

## Ephesians 5:1-21

### We Are Lights—Scented Lights

*“Smell is a potent wizard that transports you across thousands of miles and all the years you have lived.” Helen Keller*

**Eph 5:1-21** (ESV) *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. 3 But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. 4 Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. 5 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. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. 7 Therefore do not become partners with them; 8 for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light 9 (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), 10 and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. 11 Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. 13 But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, 14 for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” 15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

Paul loves metaphors. Like going from the old life to the new life is like changing our clothes. New clothes must replace the old ones, and we can't mix the two, as we saw in the last chapter. Now Paul is going to tell us about darkness becoming light. When light shines into a dark place we can see what is hidden. But what about the sense of smell? We do not see odors or aromas, but when we sense them they can trigger powerful memories and emotions. It is aromas that can carry us to our past. It is light that directs us toward our future. In terms of our new life in Christ, we can think of ourselves as “Scented Lights”—not literally, but metaphorically. For Paul, light was a lamp or a candle, not a light bulb. The oils and the candles were infused with spices and other oils. They were a pleasing aroma as well as a revealing light. Paul says this is what we can *become*, this is our *potential*, if we are willing to let God transform us into the kind of “Scented Lights” He wants us to be.

Paul has spent a lot of time telling us who we are, even praying for God to show us more clearly who we are in Christ. He told us what we have already become: “*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*”(2:13) The words “*have been brought*” are the one word “*became.*” You who were “*far off BECAME near*” by the blood (the death-sacrifice) of the King. We were complete and total foreigners—enemies!—and the King died for us! Paul says this is a

*FACT. You became near and you are IN the Family. Being in the Family means we have the potential and the ability to become LIKE the Family. Paul wants us to avoid anyone who will drag us back to who we are not, and to avoid those who would keep us from going forward to our full potential. If we are going to be fully effective as “Scented Lights” in God’s Kingdom, there are things we must do and things we cannot do. Paul said that in your old life, in your old family, you were bitter, mean, angry, and totally self-centered,(4:31), but now he says, “become”: make yourselves be kind to one another, tenderhearted, become forgiving to one another, as God in Christ forgave you.(4:32). Then he says, Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children...And walk in love... (5:1-2)*

*Becoming is an ongoing and progressive life-long work. It is daily, and it is often painful because there is always failure and imperfection in our imitation of the God who is perfect in His character and His ways. And yet He says we are His “beloved children,” and that makes Him patient and kind toward us, and most importantly, forgiving toward us. The one thing we must keep in sight as we are becoming imitators of God is that Christ has already met the demands of perfection. We are following Him to the final goal and our task, our work, is to keep following Him in this wilderness of life. We can become “Scented Lights” that attract others to the Kingdom that we see with eyes of faith. As God’s children, Paul says, we are to walk in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.(5:2) There it is: the SCENT—A Fragrant Offering.*

Paul wants us to stop and think about Temple worship. There were different kinds of offerings; atoning offerings for sin and guilt, offerings for peace and fellowship which were shared as meals, whole burnt offerings to express total devotion and commitment. All of the offerings were sacrificed and burned and that meant two things: they cost somebody something, and they all smelled. The animal sacrifices were messy and brutal. There were all kinds of smells, from the very foul odor of feces, blood and burning flesh, to the smell of burning grain, along with the more pleasant scent of incense and oils that were added to the fire. Paul arranges his words like this: *Christ gave Himself, as an offering and a sacrifice to God, for a smell of sweet fragrance.* The two words translated “*smell of sweet fragrance*” are at the end of the sentence. Why is that important? The emphasis comes at the end—because the ugly, brutal, unjust, smelly, bloody death of Jesus on the Cross was actually a sweet aroma to His Father as He looked down from His Throne. All of the Temple sacrifices were meant to be a sweet aroma in the nose of God. It is a great and wonderful metaphor that says, “*God the Father loves the sacrifices of His beloved children, and His Beloved Son.*” Smells bring back memories of the past. The scent of Jesus on the Cross, lifted up as the Light of the World, reminded His Father of the Lamb of God on that first Passover night centuries before. This sacrifice cost the Father everything. The aroma of it pleased Him very much.

