

Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2

²⁵So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not make room for the devil.

²⁸Thieves 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.

²⁹Let 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.

³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

³¹Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³²and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

5:1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God

DEALING WITH TROUBLE BEFORE IT STARTS

You may have noticed that these past few weeks I've preached a series of sermons from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. All of these lessons are to some extent about how to deal with discord in the church which led one member to say, "I haven't noticed any problem in our church. There isn't one ... right?"

Let me reassure you that there are no big problems that require a series of sermons on dealing with trouble in the church. So, you might rightly ask, "Then why are we studying these passages if they don't apply to what is going on in our church today?"

And the answer is: The best time to talk about the Christian response to conflict is not when we are in the middle of a problem. When people are filled with anxiety and anger, it may be difficult for them to see beyond their own point of view. The best time to prepare for conflict is when it isn't going on.

It's sort of like hurricane preparation. If you wait until the hurricane is bearing down on the coast of Florida to buy hurricane supplies you have waited too late. You won't find batteries or plywood at Home Depot. Indeed you may not even be able to make it into the store!

In addition to this, I think that all of us struggle with conflict in our daily lives. If we are human we have problems with emotional control, and these passages from Ephesians are very practical and helpful.

THE TRUTH

The first step in resolving any conflict situation may be the hardest one. It is to tell the truth. There's an old saying that truth is the first casualty of war. And there's a reason for that. Conflict thrives on lies and half-truth. Conflict thrives on the notion that this problem is the other person's fault.

Demonizing the enemy is the first rule of warfare.

But, as we've learned these past few weeks, the whole book of Ephesians is not about preparing for war. The whole book of Ephesians is about preparing for peace.

Our ministry is a ministry of reconciliation. We have been called to be peacemakers. Our job is to be patient with those who are difficult. Our job is to remember that God has forgiven us and has been gracious to us so we should be gracious to others.

But, how do we do that when our emotions get the best of us? A good place to start is to commit ourselves to the truth. Ephesians 4:25 tells us that we should speak the truth to each other because we are members of one another. This is a reference to an image that Paul used to describe the true nature of the church. Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians that we are the body of Christ and each one of us is a part of it. (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:28)

Demonizing others or writing them off as incorrigible is not an option for the Christian. Our job is to speak the truth. And as we learned last week we speak that truth "in love." (Ephesians 4:15) When we speak the truth it is not to tear down people with our criticism. The point is to build up the church, the body of Christ while at the same time becoming mature in the faith.

Children want what they want, and they want it right now. And one sign that the child is becoming an adult is when the person is able to put aside the desires of the moment to obtain more long term goals. The same applies as we mature in the faith. Just because we have a certain viewpoint on a subject it doesn't mean that everyone else has to agree with our way of thinking.

On the other hand we also need the courage to be as truthful as possible ... even when the truth hurts us. Whenever I find myself in a conflict situation, the first thing I ask is "What have I done wrong? What hard truth do I need to hear first in order to be sensitive and loving in my approach to others?" If you answer that question by saying, "I'm just as innocent as can be. It's the other person's fault." I would suggest that you need to check that answer with the truth-o-meter!

When I look back on the major conflicts of my life, I can truthfully say that I always played a big role in those conflicts. My lack of emotional control or my stubbornness or some other problem played a role in blinding me to what was really going on in a particular situation.

So, speak the truth to yourself first and then speak the truth to your neighbor. If you do that the odds will be greater that you will speak the truth in love and build up the community of faith instead of tearing it down.

Quite often an honest self-evaluation will keep us from being too harsh and critical toward others. Sometimes speaking the truth to ourselves will even eliminate the problem.

But, sometimes it doesn't work that way.

Sometimes our efforts at reconciliation are rebuffed, and we are left feeling frustrated and angry. What do we do when that happens?

ANGER AND SIN

Many of us have a voice in our heads that says something like, "Christians shouldn't get angry. It's a sin to be angry." And so we smile sweetly and push that anger deep down inside us.

I think this approach is absolutely wrong. It is unchristian to deny our feelings. This would be living a lie. And if we do this, these negative feelings will come out in other ways. We will sabotage the efforts of others. We will vent our true feeling through gossip and in some cases we may even turn our anger inward which will lead to depression.

Paul suggests that we acknowledge our anger right away and then deal with it. His advice is this: "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." Anger is a natural and (if it's not out of control) even a healthy human emotion.

Anger can be like those warning lights on your car. If the light on the dashboard tells you that the oil pressure in your car has dropped to a dangerously low level, it's important to stop and take care of the problem right away.

