

True Community, Ephesians 4:25-32

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Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. Today we are carrying on in our sermon series in the letter of Ephesians which we have subtitled, "Into the Fullness of Christ." So I invite you to turn in your Bibles with me to Ephesians 4:25-32. The title of today's sermon is "True Community," and the main idea is "Resisting the Holy Spirit wrecks the holy people". Even though that's focused on the negative, the way that Paul makes his application points us to the positive:

- 1) Resist being false—pursue being real - v. 25
- 2) Resist evil rage—pursue righteous anger - vv. 26-27
- 3) Resist selfish taking—pursue selfless giving - v. 28
- 4) Resist rotten talk—pursue gracious words - vv. 29-30
- 5) Resist bitter hearts—pursue tender hearts - vv. 31-32

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Ephesians 4:25-32. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:25-32

The Lord has spoken to us. Let's say this together: Thanks be to God! You may be seated.

Exposition

When I read today's passage you know what unfortunately comes to mind? The Jerry Springer Show.¹ Some of you may be too refined to have ever watched it (or to admit watching it), but the rest of you know exactly what I'm talking about. If talk shows weren't greasy enough already, Jerry Springer slid into whole new levels of televised depravity. The expectation for every episode was that a small number of people would be brought on stage (usually family members), Jerry would ask some inciting question or bring out some feuding guest, people would scream and fight until they were broken up, and then they'd do it all over again. Now we could argue that the kind of people who appeared on the show weren't your average Americans. But what does it say about us that the show became more popular than Oprah and ran for twenty-seven seasons?

I think it says that we are a people so familiar with such depravity, that we can laugh at it instead of weep over it. Lies, rage, theft, corruption, bitterness, wrath, clamor, slander, malice—these aren't just the themes of The Jerry Springer Show. They are the everyday clothes of people not wearing Christ. This is how the world speaks and treats each other. Jesus affirms as much in Matthew 12 when he says,

³⁴ You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Matthew 12:34

So it makes sense that as Paul writes to people whose hearts have been changed by Jesus, he expects that how they speak and treat each other will also be changed by Jesus. That as we put off the old self and put on the new self, the church becomes the exact opposite of The Jerry Springer Show. That as we submit to the Holy Spirit individually, we display his holy presence together.²

So the way that Paul instructs us today has a very clear pattern:

- resist being like this
- pursue being like this
- and here's why.³

¹ The Jerry Springer Show, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jerry_Springer_Show

² Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), 138; Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), Loc 8101

³ Foulkes, 138; Arnold, Loc 8070; John R.W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 183

Instead of wrecking God's people, edify God's people, according to your new identity. For the person who longs for Scripture and theology to distill into very practical instruction, well here's a dream passage.

1) Resist Being False—Pursue Being Real - v. 25

So let's begin with the first application: resist being false—pursue being real. We read in verse 25,

25 Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Ephesians 4:25

Perhaps a better way to translate “put away” falsehood is to “take off” falsehood. Not only is that more literal, but it takes us back to last week's passage about taking off the false self, this image of ourselves that we create instead of God.⁴ This entire verse seems to be taken from the prophet Zechariah. There he is writing about the coming day when God's people will dwell with him in the “city of truth”.⁵ On that day, and *now*, in light of that day,

16 These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; 17 do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the Lord.” Zechariah 8:16-17⁶

A community marked by the presence of truth from Jesus, is a community marked by the presence of truth toward one another. Being false or fake, hiding the truth, it makes true community impossible. This is why I'm so hard on “nice” Christian subculture that puts on a smile in person, then drives home criticizing people; or only shares what's on the surface, rather than what's really going on under the surface. It's false self community. And it's simply another form of lying.

It's like many cultures around the world, where their form of greeting isn't just a single handshake, but the left hand is also made visible to show you're not hiding a knife behind your back. Relationship is built on honesty and trust.

⁴ Arnold, Loc 8101; Richard Plass and James Cofield, *The Relational Soul: Moving From False Self to Deep Connection* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 60-61

⁵ Zechariah 8:3

⁶ Arnold, Loc 8131; Foulkes, 138-139

Paul says we are to do this because “we are members of one another,” parts of the same body.⁷ As one early church father wrote, “If the eye sees a serpent, does it deceive the foot? If the tongue tastes what is bitter, does it deceive the stomach?” Lying is a hindrance to the proper functioning of the body.⁸ It makes the head seem messed up, as though our head is Satan, the father of lies and confusion⁹, instead of Christ, the true head who holds all things together.¹⁰

So then church, resist being false—pursue being real.

2) Resist Evil Rage—Pursue Righteous Anger - vv. 26-27

This brings us to Paul’s second application: resist evil rage—pursue righteous anger. We read in verse 26,

26 Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and give no opportunity to the devil. Ephesians 4:26-27

If anything reflects our old Jerry Springer ways, it’s an out-of-control temper. Paul seems to take this directly from Psalm 4, which says (word for word),

4 Be angry, and do not sin; [and then] ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. Selah Psalm 4:4¹¹

What we’re being called to resist here isn’t *all* anger, but evil rage. It’s sinful anger that leads to hatred, which Jesus describes as murder—even if it doesn’t lead to violence.¹² This is so dangerous, church—that’s why Paul adds “do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil”. He didn’t say not to let the sun go down on your “argument”—otherwise married couples may often be up all night! Arguments sometimes take days, weeks, months to resolve, but the root of bitter anger underneath them must be addressed immediately.¹³ For even anger that is justified can quickly grow bitter and demonic.

⁷ Romans 12:4-5

⁸ Foulkes, 139

⁹ John 8:44; 1 Corinthians 14:33; Arnold, Loc 8122

¹⁰ Colossians 1:17-18

¹¹ Foulkes, 139

¹² Matthew 5:21-22; 1 John 3:15

¹³ Bryan Chapell, “Living Stones: Witness of Grace, Ephesians 4:25-32,” <https://www.bryanchapell.com/blog/living-stones-witness-of-grace>

For example, parents, think about how easily our discipline can turn from instruction to wrath. And children, think about how easily our response to parents can turn from honor to hatred.

And if we let it linger too long without pondering it humbly on our beds, or addressing it with the offender, then we make a place for it, a place for the devil. Now we usually interpret this as simply an “opportunity” for Satan to distract us. But if we think about the context in which Paul is writing, to believers with a background in demonic magic, then we might see that lingering anger is more than a distraction. I’m not saying that believers will be possessed by a demon, but that you *do* give him a place to reside.¹⁴

The only way I know how to describe it is like a parasite, a tick. Unless you pull a tick off, it will continue to swell with your blood. When you have unreconciled anger, you are walking around with this bulging, grotesque parasite on you. And by the time it pops, it probably has seriously infected you.

Instead, Paul says, be angry and do not sin. Give a place to *righteous* anger. Like our Lord, who saw the moneychangers at the temple and was “indignant not tolerant, angry not apathetic,” who hated sin but not the sinner; and therefore, in perfect control of his emotions, sat down to calmly weave a whip out of cords before he drove people out.¹⁵ True community doesn’t mean we’re always cordial, but that there’s a time for tension. It doesn’t mean we never cross the line, but that *when we do* we make the effort to resolve it.

So church, resist evil rage—pursue righteous anger.

3) Resist Selfish Taking—Pursue Selfless Giving - v. 28

That brings us to Paul’s third application: resist selfish taking—pursue selfless giving. We read in verse 28,

28 Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Ephesians 4:28

This exhortation from Paul very clearly comes from number eight of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not steal.”¹⁶ Apparently this was a regular issue in the days

¹⁴ Arnold, Loc 8181-8212; Foulkes, 140

¹⁵ Stott, 186; John 2:13-17

¹⁶ Exodus 20:15; Arnold, Loc 8224

of the early church, which is part of why Paul and his colleagues literally worked so hard to provide for themselves instead of burdening the church. They wanted to set an example to those who were “walking in idleness”. He tells the church at Thessalonica to keep away from such a person, for “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”¹⁷ We were created to be honest, hard-working people.¹⁸

Yet not as an end in itself, but “so that [we] may have something to share with anyone in need.” The virtue here is not building up wealth only for yourself, but so that you may share it with others—just like Jesus did when he gave us gifts according to the measure of his own gift (just like we talked about a few weeks ago).¹⁹

It brings to mind a sermon Pastor Jason Hunsucker preached a couple years ago in the book of Ecclesiastes. One of the main points was this: “money really *can* make you happy”—meaning that selfless giving brings joy both now and in the life to come.²⁰

When it comes to our context, however, I think the primary application isn’t just to finances (although I will say that if you partake in the fruits of this church community and choose not to contribute to it financially even on some small level, well, this passage should challenge you). I think the greater tendency among us is to *relationally* take more from community than we give. To divulge an endless Evidence of Grace and then check out when others share theirs. To be unwilling or unruly when it comes to hosting or bringing food or watching children. To expect to be checked on, but never checking on others. But that’s not true community.

Instead, church, resist selfish taking—pursue selfless giving.

