

Beyond Mere Commandments

Sunday, August 8, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. 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. 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. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

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.

In this fourth chapter of Paul's Ephesian Letter, we find the apostle shifting from a detailed explanation of essential Christian theology to what we might call practical instruction for daily Christian living. These chapters are packed with numerous exhortations to noble living, proverbs and mini-sermons, and each verse speaks volumes. When studying Ephesians, a reader is usually very pleased to arrive at this portion of the letter as Paul's doctrinal teachings can be challenging to fully understand, and the list of moral commands is more easily grasped. A few words of warning, however, are necessary at this point, for we dare not take the doctrinal portion of the letter lightly, and there is more to our lesson than a string of new commandments. Paul's teaching for today may look like a mere listing of commands, but there are themes and deeper messages which unify these teachings and add real depth to his message. This morning I want us to look at some of those themes.

Our lesson begins with teachings on truth-telling, peace, and honesty. First, we are urged to be truthful in our speech. *So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.* Paul appears to be drawing from Zechariah 8:16. In Old Testament times as well as New, truthfulness is

absolutely essential to a strong society, and ancient Greek society was not so concerned about truthfulness as is desirable. Many commentators see truth-telling as the main theme of these opening verses, but it appears to me that the real central message is a few verses away. Next, we are told to be careful with our emotions, and again Paul draws from the Old Testament as he is paraphrasing Psalm 4:4. *Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.* This is great practical advice, and this mini-sermon has launched many books and lectures. Emotions happen, even negative ones, and that is not bad, but we must be very careful how we deal with our anger. We must not let it linger whatever problem is at hand. To fail to do so is to give the devil great opportunity to cause trouble in our lives and for sin to multiply.

Next comes the greatest and briefest sermon ever written on the Christian's work ethic. *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.* The Christian work ethic is an attitude toward labor which is of the highest order. Not only are Christians to forsake dishonest gain and work hard at honest labor, but our goal is also to be of the noblest ideal. We are to work so that we can not only support ourselves and our families, but that we can do even more and give!

Paul calls us to be honest in our speech, honest in our emotions, and honest in our work, but we are about to be directed to a level of moral understanding which towers above all these other concerns. We are to **be builders!** *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.* Paul urges us to pursue something even greater than honesty. Honesty is important, but it can also be misunderstood or abused. Some have spread vicious gossip which has caused much harm, and when challenged for having told such hurtful stories many a gossipier has responded, "But it's true!" The story may indeed be true, but truth is not the high concern. Is the story helpful for all involved, or does it only cause pain and bad feelings? Paul asks us to examine our speaking. Do our words communicate grace? The great theme which he holds up is that of building. Are we building others up, or are we tearing others down? Let us be builders!

Whenever we speak, let us remember to build. To examine our own speech sounds like a difficult work of monitoring but the call to be builders resonates within us as a simple and manageable method. There are a few times when we may need to carefully consider every word we say, but the builder-test is not so hard to apply. As we speak our spirits can usually tell us very clearly if something is constructive or destructive, and when we are in doubt, that is a plain signal that we should hold our tongues.

In our speech and in all that we do, let us be builders. What a joy it is to be a builder, and how blessed we have been by builders in our own lives. Think of your childhood. There were those who spoke many harsh words to you, and you may still feel the pain. But turn your thoughts to those who built you up with encouragements and kind

messages. We could have quite a time of sharing if we were to take some moments to tell of those whose loving words made us feel important and loved. What a delight it is to teach Sunday school and Vacation Bible School as so many young ones can hear the positive words which are necessary for healthy spiritual growth. Ask any teacher and they will have many glad stories to tell. *Lunch with Luke* (If you can remember that far back! Hang on, for it shall return.) has been a wonderful weekly session of building. The hungry are affirmed and built up with good food. The lonely find others who remind them that they are not truly alone, and that life is good. Those who are simply worn down by daily pressures find the boost which they need to keep on with life. In my years of running, I came to find a deep delight in encouraging all the other runners that I could. One does not need to be a trained pastor or psychologist to do this crucial work. I fondly remember having finished a race in Elizabethtown and being approached by a fellow runner. He thanked me profusely for offering some words of encouragement to him in a brief conversation shared as I passed him. He explained that he was about to give up and walk the rest of the course, but that my words were the boost he needed. Not only was this report a joy to hear, but I barely remembered talking to this man! It was just a few words, which seemed of little significance at the time, but made all the difference. After a community footrace in Ephrata my son, then in junior high, told me of a middle-aged man who gave him a mid-race pep talk about never giving up even when the race is hard. Junior high boys need that kind of encouragement. They need lots of it. And truth be told, we all do! I no longer run, but the race is still on and those that I pass, and those that pass me, need a word of grace. And yes—I can always use one too! *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.* Let us build!

