

Homiletics Analysis: Ephesians 5

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Ephesians 5 moves in three distinct but connected movements. The chapter opens (vv. 1–2) with a capstone summary from chapter 4: imitate God as beloved children, walking in love as Christ loved and gave Himself up for us. From that gospel foundation, Paul issues a sustained negative contrast (vv. 3–7): the sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness, filthiness, foolish talk, and crude joking that characterize “those who are disobedient” have no place among those who are “saints” — and those who practice such things have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. The warning is explicit and sober.

The second movement (vv. 8–14) pivots to a light/darkness metaphor: you *were* darkness, but you *are* light in the Lord — therefore walk as children of light, exposing the fruitless works of darkness rather than participating in them. Verse 14 introduces what appears to be a baptismal or early liturgical fragment calling the sleeper to awake and rise from the dead so that Christ will shine on him. The third movement (vv. 15–21) calls believers to walk not as unwise but as wise — redeeming the time because the days are evil. This wisdom is filled not with wine (which leads to dissipation) but with the Spirit, expressed in singing, giving thanks, and submitting to one another in the fear of Christ. Verse 21 serves as the hinge into the household code that continues through chapter 6, with the remainder of chapter 5 (vv. 22–33) applying mutual submission first to wives and husbands — the wife’s submission to the husband as to the Lord, the husband’s love for the wife as Christ loved the church, giving Himself up for her, sanctifying and presenting her without blemish.

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking to produce in the reader a deep reconfiguration of identity and allegiance — away from the patterns, pleasures, and loves of the old self and old world, and toward the shape of Christ’s own self-giving love. The chapter is not primarily a list of moral instructions; it is a sustained argument that those who belong to God have been fundamentally changed in nature (children of light, not darkness), and that their conduct must be brought into alignment with that new nature. Specifically, God is pressing the reader toward three things: sober self-examination about what has genuine hold on the heart (idolatry beneath immorality and covetousness, v. 5); active, courageous exposure of darkness rather than passive accommodation; and Spirit-filled corporate and domestic life that embodies the self-giving pattern of Christ. The intent is transformation of the whole person — affections, worship patterns, relational conduct — not merely behavioral compliance.

Subject Sentence: Walk as children of light — imitating Christ’s love in every sphere of life.

Primary Claim: Because you have been transferred from darkness into light, from the old self into the image of Christ, God is calling you to bring every dimension of your life — moral, relational, domestic — into conformity with the shape of Christ’s self-giving love, refusing the counterfeit satisfactions of the world and being filled instead with the Spirit who produces thanksgiving, song, and mutual submission.

Interpretive Evaluation

On verse 5 — Covetousness as idolatry: Paul’s identification of the covetous person as an idolater (*eidōlōlatrēs*) has drawn varying interpretations. Some read this as a rhetorical intensification — Paul is simply saying greed is very bad, like idolatry. The Reformed reading, consistent with Keller’s idol-diagnosis lens, takes it at face value: covetousness *is* idolatry because it names the functional god to which the covetous person is actually devoted. Desire displaced from God onto created goods is worship of those goods. This is not mere hyperbole but a precise diagnostic. The Reformed reading should be embraced here without qualification — it captures exactly what Paul intends and opens the most penetrating line of application.

On verses 22–33 — Wives, husbands, and the household code: This passage generates the most significant interpretive divergence in the chapter. The positions worth engaging are:

Egalitarian reading (common in progressive evangelical and mainline Protestant contexts): Paul is merely accommodating first-century household structures with no permanent normative intent; the gospel trajectory established in Galatians 3:28 relativizes or abrogates the household code. **Refute:** The household code is not presented as accommodation but as grounded in the relationship of Christ to the church (vv. 23–24, 32). Paul explicitly says the husband-wife relationship mirrors “a great mystery” of Christ and the church. This is not culturally contingent scaffolding — it is a structure anchored in the theology of the atonement and the shape of Christ’s headship. To say Paul is merely accommodating culture is to untether the argument from its own Christological grounding.

