, at the risk of a bad pun, is our walk a static thing! We should be constantly growing as we walk. Our growing is to be into "Him who is the head – Christ". We are not walking alone; there is a whole body joined to Christ and this body, through its links to Christ, builds itself up as its members walk worthily and in unity.

Walking in Holiness (4:17-32)

The next use of the word walk is in verse 17, "This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind". This tells us how we should not walk, but the positive statements, a little further down, show how our walk is to be characterised by holiness. The emphasis in this section (verses 17 to 32) is on our minds and our thinking. Clearly, the thoughts in our minds affect the actions in our lives. The unbelieving Gentiles walk in futility – a futility that starts in their minds. Their futile thoughts result in unfruitful lives, that are without purpose and, ultimately, useless. How many people today would struggle to tell you what the purpose of their life was? If their thinking is futile it is because their understanding is darkened. This does not mean that God has maliciously prevented some people from understanding and believing. Paul spells out his line of thinking in detail in Romans chapter 1. Men chose to turn away from God, and the result was ever darkening understanding.

Verse 18 of our chapter describes such people as, "alienated from the life of God", and since God is the source and purpose of human life, this alienation is bound to lead to futility. The alienation comes from ignorance and the ignorance from blindness, or hardness, of heart. This hardness of heart has a direct impact on their way of life, their walk. Because they are "past feeling" (or callous) they have "given themselves over to lewdness". They no longer have any conscience or sense of shame, so they indulge every passion without restraint of any kind. Doesn't that sound like large parts of society today? The result is that they "work all uncleanness with greediness". In other words, they greedily indulge in every kind of immorality, but are never satisfied. This is an unholy walk, and it is just how Christians must not walk. This is not how they "learned Christ". If it is indeed the case that we "have heard Him and been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus" (verse 21), then we are to live a very different life. We must no longer live in the way just described. Paul calls this change of behaviour, "putting off your former conduct, the old man" (verse 22). The believer still possesses this "old man", and it is just as susceptible to lusts as it is in the unsaved Gentiles. We must "put off" this old man in a deliberate choice to no longer live this way. Instead we must, "be renewed in the spirit of [our] mind". An evil walk came from a darkened mind, so a holy walk must come from a renewed mind. The counterpart to "putting off" the old man is to, "put on the new man" (verse 24). This new man was created according to God, or in God's likeness, and therefore is in "true righteousness and holiness". Putting on this new man will result in living a life of true righteousness and holiness – that is walking in holiness. Paul then spells this out in some very practical 'dos and don'ts'. We should stop lying and tell the truth. This is linked back to the Christian unity of our previous section. We should not allow anger (even justified anger) to drag on and fester. We should not give place (or opportunity) to the devil. He is active, and destructive enough without our assistance! We should stop stealing. We should work hard to earn an honest living. We should use some of our pay to help support the needy. We should clean up our language and the uses that we put it to. We should use our words to build up and benefit others. These simple, stark exhortations come straight out of verses 25 to 29, and describe the way we are to walk in holiness.

We will need the work and power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish any of these things. He is not called the Holy Spirit without good reason! If we need His power then we must be careful not to grieve Him (verse 30). Not that we fear the Spirit leaving us (we have been sealed by Him, and He marks us out as belonging to God), but we must not divert Him from His work of producing Christ in our lives. The following things must be entirely absent from our walk if it is to be holy: "bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, evil speaking ... all malice." These must be displaced by kindness, tender-heartedness and forgiveness – things that God displayed to us in Christ.

Walking in Love (5:1-7)

5:1 tells us plainly that we are to be "imitators of God as dear children". That is, in the same way that children learn by copying their parents, we are to learn by copying God. As we do this, we shall "walk in love". John's first epistle tells

us that “God is love”, 1 John 4:8 so imitating Him is bound to result in a walk characterised by love. If we are wondering how we can imitate the God who is pure spirit, when we are human beings, restricted by human bodies, we are told to walk like Christ who, “loved us and [gave] Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (verse 2). The sacrifice described is not one offered for the removal of sins; we cannot follow Christ’s example as a sin-bearer. Only He could do that work. The sacrifice in question is a “sweet-savour” offering – one that brought delight to God. Christ walked in love and pleased God. We must walk in love and please God. Our thoughts and actions should spring from love and be controlled by love, and so demonstrate love.

