

Ephesians V
Ephesians 4:25-5:2**Pastor Wayne Peterson**
August 8/9, 2009

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.

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This is Part Five of our sermon series on the book of Ephesians. Before getting into this morning's passage, I think it might be valuable to quickly review what has happened so far in this letter.

Paul wrote this letter to a group of Gentile Christians, which simply means that these Christians were not of Jewish background. His purpose in writing was to heal some divisions that had arisen between the Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. The first three chapters of the letter are an appeal to unity within the church. Paul recognizes the differences between the two groups, but he reminds them that these differences are no longer of any consequence because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The two groups may have different backgrounds and different traditions, but because of their baptism into Christ those differences aren't important anymore. All Christians, whether Jewish or Gentile, are now part of the same family – the church.

In the first three chapters, then, Paul spells out what God has done for humankind in Jesus Christ. In the fourth chapter, Paul shifts gears and begins to tell his readers that God's action calls forth a response. That is, being a Christian should make a discernible difference in the way they live, the values they hold, and the ways they interact with others.

In the verses that precede our reading for this morning, Paul describes this by using the image of changing clothes. He urges the readers to “put off” their old nature with its self-centered ways and “put on” a new nature, the nature of Christ. The readers would recognize that Paul was here talking about baptism. In the ancient church it was the custom when someone was baptized to remove their old garment as they entered the water and be given a new garment to wear when they emerged from the waters of baptism. This simple ritual helped impress in people’s minds that they were now “new people” as they symbolically put on the nature of Christ.

In today’s passage, Paul gets more specific about what putting on this nature involves. He rattles off a list of seven exhortations – directives for how Christians should act in the community. He tells his readers 1) to tell the truth; 2) don’t let anger fester inside you, but deal with it appropriately; 3) don’t steal; 4) don’t use foul language; 5) don’t grieve the Holy Spirit (which we do when we fail to live up to our baptismal name of “Christian”); 6) put away all malice toward others (that is, don’t be bitter or angry with others); and finally, 7) love others.

The thing that is rather surprising about this list of do’s and don’ts is that it’s not surprising at all. There is nothing distinctively Christian about this list at all, except the one that talks about grieving the Holy Spirit, and even that is simply a way of saying, “Be sure to act in such a way that your actions will not bring dishonor to the community.”

Over the course of many centuries, humans in all cultures and religious traditions have found that for a community to exist and thrive, it must be based on certain values like trust, honesty, cooperation, and hard work. Paul gives us nothing novel in this list. A group of Greek philosophers or Muslims or Buddhists or even atheists would nod their heads in agreement that these are values for which all humans should strive.

For this reason, many people believe that the term “Christian ethics” is redundant. Truth, honesty, and cooperation are ethical values recognized by all people, Christian and non-Christian alike.

But there’s a little bit more in these verses than these simple, brief exhortations. For Paul, the distinctive thing about ethics for a Christian is not what we do and don’t do, but the reason why we do it or don’t do it. Each of Paul’s directives in these verses comes with a brief rationale attached, providing a theological basis for the actions.

“Tell the truth,” Paul says, “because we are members of one another”—a reference to his earlier analogy of the church being the body of Christ, made up of individual Christians. Our bodies depend on each part being truthful in sending messages to the brain. If we stick our hand in a pan of water and the nerves send a message to the brain saying it is cold water when it is actually hot water, our skin would be severely burned. Our senses must be truthful or we will end up hurting or killing ourselves. So too, when we are all bound into the one body of the church, the body can function properly only when we speak the truth to each other.

“A person should not steal,” Paul says, “but should do honest work.” Everyone would agree with that. But the reason Paul gives for doing honest work is not so that the person may become wealthy, but so that he or she might have something to share with those in need. The goal of work for Paul is not acquisition, but contribution to the common good.

“A person should not be bitter or spiteful toward another, but kind and forgiving” – and the reason Paul gives for this is that God in Christ has been kind and forgiving to us.

Each of the things Paul lists for Christians to do or not do is important, but more important for Paul is the reason we do what we do and say what we say.

It's important for us to identify the reasons we act the way we do and make the choices we do. Let me just give you two examples to ponder. The first is the general area of conserving natural resources. This includes anything from recycling, to turning off unnecessary lights, to purchasing more energy-efficient light bulbs and appliances, to conserving water, to buying a car that gets higher gas mileage. There are many good reasons to conserve natural resources – 1) it's in my own self-interest because it saves me money; 2) it's in my country's self-interest because using less energy makes us less dependent on oil from other parts of the world; 3) it's in the best interest of our children and grandchildren because some of these resources are non-renewable (once they're gone, they're gone), so conserving resources now means they'll last longer. All of those are good reasons to be "green" and conscious about conserving natural resources. But there's another important reason that comes into play for Christians, and that is our understanding that God has entrusted us with taking care of the beautiful creation he gave us. Conserving natural resources is one type of Christian stewardship. Conserving is a good idea for everyone, but the reason is especially important for Christians.

Another area to discern the reason why we do what we do is our offerings. Again, there are many reasons people may decide to give money to their church – 1) as a member of an organization, they want to do their "fair share" to make sure the budget is balanced; 2) they see it like any other transaction – I'm getting something of value to me (religious education for my children or a beautiful place to worship) and therefore I should pay for what I receive; 3) tradition (my parents always gave an offering, so I should, too). All of those are valid reasons for giving an offering to God through the church and they all come under the umbrella of what we at St. Barnabas call Duty. We don't have to spiritualize a reason for this aspect of our offering. Financially supporting an organization we belong to, whether it is a church, a homeowner's association, public radio, or a country club, is simply the right thing to do.

At St. Barnabas, we have looked at the church's budget and the average household income of our members and calculated that this Duty portion is about 3% of our income -- 2% for the General Fund and 1% for the Building Fund.

But again, there is another important reason to give our offering that comes into play for Christians, and that is our understanding that everything we have ultimately belongs to God and God has entrusted it to us during our lifetime to benefit ourselves and others. Speaking personally, Jackie and I give our offering because we look at everything God has given to us – healthy bodies, loving families, more than adequate food, clothing and shelter – we look at all this and more that God has given us and we want to say "thank you." At St. Barnabas, we talk about the portion of our offering that is over and above our fair-share, Duty offering as being our Delight offering.

Finding an adequate way to thank God directly is kind of difficult. Talk about trying to find an appropriate gift for the person who has everything! The fact is, we can't say "thank you" to God directly in a concrete way. And so we show our thanks to God by sharing what we have been given – our selves, our time, and our possessions – sharing them with others through the church. That's the reason Jackie and I write the checks to St. Barnabas and the wider church. It's our way of saying, "Thanks be to God!" And it gives us a sense of delight.

Paul sums up this section by simply saying, “Be imitators of God and live in love.” You might recall several years ago the bracelets many people wore with the letters WWJD, a reminder to the wearer to ask the question – What would Jesus do? I think Paul would have been very comfortable with the question. As we ponder what to do and say in a particular situation, to ask ourselves “What would Jesus do?” does not always give a self-evident answer, but what it does do is get us thinking about the rationale for our words and actions – and that’s what Paul is here urging us to in his letter to the Ephesians.