

The Talk & Walk of a Grace Community

Ephesians 4:29-5:2

October 23, 2016

Several years ago I attended my 20 year high school reunion. I walked in not really knowing what to expect. One of the first people I talked to was a guy named Mike. He immediately looked familiar to me but the last time I'd seen him was 20 years earlier. We exchanged names and kind of looked at each other like, "yeah, I remember you." And, I did remember Mike, but I couldn't quite place him. Had we been friends? Enemies? Team mates? Hum... I just couldn't quite remember so I blurted out, "Yeah, I remember you...a little..."

And with that word little, Mike's face became very angry. His voice rose, "A little hey!" I was taken aback. Uhm... offta, what did I say? I couldn't figure out what I'd done to set him off. And then, suddenly, I realized why it had been so hard for me to place Mike. You see, in high school, Mike had been a lot shorter. And, he wore these really thick glasses that were often taped in the middle. They were taped because they'd sometimes get broken when he'd get in a fight; a fight with people who teased him because he was LITTLE. Apparently Mike had a late growth spurt. Because, the man standing before me was tall and strong. He was wearing contact lenses and standing next his beautiful wife. He was doing well.

But, when I said, "I remember you a LITTLE," it poured salt in some old wounds. Once I realized what I'd done I immediately apologized. I felt just awful. And not just because of what I said at the high school reunion. I realized, in that moment, that all of the times back in high school when I'd joined in with the other guys and teased Mike and made fun of his size, I had torn him down. And I wished so badly that I could travel back in time and take back those unkind words.

Wholesome talk is a key distinctive in a Grace Community. Ephesians 4:29-30 tells us, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."

This adjective "unwholesome" is used in other parts of the Bible to describe things that are rotten or putrid.¹ So the imagery is rotten fruit or rotten fish. Can you imagine the stink of those two things? I didn't bring any samples for us to smell this morning but I think you get the idea. To go just a little further with this analogy, the warning here is not just about one piece of rotten fruit. Rather, the warning here is how one piece of rotten fruit can damage the whole pile of apples. Perhaps you've heard the saying "one rotten apple spoils the whole barrel."

In other words, our unwholesome talk is not just a matter of our own personal sin but also how that personal sin can hurt the entire community. There is a personal responsibility for our words but also a communal responsibility to be gracious with what we say to those around us.² Verses like Ephesians 4:29 are incredibly challenging. How in the world can I guard my tongue that closely? Apart from a vow of silence and abstaining from all tweeting and texting, how does a Christ-follower ensure that everything he or she says will benefit others?

This is made all the more sobering by texts like Matthew 12:36-37 where Jesus says, "But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. 37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." Earlier in v. 34 Jesus also tells us, "...For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of." Our hearts are the key to our mouths. We need our hearts and minds to be filled with the things of God. Then, the overflow will be wholesome and helpful to others.

¹ O'Brien, p. 344. See Matthew 7:17-18 and 12:33-34.

² The phrase "any unwholesome talk" is literally referring to each and every single word that is spoken. And, the grammar in v. 29 for "mouths" is actually a Semitic distributive singular; which simply means that it is referring to each of our individual mouths. So, if we put that together, v. 29 is quite particular and quite challenging: Each mouth is to guard every word that comes out of it. We are to use each one only for what is helpful. There should be no rotting fruit or rotting fish carcasses. See Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 344, notes #310 and #311.

It's very important to note that our focus is not just on avoiding saying the wrong things, but it's also on embracing our opportunities to say the right things. What a rich opportunity we have to bless others with our words. So, this is NOT a call to silence.³ On the contrary, Proverbs 25:11 reminds us, "The right word spoken at the right time is as beautiful as gold apples in a silver bowl."⁴ This is exactly opposite of the rotten fruit we started with.



When people run into someone who is a part of the Grace Community, his or her wholesome and beneficial words should stand out and point to the goodness of God. To put it another way, a community of grace, is expected to speak words of grace, in order to honor our God of grace.⁵

Ephesians 4:30 goes on to warn us, "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." The Holy Spirit is fully God and He feels grief when Christ-followers use their words against each other in unwholesome ways. Back in Ephesians 4:3-4 we learned that we should "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit..." The Holy Spirit, who indwells each Christ-follower, has a particular interest in the unity of the body of Christ. Our careless words are one of the quickest ways that we can jeopardize the unity of the body of Christ.

