

## “THE WHOLESOME RHETORIC OF GRACE” Ephesians 4:25-32

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Someone said, “Children don’t misquote you; they only repeat what you should not have said.” (Unknown) I’m sure I don’t have to persuade you that it’s important to be careful about what we say and how we say it.

- Over the past three months my weekend messages have been on the general theme of a healthy church. I’ve dealt with living in peace; the importance of belonging and feeling safe in a church; why unity is so important; how to deal with people who have hurt you; knowing how you fit in; being humble as Christ was humble; being authentic Christians; being honest with God and with ourselves; and the risks involved in judging others.

The New Testament letters to the churches focus on these themes over and over.

To the Apostles Paul and Peter and John nothing was more important in a church than its spiritual purity and unity.

- Today our Scripture theme is all about how we relate to one another in a healthy church—particularly how we speak to each other.

Why is it so easy to criticize other Christians, and then to try to influence others to do the same thing?

The faults we criticize in others are usually the same faults we have, but we don’t want to admit it.

The spiritual damage in a church is enormous if someone ignites hurtful criticism. It can spread like wildfire throughout a congregation. That’s why we must deal with this matter so often.

- In his letter to the church at Ephesus the Apostle Paul explained that the Christians who comprise a church are new spiritual creations.

That means their new life is supposed to be radically different from their former corrupt way of living.

So Paul told everyone in the church to *‘Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.’* (Ephesians 4:24)

That’s what we’re going to look at this morning—what it means to live as people whom God has given new life from the inside out. It’s Ephesians 4:25-32.

<sup>25</sup> *Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.*

<sup>26</sup> *“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,*

<sup>27</sup> *and do not give the devil a foothold.*

<sup>28</sup> *He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.*

<sup>29</sup> *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

<sup>30</sup> *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*

<sup>31</sup> *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.*

<sup>32</sup> *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

True Christians have a new nature from God that is righteous and holy. In Ephesians 4:25-32 the Apostle Paul tells us what this means for each of us in the church. We have responsibilities

### I. WE PROTECT THE UNITY OF CHRIST’S CHURCH. Ephesians 4:25-28

The psalmist David said, *‘How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!’* (Psalm 133:1).

But unity like this is always at risk. It is easily snuffed out.

Belonging to Christ’s church is a serious commitment. It’s not like a country club that exists for our recreation.

A church is a local, visible community of God’s people. It’s infinitely more than just a religious institution.

Belonging to a local church doesn’t mean you have a sort of mystical commonality with Christians everywhere.

The church is not like Garrison Keillor’s mythical Minnesota community, Lake Wobegone. You can’t find it on a map, but Keillor said it was real because thousands of Minnesotans identify in heart with the experiences in his corny and captivating yarns.

The church is not like that. It is an identifiable, visible community with nitty-gritty expectations of everyone that belongs to it. There is something real and practical that each of us is responsible for. There’s nothing whimsical or sentimental about the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>25</sup> *Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.*

In the Bible ‘neighbor’ commonly means someone you have a relationship with or you should have a relationship with. Someone close—like your fellow Christian in the church.

- We must be truthful with one another. This means honest confrontation at times. But it must be done with love.

If someone is truthful with you, then you know if you can trust that person.

It’s impossible to have unity where there is no trust.

If we can’t trust each other we have at best what former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, called *détente*—a manageable reduction of tension or hostility.

That’s not the way we’re supposed to relate to one another as Christ’s followers.

I’m told that plants grown under unnatural, artificial light produce sour fruit. I think this can apply to the fruit of character the Bible says Christ’s followers are supposed to produce. If the pure light of God’s truth is absent and instead there is an artificial light of pretense and hypocrisy, then you are sure to find some bitter, critical, cheerless Christians in the church.

<sup>26</sup> *"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,*

<sup>27</sup> *and do not give the devil a foothold.*

Sometimes anger is justifiable. It’s righteous anger, but it’s one of the hardest emotions to control.

“When we get frustrated sometimes we rip down our halos and pull out our pitchforks.” (Melody Beattie)

Anger should never become so delicious to us that we savor it.

