

Walk in the Light

"The Relationship Initiative" Series, April 11 & 12, 2026 | Ephesians 5:1-14
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You're probably not in a bowling league.

We're bowling alone and doing a lot of other stuff alone.

In 2000, Robert Putnam published, *Bowling Alone*. In it, he argued that Americans were pulling back from familiar social institutions. Participation in all kinds of social clubs was declining. People were bowling alone instead of in leagues, if they were bowling at all. As early as the year 2000, he said, we were staying home more. Wii wasn't even invented yet. I loved bowling on the Wii my kids had growing up in our basement. Putnam was ahead of his time.

I haven't heard from my high-school best friend in 35 years.

We did everything together in high school. We drove to school together. We went to football games together. We hung out on weekends. I spent plenty of holidays with him and his family. We got in touch a couple of times when I came home during my first year of college, but then we drifted apart. I moved. Multiple times. So did he. We haven't talked since. I know that losing touch with childhood friends happens to many of us, but my experience illustrates something bigger about relationships.

Many of our relationships are being choked—slowly deprived of what they need.

Today, we do eat alone, stare at our phones alone, and watch movies at home. It shows in our relationships. Sociologists and demographers tell us what we can plainly see: we are dating less, marrying later, having fewer children, having them later in life, and making fewer friends. A 2025 article in *The Atlantic* dubbed this, "The Anti-Social Century".¹ If you're not feeling it, you're seeing it. That's not the recipe that makes life all it can be or what God intended for it to be. It's not what we want for ourselves or for each other.

We long for relationships because we were created to need them.

I've told you many times, back in Genesis 1, God created us male and female. That indicates that we have an inherent need for one another. God created us in His image; He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so community is His heart. In Genesis 2, God looked at the solitary man and declared that it was not good for the man to be alone. God's greatest commandments—to love Him and to love our neighbors—call us into relationships. Throughout the Bible, God calls us to community, shows us how to live in relationship, and works to redeem a community that He will use to create a larger community. And He shows us that we will spend eternity together—with Him and with each other. We NEED relationships!

But we've all lived with relationships that just didn't work.

¹ https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/02/american-lonel...-personality-politics/681091/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

We need relationships, but we want them to work. We want marriages that thrive. We want to love our parents and children well. We want to be good colleagues, good friends, and good neighbors. In his ending to the book of Ephesians, Paul lays down a set of thoughts about relationships that can become bedrock principles for all our human relationships. Paul seems to start simply, but he takes aim at things we take casually. When we do, it's like we're living in a toxic-waste dump and wondering why we get sick.

Dark deeds damage relationships more than you think.

Paul calls out three unbelievably everyday dark deeds.

The first dark deed he lists may not seem surprising: **sexual immorality**. However, what Paul means by this is very broad. Paul means all forms of inappropriate sexuality—from shocking bedroom behaviors to casual thoughts to the images we surround ourselves with. We are bombarded with images of skin, and we can't assume that this doesn't have consequences. Second, Paul lists **impurity**. This word is vast; it means any kind of uncleanness—anything that is dirty physically or morally or even just falls short of the demands of the Old Testament Law. Impurity, then, is everywhere. It is nearly impossible to escape dirty words flying around you. Third, Paul calls out **covetousness**. That's greed and envy, and it is the basis for the marketing we are inundated with. We are bombarded with images of watches we don't have but want and watches that you have that I want to have instead. Covetousness drives our economy! Let Paul's words in **Ephesians 5:5** sink in now,

For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

These are dark deeds, and they damage relationships. How? That may not be obvious.

"Veggie Tales" brought dark deeds to life in a powerful but funny way.

"Veggie Tales" videos were popular when my sons were growing up. They told Bible tales through animated vegetables with names and faces. Do you remember them? "Veggie Tales" did a movie-length version of the story of Jonah the prophet. God sent Jonah to the evil city of Nineveh to call the people to repentance. The people of Nineveh did some very dark deeds. But how do you make dark deeds real in ways that children can understand without terrifying them? The movie said that the people of Nineveh slapped each other with fish. It sounds silly, but think about it. Slapping someone with a fish would hurt; it would leave a smell; and it's humiliating. Dark deeds damage people; they damage relationships.

