

EPHESIANS 5:1-20
GOD-SHAPED LIVES

What is life all about? There's a big question; how would you answer it? How do we look at life? What is our attitude to what life is all about? There are all sorts of forces at work to shape answer to that question, all kinds of forces that shape our world-view! Here are some of them:

- o The people we know: parents, children, family, peer group, school.
 - o Our culture: comics, books, theatre, art, TV, films, books, newspapers, magazines
 - o Work: workmates, bosses, employees, their personalities
 - o Political views: conservative, nationalist, labour, liberal, other
 - o Religious affiliations: if we are Muslim, Jewish, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Hindus, or engage in occult practices.
 - o Church: whether the church we attend is liberal, radical, conservative, evangelical, high church or low church – if these mean nothing to you, forget them.
- Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, we see the world through all of these filters.

To change the picture, the people that we are and the way we see life and live life is all shaped by each of these forces and influences at work on the way we think. We are the product of all of these forces and influences on us. As Christians we say that our view of life is shaped by what the bible teaches and by our faith in God, but when we look at this picture, the room is already fairly crowded with other influences. In amongst all these other influences is there any room for the Bible and for God to shape our lives? The huge challenge facing us as Christians in today's world is to let the Bible and God still shape the kind of people we are and the way we see life and the world in which we live. We will still have all of these others; we can only be rid of them if we go and become a hermit somewhere! We still have all others, but we will add this other, this time a conscious influence, to make sure that our life and our view of the world is shaped by what the Bible teaches and by what God is like.

Most of these influences on us happen without our noticing it. Our attitudes and way of thinking are shaped by all of these forces and we're hardly aware of it happening. There are all kinds of examples of that: young girls and women are persuaded that there is a right way to look, there is a right shape and size. Who has told them that if not the magazines they read and TV programmes they watch and that has become accepted! There are all sorts of other attitudes that we have which are the result of all of these influences and we don't always realise it. However, as Christians living God-shaped lives will not happen without noticing it; we have to make the conscious decision and conscious effort to live God-shaped lives; it is a conscious decision and effort that we need to make every day so that the way we think, speak and behave is shaped by Jesus.

In Ephesians 5, P wants to make sure that Christians see life in the right way and that their view of world is God-shaped, Jesus-shaped! Let's ignore the details for most of the time today, and focus on the one big thought: "how do we imitate God?" How is it possible for life to be God-shaped? That's what Paul wants us to be like, that all that we think and say and do should be shaped by God in Jesus. Here's the idea: "*Be imitators...*" (5:1,2) We find exactly the same idea in Leviticus 19, which again, forget the detail, but see the single big challenge that is laid down for the people and it is exactly the same challenge: "*Be holy...*" (Lev 19:2) We can become obsessed by the detail that comes after, but there is one single, big question here – how can I be like Jesus?

"be imitators..." (v1) Who teaches our children to copy their parents? There was a photo in Scotsman about 10 years ago, set up by the photographer of his family and it was something to do with 'No smoking Day'. The photographer had 2 children, an older boy who suffered from asthma and a younger girl. The photographer smoked but his wife didn't and he was banished to the shed whenever he wanted to smoke because of the boy's health. He set up the photo of his family for this portrait shot and only when he developed it (in the good old days of film!) did he see that his little girl had a pencil in her hand, pretending that it was a cigarette. When he saw his daughter copying his smoking habit, he gave up. Who teaches children to copy their parents? It's a growing up instinct it would seem; it can have a tremendous influence for good to shape our children's view of the world positively, but they can also pick up bad habits and wrong attitudes as well.

The Christian has to learn to imitate our Father and be like God. There are ways in which that is just not possible: we can't imitate God's glory or majesty, or the fact that He is eternal or that He is the Creator of everything; there are certain things about God that set him apart as God and only He is like that. But there are ways in which we can imitate God and Paul has already given us one of them: *"Be kind..." (4:32)* and that is cemented into our way of thinking by these words: *"live a life..." (5:2)* There are all kinds of other ways in which we can imitate God: He is just, kind, compassionate, forgiving, good, tender, loyal, patient – these are all qualities that we can aspire after; we can learn to be people like this.

