

Ephesians 5:1-9

In the World, But Not Of the World

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Lent 3

March 15, 2020

This has been a crazy week. Kind of like 9/11 eighteen and a half years ago, there were moments this week that just seemed kind of surreal. We were left wondering: is this really happening? And yet, here we are. Some things may be forever changed, but life goes on.

As we look at today's Epistle lesson from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the context is this statement that you've heard many, many times, I'm sure: "Christians are in the world, but not of the world."
(Repeat)

St. Paul writes, **Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.** There should be something different about us as Christians, you see. Christians are in the world, but not of the world. Christians imitate God, as beloved children. Christians walk in love, they live their lives in love, as Christ loved us and gave His life for us.

Today is Johanna's 100th birthday. What a day! Definitely a 100th birthday that just about all will remember. Now, I've only known Johanna for 7 of those 100 years, but in many ways I see how she has been an imitator of God. In visits with her at her house, Johanna has told me about how she grew up, getting up early each day and working hard on the farm. In that, she was imitating her parents. Through her hard work, she was able to help provide for others, including her three children.

Think of how God has worked hard for us. He created us! He created and preserves a beautiful world in which we receive the blessings of food, shelter, and companionship. Look at His hard work in saving us! For 33 years Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity, lived a perfect life—the perfect life we didn't live—and gave His life as a fragrant offering. In the Old Testament God issued a decree that His people should bring Him offerings, and as the smoke from these offerings ascended to God the aroma those offerings gave off was sweet. The offering of Jesus' perfect life and innocent death on the cross was a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God. By His death payment to God was made, so that the sins of all can be forgiven and washed away. Jesus worked hard for us in His vocation as Savior, and Johanna has worked hard in her vocations as a wife, homemaker and mother.

Paul then goes on to talk about how we should act in our relationships with others and he addresses what sort of language should come out of our mouths. While I know Johanna has been a widow for some time, I'm thankful for the good example she has set for our congregation on what it means to be a faithful wife.

Think of how God has been faithful to us. Because of our sins, we don't deserve His faithfulness. But see how faithful He has been to us: keeping all His promises to care for us, protect us, love us, and most of all, save us from the torment and pain of hell.

As we consider the coronavirus and its effects, we might be led to ask: "Why would God allow this?" As we ponder that question, we first want to give it some context. The context is this: The Bible teaches us that God's creation was severely damaged by the Fall into sin. Paul wrote elsewhere: **The whole creation has been subjected to frustration, and, the whole creation has been groaning.** Because of the Fall into sin, and because sin has been passed on to us, and because

we sin, every single day, we live in a fallen world, an imperfect world, a world not as God intended it to be.

Because it is fallen it is subject to things like natural disasters: earthquakes, hurricanes, brutal temperatures cold and hot, and viruses and plagues. We have sinned. By our own sins too we have brought this curse on ourselves. We can't blame it all on Adam and Eve; we have a part to play in this corrupt world too.

And the question St. Paul puts to us today is: "Okay, now that this is your situation, how should you live?" And God put this answer into his mouth: **Be imitators of God. Walk in love. Walk as children of light.**

We Christians are in the world but not of the world. We are to imitate God. We are to walk in love. We are to walk as children of light. In the midst of this Coronavirus outbreak, how should we Christians be different from the rest of the world?

First, Jesus Himself said, "**Don't worry.**" Jesus Himself said that when we worry about things we can't control we show a lack of faith in God's protection. To worry is really to break the First Commandment. God says to love Him above all things, and He will take care of us. Jesus once asked, "**Who can add an hour to his life by worrying?**" Worry can creep into our lives when we start to obsess about any one thing.

The second way we Christians can show we are different, and in the world but not of the world is to continue to show love to our neighbor. Now while it pained me to hear and still does pain me, putting the best construction on it, the reason I think all these sporting events are being cancelled and so on is because those large organizations are truly doing their best to show love of neighbor by doing what they can to stop the spread of this virus. It appears that love of neighbor is winning over monetary gain.

But I guess a fear that I have is that we become so fearful of this virus that we bottle ourselves up in our homes and stop showing love to our neighbor, as *God's Word* commands. During the Black Plague, which raged throughout Europe in Luther's time, it is said that Luther and his wife Katie had people infected with the virus stay in their own home. Now, that was in a time and place before modern science and modern hospitals, but the point is that they served their neighbor the best they could while still trusting in *God's* protection. They knew that **whether they lived or died, they belonged to the Lord**. Serving our neighbor in times like these, doing what is best for our neighbor is not an option for the Christian. It's who we are by virtue of being bought and purchased with the blood of Christ. It's a must-do. It's what makes us different and what makes us in the world but not of the world.

Now, that's not to say we throw caution to the wind and don't do what is sensible and reasonable. We should wash our hands as much as we can, cough and sneeze into our elbow, and take other measures to ensure safety as much as we can. If we're sick we need to be extra cautious to do what is right. Fifteen years ago harmful germs ultimately caused the death of our son, so I'm well aware of the importance of doing our best to control the spread of viruses. But at the same time, we put our faith and trust in *God's* goodness, right?

Finally, I'd like to close with some words by one of the most pre-eminent Christian thinkers of our time, C.S. Lewis. These words of his, written 72 years ago—ring with some relevance for us. Just replace "atomic bomb" with "coronavirus."

In one way we think a great deal too much of the atomic bomb. "How are we to live in an atomic age?" I am tempted to reply: "Why, as you would have lived in the sixteenth century when the plague visited London almost every year, or as you would have lived in a Viking age when raiders from Scandinavia might land and cut your throat any

night; or indeed, as you are already living in an age of cancer, an age of syphilis, an age of paralysis, an age of air raids, an age of railway accidents, an age of motor accidents."

In other words, do not let us begin by exaggerating the novelty of our situation. Believe me, dear sir or madam, you and all whom you love were already sentenced to death before the atomic bomb was invented: and quite a high percentage of us were going to die in unpleasant ways. We had, indeed, one very great advantage over our ancestors—anesthetics; but we have that still. It is perfectly ridiculous to go about whimpering and drawing long faces because the scientists have added one more chance of painful and premature death to a world which already bristled with such chances and in which death itself was not a chance at all, but a certainty.

This is the first point to be made: and the first action to be taken is to pull ourselves together. If we are all going to be destroyed by an atomic bomb, let that bomb when it comes find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about bombs. They may break our bodies (a microbe can do that) but they need not dominate our minds.

— "On Living in an Atomic Age" (1948) in *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*

So, dear friends, let us remember that we are in the world but not of the world. Trust in God's grace for us poor and miserable sinners, love and serve your neighbor, and walk as children of light. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria