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Ephesians 4:25—5:2

INSPIRED TO WALK IN STEP

Lying ... Anger ... Greed ... Theft ... Evil talk ... Selfishness — sound like any churches you've been in lately?

Paul seems to think it is the Church's problem. He's talking to believers. He's encouraging those who have turned away from a pagan life where lying was accepted and anger was useful, where theft in the market place was all too common, and where survival of the fittest was lived out among humans.

All these sins and more are placed in direct opposition to what is supposed to be taking place in the church: Kindness ... Tender heartedness ... Forgiveness ... Hard work ... and Love that is shared the way it was received, freely and without condition.

I recently went into a store and forgot that I had on a T-shirt which declared my connection to a seminary. The man at the cash register asked me, "Is the shirt to be believed?" And I looked down, "Oh yes, I am a believer. I trust in Christ," I said.

This man told me about his experience—how he attended a church, one of those churches that still has altar calls—the invitation to come down front for non-believers so that they can become believers. He reminded me of my own experience in those same type of communities. How coming down front of the sanctuary is the culmination of any really good worship experience. A church without an altar call just wasn't church. And sometimes, in fact most of the time, not only do non-believers come down front, but believers come down also for a little tune-up. You know, that repentance that comes from having your heart pricked by the words of scripture or their exhortation.

The convicting power of the Holy Spirit, this man said, drove him to the front of the church to ask his pastor to pray with him. And this man told me how, when he came down, he confessed to his minister that somehow he had allowed his righteous indignation to become nothing more than simple hatred, and he asked his minister to pray that God would take this hatred out of his heart.

The minister began to pray out loud for this forgiveness needed by this repentant believer. It became clearer and clearer to this man how much the minister himself was filled with anger, and even hatred. This man, whom I had only met a few moments earlier, made it perfectly clear that he no longer felt the need to completely give up his hatred and anger because his minister had been so empathetic. The minister actually became someone who encouraged and enabled this would-be believer to not let go of the very thing that Paul said we have to let go of in our lives.

Paul is telling us today in the church to stop encouraging one another to participate in evil activities. Paul says when you are provoked, do not make room for the devil. What he's talking about is not the kind of lying that we're used to. He's talking about a religious deception, and he encourages those who are watering down the gospel to start telling the truth—that none of us are self-justified, and our sins are repugnant to God. We may have become used to them, but God never does. That's why Paul uses the phrase, "Don't grieve the Holy Spirit." Do you get how that pulls at your own sense of right and wrong—that we have the power to sadden God, not to diminish God, but to cause grief to Jehovah, the Holy Spirit, our Savior?

This list of sins that Paul offers us are communal in their nature, and they are sins which perpetuate more sins. They are vices which just keep on giving. And it is extremely difficult to avoid making these mistakes. That is why Paul is so adamant in asking this community to resist. I purposely wrote the prayer of confession today to be a little bit edgy. Maybe you didn't pick it up. But when you read the Word, was your thought, "I'm glad I don't do that." Or did you contemplate, "Where might I have crossed the line? Where have I participated in that very destructive behavior to which I'm giving voice?" or "Where have I encouraged this pandemic to community health in others?"

Do you make excuses? Do you justify your own behavior? In a book entitled, *Lies, Lies, and More Lies*, we are told to be careful of those who are quick to use statistics—those who are adamant in their denial of wrong-doing, and those who promise only to be frank with us. Paul says, "Be careful, for when we are not encouraging one another toward the good, we are encouraging one another toward darkness."

In other words, it's not always okay to simply sit there quietly when people mistreat one another. When we witness injustice, we don't have to speak *every* time, but occasionally, we do have to be heard.

Or ... when we are overindulgent. I've forgotten the comedian who talks about his passion for gadgets. He's in one of the stores that has the gadgets lined up so that you can touch them. They are out of the boxes, and he's looking at a new disc player. And he thinks, "I don't really need this; I've got one that works fine," until the salesman comes over and explains to him that this is one of those players that can record and play back multiple discs—so many that you could have eighteen hours of un-repetitive music. Eighteen hours! The man thought, "Wow! Mine won't do that." So he bought it and went home. And then, like those of us who are prone to buyer's remorse (anyone here like that?), he began to think to himself, "I'm not awake for eighteen hours. I'm going to waste four or six hours that I just purchased."

What about you? Have you begun to think that your overindulgence is just the way God made you—how God intended for you to live. Or have you developed that hurtful pattern of speech which I like to call passive/aggressive, which kind of keeps everyone on their toes when they are around you. They don't want to say the wrong thing because you are so good at cutting people off at the knees. These practices which we perpetuate, which we provoke, Paul says, all to attempt to hoard happiness—self-preservation,

self-determination, self-estimation. You won't find those words in the gospel. You won't find those concepts as faithful. What you will find is that we all struggle, because deep down we are all selfish. If my cashier friend were here he would have said, "Amen."

Are we hearing the proverbs? Are we hearing the truth-telling from Ephesians—that a lie hurts not only the one who is lied to, but also the one who is lying? That we are not allowed to transform righteous indignation into self-indulgence? That, when evil knocks, we're simply not supposed to answer? That we can, indeed, be gainfully employed and productive (that's the real meaning of Paul's admonition to stop stealing), when we reach that point in our life when we no longer feel need to be productive.

Can we, at least today, take away the children's message—to practice using words which affirm, which build up? Can we recognize in our speech, in our actions, in our relationships, that we either bring God joy or we bring God sorrow? Have you been on Facebook lately? There are a lot of sad, sad souls out there who, morning to night, are unhappy. I think Paul would say to us, "Stop taunting one another with words that tear down. Stop perpetuating vengeance and wrath. Start living. Give up bitterness. Take it all, Paul says, and wrap it up in a package and put a bow of malice on it, and be done with it. Seek to be truly loving with one with another.

There was a Benedictine community where people stopped coming. Monks were growing grey haired and old. They were losing heart because no one came to them any more for comfort or encouragement. But away from their abbey and out in the woods, there was a rabbi and people would go to this rabbi time and again. Finally, the head of the abbey went to see the rabbi himself. He went to go see what was wrong with his community.

When the head of the abbey arrived at the rabbi's simple hut, he was welcomed with open arms like an old friend. They held each other. They embraced and they cried. And the abbot told him the woes of his community. The rabbi said, "I will tell you a secret. And you are allowed to repeat it to your monks only once." The secret the rabbi told him is that in you—in your midst—among you is the messiah."

The abbot went back and told his monks the secret. And they began to search for the messiah in one another. They loved and they grew. They became strong spiritually. From the moment the abbot told them the secret, they saw Christ in one another.

How will we treat our messiah? How will we speak to him? How will we greet him when he comes to us as surely as he died on that cross?

This is the word of the Lord. Amen.