4) Resist Rotten Talk—Pursue Gracious Words - vv. 29-30

This brings us to Paul’s fourth application: resist rotten talk—pursue gracious words. We read in verse 29,

29 Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. 30 And do not grieve

¹⁷ 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12

¹⁸ Foulkes, 140-141

¹⁹ Foulkes, 141; Ephesians 4:7

²⁰ Jason Hunsucker, “Jesus, Our Treasure, Ecclesiastes 5:10-20,”

<https://www.antiochpeople.org/allsermons/2018/7/17/fpcotsjirmyqfzrxcwnzpc9aem415fi?rq=jason%20hunsucker>

the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Ephesians 4:29-30

Just as Paul described our old self as wearing rotten, putrid clothes, so also our mouths can flow with rotten words. It's anything that turns the community's eyes from what's worthy to what's worthless.²¹ When it hits your ears it's meant to be like the jolt of biting into an apple only to find it's full of maggots. Unfortunately, sometimes we resist our holy filters, and we keep right on eating!

Instead, that which we are to speak is only what's "good for building up". Just like with hard work, good speech is not the end in itself, as though we just need to be morally superior in our language. The goal of the Christian tongue is to use it to bless others; to edify—that is, to build others up.²²

And it's not like there's a word chart for this, although we try to make one as Christians all the time so it's easier. The rubric is the word that "fits the occasion". That could be everything from a kind word that turns away wrath²³ to a lamentful word that expresses solidarity to no words at all because we don't know what to say. All that takes deep dependence on the Spirit to discern. And a readiness to apologize when our words miss the mark of the occasion.

And all this effort leads to giving "grace to those who hear." This was how Jesus was described, as one at whom people marveled because of "the gracious words that were coming from his mouth."²⁴ Now I don't think this was because his words were always soft and dismissive of sin. No, Jesus spoke some of the hardest words that human ears can hear! But everything he said, perfectly fit for whatever was the occasion, pointed people to their need and God's supply of *grace*.

When Katie and I do premarital counseling, we try to really hit home on the power of words. I like for it to even make its way into the wedding homily, just like it did at Jacob and Katie Harrod's wedding last year. I said to Jacob, you more than anyone in Katie's life, will have the power to make her feel beloved or abandoned. And then to Katie, you more than anyone in Jacob's life, will have the power to build him up or tear him down. *And all with your words.*

²¹ Philippians 4:8

²² Foulkes, 141-142; Arnold, Loc 8266

²³ Proverbs 15:1

²⁴ Luke 4:22; Psalm 45:2

It's one of the clearest, most remarkable signs of your new identity in Christ—that you can take that which James said no human being is able to tame, the tongue, and you can use it to build up others with gracious words.²⁵ And that's probably why when we don't use it that way, we “grieve” the ruler of our tongues, the Spirit who is holy. This phrase is used in Isaiah 63 to describe how even though God had rescued his people from slavery in Egypt, they rebelled against him in the desert and grieved his Holy Spirit.²⁶ Although all the ways we resist the Holy Spirit grieves him, I think Paul specially connects his grief to rotten talk. It's like God is saying, ‘I sealed you with my presence with the promise to help you find the words that fit the occasion, but instead of seeking me, you tore down what I wanted to build up—ugh!’²⁷

He doesn't leave, but he does grieve.²⁸

So let's not grieve him, church. Let's resist rotten talk, and pursue gracious words.

5) Resist Bitter Hearts—Pursue Tender Hearts - vv. 31-32

This brings us to Paul's last application: resist bitter hearts—pursue tender hearts. We read in verse 31,

31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Ephesians 4:31

There's a sense in which this is a continuation of the previous verse, and also a summary of the entire passage so far. Five things that begin as a seed in the heart and grow into murder of the mouth:²⁹

- 1) The first, bitterness. This is hard-heartedness that harbors resentment about the past and refuses reconciliation.³⁰
- 2) Second, wrath and anger. I put these together because they are so often cited together throughout the Bible.³¹ This is the brooding of personal animosity that springs from unresolved anger.³²

²⁵ James 3:7-8; Ephesians 5:18-19

²⁶ Isaiah 63:10

²⁷ Foulkes, 142; Arnold, Loc 8297; 8306

²⁸ Arnold, Loc 8316

²⁹ Arnold, Loc 8326

³⁰ Foulkes, 142-143; Arnold, Loc 8336

³¹ Proverbs 16:32; 27:4; 29:8; Romans 2:8; Colossians 3:8

³² Foulkes, 143; Arnold, Loc 8336

- 3) Third, clamor. This is shouting, yelling, screaming with rage.³³
- 4) Fourth, slander. This is the word used for blaspheming God, except here it is applied toward people—speaking abusively about someone.³⁴
- 5) Fifth, malice. This is wishing and plotting evil against brothers or sisters in Christ.