Complementarian reading (mainstream Reformed and Baptist): Headship is real, differentiated, and permanent — but it is defined by cruciform love, not hierarchical authority for its own sake. The husband’s headship is modeled on Christ’s headship, and Christ’s headship is expressed as self-giving sacrifice, sanctification, and presentation of the bride without blemish (vv. 25–27). Wives are called to submit as to the Lord (v. 22), not to a domineering overlord. **Acknowledge and adopt:** This reading accounts for the full Christological grounding and does not reduce either command to cultural accident. It is the reading the text itself generates.

*Roman Catholic reading on the “great mystery” (v. 32 — *mysterion* / *sacramentum*):* The Vulgate’s rendering as *sacramentum* has historically supported marriage as a sacrament of the church. **Qualify:** The word *mysterion* in Pauline usage refers to a previously hidden divine purpose now revealed — not a sacramental channel of grace. The mystery here is that human marriage has always been a type and sign of Christ’s union with the church. Marriage carries profound theological freight in Paul’s argument, but not sacramental grace in the Roman Catholic sense.

On verse 14 — The wake/sleep fragment: Interpretations vary: some take this as a quotation of an OT text (Isaiah 26:19; 60:1), others as an early Christian hymn or baptismal formula, others as Paul’s own composition. The exact source is uncertain and not load-bearing for the sermon. What matters is the content: the call to awake from spiritual death and receive the light of Christ — a call that functions in context as a summary of the light/darkness movement of vv. 8–14.

On verse 18 — “Be filled with the Spirit”: Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions tend to emphasize the experiential and gifts-oriented dimension of Spirit-filling, sometimes disconnecting verse 18 from what immediately follows (vv. 19–21). **Qualify:** The command is a present-tense passive plural (*plērousthe*) — be being filled, continuously. This is not a one-time experiential event but an ongoing disposition. More critically, Paul immediately defines what Spirit-filling looks like in practice: not spectacular gifts but singing, giving thanks, and mutual submission. The Reformed reading appropriately locates the evidence of Spirit-filling in communal and relational transformation, not primarily in ecstatic experience.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 2:24** (cited in Ephesians 5:31): The “one flesh” union of husband and wife, established at creation, is here disclosed by Paul as always having been a type of Christ’s union with the church — the original text now read with its full eschatological depth.
- **Isaiah 52:11; 60:1–3:** The call to “come out from among them” and “arise, shine” that undergirds the light/darkness metaphor and the wake-sleep fragment of verse 14 — Israel’s exodus/restoration pattern now applied to the church’s identity in Christ.
- **Romans 12:1–2:** The same pattern of transferred identity — “do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” — provides the nearest Pauline parallel to the walk/light/wisdom triad of Ephesians 5.
- **John 17:17–19; Ephesians 5:26:** Christ’s prayer to sanctify the church through the word parallels Paul’s description of Christ sanctifying the church “by the washing of

water with the word” — showing that the husband’s sanctifying role is a participation in Christ’s ongoing work, not an independent authority.

- **Revelation 19:6–9; 21:2:** The eschatological consummation of the Christ-church marriage provides the ultimate canonical grounding for Paul’s “great mystery” — the household code points forward to the wedding supper of the Lamb, giving marriage its final and fullest meaning.

Aim: To press believers to examine every sphere of life — moral purity, relational conduct, the use of time, the structure of marriage — under the single governing question: does this bear the shape of Christ’s self-giving love, or the shape of the world’s self-serving pleasures?