But, what happens if we don't heed that warning light? We might be able to drive around for the next few days or even a few weeks. But, eventually the engine will seize up and we will be in for a big repair bill.

It would have been so much easier to have taken care of the problem right away before it reached a critical level. But, some people have to learn the hard way.

Anger works in much the same way. Anger tells us that we've got a problem that needs immediate attention.

Of course the tricky thing about anger is that it is often misplaced. Have you ever become extremely angry over something that seemed like a really small matter?

The thing that precipitated your anger may not have been the real problem. Probably you have been avoiding some big issue in your life, and some small annoyance was the straw the proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back.”

When we don’t deal with important issues that make us angry, we push those feelings down inside, and that can be very dangerous. In some extreme cases repressed anger can even lead to acts of violence. That’s why we occasionally see a story on the evening news in which a pillar of the community commits some dastardly deed. The anger warning light was ignored too long, and that led to an explosion.

Notice that this passage teaches that ignoring anger will “make room for the devil.” The source of demonic evil is often repressed anger. Quite often people who do terrible things as adults have been abused as children. Since these young victims weren’t able to do anything about their abuse as children, they internalized their anger and it came out later on in criminal actions.

In the same way I have seen churches literally explode with anger because a problem was not dealt with in a more open and honest way. The intensity of the anger and the damage that is done often causes people to refer to this episode as the “work of the devil.” I would be hard pressed to disagree.

So, let’s get rid of that unscriptural idea that it is somehow unchristian to be angry. Anyone who knows me knows that I have a temper. But, that doesn’t mean that I’m less of a Christian.

However, it does mean that I have to learn how to use that anger to understand what is going on in my life and deal with it. I used to think of my anger as a curse, but more and more I have come to understand it as an important tool for understanding myself and the people around me.

For example, if a certain person tends to get under your skin, ask yourself, “Why does this person give me problems? Do they remind me of a negative person in my past? Do they remind of some personal failing that I don’t want to confront? Perhaps their actions don’t really have anything to do with me at all, but are a reflection of some problem in their own life.”

We won’t always be able to answer those questions completely, but I think that anger should cause us to spend at least a little time thinking about questions like this. Don’t ignore anger and think that it will go away. Instead, don’t let the sun set on your anger. Make it a priority to try and understand why you are angry, and if possible try and work out your differences with others before anger blossoms into the more entrenched emotions of guilt, regret and resentment.

Some anger is justified. There is such a thing as righteous anger. Most often people point to the angry actions of Jesus as he cleansed the temple to prove this point.

But, let's be honest. Most of the time our anger is not justified.

Anger is a complex emotion with many different causes. But, if I had to identify one emotion that is most often associated with anger, I would identify fear. When we are threatened in some way, we become angry.

In more primitive times the adrenaline produced by the "flight or fight" response kept us alive. But, that's no longer true. These days more often than not that adrenaline produces emotions that can get out of control.

LEARNING TO GIVE INSTEAD OF TAKE

The strategy that this passage suggests for dealing with anger is to replace the old way of life with a new way of life.

I think that some people are angry because they do not have something constructive to do with their life. Some of us remember our grandmother telling us something like, "An idle mind is the devil's playground." Well, grandma was right.

Nature abhors a vacuum, and if we do not fill our lives with something positive, something negative will come back into our lives.

Jesus told a parable that suggested as much. He said that when an evil spirit is removed from a person that is only step one in finding a cure. If that person does not fill his or her life with something positive, then the original evil spirit and "seven more" will return to take over that person's life with a vengeance. (Matthew 12:43-45)

There was one verse in our lesson that some people in our Bible studies felt were out of place. Most of our lesson is about anger and how to deal with anger. But, then in verse 28 we read,

²⁸Thieves 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.

I agreed that this verse didn't fit and that I would deal with it as most preachers who find a verse that doesn't fit. I would ignore it. At that point some members jokingly suggested that they were going to ask a question about this verse in the middle of the sermon, so I have decided to head them off before that happened!

Actually, this is an interesting verse because it illustrates the makeup of the early Christian community. It was very diverse. Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, leading citizens and thieves all were a part of that very diverse community whom God called to faith.

And though everyone was accepted into the community, it didn't necessarily mean that their behavior automatically changed. Apparently some of the thieves had to be told that they needed a new job in life. In order to exorcise the demons of the past they had to fill their lives with something new, something positive.

They had to get rid of those old associations and ways of living that would drag them back into the mire. Instead of always taking from others they were encouraged to find a way to give to others.

