

BETTER DESIRES

SERIES: EPHESIANS: THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST



Catalog No. 20220306
Ephesians 4:25-32
Ninth Message
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March 6, 2022

Ephesians 4:25-32

Buster Posey, the former San Francisco Giants catcher, is a quiet person who shies away from the microphone. However, when he announced his retirement last year, he submitted to a press conference and fielded questions. I wondered what he would say, so I tuned in.

He was asked about his legacy. He didn't answer with anything about baseball. "My legacy, I want it to be that faith is number one for me, then my family, then the way I treat people; then everything falls into place after that."

That outlook is reflected in the second half of Ephesians 4. In Ephesians 4:17-24, we learn Christ to know Christ. Then, out of a relationship with God, we put off the old self and put on the new self: we say no to what's life-diminishing and say yes to what's life-enhancing. In Ephesians 4:25-32, Paul spells out in specific terms what's life-diminishing and life-enhancing. He gets practical. He tells us what to do and what not to do.

What to do and what not to do have very much to do with how we treat people. What to do and what not to do have very much to do with the words we use.

Speak the truth

Ephesians 4:25:

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

In Romans 1:25, Paul uses the word translated "falsehood" in connection with the worship of other gods. Literally, Paul says we have put away "the" falsehood—meaning, false worship. Being untruthful proceeds from false worship. If we believe in Christ, we have already chosen the true God over the false gods. In this sense, we have already put away the falsehood.

Based on the choice we have already made to put away the false gods and worship the true God, Paul, echoing Zechariah 8:16, instructs each of us to "speak

the truth" to his or her "neighbor." Although we should speak the truth to everyone, and in a sense everyone is our neighbor, Paul here defines "neighbor" as a fellow member of the body of Christ. Especially, then, speak truth to a fellow member of the body of Christ.

First, to speak the truth means to speak the truth of the gospel (Ephesians 4:15; Galatians 2:5, 14; Galatians 4:16). When we speak the truth of the gospel to one another, we guard against lapsing into false worship. When we speak the gospel, we remind each other that victory over evil, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life are found only in Christ.

Second, to speak the truth means simply to speak truthfully. Fellowship is built on trust, and trust is built on truthfulness. It's difficult to be in community with someone you can't trust.

If we're members of one another and are therefore part of the same body, then if we deceive a brother or sister in Christ, we're not only harming that person; we're also harming ourselves (Ephesians 4:15-16). Lying to a fellow member of the body of Christ is self-defeating.

Next, Paul instructs us how to deal with anger.

Deal with anger

Ephesians 4:26-27:

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

After echoing Zechariah, Paul echoes Psalm 4:4. But what does he mean when he instructs us, "Be angry and do not sin"? In verse 31, he instructs us to let "all" anger be "put away" from us. So, what do we do with anger?

Jesus looked at the Pharisees with "anger" because of what they were doing to others and to themselves, but he also "grieved" at their hardness of heart (Mark 3:5). When humans hurt humans, and even when humans hurt themselves, Paul gives us permission, and

even instructs us, to be angry. Despite the word “all” in verse 31, we don’t necessarily need to put away this kind of anger. Are you angry, for example, about what’s happening in Ukraine? Be angry.

Of course, not all anger is other-centered anger. In fact, most of us probably are more likely to be angry because of what someone does to us or because of something that happens to us. Paul would still allow for anger, at least as an initial response. Feel what you feel as opposed to stuffing what you feel. Also, feel free to express your anger to God.

But do not sin. In Ephesians 4:25-32, Paul is especially concerned with how we speak to each other. Don’t use angry words, for example, with someone who has offended you. As James says, “the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (James 1:20).

Put another way, “do not let the sun go down on your anger”—that is, don’t nurse your anger. Feel it, bring it to God, deal with it quickly, and don’t let it fester. Paul obviously doesn’t mean for us to take this literally. What if you get angry a split second before sunset and then you’re angry as the sun sets? Are you violating his instructions? Of course not. His instructions are proverbial.

Os Guinness writes, “However an insult or injury is perceived, anger simply wants to ‘get back’ at the perpetrator. As a result, prolonged anger becomes a perverted desire for justice that grows into an obsessive rage and finally into hatred.”¹

As she lay dying, French actress Sarah Bernhardt observed of the waiting journalists, “They’ve tortured me all my life. Now I’ll torture them.”² You don’t want to let anger fester. Certainly, you don’t want to take it to your grave.

If we deal with anger quickly and in appropriate ways, we deny the devil an “opportunity” to create division. Again, Paul is especially concerned with how we relate to each other in the body of Christ. The devil wants to destroy the “unity of the Spirit” in the body of Christ, and he seeks to take advantage of our anger to do so (Ephesians 4:3).

Jan Johnson tells this story:

When my husband began pastoring a new church, one woman noted that I had been away teaching at retreats for several weeks in a row and commented, “Her career

is more important than the church.” Years ago, that would have devastated me. But I have, for years now, lain facedown on my living room carpet asking God if He wants me to speak publicly, and if so, what my focus should be. The answer over the years has been clear: retreats are my specialty. Still, after hearing this woman’s comment, I brought it to God for a while. I didn’t sense a change in direction, but a change in me. I gained a compassion for my critic that I needed, and I was able to respond with a gentleness that surprised me.³

Next, Paul gives us a reason for working.

Work to give

Ephesians 4:28:

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.

Paul harkens back to the Eighth Commandment: “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15). One can steal in obvious ways that everyone would define as stealing and in subtle ways that allow us to think that we’re not stealing. In any event, instead of stealing, Paul instructs us to work. Literally, Paul instructs us to work for the sake of “the good,” so that we benefit others, not least our employers.