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
5:1–2	Be imitators of God as beloved children; walk in love as Christ loved us and gave Himself up as a fragrant offering and sacrifice	Gospel foundation for entire chapter; the standard is Christ’s own love, not human moral achievement
5:3–4	Sexual immorality, impurity, covetousness must not even be named among saints; filthiness, foolish talk, crude joking are out of place — thanksgiving is the replacement	Note the positive replacement: not mere silence but thanksgiving; “not even named” sets a high standard
5:5	The sexually immoral, impure, and covetous (= idolater) have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God	Covetousness explicitly identified as idolatry — the diagnostic word; this is warning, not condemnation of believers, but a sober reality check
5:6–7	Let no one deceive you with empty words; because of these things the wrath of God comes on the sons of disobedience; do not become partners with them	Warning against false comfort; “empty words” likely refers to teachers who minimized the moral seriousness

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
5:8–10	You were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light — the fruit of light is goodness, righteousness, and truth; try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord	The identity statement drives the imperative: <i>are</i> light, therefore <i>walk</i> as light; fruit of light defined
5:11–13	Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness; instead expose them; for it is shameful even to speak of what they do in secret, but when exposed by the light, they become visible	Exposure is active, not passive; light transforms what it touches — even shameful things become visible and can be addressed
5:14	“Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you”	Probable early Christian hymn or liturgical fragment; summarizes the whole light/darkness section as a call to life
5:15–16	Look carefully how you walk — not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time because the days are evil	Time-stewardship as wisdom; the eschatological urgency of “evil days” drives intentional living
5:17	Do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is	Wisdom defined as knowing and aligning with God’s will — not merely prudential cleverness
5:18	Do not get drunk with wine (dissipation) but be filled with the Spirit	The antithesis: wine-filling leads to loss of self-control; Spirit-filling leads to the opposite — coherent, joyful, submitted community
5:19–20	Addressing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart; giving thanks always and for everything	Spirit-filling immediately expressed communally and worshipfully — the evidence is corporate song and universal thanksgiving
5:21	Submitting to one another	The hinge verse — the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	out of reverence for Christ	capstone of the Spirit-filled walk and the introduction to the household code; mutual submission is the governing disposition
5:22–24	Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord; for the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, His body, and is Himself its Savior; the church submits to Christ, so wives to their husbands in everything	Wife’s submission grounded in the Christ/church analogy; “in everything” qualified by the analogy itself — Christ’s headship is loving and saving
5:25–27	Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her — sanctifying her by washing of water with the word, presenting her without spot or blemish	The husband’s model is cruciform sacrifice, not authority for its own sake; the goal is the wife’s holiness, not the husband’s comfort or control
5:28–30	Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself; no one hates his own flesh but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church	The argument descends to the practical: self-interest rightly understood drives spousal love; unity of flesh means the husband’s wellbeing is inseparable from the wife’s
5:31–32	“A man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” — this mystery is profound, and Paul refers it to Christ and the church	Genesis 2:24 disclosed as always-already pointing to Christ; marriage is a prophetic sign pointing to the eschatological union
5:33	Let each man love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband	Practical summary: the husband’s command is love, the wife’s command is respect — each given what is harder for them to give by nature

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	5:1–2	The Pattern: Imitate God by Walking in Christ’s Self-Giving Love
2	5:3–7	The Warning: The Old World’s Pleasures Have No Place Among Saints
3	5:8–14	The Identity: You Are Light — Walk as What You Are and Expose Darkness
4	5:15–21	The Wisdom: Be Filled with the Spirit, Not the World — Walk Carefully, Give Thanks, Submit
5	5:22–33	The Application: The Christ-Pattern Embodied in Marriage

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

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Applications (Five)

1. Examine what your desires are actually worshiping. (*Mind/Belief*)

Paul does not merely say covetousness is sinful — he says the covetous person *is an idolater* (v. 5). This means that beneath every persistent desire for what God has not given lies a functional god — a thing or person or outcome that has taken the place of God as the source of security, significance, or satisfaction. The application is not “want less” but “ask what this wanting is really worshiping.” Name the idol. Is your restlessness about money actually a worship of security? Is the sexual desire you cannot surrender actually a worship

of intimacy-without-covenant? Paul's diagnostic is surgical: the presenting sin is rarely the deepest problem. The deeper problem is a displaced god, and the gospel addresses that god at the root.

