

“Imitators of Christ”

Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

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August 8, 2021

We are continuing today in the ethical section of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, the lengthy part of the letter in which Paul expounds on various practical aspects of Christ’s work of redemption. *Because* Jesus did all those great things, *therefore* we are called to live our lives in a certain kind of way.

Now the immediate context that precedes the passage we heard this morning has to do with putting away “your former way of life,” “your old self,” and to be “renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Paul is quite clear: “you must no longer live like the Gentiles live.” When we become Christians, when we give our lives to Jesus, there are all sorts of things that we need to put away, all sorts of practices and behaviors that we might have done in the past, that are simply not worthy of Jesus. The early church was really quite clear about what those were, and they went to great lengths to train people in the faith, *before* a person joined the church. For many centuries new converts to Christianity went through a *three-year initiation process*, that culminated in their baptism. The idea was, people really need to know what Christianity is all about. They need to be taught a great deal, they need to internalize a great deal, and, in many cases, they need to *change their way of living*, so that when they formally join the church, they are ready *really* to live like Christians should live.

We’ve lost a lot of that rich tradition over the centuries. Most churches don’t go to anywhere *near* that kind of effort with new converts to the faith, or with young people joining the church. The unfortunate result is that we have many Christians today who really haven’t received much in-depth training and instruction about the faith. But it’s never too late to change that. Each new encounter with the scriptures gives us an opportunity to teach and train, and to take a good look at our lives and notice what about them is really not worthy of Jesus – what really needs to change. So, to start from the top:

“So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” Christians who are sincere in following Jesus do not lie to other people. The Greek word for lying is “pseudos,” which literally means “falsehood;” Christians do not present their *false* selves, but their *true* selves. This applies to our interactions with our fellow Christians – “one another” – and also to our interactions with every other person with whom we meet or do business – “our neighbors.” When was the last time you told a lie, or presented a false self to another person? Why did you do it? What did you hope to *gain* from that? Was it worth the price of Jesus’ *life*?

“Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.” It is okay to be angry. We see in the gospels examples of Jesus getting angry at times, especially at people’s hardness of heart, their unwillingness to do the right thing, their hiding behind rules and regulations instead of living in

faith and trust in God. There is nothing wrong with being angry at times, when there is injustice, or wrongdoing, or at situations that simply aren't fair, or when you are suffering because of the evil or unkind or self-centered acts of other people. The real issue for us Christians is what we *do* with our anger. Does our anger lead us into sin? That should not happen. We need to manage our anger, not let it consume us, not let it overpower us, not let it cause us to do things that are not worthy of Jesus. We should not "let the sun go down on our anger," which means we need to find effective ways to *deal* with our anger, so it does not consume us day after day, dragging our hearts away from Jesus.

"... And do not make room for the devil." Anger is one of many things that can be a snare for us, a factor that allows for evil to rise up in our hearts. I am remembering the story of Cain and Abel, way back in Genesis; Cain was very angry because God had accepted his brother Abel's offering, but had not accepted his own. God said to Cain, "Why are you angry? ... If you do well, will you not be accepted? ... Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you; but you must master it." Cain failed to master his sin; Cain allowed evil to rise up in his heart; Cain made room for the devil – and Abel *died* because of it.

"Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy." Stealing – any act of taking something which does not rightfully belong to you – is not worthy of Christ. The instruction to not steal is one of the Ten Commandments. Paul says that thieves should *work* for their money – indeed, not just earn enough to take care of their own needs, but work to the point where they have enough money and resources to be able to share with those who are truly in need. The Christian life is about *giving*, not about *taking*.

"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear." Literally in the Greek, "evil talk" is "corrupt word" or "worthless words." We Christians are called to choose our words carefully. There are all kinds of words that come out of our mouths that are not worthy of Jesus. There are many times when our words serve to tear down rather than to build up. The point of our being able to talk, to use words, is to *give grace*, to be ambassadors of Christ's truth and love. But some people are filled with vitriol; some people spend a lot more time and energy complaining than they do thanking; some people like to point out every flaw in their neighbor but refuse to hear any constructive feedback in return; too many people do not think about the *effect* their words might have, before they come out of their mouth. Paul asks us to be more careful with our words, that they not be corrupt, or worthless, or evil.

