

When it comes to selling a product to an increasingly informed public, it turns out that less is definitely more!

In the verses preceding today's reading, the apostle Paul is marketing the benefits of life in Christ to the members of the Ephesian church, and his strategy is that of a skilled promoter. He begins with the YES stuff. He promotes the healthy benefits of being "imitators of God" and "living in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." Christ was no scent-free Savior, however, but "a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (v. 1).

Having told them about the good ingredients, Paul then stamped out the "no" list of things that life in Christ does not include: NO Sexual Promiscuity! NO Impurity! NO Greed! NO Obscenities! Check it out: "But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among the saints. Entirely out of place is obscene, silly and vulgar talk ..." (vv. 3-4). These are the "unfruitful works of darkness" that characterized the life they lived before coming to Christ - nasty ingredients that contributed to spiritual sickness (v. 10).

"Fornication" (*porneia* in Greek) and "impurity" describe a host of premarital, extramarital and immoral sex practices outside of marriage. The sexually charged Greco-Roman world offered a host of socially acceptable sexual practices. Men kept mistresses – with the full knowledge of their wives – and took advantage of slaves (both female and male); these social practices did not extend to women, however. The Empire legalized prostitution, both for individual pleasure and religious ceremonies. Children could be sexually exploited, and babies that were the result of illicit sex (or even undesired by married couples) could be discarded and left to die.

Our own culture accepts a host of sexual practices as well, and now they are on display every time we turn on a screen. It's difficult to avoid "obscene, silly and vulgar talk" as well as the constant sexual imagery to which we are exposed (v. 4). Sex and sexual talk now permeate nearly every aspect of life from the halls of politics to the workplace water cooler to the schoolyard.

Nevertheless, Paul urges the Ephesians, and us, to remember that such illicit practices and talk are now on the "no" list for the Christian life. Later in verses 21-33, he lays out a vision of marriage as mutual submission between husband and wife, as the kind of relationship that reflects the pure relationship of Christ and his bride, the church.

"Greed" is also on that "no" list. Paul understood greed as a form of idolatry, where the worship of money and material possessions replaces worship of the God to whom all things belong and through whom every good gift is given (v. 5). Imitating Christ means imitating his own generosity and honoring his wish that we share with those in need. We should not engage in the relentless pursuit of wealth by any means (4:28).

The particular temptation we face is the one that suggests that just a little bit of these things is not so bad. As in: everything in moderation. This temptation suggests that none of these things is *absolutely* wrong, they are wrong or harmful in terms of dosage. If we take too much of these "NO" items, it could seriously ruin our spiritual health. But if we indulge in small amounts, we'll be fine. That's the pernicious lie of the devil. It is the lie of darkness. It's the lie of false advertising.

While some things that are lethal in large doses are beneficial in small doses (pain-killers, sleeping pills), it doesn't work that way in the life of faith. When we compromise just a little on sexual promiscuity; when we're avaricious and money-hungry; and when our mouths are full of vulgar language, we're becoming sick, and not just sick by degrees. We're in real danger here. We're becoming children of darkness, not light.

Paul makes it clear that anyone who continues to practice the things on the "no" list will not have any inheritance in "the kingdom of Christ and of God" (v. 5) and will also be subject to the "wrath of God" (v. 6). In fact, says Paul, imitators of Christ should not even "associate" with those who are "disobedient" and continue to spiritually ingest these things that are harmful to their spiritual health (v. 7).

It's not that Christ followers are to retreat fully from the world, but rather they are to live as "children of light" whose fruit is found "in all that is good and true" (vv. 8-9). They should seek out only the ingredients of a life that is "pleasing to the Lord" (v. 10), taking no part in the "unfruitful works of darkness," but should "expose" them instead for what they are: harmful ingredients that ultimately contribute to death (v. 11).

Government regulations on consumer products help us to know what's in the stuff we buy. God is even more stringent when it comes to exposing the secret ingredients that people try to hide from God, from others and from themselves (v. 12). When we become children of light, however, all those secret ingredients become visible and can be eliminated (v. 13). It's a spiritual wake-up call that brings us back from the brink of death and gives us a new

and healthier way of life (v. 14). We can then walk in the world as wise consumers, understanding God's will for ultimate health and wholeness for all God's people (vv. 15-16).

Shoppers who are phobic about pharmaceuticals in the products they buy often patronize only those stores they can trust, like health food stores. The cost of the products may be higher than other stores, but this is a small price to pay for a sense of *physical* well-being. And often in such stores, there's a community of people who are looking out for one another.

Paul lifts up life in Christ as a life that's basically a "SIN-FREE" zone, or close to it! What makes the Christian life attractive? Why would you want to "buy" it? Why would you want to use this "product"? Because an authentic and truly Christian life contains "NO Sexual Promiscuity! NO Impurity! NO Obscenities! NO Greed! NO Darkness!" This kind of Christian living creates a safe zone for women, wives and girls, and for men, husbands and boys. Christian living is healthy living in both a physical and spiritual sense.

This is the Christian life, and those who follow Jesus embrace this holistic and holy approach to life whole-heartedly. It's the kind of life that is free of the damaging effects of cultural additives, and is naturally filled with thanksgiving for all that God has done in Christ to make us free from sin and death (vv. 4, 20).

Prayer: Holy God, through your Son, you made us a new creation. He shared our nature and became one of us; with his help, may we become more like Him, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. AMEN

Sources:

- Goldschmidt, Vivian. "12 dangerous and hidden food ingredients in seemingly healthy foods." *Save Institute Website*. saveourbones.com. Retrieved October 11, 2016.
- Holmes, Elizabeth. "'No' lists on labels make shoppers say 'Yes.'" *The Wall Street Journal Website*. May 25, 2016. wsj.com. Retrieved October 6, 2016.

Know the No's

Sunday, March 26, 2017

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Ephesians 5:8-14

NO MSG! NO Parabens! NO Sulfates! NO Phthlates! You may not know what these things are, but if you see these NO items on a product, market research says you're more likely to buy the product! One nutritionist writes, "Would you eat your favorite breakfast cereal if you knew that it contained butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT), a product also used in jet fuel and embalming fluid?" Probably not. So if the cereal box screams "NO BHT!" marketers know that you're more likely to buy their cereal, even if you've never heard of BHT and have no clue as to why it might be harmful!

Have you ever wondered what's in your shampoo or your toothpaste? Perhaps you've looked at the list of unpronounceable ingredients on that jar of skin cream and wondered what each of those chemicals does and whether they really help. If you're like most people, you probably dump, rub, spritz, drizzle or ingest a host of stuff every day without ever knowing what's in the products you're using. We don't know what's bad for us unless somebody tells us, and these days marketers are doing that with increasing frequency as a way of separating their products from the rest of the pack. Savvy and health-conscious consumers appreciate it, and are more likely to buy a product for what's not in it than for what is in it.

Check out the aisles in the grocery store and you'll notice this trend of using "no" lists as a way of selling products that at least seem healthier for what they don't have in them. You may not know what parabens, sulfates, and phthalates are, for example, but when their absence is stamped in large letters with "NO" attached to them, even the uninformed consumer breathes a sigh of relief. If it's something with a name that begins with four consonants in a row, it can't be good!

It's not just nasty chemicals that the "no" lists tout; it's also things like scent. Fragrances are occasionally a concern for allergy-sensitive shoppers, but often the elimination of a scent requires a host of other chemicals to mask it. Marketers have taken up the cause by using the word "FREE" to describe a product that doesn't use scent-masking agents.