

October 29, 2023

SOME SPECIFICS FOR LIFE TOGETHER AS A CHURCH

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

(9 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)

Twenty-three years ago today I stood at the front of the church after preaching that Sunday morning and called the names of sixty-some people who came up front one-by-one and signed a copy of our church covenant. As a church, we were somewhat re-constituting our membership and decided that we wanted to do what churches had historically done until about the middle of the twentieth century—draft a church covenant and have members sign it as an expression of their commitment to the Lord, one another, and to walking in obedience to the commands of God’s Word.

The covenant we signed that day is the same covenant members sign today. In it, we covenant together to commit ourselves to “work and pray for unity among the members of this body,” “walk together in brotherly love, exercise affectionate care for one another,” “rejoice at one another’s happiness and, by tenderness and sympathy, bear one another’s burdens and sorrows,” among other things. It’s a powerful reminder of what Christ has called us to and what it means to be a member of a local church. It’s a reminder of what is required of us if we’re going to walk and live and work together in such a way that the whole of this church grows up into Christ. But long before Cornerstone or any other local church drafted a covenant to express specifically what is required for a group of people to walk together as a local church, Paul had already addressed this issue in Ephesians 4:25-5:2.

It’s not by mistake that Ephesians 4:25-5:2 is after Paul’s glorious vision of who the church is that he laid out in 4:1-16. After laying out that beautiful picture of individuals having been captured by Christ, gifted by his grace, and then each carefully given and placed in the church for the building up of the whole, you need some exhortations on how we live in such a way that we’re building each other up rather than tearing each other down. You see, just bringing believers together and forming a local church doesn’t guarantee all will come up lilies and roses. You and I could probably tell horror stories where all kinds of wickedness showed itself in local churches. Many members meetings over the years have been notorious for being the last place you’d want to be. And so Paul uses these verses we’re looking at this morning to tell us what we need to do in order to walk together in a healthy way as a local church so that each of us is built up in Christ.

These verses relate to the text we saw last week by fleshing out the general exhortations we saw there in detail. If Paul gave us the general guidelines for fighting sin and pursuing holiness by rejecting our pursuit of sin, renewing our minds to what the Scripture says, and then pursuing obedience to God’s Word, this morning’s text focuses on specific applications of that in terms of our speech, handling anger, working, and more. So, I just want to mimic what Paul does in our text and just walk through these commands. As you can see, he just lists exhortation after exhortation.

Whenever I see a text like this I wonder if the biblical author thought, “Well, this will be hard to preach, won’t it?” Or perhaps Paul would say, “Just walk through my commands!” So, that’s what I’m going to do. This isn’t going to be an artful and creative sermon. But before I start walking through these commands, I will note that they do seem to follow a general pattern. The pattern is: 1) put away or stop doing something, 2) start doing this other thing that is better, and 3) this is the ground or reason why you want to do this better thing. Therefore, I’ve identified five times Paul generally repeats this pattern in our text, and I simply want to highlight them one by one. What kinds of things do we need to do in order to live well together as a church? First, instead of speaking dishonestly to one another, speak truthfully.

Instead of speaking dishonestly to one another, speak truthfully (v. 25)

This is where Paul begins our text, writing, “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another” (v. 25). Now, the presence of the word “neighbor” might lead us to think that Paul’s focus isn’t the church. After all, the Bible will refer to our neighbor (the term Paul uses here) to be anyone—believer or not—who is in need. However, though we shouldn’t speak falsehoods to our unbelieving neighbor, I think Paul’s focus here is on the church community. I say that because he ends this verse by nothing that we’re members of one another, which is only true of those who belong to the church.

So, Paul tells us that as believers, living our lives together as members of the church, we need to make sure that we aren’t lying but are speaking truthfully with each other. If we’re going to be the means by which each other grows into maturity in Christ, then the community of believers must be a community where we trust one another. You can imagine how lying to one another and being dishonest with one another could tear apart a Christian community quickly. Strong relations require trust and honesty. And so let’s make sure we speak truthfully with one another and are always trustworthy.

Now, that is straightforward enough, while some more of these get tricky, so let’s move on to the next one. Next, Paul tells us not to sin in our anger and make sure it’s short-lived.

Don’t sin in your anger and make sure it’s short-lived (vv. 26-27)

Paul writes, “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil” (vv. 26-27). Now, what’s odd about the way this verse begins is that Paul is going to say in verse 31 that we should put away all anger. What do we then do with Paul saying, “Be angry” in verse 26?

