

THEME: THE BEAUTY OF HOLINESS: UNDERSTANDING THE SANCTITY OF THE CHURCH

TEXT: EPHESIANS 5:25–27

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INTRODUCTION

In a quiet rural village in South East Nigeria stood the nearly forgotten St. Peter's Church. The building was dilapidated, its roof leaked, and only a handful of elderly women and children attended services. For years, the Church showed no signs of revival or growth. Everything changed when Rev. Gideon, a humble and deeply spiritual man, was posted there by the Bishop. He was neither popular nor flashy, but carried a deep burden to see the Church reflect Christ's intention. His messages centred on Christ's love for the Church and the call to holiness.

Instead of launching big programmes, Rev. Gideon led the Church into repentance and holy living, fasting, and prayer. Gradually, transformation followed. A local teacher confessed to falsifying records and returned the stolen funds. A wife-beater repented publicly. Youth abandoned night clubbing for Bible study. Even Mama Nkechi, once known for gossip, began visiting the sick and praying lovingly.

As the Church was cleansed, the community noticed. People confessed to feeling a sense of peace around the Church building. A known cultist walked in one Sunday and broke down during worship. Without publicity, the Church began to grow and attract members within and outside the community. Eventually, St. Peter's Church became a mission centre, raising leaders and sending evangelists who transformed lives.

1. What was/were the secret(s) of the growth of St. Peter's Church?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

HEAD (What does the passage say/mean?)

1. How does the relationship between husband and wife symbolize the relationship between Christ and the Church? (**Ephesians 5:23–25** cf. **2 Corinthians 11:2**; **Revelation 19:7-8**)

2. What specific actions did Christ take to sanctify and cleanse the Church? (**Ephesians 5:25–26** cf. **John 15:3; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 10:10**)
3. According to **Ephesians 5:27**, what is Christ's ultimate goal for the Church? (cf. **Colossians 1:22; Revelation 21:2, 9-10**)

HEART (What is my attitude towards what the passage is saying?)

1. As a member of the Church (the Bride of Christ), am I willingly subject to Christ “in everything”? Where do I struggle with submission to God's will? (**Ephesians 5:24; cf. Matthew 7:21; Luke 6:46; James 4:7**)
2. How do my thoughts, speech, and actions reflect my value for the holiness, purity, and spiritual integrity of the Church? (cf. **1 Corinthians 3:16–17; Ephesians 5:25–27; Philippians 4:8; 1 Peter 1:15–16**).
3. Do I see holiness as a beautiful and desirable attribute of the Church, and am I willing to adjust my lifestyle to align with the sanctity God desires? (cf. **Psalm 29:2; Romans 12:1–2; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Hebrews 12:14**)

LESSONS

Ephesians 5:25–27 forms a profound theological statement about Christ's relationship with His Church, using the imagery of marriage to illustrate divine love, sanctification, and the Church's ultimate glorification. While Paul instructs husbands to love their wives, the text transcends the human marital context and unveils Christ's redemptive work for His Church. These verses unveil a progression - from sacrificial love to sanctification, cleansing, and ultimately the glorified presentation of the Church as a holy and spotless bride. Understanding these themes is crucial for grasping the Church's identity, mission, and destiny.

1. **The Sacrificial Love of Christ for His Church** (v. 25 “*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*”) Paul elevates love to a divine standard by anchoring a husband's love for his wife in the selfless, unconditional love Christ has for the Church. The Greek word *agapē* describes this volitional, self-giving love, rooted not in merit or reciprocation but in willful commitment and grace. It actively seeks the other's good, regardless of cost. The phrase “gave himself up” (*paredōken*) refers to Christ's substitutionary

and sacrificial death, a deliberate and redemptive act, as affirmed in **John 10:17–18**. Christ's death is not a tragic accident but a conscious redemptive act. Hence, the Cross is the ultimate expression of Christ's love for the Church. This act shows the Church as a divine community, purchased by Christ's blood and not merely a human organization. Recognizing this identity should inspire reverence, unity, and humility, reminding believers that they belong to something sacred and priceless. Consequently, all ministry, leadership, and service within the Church must reflect this same sacrificial love. Without it, any action or agenda misrepresents the Church's true identity.