"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption." For this sentence, we have to remember that we who place our trust in Jesus Christ have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. It may not have come upon us in tongues of fire, as it did the original disciples on the day of Pentecost, but it *has* come upon us. Earlier in this letter to the Ephesians, Paul had said: "You also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit." (Eph. 1:13) The book of Revelation presents an image of the believers in Jesus, the servants of God, marked "with a seal on their foreheads." (Rev. 7:3) The seal of the Holy Spirit may not be immanently visible to you or to me, or to any human on the face of the earth, but it *is* visible to God. God knows who has received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The thing is, though, we don't always live up to God's expectations of us; there are times we say or do things that "grieve the Holy Spirit of God." Indeed, any of these various things that Paul is cautioning us about in this passage are things that "grieve the Holy Spirit of God," and there are many more as well. What we have to understand is that God *feels* the weight of our sin. We disappoint God

every time we stray from God's path. Our poor choices cause God to *feel* sadness and sorrow.

“Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice...” Here are several more things we need to part with. *Bitterness* has to do with *sharpness*; the Greek word has to do with *cutting or pricking*. It comes from a heart that is not whole. *Wrath* has to do with *passionate indignation*, with heat boiling up into anger. Wrath is an attribute of God; it is the kind of anger that God is described as having numerous times throughout the scriptures, when people despise God's word. But it's not something that we need to be carrying around. *Anger* we have already discussed; just a few verses earlier Paul had said “be angry but do not sin.” Now he says we need to *put away* anger. That gives us a clue how to interpret this whole series of passions – bitterness and wrath and anger and so forth; we might at times *feel* them, but we need to move *past* them, we need to *put them away* from us, for they bring rot to our souls. *Wrangling* has to do with *clamor*, with *outcries*, with the moral outrage we sometimes feel at the injustice that exists in the world. It might be justified – there are times when the word appears in the New Testament when it definitely seems to be justified – but, once again, the idea is that we need to move *past* it. We can't stay angry at injustice forever; we can't let our outrage *consume* us. *Slander* has to do with saying things that cause injury to the name or character of another person. Literally in Greek, the word is *blasphemy*, which we associate with saying things that cause injury to the name or character of *God*, but Paul is speaking more broadly here. We can use our words to blaspheme *anybody's* good name, anytime we say things about another person that simply aren't true. It is yet another behavior pattern that we as Christians simply need to stop doing. Finally, there is *malice*, literally “evilness;” this has to do with ill will, with the desire to cause harm, with depravity, with the willful disregard of God's law. Those whose hearts are filled with malice – or with *any* of these behaviors we have been discussing – are not living lives worthy of Jesus Christ.

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” Finally, Paul starts telling us how to *live*, instead of how *not* to live. A Christian life is characterized by *kindness*, by *tenderheartedness*, by *forgiveness* of one another's faults. That ... can be hard to do. It is especially hard when people do not realize the harm they have caused, the way they have hurt other people. There are times when people need to apologize, and they don't ... and we are *still* called to forgive. The model, once again, is Jesus: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Here is the capstone to it all. Jesus calls us to live ... like *he* did. Exhibiting the same kind of love to others that *he* has offered to all of us. That is a *tremendous* amount of love! And the only way to do that is to truly seek to *imitate God* in all things. The word “imitator,” in Greek, is *mimetes*; it's where we get our word “mimic,” someone who is trying to imitate or copy what someone else is doing. Paul is saying that our job as Christians is to try to *mimic* Jesus Christ. To say and do the kind of things that he did. To treat people the way he did – the lowly, with compassion; the outcasts, with grace; the people from other countries, with mercy; the arrogant and haughty, with the hard truth of God. To give of yourself freely and generously, yet also to regularly take time apart by yourself to talk and pray with God. To teach and train up others in the way of God. To put up with all kinds of adversity and hardship with patient endurance, and – when you are literally being slaughtered – to offer words of forgiveness and grace. Imitators of Christ. *That* is what we are called to be. May God grant us wisdom and courage and grace to take up that calling ... and do it *well*.

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