2. Stop treating darkness as merely embarrassing — treat it as worth exposing.

(Will/Behavior)

Verses 11–13 do not call believers to avoid darkness and mind their own business. They call for active exposure: “Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness, but instead expose them.” This is not the exposure of self-righteous denunciation but the exposure that comes from being so clearly light that darkness cannot be comfortable in the room. In practical terms, this means the believer who laughs along with the crude joke rather than gently redirecting it, the employee who sees financial manipulation and stays silent, the church member who knows of sin in another's life and does nothing — each of these is not merely failing to do good but actively accommodating darkness. The call is to the harder thing: say something, name what is wrong, be the light in the room.

3. Bring your use of time under the category of wisdom, not preference. *(Will/Behavior)*

“Making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (v. 16) is not a productivity principle — it is an eschatological one. The days are evil; the age is urgent; eternity is closer than yesterday. The question is not “am I using my time efficiently?” but “am I using my time wisely?” — which Paul defines in verse 17 as understanding “what the will of the Lord is.” This means that every sustained pattern of time use — screen habits, entertainment choices, the shape of a week — is a discipleship question, not a personal preference question. The believer who has never asked whether their habitual time use reflects the will of the Lord has simply not thought carefully about what it means to walk as wise.

4. Let your worship genuinely address other people, not only God. *(Affections/Worship)*

The Spirit-filled life of verses 19–20 is pointedly corporate: “addressing *one another* in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” Worship in Paul's vision is not only vertical (singing to the Lord with your heart) but horizontal — it builds, encourages, and speaks truth into others. The person in the congregation who sings but is entirely inward, who participates in worship as a private transaction between themselves and God without awareness of who is beside them, is missing something Paul considers essential to Spirit-filling. Ask: when you worship, are you also conscious of the brother or sister who may need what you are singing to hear? Let worship become a form of mutual ministry, not merely personal devotion.

5. Husbands: define headship entirely by what it costs you, not what it gives you.

(Affections/Worship)

Paul's command to husbands is not “lead your wife” — it is “love your wife as Christ loved the church and *gave Himself up for her*” (v. 25). The entire weight of the analogy falls on self-expenditure: Christ's headship is defined by what it cost Him, not what it granted Him. He gave Himself for the church's holiness, not for His own comfort. The husband who uses

headship to extract compliance, who leads primarily for his own benefit, or who defines spiritual leadership as having final say has missed Paul's point entirely. The question for the husband is not "am I the head?" but "am I spending myself for her holiness? Am I the kind of head that makes submission genuinely safe?"

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Ephesians 5 makes three theologically weighty claims that go beyond moral instruction. First, it reveals the depth of the identity transformation that has occurred in Christ: the believer is not someone who was in darkness and is trying to act like the light — the believer *is* light in the Lord (v. 8). Conduct flows from nature, not toward it. Second, the chapter discloses that covetousness is structurally idolatrous — which means every moral failure has a theological root in worship, and the diagnosis of sin must always descend to the level of what is actually being trusted and adored. Third, and most profoundly, Paul lifts the curtain on the meaning of marriage itself: human marriage was always a type and shadow of Christ's union with the church. This means that the household code is not sociological instruction with a theological illustration — the marriage structure is itself doing theological work, embodying and displaying the shape of the gospel in the most intimate human relationship.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Ephesians 5 is a concentrated display of several distinctives central to Reformed theology. The indicative-imperative structure — you *are* light, therefore *walk* as light (vv. 8–10) — is the grammar of Reformed sanctification: obedience flows from a transformed nature, not toward earning one. The passage radically undermines moralism: Paul does not say "stop sinning so that you might become holy" but "you are saints — stop naming among yourselves what belongs to a different kingdom." The idol-diagnosis of verse 5 confirms what Reformed theology has always maintained: the heart is a factory of idols, and every behavioral problem is downstream of a worship problem. Most distinctively, the household code is grounded entirely in Christology — the husband-wife relationship is not an independent social structure but a participation in and display of Christ's own cruciform love for the church. The gospel does not merely inform marriage; the gospel *shapes* the structure and direction of marriage from the inside out. This is Reformed theology's insistence that Christ's lordship is not additive to human relationships but constitutive of them.