After the first Passover, God took Moses to Mount Sinai and gave him a recipe for oil and incense after He showed him the pattern of the Temple where God would dwell. He wanted Moses to anoint the temple, the altar, even the priests with the scented oil. No one else was to use that same perfume. God said, “Think of it as holy to me,” as if He were saying, “...THIS is what I smell like.” When God created Adam he hooked up an olfactory nerve that connects to the amygdala, that part of the brain associated with memory and emotion that is triggered by our nose. That is why the fragrance of a flower, or the scent of soap, or the smell of fresh bread, seems to flood our entire body

with memories.<sup>1</sup> God wanted his people to know His scent and to remember Him with a visceral and emotional memory. The whole Temple, the priests, the offerings, were saturated with God's scent, and that scent represented His Holiness. He told Moses to tell the nation *"You be Holy as I am Holy."* God told Paul to tell us *"BECOME imitators of God ...to walk in love...to forgive like God forgives...to BECOME sweet smelling sacrifices for God in the world."* We, like Israel, carry God's message, but we have a fuller message, a greater hope, a Gospel for the whole world. What does it look like to offer ourselves as a sacrifice? What does it look like to be "sold out" to a message the world doesn't understand, to love a Person the world can't see? John tells us in his Gospel.

*John 12:1-8 (GNB) Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, the man he had raised from death. 2 They prepared a dinner for him there, which Martha helped serve; Lazarus was one of those who were sitting at the table with Jesus. 3 Then Mary took a whole pint of a very expensive perfume made of pure nard, poured it on Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The sweet smell of the perfume filled the whole house. 4 One of Jesus' disciples, Judas Iscariot—the one who was going to betray him—said, 5 "Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor?" 6 He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief. He carried the money bag and would help himself from it. 7 But Jesus said, "Leave her alone! Let her keep what she has for the day of my burial. 8 You will always have poor people with you, but you will not always have me."*

Mary does not carefully dab out a small amount of oil. She breaks the jar and lets it all pour out. She's all-in, sparing no expense. This is oil she could have used for her own burial, or the burial of a loved one, but she poured out without thought of the future.<sup>2</sup> Reckless? Maybe. But maybe she knows, and is certain, that Jesus is her future. Her future is not secure in any wealth she and her family may possess. And Mary does more than anoint His head, which is a normal custom, but John tells us, in an astonishing act of humility, that she anoints his feet using her hair. The disciples object—all of them. John names Judas as the objector, but when Jesus would wash the disciples feet later in the week, it is Peter who objects. The scent of Mary's oil foreshadows the death of Jesus. And her actions? They are a preview of the humility of Jesus. Don't we often think that it is the "world out there" that doesn't understand Jesus? But notice on this night, it is the very followers of Jesus who do not understand. Sometimes it is in the Church that sacrifice may be seen by some as wasteful, unnecessary, or reckless. Matthew and Mark tell us that all of the disciples were rebuking Mary as *"the sweet smell of the perfume was filling the whole house."* But Jesus knows this aroma meant sacrifice—His sacrifice. And as the fragrance filled his nostrils Jesus said, *"...wherever the gospel is preached all over the world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."* (Mk 14:9) Aroma and memory! The aroma that filled the house that night, the aroma that spoke of burial, is also the aroma of the resurrection which would lead to the announcement of a risen King that would spread all over the world. The aroma of God is in the world! And, just like it was that night in Simon's house, that aroma of the Gospel of God will be both pleasing and offensive. Paul tells the Corinthian church: *"But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance (aroma) of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance (an aroma) from death to death, to the other a fragrance (an aroma) from life to life."* (2Co 2:14-16,

ESV) No matter how men may respond, our message is an aroma pleasing to God. This is the aroma, the “Scent,” we carry. We carry it to each other as we serve Christ the way Mary did: *I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.* (Phil 4:18) It is not just at the Cross we see the sacrifice that is a pleasing aroma in the nose of our Father, it is every time we make a sacrifice in our service for the Church, and every time the Church is willing to sacrifice for the lost in the world—even for those who do not understand. To be an imitator of God is also to be an imitator of Christ, it means to “*Walk in love*” (5:2), giving off the aroma, the *Scent of God*.

As we walk in love as imitators of God, it means we also “*Walk as children of light*” (5:8). Paul says light does not give off an aroma but it does bear fruit. He says, “...*the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.*” I never think of light as fruit bearing. I think of light as a sunrise, or as rays of light, or a flash of light like lightening. But Paul says light is produced by the things we do as we live life. It is the *good* things, as in good works or generosity. It is the *right* things, as in justice for the poor and needy, as in speaking out against bribes and crimes. And it is *true*, as in truthfulness, faithfulness and integrity, character that the world can see. Any of these things, if we actually do them, can cost us! Good works and seeking justice and being a person of integrity can cost both time and treasure. And God is pleased! Notice Paul does not list which right things we do. He tells us to walk in love and walk in the light. Paul leaves it for us to figure it out, to learn “*and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.*” (5:10). Remember it is about *becoming*. Then Paul uses the word walk again and says, “*Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.*” (5:15-16) God the Creator not only gave us smell to trigger memory, and sight to guide us forward, but He gave us the ability to think, to reason and to choose. As we grow in wisdom we are *becoming* more like the Father, and more like Jesus. Then we sense a greater reverence, or fear, of our Lord, and we want to please Him. To pour *our* oil at His feet.