Paul challenges believers to tell the truth, manage our emotions and to work hard for the sake of others and giving, and all of this is to be done with a builder's mindset. Just as we are to do all things with a builder's desire, we are also reminded to live and work with a strong, positive **sense of destiny**. *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.* When we first hear this verse, we may tend to receive it as a scold. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God which is within us, we are warned. This is a valid and occasionally necessary warning, for we do not wish to frustrate and disappoint God as He works in our lives and in our very souls, but there is much more to Paul's words. We are marked by the Holy Spirit as God's people, and that same Spirit is at work within us, making us more and more like Jesus, and guiding us on our daily walk. God is doing a wonderful work within each of us. When we feel that a spiritual struggle is going on inside of us, we are quick to feel defeated and that we have failed. Think again! Just because the battles follow us through life does not mean that we have lost. God *marked us with a seal for the day of redemption*, meaning that we are assured victory! On the last day we will be able to claim victory. Perhaps you have struggled with depression all of your life. Even when

one learns coping skills and strategies to keep depression from ruining one's life, it is still easy to feel like a loser in this seemingly endless battle. But keep fighting! The battle, though it may prove to be life-long, will eventually come to an end, with ourselves the victors, and all this by God's grace. In fact, when we get to heaven, our greatest joy and our greatest rewards shall be the results of the greatest battles which we had fought—and probably felt at the time that we were losing!

In this great battle which we know as life on earth, we win. Christ's Resurrection is the ultimate proof and assurance. Are we living like winners, and do we remind ourselves frequently that we are victors? Do we even include the word destiny in our regular vocabularies? Please bear with me through another racing story. I cherish a shirt which I made for the Philadelphia Marathon and have worn for a number of other races. On a white shirt I drew a cross, and above and below it the words, "Jesus won my race for me. This is just a victory lap." This should be the story of our race.

In this laundry list of commands and exhortations Paul interspersed some overall themes which give these individual commands a fuller meaning. Always be a builder, rejoice in your victorious destiny, and finally, serve with Christ and by His power. Paul tells believers to cast aside all kinds of bad attitudes and dishonest behaviors, he urges us to be gracious and forgiving to others, just as God forgave us through Christ. He now reaches a high point of godly ambition as he tells us: *Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us.* Paul is making an amazing and audacious statement. *Be imitators of God!* How shall we obey such a grand command as that? In one respect this sounds rational and understandable, for to say that someone seeks to live a godly life means that they desire to be like God. But to hear the command to godliness stated so boldly and plainly can be intimidating.

My greatest concern when people hear the command to be imitators of God is that many will interpret Christian faith to be nothing more or less than our following the example of Jesus. Strange as it may sound, I become very uncomfortable when I hear folks speak of their walk of faith as that of following Christ's example, for what could be possibly be wrong with that? At first glance this seems perfectly logical and reasonable. Jesus is the perfect One, so we follow his lead. The letters W.W.J.D.? mean a lot to many Christians and is a guiding principle in their lives. In all things they ask themselves, "**What Would Jesus Do?**"—and what could possibly go wrong with that? This may be a good start to our faith, but it is not the way to a full and healthy life with God.

The great problem with such an approach to Christianity is that because of our fallen and sinful nature we do not have the strength or wisdom to follow that perfect path. Some are quickly frustrated as they come to this realization. Much worse than this, many *think* they are able to live as Christ lived if only they try hard enough. This usually involves distorting Christian faith into a list of rules. Like the Pharisees of long ago and the many others who have followed in their tragic path of legalism, life

becomes a long list of commandments and rules, and the adherents of this sad religion may even convince themselves that they have attained a higher state of morality and godly living.

When we are commanded to *be imitators of God*, this is not a call to rely upon our own strength, but upon God's. Consider the wider context of this teaching. Paul tells us to put aside impurity and be gracious to one another, not out of our own inner strength, but by the strength and inspiration of Christ—*“as God in Christ has forgiven you.”* We are to imitate God, but to do so as *beloved children* of the Father. This work of imitation is not to be done as a demonstration of spiritual achievement, but out of a child's love for a father or mother. This work is to be done joyfully and proudly, and not a pride in self but a deep abiding pride in a greatly beloved parent. Our love and forgiving of one another is to be empowered by the knowledge that God so loved us that He would send a Son who *gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*. Our lives are to be an ongoing act of worship and gratitude as we constantly consider God's love for us.

Our bulletin cover presents a verse from early in the chapter as Paul introduces his litany of instruction on Christian living. *Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*. As we are asked to make every *effort*, it may sound like a challenge to muster all our human strength, but look again. This is a work of the Spirit, and the bulletin art appropriately displays a dove, a symbol of the Holy Spirit of God. All these works we do, we do **by the strength and guidance of God**.

Paul presents us with a wealth of commands and wise sayings. We are given sweet commandments of love. Let us receive them gratefully, but let us be careful that they do not lead us into legalism. As we ponder these commands let us remember the foundational principles which underlie them. We must always be Kingdom builders. We must gratefully remember our destiny and the victory which is already ours in Christ, and we must follow these commands of love by the Spirit's power and not our own. The world will look at a chapter like Ephesians 4 and see a mere list of commands. By their understanding we religious people love our rules and seek to be do-gooders for goodness' sake. May we always remember, and may we show the world that what God is presenting us is the walk of the abundant life.