The Scriptures give multiple reasons for work. (See my sermon titled “The Dignity of Labor”: (https://www.pbc.org/sermons?enmse_mid=3266). One reason is so that people can “earn their own living” and not sponge off others (2 Thessalonians 3:12).

Another reason for working, especially in opposition to stealing, is that we may have “something to share with anyone in need” (see also Acts 20:35, 1 Timothy 5:8, Titus 3:14, James 1:27, 1 John 3:17). For those of you who work for a living, did you know that one of the reasons for working is that so you have something to give to someone in need? If not, now you know.

A thief steals to take. A worker works to give.

Paul opened Ephesians 4:25-32 with words about our words. He closes in similar fashion.

Speak to build up

Ephesians 4:29-31:

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.

“Corrupting talk” takes many forms, but what’s especially in view here is talk that tears down other people. Why do we tear down others? Don’t we sometimes do so to build ourselves up? Don’t we sometimes do so to get attention? Which posts in social media do you think get the most views: those that build other people up or those that tear other people down? It’s as if corrupting talk is longing to escape from our mouths, so Paul instructs us to ensure that no such words “come out of” our mouths.

On the other hand, the kind of talk that should freely come out of our mouths is that which is “good for building up, as fits the occasion.” As members of the body of Christ, we should talk in such a way that the body “builds itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:16), and we should be particularly aware of when such talk is needed. “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, / but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Proverbs 12:18).

When we build others up with our words, we “give grace” to them, encouraging them to accomplish what God gives them to do.

When I prepare a sermon for a Sunday morning, and I’m trying to decide what to include and what not to include, I often ask myself the question, “What’s helpful?” Are these words going to help people know God and follow Jesus? Are these words good for building up? In view of such questions, some words don’t make the cut. On the other hand, I know that some words make the cut that shouldn’t, and I also know that some words that should make the cut don’t. I’m a flawed editor.

I let my wife read the written version of my sermon before I preach it. She has saved me—and you!—on many occasions.

Don’t speak to tear down

When we tear down another person in the body of Christ with words, we not only hurt that person; we also hurt the Holy Spirit. Paul, echoing Isaiah 63:10, says we “grieve” the Spirit. The Spirit not only dwells in each member of the body of Christ, he also dwells among us. The Spirit unites us. He makes us “members of one another” (verse 25). No wonder the Spirit grieves when we hurt each other.

If for some reason we are unconcerned with grieving a fellow member of our body, we should be concerned about grieving the Holy Spirit, because he has “sealed” us “for the day of redemption,” which means we belong to God forever. The Spirit, of course, is God himself, a member of the Trinity.

The six words in verse 31 concern either inward attitudes or outward expressions of inward attitudes, corrupting talk that tears down others. Jesus said, “For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness” (Mark 7:20-22).

Paul instructs us to “let” such attitudes or expressions “be put away from” us. Although he has already instructed us to put away the old self, here he uses the passive voice—as if something is done for us that we can’t do for ourselves. The Spirit helps us put away bitterness and the like, not least by reminding us that God has sealed us for the day of redemption and has forgiven us in Christ Jesus.

Toward the end of my journalism career, I began serving in a church, teaching Bible studies, and discipling high school and college students. With that church, I took multiple mission trips to Mexico. Right about the same time, several people approached me, independent of each other, to tell me that they saw in me a pastor. Among them were two missionaries in Mexico.

Especially in that these members of the body of Christ acted independently of each other, I take it that each was sensitive to the occasion. Indeed, they each built me up and gave me grace, encouraging me in what God was giving me to do.

Let’s be on the lookout for how we can encourage one another.

Promote kindness

Ephesians 4:32:

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

After what we've heard in verses 29-31, don't the words "kind," "tenderhearted," and "forgiving" sound beautiful? God is kind even to the "ungrateful and evil" (Luke 6:35). Jesus is tender-hearted, or compassionate (Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 15:32). And, of course, God forgives us because of Christ's sacrifice. Therefore, of course, because God has forgiven us, we should be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving toward each other.

With kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness, we build each other up instead of tearing each other down. Kind words are especially needed these days.

Dr. Samuel Johnson, a devout follower of Jesus, was one of the best-known literary figures in eighteenth-century England. Many of his friends turned conversation into displays of verbal brilliance, gossip, or slander, but Johnson was without malice.

On one occasion his companion, Boswell, asked him what the point was of sharing meals with people if, as sometimes happened, no one said anything worth remembering. Johnson replied that the point was "to eat and drink together and to promote kindness."⁴

What a concept: Gather to promote kindness. May Johnson's tribe increase!

Better desires

When we learn Christ to know Christ, we're cultivating a relationship with God. In our relationship with God, we dwell on who he is, what he has done for us, and what he will do for us.

What do we see of God in these verses? First, we've been sealed by the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption—that is, the day that God establishes his eternal kingdom. Second, God in Christ has forgiven us so that we can know him, now and forever. In these

verses, we see what God—Father, Son, and Spirit—has done for us and what he will do for us.

We see grace. Maybe we feel grace. Maybe we believe grace. And grace, as we see it and feel it and believe it, transforms us. It gives us better desires. It makes us want to love the way God loves. It makes us want to speak the truth, not falsehood. It makes us want to give, not take. It makes us want to build up, not tear down. It makes us want to be kind, tenderhearted, forgiving. It makes you want to give grace to others.

Think of God's love for you. Now think of someone you can encourage this week. And be kind to one another.

Endnotes

1. Os Guinness, *Steering Through Chaos* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2000), 117.
2. Robert Gottlieb, *Sarah: The Life of Sarah Bernhardt* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).
3. Jan Johnson, *Enjoying the Presence of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1996), 128.
4. Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2004), 54.