I think there are one of two ways we could go with this. One is to say that Paul is recognizing anger as a concession. In other words, he’s not commanding us to be angry about anything. In fact, he doesn’t want us to get angry. But he is recognizing that sometimes we will get angry,

and in those moments, he wants to tell us how to handle it.¹ Another way to reconcile verses 26 and 31 is to note that before Paul condemns sinful anger, he first recognizes in verse 26 that there are things about which we should properly get angry. For example, watching a person chase after sin to the detriment of himself, his family, and his church should arouse righteous anger. That's what Paul is addressing. He's saying, "On those occasions when righteous anger is required, let me tell you how to handle it." And either of these may be the case, but what both rightly identify is that Paul is telling us how to handle our anger—whether the anger itself is justified or not.

There are things in this world that will make us angry—again, whether righteously or not. We need to acknowledge that. But anger also poses a threat to us, and if we fail to recognize this, it will be to our own detriment. Paul wants us to see that even righteous anger can lead to sin. After telling us not to sin in our anger he specifically says, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil."

In other words, what we need to see is that even righteous anger has an expiration date. You know how you buy a gallon of milk, and it has an expiration date on it. The idea is that if you're going to open that gallon of milk and drink it, you better make sure it's before that date. If it's after that date, you might want to smell it first. Because at some point that really tasty milk becomes rancid. It's disgusting. We've probably all been there.

Well, the same thing is true with anger. Even if it begins as something good—you're angry that abortion happens so frequently in our country and is applauded—it too has an expiration date and can become rancid in your soul. If we let anger linger, Paul tells us that we open the door to the devil to exploit this for our harm. Righteous anger, if not released unto the Lord can turn into bitterness and a characteristic in us that will drive others away.

Have you ever been around someone who is just angry? He may be able to articulate righteous reasons why he's angry, but it doesn't change the fact that he's characterized by anger and that it makes others want to avoid him. We must not become that person. He's allowed Satan to seize his anger and use it to turn him away from bearing the fruit of the Spirit. And the way not to become that is to release your anger unto the Lord who is judge of all instead of letting it linger in your soul and allow you to become a tool of the evil one.

And what makes this particularly needed for us is that we live in a culture that gives us all kinds of reasons to be angry. Just listening to the news, scrolling through a social media sight, or listening to the radio or podcasts will bombard you with reasons to be angry. We can get angry about our local, state, or national government. If you've not been provoked to anger by any of these yet, you're probably just ignorant of much. But when these realities cause anger to rise up within you, just realize that you're playing with a ticking time bomb. You're sipping on a gallon of milk whose expiration date is tomorrow. Things could get nasty in your soul very quickly. So

¹ This is the view, for example, of Robert Jones, *Uprooting Anger* (Phillipsburg, NJ: 2005), 181-88.

let's make sure that when anger arises in our heart, we take it to the Lord and release it unto the one who will bring justice on that last day. And perhaps we need to avoid those things that might constantly arouse us to anger. I've stopped listening to certain podcast that highlight all the foolish decisions made each day because I found myself feeling angry all the time, and I don't want to give room to the devil. Plus, it helps your lunch conversations. When someone says, "Did you hear about what happened?" You can say, "No, tell me." When you're angry, don't sin, realizing even righteous anger has an expiration date. Next, Paul moves on to another practical topic, telling us not to steal but work hard so that we can give.

Don't steal but work hard so that you can give (v. 28)

We see this in verse 28 as Paul writes, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need." Now, the first half of this verse is obvious. If one was a thief before his conversion, he should stop stealing now that he belongs to Christ. I doubt any of us wants to push back on that and take up a pro-stealing argument—or at least we shouldn't. But the rest of the verse is interesting.

First, Paul says that we should work hard with our own hands. This isn't Paul's way of saying that the only way to earn money is to do manual labor. There are a number of jobs that aren't physically demanding but are good, honest work. That's all Paul is commending. Sometimes we can wrongly think that hard work is part of the fall because God told Adam that as a consequence of his sin he would toil by the sweat of his brow. But this didn't mean that work itself was part of the curse. Rather, the curse was that as we work, it'll often feel like the earth itself is working against us. We'll plant gardens only to have to fight weeds, struggle with drought, and be pricked by thorns. In a cursed world, there are days we might all hate our jobs. But work itself is a good thing, given to us by the Lord.

But what's most interesting is that Paul says we should work hard in order that we might have something to share. In other words, we do not work simply to provide for ourselves. This is a necessary element in life, and if we refuse to work to provide for ourselves, that's not good. But as necessary as it is to work and provide for yourself, it's not sufficient as a believer. We must also work in order to give.

At any moment in life we may well find ourselves in a place of abundance or a place of need. And need doesn't necessarily indicate that we're not working hard. You can work hard and still find yourself in need. Perhaps you worked hard and then poor weather ruined your crops. Or, maybe you work hard, and the margins in your life are still pretty tight financially so that when your HVAC unit goes out, you're facing hardship. In those moments, we want to make sure that you're cared for. In fact, we have a line item in our church budget called "storehouse" for any church member who is in need. We want to help meet those needs. But the only way we're able to have money in that budget line is because believers work hard, in part, so that they can give to the church in order that we might do such things.