Main Takeaway

You are not who you used to be. You were darkness; you are now light — and that is not a goal to pursue but a reality to inhabit. Everything Paul calls you to in this chapter is simply the spelling out of what it looks like to live as what you already are: to refuse the idols, expose the darkness, fill your days with wisdom instead of waste, let the Spirit produce song and gratitude and submission in you, and — if you are married — to embody in your most intimate relationship the shape of the love that sent Christ to the cross. Stop living like a person who has not yet been changed.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Preaching the household code without the Christological grounding.** The most common error in preaching Ephesians 5:22–33 is to treat it as a social instruction with a theological illustration attached. It is the reverse: the theological claim — that marriage is a type of Christ and the church — is the point, and the practical instructions are applications of it. A sermon that produces “wives, submit; husbands, lead” without producing a vision of cruciform love as the governing center of both commands has preached less than half the passage. Wives submit *as to the Lord*; husbands love *as Christ loved*. The analogies are not decorative — they define the commands.
- **Turning verses 3–7 into a purity culture checklist.** The passage calls for sexual purity and clean speech, but it grounds both in a theology of identity (“among saints,” v. 3) and a theology of inheritance (v. 5). A sermon that reduces these verses to behavioral standards — no sex before marriage, no crude language — without engaging why these things don’t belong (they belong to a different kingdom; they represent the worship of false gods) will produce shame-management, not sanctification. The idol-diagnosis of verse 5 must control the application.
- **Treating verse 18 as primarily about charismatic experience.** “Be filled with the Spirit” is frequently preached toward dramatic experience, emotional intensity, or spiritual gifts. Paul’s own definition of what Spirit-filling looks like is immediate and concrete: corporate singing, universal thanksgiving, and mutual submission (vv. 19–21). A sermon that promises the Spirit-filled life will look like heightened spiritual experience without mentioning that it looks like a husband washing dishes and a congregation member singing for the sake of the person next to them has missed Paul’s application entirely.
- **Missing the idol-diagnosis in verse 5.** Covetousness-as-idolatry is one of the most penetrating diagnostic lines in the entire New Testament, and it is frequently preached past as though it were mere rhetorical emphasis. It is not. Paul is naming

the theological structure of disordered desire: when you persistently want what God has not given, you are worshiping that thing. Preachers who preach the behavior without diagnosing the worship beneath it will address symptoms but not causes.

- **Extracting verses 1–2 as a stand-alone exhortation.** “Be imitators of God” and “walk in love” are frequently used as independent devotional thoughts. In context, they function as the governing thesis for everything that follows. The standard for imitation is Christ’s self-giving sacrifice — “as Christ loved us and gave Himself up.” Every application in the chapter — moral purity, exposing darkness, redeeming time, husband-love — is a specific form of that self-giving pattern. Preaching verse 1–2 without showing how they control the rest of the chapter lets the most important orienting verse become merely inspirational.
- **Flattening the light/darkness metaphor into simple moral contrast.** The light/darkness language in verses 8–14 carries an ontological weight that goes beyond “do good things, avoid bad things.” Paul says *you were darkness* — not “you were in the dark” but you *were* darkness. The transfer is not behavioral modification but nature-change. Preaching this section morally (here are the dark things to avoid, here are the light things to do) without preaching it ontologically (you have been fundamentally changed in what you are) produces behavioral pressure without gospel power. The imperative must rest on the indicative or it collapses under its own weight.