

Ephesians—God’s New Community
New Relationships
Ephesians chapter 4:25-5:2
9th January 2022
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Introduction

Paul wrote almost half of the New Testament books, 13 out of 27. In around the year AD 60 he wrote a cluster of four letters and among them was this wonderful letter to the church at Ephesus.

Last term we explored the first 3 chapters, this term, God-willing, the last three which are all about the new behaviour the Lord expects of his people in the church, in our families and at work, lots of commands, such as:

- “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths”
- “Children obey your parents”, and so on

All these exhortations may surprise you because Christianity is not a moral code: it’s not like Jordan Peterson’s “12 Rules for Life.” It is not even like the Old Covenant of the Old Testament where Moses handed down the 10 Commandments to the people to obey!

Every Ephesian Sunday this term, we’ll need to remind ourselves of three truths:

1. Christian behaviour is our loving response to God’s amazing grace!

“Since God has poured his grace and mercy into my life, since I have been “blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” I want to please the Lord by living a life that honours him!” That’s the motive! That’s why chapters 1-3, which tell us what God has done for us, come before these chapters 4-6, which tell us how to respond.

Let’s remember that when Jesus asks us to do things that seem difficult! Is God asking you to do something you find hard to do in practise? Well, think of what God has done for you and respond to God’s grace!

2. Christian behaviour is reasonable!

The second truth we need to remind ourselves every Ephesian Sunday morning is that Christian behaviour is reasonable, Paul gives good reasons for each of the instructions.

Yvonne and I have been pondering the end of an era this week. Our youngest son turned 20, so he is no longer a teen, technically, at least! We have been parenting teenagers for some 17 years and our top tip for others parenting teens would be “give them reasons for your commands.” They are not children any more, they are little adults who need to have reasons for why you want them, for example, to put their phones on charge in the kitchen every evening at 8:00pm, rather than stashing them under their pillows! In the same way, the Lord treats us as grown-ups and so we will find sound reasons for all that he asks of us.

3. Christian don’t also come with Christian dos

Paul balances the negative with a positive. “Don’t lie,” for example, but instead, “speak the truth.” Don’t merely get rid of old habits and leave a vacuum, replace old behaviour with new behaviour. With all that in mind, let’s turn this morning to Ephesians chapter 4:25 - 5:2, where Paul explains how Christians are to behave towards one another in God’s new community called the church.

(1) Christians speak graciously

Let's begin with speech. How are Christians to speak to one another? Paul lays down two principles, the first is

Speak the Truth, verse 25

When we were in Satan's dominion, lying was a way of life, because Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44). My parents worked as missionaries for many years among a people-group whose background had not been shaped by the Gospel. And my mother would often lament to me that lying was the normal way of life in that culture.

One day she visited a home—not a Christian home—and discovered it was jam-packed with furniture and carpets! When she asked what was going on, she was told that the neighbours (who were not Christians either) were having a house assessment from the council that day—they had heard about a grant for people in poverty—and decided to lie, to deceive the officers into thinking they were poor by placing all their worldly goods in their neighbour's house for the day. The point was this: the family explained all this without a single ounce of shame or wince of embarrassment.

Learning to speak the truth, mom told me, the first challenge of new converts.

Christian speech must be characterised by truth-telling. Why? "Because we are all members of one body." Truth is the foundation of trust between brothers and sisters and trust is the foundation of loving fellowship. Christian community is fostered by truth and destroyed by lies. God wants us to be united and loving—and that can only happen if we speak the truth.

Here are two Christian friends. One day a third party whispers a lie, a piece of gossip, to one of the friends about the other. What happens? The next time they meet up there is cloud over their relationship. "*A gossip separates close friends.*" (Proverbs 16:28) Lies break community!

Because gossip and slander breaks community – God takes it very seriously. Paul says we are not to eat with a person who calls themselves a believer but engages in slander! Suppose someone who calls themselves a Christian invites you to their house for a meal and they begin to trash-talk other Christians. What should you do? Paul says "walk out." "You must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother (or a sister) but is a slanderer. With such a man (or woman) do not even eat." (1 Corinthians 5:11)

Christian speech must be truthful.

Speak what is helpful, 29-30

The Greek word for "unwholesome talk" comes from rotten vegetables, rotten fruit. Quite literally, Paul says don't talk garbage! We have a compost at the end of the garden where all our vegetable and fruit peel goes. It stinks, especially on a hot day!

Christians must not say things to one another that stink, that leave an unpleasant odour in the room. Gossip, arguments, you know the sort of things that create a bad atmosphere in the room! Instead of rotten words, the object of our speech should be "what is helpful for building others up according to their needs." What will help this person, what will help these people? That's the principle of all Christian speech.

"There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts but the tongue of the wise brings healing." (Proverbs 12:18) "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver." Proverbs 25:11

Christian speech must be truthful and helpful.

