

EPHESIANS 4:25 – 5:2 ST JAMES', 12.8.18, 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION

As you may know, we've just got back from our holiday. We spent our first week away at the Keswick Convention, enjoying worshipping with hundreds of other Christians from all round the world, and listening to some really great Bible teaching. The theme of the Convention this year was 'Sent', and we were constantly encouraged to realise that each one of us is sent by God to be a missionary in our own context.

One of the speakers illustrated this talk with the story of the Prodigal Son. After the selfish, rebellious, spendthrift son leaves to squander his inheritance on wine, women and song, his father is constantly watching and hoping that he will come home again. When the son eventually appears in the distance, his father abandons his dignity, bares his legs, and runs to greet him. He throws his arms around him, and throws a massive welcome party. That's a picture of how much our Father God longs for each and every person on this planet to come and join his family, to come and enjoy the riches of his relentless loving-kindness.

If we already count ourselves as members of God's family, then we need to display the family likeness in the way we live our lives, so we can show all those we know and love just who our Father God is. In that way, we will be missionaries in our own context. How else can we possibly even begin to show our gratitude for all that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us?

In this passage from the letter to the Ephesians, Paul is making a very similar point. The Lord's people *must no longer live as the Gentiles do* (v 17). We must *be made new in the attitude of [our] minds, and . . . put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness* (vv 23-24). Paul gives some very practical instructions, which all concern our relationships with other people, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. I'm sure that every single person here this morning will be challenged by at least one of Paul's instructions here.

TRUTH, NOT LIES

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood, and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body (v 25).

As Christians, we follow Jesus, who said, *I am . . . the truth* (John 14:6). The context of our passage is the picture of the church as the body of Christ (4:15-16) – in that sense, *we are all members of one body* (v 25). In C4, St John Chrysostom commented, 'If the eye sees a serpent, does it deceive the foot? If the tongue tastes what is bitter, does it deceive the stomach?'¹ We can't function effectively as the body of Christ, if we're trying to deceive one another. Why? Because if we're lying to one another then we can't trust one another, and if we can't trust one another then our fellowship is broken, and the church becomes nothing more than a religious club.

RIGHTEOUS ANGER, NOT TEMPER TANTRUMS

In your anger do not sin (v 26). There are circumstances in which it's good and right and proper to be angry. But we need to be careful:

righteous anger is no excuse for injured pride, malice, animosity or the spirit of revenge.

When is it right to be angry? We can see an example of Jesus' anger - with the money-changers in the Temple. They were getting in the way of worship. As his followers, we too should be angry about anything which prevents people from coming to the Lord in repentance and worship. We know that God hates sin, so as his people, we should hate it too. We should be angry when the Lord is not honoured. We should be angry when the poor are exploited, or the vulnerable abused.

But when we're angry, we have to be very careful. As Paul says, we're not to sin, and we're not to *give the devil a foothold* (v 27). There's a very fine line between righteous and unrighteous anger. In particular, when we're angry about what someone has done to us, we need to make sure that our anger doesn't turn to resentment, bitterness, or looking for revenge. There's no excuse for brothers and sisters in Christ to spend years not speaking to each other, or to allow old injuries to fester. Even if you're the person who's been hurt, you're to seek reconciliation if possible. If reconciliation isn't possible (for example if you're no longer in touch with the person who's hurt you, or they refuse to allow it), then you're to ask the Lord to heal your pain, and to give you grace to forgive. If we hold on to our resentment or bitterness, we're allowing the devil every opportunity to damage the church, the very body of Christ.

WORK AND GIVING, NOT STEALING

Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need (v 28).

This verse clearly echoes the eighth commandment, 'You shall not steal' (Exodus 20:15). Amongst the Christians in Ephesus were people who previously made their living by pilfering. This isn't an option for members of God's family. Neither are other forms of stealing. If we evade tax by making a false declaration, we're stealing from the government. If employers demand that their employees work very long hours, and/or don't pay them a fair wage for the work they do, they're stealing from them. If workers don't fulfil their duties, or use working time for their personal projects, they're stealing from their employers.

But Paul goes a lot further here than reiterating the eighth commandment. We're to labour, to do honest work, so that we may have something to share with those in need. We're called to do far more with our hard-earned cash than simply provide for ourselves and our families, or treat ourselves to a few luxuries. We're to contribute to our community by sharing what we have with those who are in need. It's for each one of us to decide before God exactly what that means in our particular circumstances, but as God's children we're called to be generous with the material goods which he's lavished on us.

CIVIL TONGUES, NOT FOUL MOUTHS

When Paul says *do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths* in verse 29, he's not just forbidding the use of bad language.

The Greek word is used of rotten trees and rotten fruit. When we say things which are dishonest, unkind or vulgar, we don't build people up. Rather, we hurt them. And when we're dishonest, unkind or rude to our brothers or sisters in Christ, then we're inflicting injury on the body of Christ, and therefore on Christ himself.

When God speaks, he always uses his words to help, to encourage, to cheer, to comfort, or to stimulate his people. As those who call him Father, we're to do the same, especially in our relationships with one another. Just like any other family, we might struggle to get along together, we might have arguments. In our natural families, we know that we need to apologise and make up after an argument. It's a tragedy when families fail to be reconciled with each other, and break apart. It's even more of a tragedy when that sort of thing happens within a church family. As Paul says here, it grieves the Holy Spirit (v 30); it hurts the one we call Lord, Saviour, Friend and God.

KINDNESS AND LOVE, NOT UNKINDNESS OR BITTERNESS

Unwholesome talk (v 29) has its roots in our attitudes to one another. We can't avoid it if we harbour resentment, passionate rage, sullen hostility, or bad feeling against other people. *Unwholesome talk* will erupt from us if we allow our quarrels to become shouting-matches, or if we wish or plot evil against other people. Paul tells us that we must

get rid of all such attitudes (v 31). If instead we're *kind, compassionate and forgiving* (v 32), we'll be showing the family likeness of God's *dearly loved children* (5:1).

CONCLUSION

If you haven't been challenged by at least one of Paul's instructions here, then you're either a model Christian, or you haven't allowed God the Holy Spirit to speak to you through this passage.

The Christian life is a constant challenge. We each have particular areas which we find harder than others. None of us will get it right all the time. But, as Paul reminds us in our final verse, *Christ loved us*. And because he loved us, he *gave himself up for us* (5:2). Our response to his love must never be to take his love for granted, and think that our behaviour doesn't matter. Our response to his love should always be to co-operate with him as he works in us to transform us into true children of God, displaying his family likeness in all we think, say and do. Never forget that each one of us is sent to show and to tell those around us that God longs to welcome them into his family too.

¹ Quoted in Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, (Tyndale NT Commentary, Leicester, IVP, 1956/1983), p 133