It’s been said that in some churches not only has the sun gone down on the anger and bitterness of Christians toward one another, but countless moons have set as well.

Across America people attend church services together, but some of them refuse to speak to others who are in the same service with them. This ought not to be!

If we become angry, we must recognize the danger and not let it fester by holding on to it day after day. That gives the devil an opportunity.

It gives him a place to stand where he can wreak havoc in the life of a Christian where he doesn’t belong.

The text reads literally, “*Don’t give the devil a place among you.*” Don’t let him move about and do his deceitful work in your lives.

The devil is real. You can be sure that he does his utmost to get in among us when we meet to worship our Lord Jesus Christ and to pay attention to God’s word.

We are not unaware of his schemes to neutralize the worship by stoking anger and bitterness in Christians’ hearts.

We should cherish our relationships with one another here at Crossroads so that the devil won’t be able to set up camp anywhere near us.

The Apostle Paul tells Christ’s followers to ‘*Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.*’ (Ephesians 6:11)

If we allow anger to simmer into bitterness, it’s like saying to the devil, “*come on in and join us.*”

- Why do we get angry in the church?

There are many reasons. Often it starts with the resentment we feel if someone points out something in our lives that we know we need to change, but we don’t want to admit it.

‘*When a man is wrong and won’t admit it, he always gets angry.*’ (Thomas Haliburton)

When God’s word is taught or preached it often pricks at sensitive areas in our lives where we need to confess and repent. Instead of repenting, some people get angry.

- Do you have any anger or bitterness toward another Christian? Have you been letting it simmer?

Please deal with it, because you are giving the devil a foothold to do a lot of damage in our church.

- So you see, this is not a private matter. It affects all of us.

It’s extremely important to make things right when there have been offenses, to repent and ask forgiveness of one another and to be reconciled.

<sup>28</sup> *He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.*

Stealing has always been a major problem in all societies.

It’s number eight in the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses 3,500 years ago.

It was a big problem in the culture of Ephesus in the first century. And it’s a big problem today.

Just about everything you buy in a store today has a percentage added to cover the cost of all the shoplifting.

We all pay for other people’s sins. We’ve become accustomed to surveillance cameras watching our every move in stores and banks.

People steal from the government by being dishonest in their tax returns. Employees steal from their employers by pilfering supplies or by slacking on the job. Stealing is an epidemic.

But Christ's followers must beware of this besetting sin.

Remember, half of the population of the Roman Empire was slaves. They stole to supplement the little they received for their needs. Many church members were slaves.

Others had menial jobs or didn't work, and they faced the same temptations.

Paul focused especially on those who made a living by stealing instead of working. He said they should get jobs and support themselves and their families, and still be able to help others in need.

*'And none but Christ can turn a burglar into a benefactor!'* (John Stott)

- In the church we are all members of one body—the spiritual body of Christ.

How we relate to one another and how we live either builds up the church, or tears it apart.

In Christ's church we cultivate Christian community. We don't poison it.

The Apostle set forth the expectations for each of us in terms of how we speak and what we do to protect the unity of the body, Christ's church. Each of us has this responsibility.

Church health is not really dependent on all the works and ministries people do in the context of the church.

Church health depends on what each of us brings to the church. It's about who we are, not so much about what we do. There are many unhealthy churches that are veritable beehives of activity.

## II. WE PROMOTE MATURITY IN CHRIST'S CHURCH. Ephesians 4:29-32

Let me point out that Paul targets our speech and hits the bull's eye twice in this paragraph—in verses 25 and 29.

He said Christ's followers must put off falsehood and speak truth to one another because we're connected to one another spiritually in the church. Lies and pretence destroy trust; and without trust there is no unity. (25)

Now he writes:

<sup>29</sup> *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.*

“Unwholesome” (*sapros*) was the word used for rotten fish.

It's interesting that this would come up just a few days after I had my first Lutefisk dinner last week. I'd heard lots of derogatory remarks about the *piece of cod that passes all understanding*. I had three servings, not so much because I enjoyed it as to prove that I could do it. It's not bad. But please excuse a little vulgar advice here: do whatever you have to to avoid a lutefisk burp afterward. That's really bad!