If the saints (those that belong to God and have been made holy by Him) are to be genuinely like Christ, then some things are so utterly out of place that there is to be no hint of them in the church. These are:

- Fornication (or sexual immorality)
- All kinds of uncleanness (or impurity)
- Covetousness (or greed)

Sometimes the church only focuses on the need to avoid sexual immorality, as if this was the only, or chief, sin. Perhaps the sin of greed is more widespread today! None of these things is fitting for saints. Banishing all evidence of all three things sounds like an impossibly high standard until we remember that the standard is Christ Himself. But Paul hasn’t finished yet! Filthiness (that is, vulgar speech), foolish talk and coarse jesting are not fitting behaviour for Christians either. For many people, these three phrases accurately describe the whole conversation in the workplace. We may be unable to avoid being constantly exposed to these things, but we must avoid talking this way ourselves. The way we talk is a central part of our walk, and the positive speech characteristic that we should display is thanksgiving. In a grumbling, complaining world, the thankful believer will stand out for Christ.

If we think Paul is setting an impossible standard, then verse 5 may be a bit of a shock! Paul states that those characterised by the sexual immorality, impurity and greed of verse 3 have no part in the kingdom of Christ and God. These things are clear evidence that the person is an unbeliever. Paul does not mean that anybody who falls into one of these sins is then lost, or was never saved in the first place. He means that if a person’s walk is not seen to be in holiness and love, but is seen to consist only of these sins, this is clear evidence that such a person is unsaved. If we wonder why greed is in the list we are told that greed is idolatry - that is the worshipping of a false god. Idolatry is often seen to enrage God in the Old Testament, because it dethrones God and robs Him of His rightful position.

If anybody produces enticing arguments to suggest that this all sounds too legalistic, and that a more liberal standard of behaviour should be acceptable for the Christian, Paul warns us not to be deceived by such “empty words”. Such behaviour is the reason that God’s wrath and judgement will fall on unbelievers, and we don’t want to be sharers with such people, either in their behaviour or as the subjects of God’s wrath.

Walking as Children of Light (5:8-14)

Before we believed we ourselves were “sons of disobedience”. At that time we were darkness. Now we are “light in the Lord” (verse 8). We were darkness entirely by our own efforts – we are light only because we are in the Lord. If that is what we are, then we should act accordingly, by walking as “children of light... finding out what is acceptable to the Lord”. Our chief criterion for what is an acceptable way to behave is not what pleases us, what doesn’t hurt other people or what appears to work, but what pleases our Lord. To help explain what walking as children of light involves, Paul inserts the phrase, “for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness and truth”. We should do what is good, as our Lord did. We should live righteously, not to become saved, but because we are saved. We should follow the One who told the truth and said “I am the truth”, by practising and speaking the truth. In these ways we will walk as children of light and bring light into a dark world.

The opposite of the fruitful works of light are the, “unfruitful works of darkness”. We are to have no fellowship with these. We must have no active or passive participation in such things, but expose them by shining as lights ourselves. Even talking about some of these activities is shameful, so being actively involved in them, or enjoying reading about them in newspapers and magazines, while pretending to be shocked by them, is definitely wrong! The task of light is to make clear and visible things that have been hidden and covered up in darkness. So, the children of light may have to call sin by its proper name, in a world that likes to hide behind euphemisms. Verse 14 reminds us that the light does not derive from us – we are only children of light; Christ is the one that gives light.

Walking in Wisdom (5:15-21)

The last use of the word walk in our passage is in verse 15, “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise”. This time we have the two possibilities, negative and positive, right next to each other – “not as fools but as wise”. Who would want to walk like a fool! We must be circumspect, or very careful, if we want to walk wisely. This will involve “redeeming the time” (verse 16), i.e. recognising that time and opportunities are very valuable. The days that

we live in are evil, and our lives are short, with limited opportunities for living for God. Wasting time is to walk like a fool. This does not mean that Christians should not enjoy any leisure activities at all. Everybody needs rest and refreshing from time to time. But it is a clear warning against idleness and frivolousness. A life devoted to playing games, reading novels, or whatever your secret pleasure is, is a life wasted. These are not ways to, “understand what the will of the Lord is” (verse 17). It is impossible to walk in wisdom without understanding what the will of the Lord is. Getting drunk will certainly not help us understand the Lord’s will. Rather, it will lead to dissipation or debauchery. Wise people will be filled with the Spirit which, far from leading to debauchery, will result in “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (verse 19). The ultimate results of these things are thanksgiving to God and submission to other believers. This submission will assist the unity that was the subject of our first section.

Paul will go on to describe how the Christian walk is lived out in the everyday relationships of family and work, but we have no time to follow him there today.

However much, or little, walking you do in your daily routine, make it your aim to grow in your Christian life so that you increasingly walk in holiness, love, light and wisdom. In this way, your life will be worthy of your high calling and the One who called you!

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