Arthur and Bart bring dark deeds and their impact right down to daily life.

Arthur was Bart's dad. Arthur had been a football star in high school and college. He was injured and never made the pros, which seems to have made him bitter. When he came home, he got a job flagging cars for the Texas Highway Department. He was hit by a truck, was in a coma for eight weeks, and was never the same again. Arthur became verbally and emotionally abusive to Bart's mom, so they divorced when Bart was just three years old. Bart bounced back and forth between his mom and dad, until his mom moved away to be with another man and left Bart with his dad. From that point forward, Arthur's temper kept getting worse. He took his anger out on his son. When he got cut off in traffic, he would take a swing at Bart. One time, Arthur broke a plate on Bart's head. One time, Arthur took a

razor strap and beat Bart to the point where Bart thought he was going to die. When he survived, Bart moved to be with his mom.² Dark deeds rupture relationships.

Slapping people with a fish is more common than you think.

When we speak casually and crudely about sex, we humiliate people and make everyone less safe. When we cover our bodies and our homes in signs of death and evil, we think we look rebellious, but we're glorifying death, and that changes how we value each other. When filling our homes with the latest and greatest electronics becomes an obsession, it drives us to earn more money and drives us away from the people we love. It's fish slapping. It's everywhere, and it does vast amounts of damage to our relationships.

Light protects and heals relationships.

Light does not name dark deeds.

Paul's comment in **Ephesians 5:4** is probably not shocking, but it is still important,

Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.

Cussing and crude jokes are everywhere. One person's cuss word is another person's go-to expression. Get a group of guys standing around for long enough, let them get comfortable, and the language is going to deteriorate. If you're not going to join in, what are you supposed to say? Paul gives us a clue when he says that we should give thanks, and he is going to say more about that in the passage we will cover next week. But Paul is telling us that words are powerful. They shape our relationships. If we use filthy, crude words, we are hurting everyone—including ourselves—whether we know it or not.

Light does not join dark deeds.

Paul says something that seems easy at first in **Ephesians 5:7**:

Therefore do not become partners with them ...

He adds that, at one time, we were darkness ourselves but now we have become light. It sounds like he's saying not to go dabble in dark deeds. But the word he actually uses here means to share or participate in something. If we are partners with darkness, then the darkness is flowing through us, we are manifesting the darkness, and we are becoming darkness. Light just can't do that. It's a warning.

Light protects relationships so they can grow and rebound naturally.

Relationships are like plants. They grow naturally and rebound from stress naturally. All we have to do is to protect them from deeply damaging stressors, and plants long to grow. Keeping out foul language and refusing to channel darkness protect our relationships. So, when we express gratitude to our parents, we are protecting that relationship from damage. When we keep crude language out of the workplace, we are allowing those relationships to grow. When we feel an impulse to hit back at someone who has hurt us and we refuse to let the darkness flow through us, we are protecting that relationship.

² <https://www.historyshollywood.com/reelfaces/i-can-only-imagine/>

Light exposes dark deeds.

In **Ephesians 4:11**, Paul goes on,

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

Paul is encouraging us to fight the mold that may have crept into our relationships. When your house is damaged by mold, the worst thing to do is to leave it in the dark to spread. If it's in a wall, you open the wall up. You expose the mold to light. You clean it. And it's gone. The same is true in relationships. If there is sin that has caused damage, get it into the open. Confront it. Confess it. Ask forgiveness of God and the person harmed. Then the healing can begin.

Light can heal relationships that have become damaged or strained.

If you've said hurtful things to your children that have left them hurt and walking away, turn the light on it. Confront it. Confess anything you've done. Let the healing begin. If you've hurt your spouse, be honest. Forgiveness and healing are available in Jesus Christ. If you've made your work environment toxic, repent, make it right, and make it new. Light can heal relationships.

You ARE light because of Jesus.

God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

This is how Paul started the book of Ephesians. **Ephesians 1:3-4**:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. ...

Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for our sin. Then He rose again from the dead—victorious over sin, death, and evil. Through the Holy Spirit we receive forgiveness, new life, adoption as God's sons and daughters, a new purpose in life, and eternal life. That's what Paul is writing about in Ephesians chapters one through three. And it has a dramatic impact here and now.

God's Holiness becomes our holiness.

You see it right here. Jesus is holy. When we accept forgiveness from Him and become His followers, the Holy Spirit connects us to Jesus and takes Jesus' Holiness and puts it inside of us. Let's put it in terms of light because Jesus is the Light of the World. Jesus' Light becomes our light. What God has is becoming ours, we are becoming more like God in the process, and we really want that!

Impersonators seem to become the people they are imitating.

Dana Carvey did one of the most well-known impersonations of all time. In the late 80s and early 90s, he impersonated George H. W. Bush on Saturday Night Live. He nailed President Bush's hand motions and his expressions. With the set designers, wardrobe, and makeup available on Saturday Night Live, it was like he was becoming President Bush. Dana Carvey was an expert impersonator of President Bush, but we want to take impersonating one step further.

We are now imitators of God every day!

That is Paul's guiding thought in **Ephesians 5:1**:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.

We are imitating God. We imitate Him because He loves us and we love Him. We do it as He fills us with His own being. It's not something we do simply by trying hard. We are holy in our behavior because God is holy in His being. Our striving to be holy protects and heals our relationships.

Let Christ flood your relationships with light.

Let no one ever separate holiness AND forgiveness.

Paul spends so much time in Ephesians 5 describing holiness that you might get the sense that relationships are only going to work because you're going to become good enough. That won't happen after the Fall and before eternity. Holiness is critical to thriving relationships, but so is forgiveness. We have been forgiven, we need to be forgiven, and we need to forgive. Holiness and forgiveness have become like a husband and wife—those whom God has joined together, let no one ever separate.

What God has done for us in Christ motivates how we treat others.

Paul closed chapter four by reminding us that God had forgiven us in Jesus. **Ephesians 4:32** says, Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

There is a what: be kind and forgive one another. Then there is a why: in the same way that God has forgiven you in Jesus Christ. Paul opens chapter five the same way. **Ephesians 5:2** says,

And walk in love, as Christ loved us ...

The way Jesus has treated us is the model and motivation for the way that we treat others. Again, we are imitating God. But we're not just doing an impersonation. Jesus' way is becoming our way. Jesus' holiness is our holiness, and His forgiveness is our forgiveness. And that's the first pillar of thriving relationships: **Treat each other the way Jesus treats you!**

Arthur met Jesus, but it was almost too late.

While Bart was away living with his mother, Arthur became a Christian. It changed him from his brain to his fists. He was a different man, but Bart didn't know it at first. Then Arthur was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Bart came home to be with his father despite everything that had happened. He wanted to take care of his father. And he found that his father was a changed man. This was the father that he had always longed for, and it was bitterly disappointing to him to think of losing him. Before Arthur died, Bart forgave him. At Arthur's graveside, his mother—Bart's grandmother—said, "I can only imagine what [he's] seeing now!" Bart wrote those words down, and when he started a band and a recording career, those words became the basis for Mercy Me's mega hit, "I Can Only Imagine."³

Who might you forgive this week?

Has someone been asking for your forgiveness? Have they been clear about their sin, regretful about the damage they have done to you, and eager to make things right? Then holding back forgiveness has been holding up life's coming back into those relationships. But what about the person who hasn't asked for forgiveness? Is it your prodigal child who has closed the door to you unfairly? Is it the spouse who has never lived up to your expectations? Is it the friend who shared your deepest secret and damaged your reputation but refuses to repent? Forgiving those who have failed you and have

³ <https://juicyecumenism.com/2018/03/15/i-can-only-imagine-film-tells-the-story-of-a-father-transformed-by-gods-grace/>

refused to repent will bring something toxic into the bright light so that you can begin to heal. That may not lead to reconciliation. At least, not yet. But the journey is beginning.

I can only imagine how forgiving people will let them see Jesus in you.

When people see Jesus in us, they are seeing the face of love—the protection and healing of holiness plus the balm of forgiveness. And isn't that what we want? That is one giant leap toward the kind of thriving relationships we long for.