*Becoming “Scented Lights”* means we must choose the path of light, because there is another path; a way we must not choose. Because that leads to another kind of *becoming*, another process that becomes a descent back into the darkness from which we came. Paul tells us what and who to avoid: “*Therefore do not become partners with them, for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.*” (5:7-8) *Become* is the same word we have in 4:32 and 5:2. The “progressive process” that can take us *UP* can also take us *DOWN*. Who are they? These people Paul says not to partner with, not to bind ourselves with in their goals and plans? They are the idolators; people who are looking for fulfillment and blessing in sex or money or power. They are people who have no part, no inheritance, in this Kingdom of King Jesus either now or in the future. Paul warns us “*You were from there!*” He has reminded us more than once of our former condition when we were cut off with no hope. Do we want to go back to that? It is possible and it is a danger. Paul says not even to talk or joke about sexual immorality and impurity, or covetousness (greed), because to talk of them means we are thinking of them and our thoughts can become reality if left to grow like weeds in our hearts. But *instead let there be thanksgiving.* (5:4). We live in a culture saturated with sexual temptation, where immorality is rationalized as a normal appetite. We live in a culture where greed and envy are the motivators for selling us our way of life. The American dream is built on greed. It is the opposite of the Kingdom of King Jesus. We can develop spiritual amnesia. We forget God’s grace toward us, forget we are beloved

children, forget we are children of light. As gratitude dies self-pity steps in and says, "Aren't I entitled to some pleasure, to enjoy what others enjoy?" The solution to *becoming* an imitator of God and *not becoming* immoral, impure and greedy is not really any more complicated than simply being *thankful*.<sup>3</sup> It is about gratitude. It sounds simple, but it is not easy. It can be a painful process and a daily reliance on God and His providence and wisdom. *Becoming* means using our minds. Paul says: *Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.*(5:17) Do not become foolish! Foolishness is losing the capacity to think and reason and to have real wisdom in life. It means no have "no mind," a person who is "empty-headed" and can never seem to make a sound decision. Understanding and knowing the will of God takes care and thought until God gives us the ability to see the better as well as the good. It takes work and focus, a clear head. So Paul says, *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery...*" Getting drunk, and being drunk as a way of life, and using wine or drugs as a way to cope with life, is such destructive force. Being drunk strips us of the capacity to think and make sound decisions. Proverbs says: *Do not join with those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.*(5:18)

Drunks and fools lose the ability to think at all!

What is Paul's antidote to becoming a fool? How do we maintain the aroma of the Gospel, and not let our light go dim? Turn up the heat! Pour in the oil! Fill myself with spiritual things: things that come from the Holy Spirit. He is already living in my body and is already in my mind. Paul warned us before not to grieve Him, *...but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*(5:19-21) And this is where other people are so important; other people who are committed to *becoming* imitators, and sacrificers, and servants as much or even more than I am. They are people who want to talk about spiritual things, sing about spiritual things, are grateful, not grumpy, and humble in the way they think of others first and are willing to serve because of fear and reverence for Christ. Knowing other spirit filled people makes us better people, and we find we are *becoming* what God wants us to be, and we are not *becoming* what the world thinks we should be.

Just imagine if you can, a Church where everyone is committed to *becoming Scented Lights* in a dark smelly world? We are the aroma of life to some. We are the light of life to others. The aroma drives some away, and the light can expose others who do not want to be exposed. But there are some who wake up because they see the light and hear the call of the prophet: *"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."*(5:13) This is what Paul has been saying all along, *"you were dead...now you are alive in Christ...you were far away and without hope...now you are near...your were darkness...now you are light."* Paul is also warning us as Christians, *"Do NOT go to sleep, and lose your way, like Israel did!"* We do not want to become foolish. Never forget, Paul is quoting Isaiah, who the Lord sent to Israel, and Israel could not see, could not hear, and could no longer smell the wonderful fragrance of a Holy God. It did not happen overnight. It was a process...

*Our Father, you are so patient with us, and we are dear to you. Paul prayed we would have the power to understand you and your ways. Now we ask you reveal our path, the one you have chosen for each one of us. We are all unique and different, but we are all one in you. Fill us with the oil of your spirit. Help us to shine together as one, like a bright light on a high hill. Amen*

<sup>1</sup>Rachel Evans, "Searching for Sunday" p. 230

<sup>2</sup>Rachel Evans, "Searching for Sunday" p. 231

<sup>3</sup>Richard Coekin, "Explore by the Book: Ephesians" p. 251