

**Ephesians VI**  
**Ephesians 5:1-20****Pastor Wayne Peterson**  
**August 15/16, 2009**

*Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

*But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints. Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk; but instead, let there be thanksgiving. Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*

*Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be associated with them. For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, ‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’*

*Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

I'm going to get at this section of Ephesians indirectly by telling you a story. It is the story of a man whose name had been reduced to a number -- #24601. It had been 19 years since anyone had called him by his given name, Jean Valjean. 19 years that he had spent in prison – not for murder, rape, or treason, but for stealing a loaf of bread.

It was 1795 in rural France. Jean Valjean was living with his widowed sister and her seven children, all under 9 years old. It was an especially severe winter, and Jean Valjean was unable to get any work, meaning he had no money to buy food. In those days there were no unemployment benefits and no food shelves. He knew that stealing was wrong, but he felt it was more wrong for his nieces and nephews to suffer from hunger as well as the cold, so he broke the window of the bakery, grabbed a single loaf of bread, and ran.

He did not run fast enough. The baker caught him and filed charges. The French legal system of that time did not make exceptions for situations like this, so Jean Valjean was given the mandatory five year sentence. He lost his name and became #24601, a number he could never forget as it was burned onto his chest.

Five years seems a terribly long sentence for stealing a loaf of bread worth a few pennies, but the five years turned into nineteen as Jean Valjean attempted to escape on several occasions, each time having 2-3 years tacked onto his sentence.

When he was finally released, he was 46 and a bitter man. His bitterness grew as he realized that though he was free from prison, he was not free from his sentence. French law required him to carry a yellow passport and show it to the authorities in every town he entered. This resulted in him being subjected to discrimination and spite.

The first day he got a job unloading wagons, but when he went to receive his pay, he received only half of what the other workers received. When he protested, he was told that's all convicts like him deserved.

The next day he walked to the town of Digne where he dutifully went to the mayor and showed his yellow passport. He then tried to buy supper and rent a room at an inn. He did have some money that he had earned in prison, and the innkeeper was initially very happy for another customer, but before the supper was served, the innkeeper received word from the mayor about this man's circumstances. Jean Valjean was shocked to be informed that all the rooms had suddenly been rented and food was only for those staying at the inn. Jean Valjean protested and was kicked out.

He went to a small tavern and was told he could stay there, but another customer recognized him and again he was kicked out. He eventually found a small hut to crawl into, but it turned out to be a kennel and he was run off by a large bulldog who shredded his clothes a little more than they had been previously.

Jean Valjean was extremely bitter toward the whole world by this time. At the advice of a kindly old woman, he knocked on one last door. This turned out to be the residence of Monsieur Bienvenu, the bishop of Digne. The elderly bishop was just sitting down to supper with his sister and their housekeeper. Jean Valjean spilled out his story and expected to be turned away again, but was surprised to discover that he was invited to join them for supper and offered a bed for the night.

The bishop lived very simply and by most all criteria would be considered a saint. Like all bishops of that day, he received a considerable salary, but he gave most of it away to the poor. He had turned his palatial residence into a hospital and lived in a small house with only three rooms. The only extravagance he allowed himself was the solid silver place settings and candlesticks that were used for supper each evening.

Jean Valjean gobbled his food down as the bishop talked. The bishop did not inquire about his past nor lecture him about how he should live his life. When the meal was over, the housekeeper put the silver in the cabinet next to the bishop's bed and they all went to sleep.

Jean Valjean woke in the middle of the night and began to think of how cruel society was to him. Realizing that he would never get a fair chance to live an honest life, he decided his best option was to steal the bishop's silver (worth several hundred dollars), sell it, and start a new life. So he got up, gathered up the silver place settings, and escaped by jumping the fence in the garden behind the house.

The next morning the housekeeper was distraught to find the silver place settings missing, but the bishop seemed to take it pretty much in stride. As they sat at breakfast using wooden spoons, the police showed up at their door with Jean Valjean. The bishop immediately went to Jean Valjean and said, “Ah, there you are! I am glad to see you. But I gave you the candlesticks as well. Why didn’t you take them along with the place settings?”

Jean Valjean looked dumbstruck as the bishop went to the cupboard, pulled out the candlesticks and brought them to him. The police looked puzzled. “Monsieur, you mean what this man said was true, that you gave him this silverware?”

“Yes, of course,” said the bishop. “You may let him go now.” The police left and Jean Valjean stood alone with the bishop. He felt like he was about to faint. The bishop said to him, “Do not forget, ever, that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man.” Jean Valjean did not recall making any such promise and stood dumbfounded. The bishop continued, “Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!”

This story of Jean Valjean is found in the first hundred pages of Victor Hugo’s novel *Les Miserables*. The remaining 1300 pages tell the story of how this act of grace turned Jean Valjean’s life around and how the bishop’s words transformed Jean Valjean into an honest man.

The bishop gave Jean Valjean a new status – “brother” he calls him – a title that seems to give lie to reality. “Brother” implies being of the same family, having equal status. Jean Valjean did not deserve this title and had done nothing to earn it. The bishop simply declared him to be his brother and told him to go and live a life worthy of being a brother of a bishop, which in turn meant being a brother of Christ.

Paul says much the same to the Christian community at Ephesus. In our reading today, he refers to them by three names – imitators of God, children of light, saints (holy ones). I would guess that no one in Ephesus, and no one here today, is deserving of those names because of their actions. But Paul recalls their baptism by quoting part of an early baptismal liturgy, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” to declare to them that they now bear these names and have this status. He tells them to live into those names by choosing their words and actions according to three pair of criteria – 1) know the difference between love and lust; 2) act as if every action was done in light, where all can see it, rather than in darkness; and 3) live in wisdom, not folly. A quick word about each:

Notice that by grouping fornication with greed, Paul equates the lust for sex and the lust for money. He is not saying that sex and earning money is sinful, but that lusting for either is making of it an idol and therefore a violation of the First Commandment: “I am the LORD, your God. You shall have no other gods.” It is interesting that over the centuries the church has been forthright in speaking against sexual sins, but largely silent in speaking against the sin of greed. I guess we all fall prey to the tendency to read the Bible and apply it to our lives selectively.

I love the image of being “children of light”. It means that any action we do in private, whether it is speaking to a member of our family or surfing the Internet late at night or being in a town where no one knows us (remember the ad line, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas?”), our actions will be such that we would not be ashamed if everyone knew what we had done.

Finally, Paul says to live as wise people, making the most of the time. The word he uses for “make the most of” comes from the marketplace. It literally means, “snap up all the chances of a bargain that are available.” That’s a great image! Time is a priceless commodity, so this is a call to invest our energies in occupations and actions that are worthwhile, that build up the community. When we see each day as a precious gift, an opportunity to serve God and our neighbor, we will become the thankful people Paul calls us to be in the concluding words of this passage, “giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

You and I are children of light. We are saints. We are imitators of God. Let us live like it.