So, if you find yourself in a place where you might work very little and are still able to provide for your family, that's great. But if you can, consider working more, working harder, setting your sights on being able to have more to give in order that others might be blessed as well. You may be the very means by which your Heavenly Father provides for another child of his. Work so you can give. Next, instead of using corrupting speech, speak only that which builds up others.

Instead of using corrupting speech, speak only that which builds up others (vv. 29-30)

Paul writes in verse 29, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." Now, when I was young, this was a verse I memorized in order to stop using profanity that I'd heard often in public school, which is an embarrassing admission, and I definitely shouldn't have been speaking that way. If nothing else, it was absolutely dishonoring to my parents. But as much as this verse helped me fight that, I think that would be a very shallow reading of this text if we thought it simply addressed profanity. What is much more destructive is using our speech to tear down one another, to gossip, backbite, and slander. I think this is the kind of corrupting talk that Paul mainly has in mind because he contrasts corrupting speech with speech that builds up others. I also believe that verse 30 is linked here, as Paul writes, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." What grieves the Spirit is division and corruption in the body of Christ, especially through our speech.

This can perhaps be the most challenging of Paul's commands here. How easy is it for us to have a challenging encounter or situation with someone and go to another and say all kinds of bad things about that person? That's definitely how the world works, but it must not be that way among us. So, as a congregation, let's just make a rule, let's not say things that would tear down, be unloving, cast others in this body in a bad light, etc. If we do that, not only is that pleasing to the Holy Spirit, but it thwarts a lot of devices that the devil has up his sleeve. Our enemy's schemes are dependent, in part, on us slandering, gossiping, backbiting, and simply saying things that are unkind, disrespectful, and unloving. Let's ask ourselves, "Does my saying this to this person cast my brother and sister in a bad light, suggest evil of them, or exalt myself above them?" If so, don't say it.

By contrast, Paul tells us to speak that which is good for building up. It's not sufficient for us not to say things that would tear down or be unloving; we also need to make sure that our words are building others up. Instead of being quick to pounce with gossip when you see others falling short, let's be quick to pounce with encouragement and bragging about others when we see evidence of grace in their lives. Let's make it a practice as a church to encourage one another face-to-face and brag about grace in each other's lives behind our backs. This delights the Holy Spirit. When you're about to get together with others after a bad encounter, pray that the Lord will show you his grace in others, and then go brag about that behind that person's back. That creates a tight, united, loving community. And, finally, let us put away all bitterness and be kind, forgiving, and loving.

Put away all bitterness and be kind, forgiving, and loving (vv. 31-2)

Now, I said “bitterness,” but that’s really just one of the many things Paul lumps together in verse 31. He writes, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander but put away from you, along with all malice.” These verses from now to the end of our text serve as a summary of the negative we need to put away and the positive we need to take up. So, as Paul sums it up, we see that we must not let bitterness dwell in us. We should not feel wrath or anger toward one another, especially when what undergirds it is our own selfishness and pride. As we’ve noted, slander simply must not have any place among us.

But even more helpfully, Paul lays out a positive vision, telling us in verse 32, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” Brothers and sisters, kindness isn’t simply a personality trait. It’s a fruit of the Spirit. We must strive to be kind to one another, tender with one another, and quick to forgive one another because we know how much we’ve been forgiven by Christ. And in this way we get to imitate how God is toward us as his beloved children (5:1). We get to walk in love with one another, imitating our Lord, who loved us and gave himself up for us (5:2).

When you throw a bunch of people who have not yet been glorified—as we will be at the resurrection—together, the possibilities for that people destroying one another can be great. Again, we could tell stories of churches acting in ways that are far from honoring Christ. But Paul has laid out for us a way of going about things that not only makes sense but isn’t out of our reach as believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We can speak truthfully to one another, refuse to let our anger linger so that it won’t grow into more, work hard so that we might be able to share with one another, speak only that which will build each other up, and be kind, loving, and forgiving to one another, even as our Father is to us. And if we live this way I think we’ll be amazed at how we’ll grow into greater spiritual maturity as a congregation.

But let me note one other element. I’ve noted that today is the twenty-third anniversary of our first church members signing our church covenant. But there’s one other thing I want to note about our covenant. Before any commitment on that document, our covenant begins with these words: “Having been brought by the grace of God to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.” And with those words we’re saying two things: 1) we don’t see these commands as a means of becoming righteous before God. Our only hope of righteousness is trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as being righteous for us. And, 2) we trust that the grace that brought us to Jesus will empower us to keep Christ commands, which will list on that document.

Let’s remember those two things this morning. We don’t obey these commands we’ve looked at today to make us righteous, and we’re only able to obey them because God has given us to grace to come to him and the grace that God gives to save is also able to transform us. So let’s thank him by coming to the table and express our desire by faith to obey the one who lived, died, and was raised for us. Amen.