

Opening Words

In our reach for “what works” it can be easy to lose sight of holy living. It is easier to practice a principle or implement a strategy than it is to say “no” to sin or to cultivate a godly habit.

176 Eph Live Obediently Because God Will Judge

In recent years, wise employers have learned something significant about the employees who work for them. Although a good salary and a fair wage are important, they are not the only motivating factor for good work. Believing in what one is doing and having the freedom to use one’s creativity are also crucial factors that contribute to high productivity. The work must be challenging as well as rewarding and enable the worker to use his or her God-given talent in a fresh way to contribute. This gives emotional satisfaction to the worker, and wise employers use these types of incentives to motivate their workers.

The same is true spiritually! In our Christian life God does hold out rewards as a motive for our labor. There is nothing wrong with that. It is in his Word, after all, and if God wishes to reward us, we should gladly and humbly receive them, giving him the glory for the rewards.

But God provides other incentives. We have learned that God wants us to discover and develop our spiritual gifts and use them with creativity. We have seen the incentive to be united with other Christians for the glory of our heavenly Father, and we have seen the incentive of avoiding the consequences of living a life in darkness as Paul described it in detail in Ephesians 4:17-19.

Now, in Ephesians 5, Paul after setting out six practical steps for obedience in 4:25-5:3, will lay out four incentives for holy living. These are

1. The fear of the judgment of God in 5:5-7
2. The nature of the light of God in 5:8-14
3. The benefit of walking in the wisdom of God in 5:15-17
4. The power of being filled with the Holy in 5:18-21

We will explore each of these but first, let me point out something that struck me as I was preparing these messages. It struck me freshly how important holy living is. In my life, I have seen so much about techniques, strategies, and methods to help our churches grow. I appreciate much that I have heard. God has given us minds to figure things out and to discover that some things work better than others, and we are wise to pay attention to them.

But in our reach for “what works” it can be easy to lose sight of holy living. It is easier to practice a principle or implement a strategy than it is to say “no” to sin or to cultivate a godly habit. Character, building character is always more demanding than implementing a strategy. Implementing a strategy is impersonal, but cultivating character and a holy life is personal and requires our constant vigilance and devotion. Principles come and go but a life well lived takes a lifetime to

achieve. So, let's not forget our strategies and principles, but let's focus daily on holy living and character building.

We see that Paul spends a great deal of time on this subject. He has described a life in darkness, told us that that is not who we are and given us several practical steps to live out our new identity in Christ. Now, like a wise employer who knows how to motivate his workers, he gives us extra motives for holy living. The first motive he gives is a reminder that our God of love and grace is also a God of judgment. Listen to what he says in verses 5-7 of Ephesians 5.

For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

⁶Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷Therefore do not be partakers with them;

Let's make a few observations. Notice that Paul begins with the phrase, "for this you know with certainty." Let there be no doubt – God is not Santa Claus. God is not Mr. Rogers. God is not Captain Kangaroo. God is God. He is not some doddering old grandfather who is tired of living and just wants to sit on his front porch in his rocking chair with a blanket over him to keep him warm. He is the creator of the universe and his character is holy, righteous, and just. Sin is anything that transgresses what he is at his core. God did not just arbitrarily make a list of rules and say, "I decree that this is right and that is wrong." God's standards are eternal and unchanging. Look, even Santa Claus in the Santa Claus stories withholds some toys from naughty children! He has standards! But somehow, we think God will wink his eyes at our misbehavior and not call us to account. This is the spirit of our age in which we are told that there is no absolute standard for truth and your morality is a private affair and my morality is a private affair, and we just must make our own decisions, not judge one another, and tolerate one another in everything.

I think Paul's words in verse 6 are appropriate for us. "Let no one deceive you with empty words." In Paul's day, the spirit of the age was Greek dualism which held that spiritual matter was intrinsically more important than physical matter. This philosophy held that things pertaining to the body were not that important and what you did with your body did not matter eternally. If you wanted to engage in sexual practices outside marriage that was OK because the body did not matter to God. This type of thinking in the first century exploded into the full-scale threat of Gnosticism in the second and third centuries that threatened large sections of the church.

And for this reason, Paul's words were powerful and appropriate – "Let no one deceive you with empty words." My friends, those words are just as powerful and appropriate today. We face the same threat of Gnosticism, although under a different name. It is "new age spirituality." But the greatest threat, especially in the United States and Europe is the idea that our morality does not matter, that God will not judge, that everyone's choices are valid. If a man wants to marry a man or a woman a woman, that's OK. If a man wants to sleep around and cheat on his wife. Get over it. If a couple wants to live together before they are married, no big deal.

But it is a big deal. It is a big deal to God. And it should be a big deal to us. Remember what Paul said in the previous verses about immorality? He said they are not proper. They are not fitting. They should not even be named among us. I like the phrase, “not fitting.” It’s like trying to put on some clothes that don’t fit you well and don’t look good on you.

And so, Paul gives us many reasons not to engage in this behavior. He has reminded us of the darkness of the pagan world out of which we came. He has told us this behavior is improper for our stature as children of God and in these verses, he reminds us that this kind of behavior brings the judgment of God.

Paul tells us plainly in verse 6, “because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.” Paul has already told us who the sons of disobedience are in Ephesians 2:2. These are the ones without Christ who are filled with the prince of the power of the air. This is who we used to be before we came to Christ. God is going to judge the sons of disobedience.

We must remember that the final judgment is preceded by judgments on this earth. Paul makes that plain in Romans 1 when he was talking of extreme sexual sin and people receiving in their bodies the penalty for their sin. This is the judgment of God in this life. We must not think that judgment only takes place when Christ returns. It starts now. Physical problems, emotional problems, relational problems. Families falling apart. Financial problems. These and many more can often be traced to open and blatant defiance of the character of God, especially in moral areas. Thankfully, sometimes, when these temporal judgments come, people wake up and turn from their sin and embrace Christ.

Isaiah 26:9 says, “when the earth experiences your judgments the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.” But some people will never learn or they refuse to learn and they go from the judgments of this world which were meant to correct to the final judgment of eternity where they will be lost forever.

Such a thought of people being lost forever should make us shudder. These verses should make us shudder. That’s why Paul wrote them. He wants to remind us that those who remain in darkness will be judged. It is a certainty. Let no one deceive you that it will not take place. When people try to tell you that judgment will not take place you can be sure there is no basis to what they say. They have no backing for their words. Paul calls them empty words.

And so, those who engage in a lifestyle of immorality, impurity and coveting, always desiring more and never being satisfied, will not inherit the kingdom of God. One day his kingdom will be the only kingdom. One day the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, but those who refused his offer of forgiveness and new life will be excluded and will die. Their judgment will be true and righteous. Paul tells us “do not be partakers with them” in their sinful behavior.

Paul, in verse 5, associates immoral and impure practices with coveting and says that it is idolatry because it is putting something of the created world at the center of life rather than keeping the Creator at the center of life. That is at the core of the problems of the world.

Finally, I want to remind us as we speak on the judgment of God that we must be careful not to pick up stones to stone people. We must not look upon the lost with disfavor. We must pray for them. We must urge them to turn from their sin, and we must look to our lives lest we lapse into the kind of behavior for which Christ paid the penalty. Yes, we are forgiven for our sins, and there is no condemnation for us in Christ Jesus. But we must remember that Christ has delivered us from the kind of life that leads to judgment. The judgment of God is a terrible thing. We know that it will righteously fall upon the lost, and we also know that we have escaped it by grace. We must use that sobering and humbling truth to remind us to live a holy life.