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There is one rule that governs these five things for those in Christ: they are to be put away, done with forever. In their place (verse 32),

32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:32

Remember the point isn't just that we put off the old identity, but we put on the new. Three things this includes:

- 1) First, kindness. This is a characteristic of God himself, who is good toward us even while we rage against him; whose kindness leads us to repentance.³⁶ This is actively loving people when they are not lovely.³⁷
- 2) Second, tenderheartedness. Again, God models this in his “tender mercy” toward us.³⁸ This isn't just an outward act of kindness, but a genuine heart of affection toward others in the body of Christ.³⁹
- 3) Third, forgiveness. Paul knows that kindness and tenderheartedness aren't possible ultimately without forgiveness. This is giving that which is undeserved—not just when an offender comes crawling back to us in tears saying, “You were right! I was wrong!”—but while they are continuing their offense, we give the forgiveness that is not deserved.

For the greatest example of this Paul turns to the forgiveness of God given to us through Christ. And really more than an example, it's the motivation, the power to forgive. This is the hope we have in the face of such a difficult passage. I don't know about you, but letting this passage confront me one application at a time leads me to cry out with the tax collector, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I need forgiveness! Look, Paul's not writing this to people who have already gotten the hang of being real,

³³ Foulkes, 143; Arnold, Loc 8347

³⁴ Foulkes, 143

³⁵ Stott, 190

³⁶ Psalm 2:1; Romans 2:4

³⁷ Arnold, Loc 8369

³⁸ Luke 1:78; Philippians 1:8

³⁹ Arnold, Loc 8379; Foulkes, 143

righteously angry, generous, gracious, tender-hearted saints. No, he's writing to saints who still struggle with being false, raging, selfish, rotten, embittered people who need what—*forgiveness*. Who are growing in their awareness of how dependent they are on a Savior who would love them and die on a cross for them even when they didn't deserve it, and who would rise from the grave and live for them so their sins could be forgiven and so they could forgive the sins of others.⁴⁰

So church, in light of that, resist bitter hearts—pursue tender hearts.

Conclusion

As much as we would like to say that the church never resembles The Jerry Springer Show, the reality is, sometimes there's not much difference. All it takes is one inciting topic, one feuding relationship, one posture of resistance to the Holy Spirit, and we can slide right back into the depraved behavior from which we all came. What greater tragedy than God's holy people speaking and treating each other the same way the world does! Resisting the Holy Spirit wrecks the holy people.

But that doesn't mean we can't have honest dialogue and healthy conflict. In fact, one of the ways we are the most confounding to the world is our unity in the midst of diversity—that we can have vastly different opinions on many things and yet still deeply love each other because of Christ in us.

There are two topics that have the potential to make us go Jerry Springer on each other, but topics that we have to be able to talk about with honest dialogue and healthy conflict—they are reopening and race. Unfortunately, both conversations are raging right now all around us. I say "unfortunately" because in our current mental and emotional state, both of them at the same time are just too much. I want us to have an intentional season of structured teaching and dialogue about race, and that time will come. But right now as a church we have to talk about reopening. And because it is such an issue of conscience, we have to talk about it not just as pastors who make decisions for you, but as a church; as ones who submit to the Holy Spirit individually, and thus display his holy presence together.

So this week in Family Groups we will be applying today's passage to the discussion of reopening Antioch, first on a Family Group basis, and then regarding the Sunday

⁴⁰ Arnold, Loc 8391

Gathering. Even though this is a delicate conversation, it gives us the opportunity to put into practice some of the very things we've learned today:

- Resist being false—pursue being real [don't hide your opinions, declare yourself]
- Resist evil rage—pursue righteous anger [don't blow up at the wrong things, remember who the real enemy is]
- Resist selfish taking—pursue selfless giving [don't just think about your own needs and conscience, but those of others]
- Resist rotten talk—pursue gracious words [don't say things that polarize, and when you do, be restored]
- Resist bitter hearts—pursue tender hearts [remember that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks]

And in so doing, we will all experience *true community*.

That is, for those of you who are in Christ, who find in him the resolution to life's greatest conflict: the sin that incites every lesser conflict. For those outside of Christ, as we invite you into true community, know that we first invite you to the true Christ, who doesn't wreck your relationship with God, but restores it. Let's pray.

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