Here's another way of looking at it: *"You were..." (5:8f)* Jesus said about Himself *"I am the light of the world"* – part of that was all about Him showing us what God is like, but part of it was about the quality of His lifestyle, that He was a good man, righteous, full of truth and integrity. Then He said to his disciples *"You are the light of the world."* Again part of that is about reflecting Jesus to the world by telling people about Him, but part of it is about learning to be like Jesus; we reflect Jesus to the world by showing people what He is like; we show people what Jesus is like when we live like Him, when we are people who are good, who do what is right, who love truth and are full of integrity, when we are people who imitate Jesus.

What does it mean to be 'holy?' 'Holy' is a religious word, that we use, but is not always easy to know what it means. It is a word that has been taken to mean the saints, these plaster casts of people of faith who have died and gone to heaven and in some Christian traditions have taken on a new meaning; these are the holy ones. That's not what the Bible means. Or we can have a quite wrong idea, that somehow to be holy is a bad thing because it means that you set yourself up to be better than someone else and have some kind of superior notion that looks down on everyone else because "I'm better than you; I've got something you've not got!" We call it 'holier than thou!' So when we read the word 'holy' in the Bible we immediately and automatically think that it doesn't apply to us; it applies to God and to some other perfect people, but it doesn't apply to me!

In fact, it does apply to us! The problem is the word has 2 meanings: first of all, we already are God's holy people – that is who and what we are, people who belong to God through faith in Jesus, people whom God loves and blesses, people who are forgiven and saved. We already are God's holy people and that's true of all of us; this is who we are and is nothing to do with our morals; we already are people who belong to God and this because of our faith in Jesus and nothing else; this is who and what God has made us. So, in the bible, we are God's holy people.

Secondly, 'holy' also describes something to aspire to and this is where the confusion arises because the same word talks about the way we live life. Paul again – there are

certain things that are fitting for God's holy people to do, certain ways of behaving that are appropriate for people who belong to God and there are certain things that are not fitting, inappropriate! So we read that it is fitting for us to be good, compassionate, kind and forgiving, but it is entirely inappropriate for us to be coarse, obscene, impure or greedy. Our task is to spot difference and live by it and we aspire to that holy lifestyle because we already are holy people.

Reading Leviticus is not the easiest thing in the world; I'd be the first to admit that! But I find this fascinating! Do you see what being holy means? "*Be holy...*" (19:1) and then the writer goes on to explain; there are three big themes: first, obey God, the laws and principles He teaches; second, worship God in the right way, in the right spirit, in faith and love for God; thirdly, get your relationships right and there is a great long list of ways to explain what that means, but basically, get your relationships with other people right. Here are three ways to understand how we can be right kind of people, how our lives can be God-shaped: obey God, worship Him in right way; relate to other people in right way. There is nothing fancy about that, nothing super-spiritual about that, but being God's people in the right way in ordinary every-day things of life.

Have you ever had a role model in life? Was there someone that you wanted to be like? Someone in your family that you always thought you would want to be; or someone at work who did their work in a way you admire and you wished you could do that? For lots of young women, their role model is Victoria Beckham because they want to be her shape and size. For the Christian, the greatest role model we can ever have is Jesus; there are certain ways in which He is unique and we can never be like Him, but there are a whole host of ways in which we can be like Him. He is to be great role model for Christians; we are to learn to be like Him; to be loving, compassionate, forgiving. In His love, He sacrificed His life for us; that is the measure of His love and that is to be the measure of our love for one another and for others; the measure from which we will so often fall short, but the measure to which we must constantly aspire. God give us a love for others that reflects Jesus' love for us!

Here is the big theme of life; how do we live God-shaped lives? That we obey God; that we learn to be like Jesus; we learn to think, speak, and behave in ways fitting for holy people, people who belong to God. There is no better way to look at life; we imbibe so many other influences that shape the way we think, speak and behave; in midst of all these others, let life be shaped most of all by Jesus.