

Growing Up to God  
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Ephesians 4:25-5:2

24 So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

26 Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and do not make room for the devil.

28 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.

29 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. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

31 Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, 32 and 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, 2 and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

## GROWING UP TO GOD

The title of my sermon is "Growing Up to God."  
 That almost sounds sacrilegious doesn't it?  
 After all the basic sin of Adam and Eve was to think that they could be "like God."

But, our lesson for today suggests that at least in some sense this is indeed possible.

Paul wrote in our lesson for today, "Be imitators of God."

Now that is a tall order! I might be able to imitate my parents. I might be able to imitate my brother or my sister. I might be able to imitate someone that I admire.

But, how can I imitate God?

The idea that we can imitate God seems crazy.

And yet here it is in black and white in the Bible.

What would ever give us the idea that we could imitate God?

## SACRIFICE AND FORGIVENESS

The next phrase amplifies the reason that we should imitate God. We are God's beloved children. (5:1) And that means there needs to be a family resemblance. We need to look like God's children in the way we act.

In order to make this command even more down to earth God sent his Son into the world. We see a human picture of God's love in Jesus Christ.

And what does that portrait of God's love look like?

It is a portrait one who sacrifices and forgives.

There are many ways that we cannot be like God.

We don't have unlimited power.

We can't understand everything.

But, we can be like God in two ways.

We can sacrifice for others, and we can forgive others.

Sacrifice and forgiveness, those two godly characteristics can be imitated.

However, I think it is vitally important to understand how and why we can imitate God in these ways. Ephesians 5:1 reads, "Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children ..." The "therefore" in this verse refers to the two verses that precede it.

Paul wrote,

"Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." (4:31-32)

This marks the third week that I have preached on Paul's letter to the Ephesians. And in each of those passages the same message has come through loud and clear.

Since God has been gracious toward us, we can be a gracious people. Since God has forgiven our sins, we can forgive the sins of others. Since God in Christ has died for our sins on the cross, we can serve others sacrificially.

## THE WAY

Before the followers of Christ were known as Christians, they were known as the people of the way. We love and forgive because God in Christ has shown us the way to eternal life.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." We come to the Father, we come to God through imitating the love and forgiveness of Christ.

God in Christ has given us the road map for our journey through life.

We will not be perfect, but when we imitate Christ, we come closer to the Divine.

We're on the way.

And this is how we grow spiritually.

The rest of our passage for today deals with how we might do this in practical situations.

I want to remind you again of what was going on in the church at Ephesus. The church at Ephesus had a long way to go on their journey of faith. There was conflict between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. People were not being very gracious toward one another.

In fact, they were very angry with one another. So, Paul applies the theology of grace in a practical way.

## THE WAY OF TRUTH

First, he tells the Ephesians to speak the truth.  
 The way of Jesus is the way of truth.  
 And Jesus also said that the truth will set you free. (John 8:32)

Last week we talked about speaking the truth in love.  
 And we noted that this kind of honest love comes easily or naturally.

Sometimes the truth hurts.  
 Sometimes what we need to hear is not what we want to hear. But, telling the truth is necessary and in the final analysis the most loving action we can take.

In the church we are not politicians who “shade” the truth to build our way up and tear down the ideas of others. In the church we tell a truth that brings us together. It is a truth telling that involves mutual confession and forgiveness.

Paul said that since the Ephesians were members of the body of Christ, and so they needed above all else to tell each other the truth. (4:25)

## ANGER MANAGEMENT

So, what would that look like, putting away all falsehoods and speaking the truth? In a way it sounds very idealistic.

But, look at the very next verse. It is a very good description of what happens when folks speak the truth, at least the truth as they know it.

We disagree.  
 And we get angry.

Sometimes the church is criticized because people get angry and struggle with one another.  
 Many seem to think the church should be like home on the range ... you know, where never is heard a discouraging word!

It doesn't work that way.

In the church people have strong feelings about their faith, and sometimes those strong feelings lead to conflict.

We often clash in the church because we are concerned about God's truth. This is to be expected.

And it happened that way in the Ephesian Church. People had strong ideas about God and what might be acceptable in the church.

And so there was significant conflict.

But, Paul is not worried about the fact that we become angry. Paul is worried about what we do with our anger.

He wrote, "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil." (4:26-27)

You might be surprised that Paul wrote, "Be angry."

A lot of us have been taught that its not nice to be angry.

So, we stuff our anger inside until one day we explode for no apparent reason.

That's not very helpful.

In fact it can even be dangerous.

It does indeed make room for the devil.

We often see tragic examples of this on the evening news.

I think anger is like a warning bell.

Anger tells us that there's something wrong in our relationship with God and our relationship with the people in our lives.

When we get angry we need to ask,

"Why am I angry? What is going on here? What can I do to change this situation?"

Sometimes it's possible to work something out and alleviate anger that way. But, sometimes its not.

Maybe those with whom we are angry do not want to reconcile or perhaps the situation that is stoking our anger is beyond our control. But, we can

still take steps to understand why we are angry, and we can talk with someone about our anger and try to get it under control.

## T-SHIRT THEOLOGY

Now you may say, "What do you mean understand my anger and get it under control? I've tried and I just can't do it. I'm just a fiery person. I'm just like this."

I understand. Believe me I do.

I have a temper and struggle to keep it under control.

But, I also believe that when we remember that we are God's children, it is possible to control our anger.

Let me give you an example.

Many years before we lived here my family went on vacation to Central Florida. And as a part of that vacation we visited the Kennedy Space Center.

Carrollyn thought that it would be good idea that we all wear the same t-shirt so that we could keep up with each other in the crowds.