I can now assure you Paul didn't have anything like Lutefisk in mind here. This term 'unwholesome' applied to something that could emit a nauseating stench.

Here it's used figuratively for talk that is rotten and spreads rottenness. It's malicious gossip and slander that injures others and spreads its foul fumes through a church.

Christ's followers must be diligent to use our words to spread the pleasing aroma of encouragement and to build up one another in the church.

- Something is dreadfully wrong if Christians are more adept at criticizing than they are at encouraging.

The rhetoric of a church should never be hurtful gossip, but wholesome encouragement, overflowing with grace.

We are to help each other to grow and mature spiritually.

<sup>30</sup> *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*

The Holy Spirit of Christ indwells Christians and inhabits the church.

Paul said, *'Don't grieve, cause pain and anguish to the Holy Spirit.'*

It's the same word Matthew used to describe Jesus' anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane. *'He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and watch with me.'* (Matthew 26:37-38)

- How does a church cause agony and sorrow to the Holy Spirit?

By the way we mistreat others who have the Holy Spirit in them.

By holding onto what we should get rid of. It's when bitterness continues unresolved between Christians.

Anything we do to one another in the church that is unloving is sheer agony to the Holy Spirit.

Martin Lloyd-Jones was pastor of Westminster Chapel in London for 30 years. He explained the contrast between someone who is not a -Christian sinning and a Christian sinning.

*It's like the difference between a citizen doing something against the law of the land and a husband doing something unkind to his wife.*

*In one case a man commits an offense against the state. He has broken the law. He is under condemnation.*

*But in the other case, the husband hasn't broken the law. He has wounded a heart. It isn't a legal matter. It's a personal, family matter. He doesn't stop being a husband.*

*That's how it is when a Christian sins against a fellow-Christian and grieves the Holy Spirit. He is not condemned. It's a family matter—in the family of God.*

*The legal matter was settled on the cross. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.*

*God doesn't expel from His family a child who has sinned. But God's heart has been wounded. This is not a trivial matter. (Martin Lloyd-Jones)*

<sup>31</sup> *Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.*

Bitterness is the spite that harbors resentment and keeps a score of wrongs.

In his great treatise on love the apostle Paul said love “keeps no record of wrongs.” (1 Corinthians 13:5).

All these horrible traits belong to the old sinful nature that those who belong to Christ must put off (v.22)

Instead Paul says:

<sup>32</sup> *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

Mutual forgiveness is an essential feature in true Christian fellowship. ‘*Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*’ (Colossians 3:13)

Our forgiveness of others is to be like God's forgiveness of us. It must flow from ungrudging love.

- Jesus told a parable about a man who owed the king a huge debt and was unable to pay. The common practice in such cases was to sell a man's wife and children as slaves and put the man in prison. But the king graciously forgave the debt completely. That man promptly went and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a relatively small debt and was unable to pay him back. He had him thrown into prison. Other servants were distressed and reported it to their master. ‘*Then the master called the servant in. “You wicked servant,” he said, “I cancelled all that debt because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*’ Then Jesus added, ‘*This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from the heart.*’ (Matthew 18:35)
- Our Lord Jesus Christ expects all of us who belong to him to excel in his grace and to demonstrate this grace in all we do and say in our relationships with one another.

It's by God's grace expressed through us that we build up one another in the church.

Will you pledge this morning to use your words to build others up instead of to tear them down? Will you have nothing to do with the sinful practice of gossip?

There's a Commitment that I'm going to read now, and I ask you to consider it and, if you are willing, make it your personal commitment to the Lord in prayer.

### **My Commitment**

Jesus Christ, my Savior and my Lord, I humbly ask for your help as I make this sincere commitment:

I renounce criticism, gossip and all other sinful and hurtful forms of communication.

I will obey the command in God's word, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” (Ephesians 4:29)

I will be honest and loving in my relationships with my Christian brothers and sisters, because we are all members of one body—the body of Christ.