#2 Christian forgive freely

The second distinctive of behaviour in a Christian community is how we deal with brothers and sisters who wrong us. You and I are not going to make it through a single year of church life without someone upsetting you, or you upsetting someone else! And especially if you are meaningfully plugged into the church—which you should be.

Paul gives us two instructions:

Anger is not wrong but make sure you limit it, verse 26

“In your anger....” Paul assumes that you and I will get angry with one another. Anger is a God-given emotional response to wrongdoing. God gets angry (Psalm 60), Jesus was angry with the money lenders (John 2). One day I want to preach a series of sermons on human emotions called “Life in Technicolour” (or should that be HD or 4K). Sadness, joy, anger, grief. God has given us facial muscles and tear glands to express them all!) Nothing wrong with that initial response of anger, it’s what we do with it next that matters

Don’t sin says Paul. Don’t strike out with your fists, don’t brawl, don’t take revenge—there’s a whole suite of negatives in verse 31 that can follow in the wake of anger which we are called to ditch. Secondly, when you get angry, don’t stay angry: “Don’t let the sun go down on your wrath.” Don’t let that state of anger linger on for hours or days or weeks. If it does it could easily fester into bitterness and hatred and even murder!

The preacher at our wedding told everyone that when he and his wife got married they decided never to go to sleep until they had sorted out a difference an argument. He then added that they had had some very long evenings!!

You’re going to get angry with others, Paul acknowledges that (whether your anger is of the outward diva variety or the hidden steel-cold smouldering variety) But when you do, don’t sin and don’t allow it to linger on and on and on...

Don’t give the devil foothold. A continual state of anger towards someone allows Satan to gain a foothold in your life. We all know this to be true don’t we? I’ve said this before, when I’m cross at Yvonne I discover I’m cross at everyone else in the world?

We’re all going to get angry, but we must not allow that anger to take the next step of sin, we must limit the duration of anger and we must not give Satan a foot in the door through that anger.

Are you angry with someone today, right now? The mere thought of their name raise your heckles? Ask God to help you today to move away from anger towards forgiveness—whatever they have done, for that is the second principle Paul gives about how to deal with offences.

Forgive those who have sinned against you, verses 32.

You must forgive that person in the same way that God forgave you through the cross of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness was costly to God and it will be costly to you, but you must move past the offensive with God’s help and grace and you must forgive.

By the way, there is a difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. If a brother or sister sins against you the ideal scenario is that you work towards reconciliation, renewed friendship, renewed fellowship. But that is not always possible. The other person may reject all your attempts to reconciliation, they may live in another country. Whatever their response, however, you and I must always forgive them in our own hearts. Think well of them, never speak evil of them, help them if you find them in need.

Summary

What does Christian community look like? A new kind of speaking - Christians seek to speak the truth and they seek to say helpful things. A new kind of dealing with offences - Christians deal with offences, not with hatred and malice or revenge ("Don't get mad get even!") but when they get angry, they ask God to help them limit their anger and they ask God to help them to move towards forgiveness.

"Whether it's a simple spat with your spouse" says an article from university of John Hopkins, "or long-held resentment toward a family member or friend, unresolved conflict can go deeper than you may realize—it may be affecting your physical health. The good news: Studies have found that the act of forgiveness can reap huge rewards for your health, lowering the risk of heart attack; improving cholesterol levels and sleep; and reducing pain, blood pressure, and levels of anxiety, depression and stress"

(3) Christians share

The third mark of this new community called the church is sharing, verse 28.

The negative is don't steal stuff. *"He who has been stealing must steal no longer."* What my mother witnessed on that day—the pile of possessions moved to a neighbour's house— was not only lying to the council officials it was stealing from all the people of that city wasn't it? What's the eighth commandment? *"Thou shalt not steal."* (Exodus 20)

Instead of stealing do something useful. *"He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work doing something useful with his own hands..."* Why? *"...that he may have something to share with those in need."* In our western world where there is so much material prosperity, there are still folks in financial need, do we look out for them? And let's remember that this principle of sharing goes beyond money and material needs, it includes sharing our homes, providing a meal, sharing our time with someone who is lonely or in need, sharing the spiritual gift God has given to us, others. Let's share our money and our food and our homes and our time freely.

If I have a concern arising from the last two years of pandemic, it's that the sharing of our homes and showing hospitality has diminished.

In all of this, God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son are our great examples, 4:32-5:2. May the Lord help each one of us to love one another so that the lost world will see the difference& take note.

*A new commandment I give unto you,
that you love one another as I have loved you,
that you love one another as I have loved you.
By this shall all know that you are my disciples,
if you have love one for another;
by this shall all know that you are my disciples:
if you have love one for another.*

(John 13:34-35)