The church I served in North Carolina had purchased t-shirts with the church logo on them, and all of us had them. So, we wore those shirts.

At one point in the tour I was walking around that huge Atlas rocket which took men to the moon, and three foreign tourists practically walked right over me.

These were big brawny guys who were obviously in town for the World Cup Soccer matches as they wore t-shirts proclaiming their allegiance to their country's team.

They didn't say excuse me. In a very arrogant way they just kept going, running right over top of me.

My wife saw the fire in my eye. I was getting ready to let them know exactly what I thought in a way that would need no translation!

And she just smiled and said a cheery voice,  
“Remember the shirt you are wearing!”

Immediately the flame that was burning inside me was extinguished. It just wasn't possible to react with anger while wearing that shirt. It was just too obvious a reminder of my identity.

When we remember who we are and whose we are it makes a difference. We don't have to let anger control our actions.

Indeed, remembering that we are God's children, saved by grace is the best foundation I know for Christian ethics. We do the right thing because of who we are.

## STEALING

Paul gives another example of this when he tells the Ephesians that thieves should “give up stealing and take up honest work so that they can have something to contribute to the those who are in need.”

This has always been a bit of a mystery to me. I can understand Christians getting angry over important matters. That's been a fact of life in the history of the church.

But, why did he have to tell some in this congregation to quit stealing?

Perhaps when the early church proclaimed the gospel they cast a wide net. Like Jesus they accepted those whom society deemed unacceptable. And perhaps some of the new Gentile converts had a hard time leaving their old way of life behind.

This would explain why there was conflict in the church at Ephesus.

Pious Jews didn't want anything to do with people who acted in this way. So, Paul told the Jews, “Remember we're all saved by grace through faith. None of us can boast. Don't judge these new Gentile believers harshly.”

But, on the other hand, he told Gentiles who had a hard time leaving the old way of life behind,

“Remember who you are. Don’t let anger get the best of you and live in such a way that the cause of Christ is not compromised. Do not be dishonest. Work and support the work of the church.

Grace should never be an excuse for bad behavior.

## GRIEVING THE HOLY SPIRIT

And then Paul reminded Jewish and Gentile Christians of the overriding principle in the church.

Don’t tear down others. Build each other up. In this way we avoid “grieving the Holy Spirit.”

That’s another phrase that has caught my imagination. What does it mean to grieve the Holy Spirit? I must admit that I’m not entirely sure what that means.

But, I ran across a story this past week that suggested an answer. I’ve been reading George W. Bush’s biography of his father, George H.W. Bush.

“W” told of an instance in his misspent youth when he had a bit too much to drink after playing tennis with some friends. He knew that he was on thin ice driving home, but he made it to the house without incident ... until he ran over and destroyed their neighbor’s garbage can and then zoomed into the driveway.

And unfortunately for “W” his mother saw the whole thing. She was furious and told her son. “Go upstairs and see your father.” George defiantly charged upstairs, put his hands on his hips and told his father, “I understand you want to see me.”

His dad was reading a book at the time. He calmly put the book down, slid off his glasses and stared right at his son for a long time. Then without saying a word he put his glasses back on and went back to reading his book.

George said that he felt like a fool.



He realized that he had disappointed his father so deeply that he wouldn't even speak to him.

I wonder if Paul meant something like this when he talked about grieving the Holy Spirit. Could it be that sometimes we disappoint God so much with our angry and ungracious ways that God is silent in grief?

Many in the modern world believe that we gain our freedom through sin, through doing what we want to do. Christians believe that we lose our freedom through sin. Sin mars the image of God in us and makes us less than we are called to be.

### A FRAGRANT SACRIFICE

I often ask people who feel alienated from God, "Is there something that you need to confess? Is there something that you need to do? Is there someone that you need to forgive? Do what faith requires and then re-evaluate your sense of God's presence."

When we grieve the Holy Spirit through our actions we often experience a period of spiritual dryness. But, these disappointing times can spur us to positive action in the future. We remember who we are and whose we are.

The grace of God spurs us to live in a different way.  
We put away anger and slander.

Instead of malice we treat each other with kindness.  
We forgive one another as God in Christ has forgiven us. (4:31-32)

The really important thing to remember about today's lesson is this:  
We don't do good things so that we might become a Christian. Instead, we do good things because we are Christians.

To put it another way, the text doesn't say,  
"You ought to act like somebody."  
The text says, "You are somebody, so act like it."

Now matter how much we talk about the grace of God; the idea of works righteousness hangs on. We keep thinking that it is somehow necessary for us to do something to make the grade with God.

But, the gospel tells us that Jesus took the test for us and we have passed not because of what we have done. We have passed because of what Jesus did for us.

I say it every week, but let me say it again, “In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.” And that forgiveness means we are freed to live with joy and grace.

We are no longer controlled by guilt.  
We no longer have to justify ourselves before others.  
We are God’s children.

We are loved and out of love we seek to imitate our Lord.

I like the way Paul closes this section in 5:2.  
He writes, “Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Our lives are a sacrifice, that is a gift, gratefully returned to the God who has given us so much.

It’s the same idea expressed in Isaac Watts hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”

In that hymn he spoke of a “love so amazing, so divine” that it deserves our life, our gifts and our all.

Our service to our Lord is not a grinding sacrifice but a joyful response to grace.

## KEEP ON IMITATING

When Paul tells the Ephesians to imitate God in our passage for today (5:1) the word “imitate” is in a tense that indicates an ongoing action. We might translate it, “Keep on imitating God.”

In other words, it’s a process.

Martin Luther put it this way,

“This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise.

We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.”

So friends let us grow up to God.

Let God’s grace be a part of our lives each day.

Let us be a fragrant offering to the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Amen.