I have found that those who always want to take from others are often very angry and dissatisfied people. More than one elder has remarked to me, "You know it seems like the people who do the least for the church are always the ones who are complaining!" And that is often true.

You may not be a thief, but are you a taker? Are you someone who always wants it your way?

You will always be angry and dissatisfied until you learn to give instead of take. Jesus told his disciples that he came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. The same is true of his disciples. We are called to be servers and not takers. And it is only in service that we will find satisfaction. (cf. Mark 10:41-45)

WATCH WHAT YOU SAY

Another way that we can prevent anger from getting out of control is to keep a tight reign on what we say. Our lesson for today puts it this way,

²⁹Let 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.

It almost sounds like something else our grandmothers used to say, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." In some cases that is good advice.

But, today we're thinking about that fact that sometimes that's not such good advice. Sometimes we have to talk about and consider things that are not so nice. Sometimes we have to deal with conflict and issues that provoke anger.

And this verse is about how we deal with those issues. We must have a style that is conducive to reconciliation. How we say something is often the difference between speaking the truth in love and using our own version of the truth as a sword to divide and conquer. And how we speak

often belies what we believe. If we believe that we are sinners saved by grace, our speech will have quite a different tone than if we really believe that we are agents of God's judgment.

The Bible tells us that a "soft answer turns away wrath but a harsh reply stirs up anger." (Proverbs 15:1) I've mentioned a few times that I really like to watch Caesar Milan's show, The Dog Whisperer. Caesar is able to control hostility and anxiety in dogs (and in people) by being firm and consistent with a soft touch.

That's what we all need in life. We need leaders who are in control of themselves while at the same time addressing the very real problems that need to be solved. This means being willing to disagree without being disagreeable. It does us no good to demonize our opponents. Great good can be done if we learn how to give a soft reply to anger.

Some psychologists have rightly noted that a soft reply to anger begins with what we say to ourselves. In order to stop evil talk from coming out of mouth we have to learn to be more reflective about what we think.

Anger is often rehearsed. Prejudice is a good example of how this happens.

If we rehearse angry thoughts about a certain group of people we will automatically respond in angry tones when a problem arises with that group.

This explains why we have so much political and religious turmoil in our world. Much of our water cooler conversation and television commentary is designed to help us rehearse our deeply held beliefs in an angry way.

Now I'm not suggesting that you abandon your political and religious beliefs! But, I am suggesting that you watch how you say what you believe.

Often anger in the church is due to the polarizing effects of harsh rhetoric. A truly strong person can say what they believe in a way that invites dialogue instead of cutting it off.

A SPIRITUAL NECESSITY

The struggle to be who we are called to be, the Body of Christ in this world, is a struggle that will never end. And it will always be a struggle. Each day will present new challenges and opportunities. Sometimes we will succeed, and sometimes we will fail. Sometime we will be able to control our emotions and sometimes our emotions will control us.

But, we need to mark this one important point. Our spiritual state will always be intimately connected with our emotional state. If we have unresolved anger, we will find it hard if not impossible to worship. And though God does not leave us when we are angry, the Bible tells us that the Spirit is grieved by our actions.

Children may become angry with their parents and leave them in a disrespectful way. (Jesus told a story about that called the parable of the Prodigal Son.) Good parents will never stop loving their children ... no matter where they go or what they do. They will always be willing to welcome their child back home. But, they will also be grieved by their child's bad behavior.

The Bible tells us that God is grieved by our bad behavior. When we let anger take over our lives and our communities we separate ourselves from grace. We travel to the far country and live a life that is less than it should be.

But, like a good parent God is always willing to take us back home. We just need to remember that we don't have to live this way. We don't have to be so angry at ourselves and everyone else.

As our lesson for today puts it we can put away bitterness and anger. We can refuse to participate in slander and wrangling.

And this is possible because God in Christ has forgiven us. The grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ enables us to be a gracious people. (Ephesians 4:31-5:2) Out of gratitude for God's grace we can dare to be gracious to others.

Let me close with my favorite quote when it comes to anger. Frederick Buechner wrote,

“Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun.

To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back ... in many ways it is a feast fit for a king.

The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

I have seen far too many people “eaten up” by their own anger. And with the Apostle Paul I urge us all to deal with our angry feelings sooner rather than later.

The Bible tells us that God in Christ has given us a ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:18-21) This is the gospel; this is the good news. Let us strive together to make that ministry, that gospel, that good news a reality.

Amen.