2. The Purpose of Sanctification (v. 26a *“that he might sanctify her”*) The verb “sanctify” (hagiase) means to consecrate or set apart for a sacred purpose. In salvation history, sanctification involves both an immediate positional holiness (**1 Corinthians 6:11**) and a progressive transformation (**2 Corinthians 3:18**) and ultimate holiness (**Ephesians 5:27; 1 John 3:2**). Christ's death was not merely to rescue the Church from judgment but to transform her into a holy people who reflect His character (**Titus 2:14**). Holiness is therefore not peripheral but central to the Church's calling. Many contemporary churches wrestle with maintaining relevance while preserving holiness. This verse reminds us that any model of Church growth or cultural engagement that compromises sanctity is a deviation from Christ's purpose. Personal holiness therefore is not a private affair but part of the Church's corporate witness. Each believer's sanctification contributes to the Church's collective purity.
3. Cleansing by the Washing of Water with the Word (v. 26b *“having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word”*) Paul intertwines the imagery of baptismal washing with the ongoing cleansing through God's Word. The “washing of water” symbolizes initial purification (**Acts 22:16**), while “the word” (*rhēmati*) refers to the proclaimed, active Word of God that continually renews the believer (**John 17:17**). Early Christians understood baptism not as a mere ritual but as an outward sign of inward cleansing (Romans 6:3-4). It represents the believer's identification with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Beyond baptism, the Word functions as an ongoing instrument of sanctification. The Church is washed daily as she submits to Scriptural teaching, correction, and reproof (**Ephesians 4:11-13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17**). This underscores the necessity of word-centered worship and discipleship in the Church. The word is not decorative in the Church's life; it is the cleansing water that nurtures her continual sanctity.

4. The Eschatological Presentation of the Church (v. 27a **“so that he might present the church to himself in splendor”**) The verb “present” (*parastēsē*) evokes imagery of a bride being presented to her husband in beauty and purity. Christ is not only the Redeemer but also the divine Bridegroom who prepares His bride (the Church) for an eschatological wedding (**Revelation 19:7-9**). The term “splendor” (*endoxos*) denotes glory, dignity, and honour. The Church, though often marred in the present age, is destined for a future of radiant glory. Note that Christ presents the Church “to Himself.” Thus the entire process of sanctification and glorification is not ultimately for the Church's self-display but for Christ's pleasure and glory. It is Christ-centric. Therefore, this eschatological perspective should foster perseverance among believers, knowing that their current struggles, imperfections, and sufferings are temporary stages in a journey toward eternal glorification.
5. Purity Without Spot or Wrinkle (v. 27b) **“without spot or wrinkle or any such thing”** “Spot” refers to moral and spiritual blemishes (2 Peter 3:14), while “wrinkle” symbolizes decay or imperfection. These metaphors indicate any form of defilement - doctrinal, moral, or spiritual - that mars the Church's beauty. The phrase “or any such thing” (Greek: *tōn toioutōn*) emphasizes the exhaustive removal of all imperfections. This is not a partial cleansing but a thorough sanctification. While the complete eradication of spots and wrinkles awaits the eschaton, the Church is called to actively pursue purity now (**Philippians 2:15**). The Church must therefore guard against theological errors, moral laxity, and spiritual apathy that create “spots and wrinkles” on her. Regular and vigilant self-examination and repentance are essential.
6. The Goal of Holiness and Blamelessness (v. 27c **“that she might be holy and without blemish.”**) The word “Holy” (*hagios*) reflects the Church's set-apartness for God's exclusive use. It is her identity and destiny and not merely about moral purity but about being devoted to God's purposes. On the other hand, the term, blamelessness (*amomos*) often used in sacrificial contexts, refers to being without defect or fault (**Colossians 1:22**). Thus, the Church is envisioned as a perfect offering to God. Let us note here that the Church is already declared holy through justification but is in the process of becoming practically holy through sanctification. This dual reality shapes her earthly mission and heavenly hope. Therefore, holiness must permeate the Church's worship, governance, discipline, and witness. The Church must cultivate an environment where believers are formed into the likeness of Christ.

HANDS (How can I obey?)

1. In what practical ways can I demonstrate reverence when I gather with the Church for worship?
2. What specific changes can I make from today to reflect God's holiness in my personal life and conduct within the Church community?
3. What steps can I take to encourage other believers in my local Church to value, pursue and uphold holiness in both doctrine and conduct? (**Ephesians 4:11-13; Colossians 3:16; Philippians 2: 14-16; 1 Thessalonians 4:7; Hebrews 10:24-25**)

HELP (How is my relationship?)

1. How can my relationship with fellow believers help promote and protect the holiness of the Church? (**Romans 14:19; Ephesians 4:1-3; Galatians 6:1-2**)
2. Who in my family, Church, community or office do I need to share the message of sanctification and holiness from this study with? How will I share it with them? (**Matthew 28:19-20; 2 Timothy 2:2**)

CONCLUSION

Holiness is the spiritual fragrance of the Church that attracts God's presence and draws believers into deeper intimacy with Christ. When the Church is set apart in doctrine, conduct, and love, it becomes fertile ground where faith matures, spiritual gifts flourish, and the light of Christ shines into a dark world. **Ephesians 5:25–27** reveals Christ's desire for His Church to be spotless and glorious - a Bride adorned with purity and love. Holiness is not just a doctrine but a living atmosphere that fosters growth, unity, and the visible power of the Gospel in believers' lives. Therefore, the Church, as God's holy possession, is called to reflect His glory. Through the imagery of marriage, Paul shows that sanctity is a relational reality - mirrored in families and upheld by every believer. Each of us shares in the responsibility of keeping the Church pure, so she may be presented as a radiant Bride, prepared for Christ's return.

Memory Verse: Ephesians 5:27 *“That he might present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”* (KJV)