As a Christ-follower, when you feel the Holy Spirit convicting you regarding unwholesome talk, don't ignore that. Conviction is our way of grieving along with the Holy Spirit. Be sensitive to it. Pay attention to it. Humbly respond with a tender and teachable heart. You'll be glad to find the weight of conviction lifted. And, those around you, will be blessed as your vocabulary begins to build them up rather than tear them down. God's has designed Christian conversation to work this way:

It builds others up.

It benefits those who listen.

It is sensitive to what grieves the HOLY SPIRIT.

None of us will do this perfectly, every time, but a daily goal for our faith is that we put off unwholesome talk and embrace beneficial, God-honoring talk.

Ephesians chapter 4 continues to address the things we need to put off in our Christian life and things we need to put on. It keeps bringing home this same theme over and over again...

2. Putting off & putting on, continually refine a Grace Community.

Ephesians 4:31-32 sets up yet another list: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

V. 31 tells us to get rid of some things. There is no place for these kinds of hateful attitudes and behaviors within the church. But, that doesn't mean these issues weren't a concern in the Ephesian Church. And, we shouldn't be so naïve or self-righteous as to think that we won't struggle with some of them here at EFC Bemidji as well. Discipleship is an ongoing, continual process over time. God is patiently refining His people into the Grace Community that He intends us to be.

Let's define⁶ more clearly what we are to get rid of:

Bitterness: loathing and harshness.

Rage: an outburst of intense wrath or fury.

Anger: a lingering emotion of strong displeasure.

Brawling: loud quarreling; unrestrained shouting back and forth.

Slander: speech that is abusive, denigrating, or defaming.

Malice: a nasty, mean-spirited, or vicious attitude.

³ But, consider Proverbs 17:28, "Even fools are thought wise when they keep silent; with their mouths shut, they seem intelligent." (NLT)

⁴ International Children's Bible

⁵ Col. 4:6, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

⁶ Works consulted include O'Brien p. 350 and Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 813). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Now, as we look at this list, let's take a minute to ponder that Paul is writing this to Christians in the church! Our immediate context, at the end of v. 32, uses the phrases "one another" and "each other."⁷ This points to fellow Christians. Paul is calling the body of Christ to get rid of these things that are right in the midst of their own fellowship. It's a sad commentary. And yet... this is reality. This text is instructive for us today. If things like bitterness and malice are in our hearts, it shouldn't surprise us to hear terrible words coming out of our mouths. It's no wonder that Paul warned them about unwholesome talk in v. 29. All of these things become clear warning signs that we need to go to the Lord in prayerful repentance. That we need to grieve over our sin along with the Holy Spirit. Two weeks ago, we addressed the reality, that as believers in Christ, we feel very real and human emotions. But, with God's help and wisdom, we are able to make sure those emotions don't lead us into sin.

Now, after listing all these unwholesome things that we need to put off, it's so refreshing to have Ephesians 4:32 show us what to put on:

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." So, this is the way a Grace Community should be:

Be kind: Ephesians 2:7 taught us that God shows, "... the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."⁸ Therefore, just as, in Christ, God was kind to you, be kind to others.

Be compassionate: Ps. 116:5 says, "...our God is full of compassion."⁹ So, be compassionate, just like your Heavenly Father.

Be Forgiving: Ephesians 1:7 taught us that in Jesus, "...we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."¹⁰ Therefore, just as in Christ God forgave you, be forgiving.

In each of these 3 virtues, since we have been treated graciously by God, we become people who treat others graciously. This is the very definition of a Grace Community. God is continually refining us.

The focus in our text has broadened from not only the way a Grace Community talks but now also to the way it walks.

3. God is pleased when a Grace Community walks in the way that Jesus walked.

Ephesians 5:1-2 commands us to, "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." This word "therefore" signals that we have reached the crescendo. Paul now states a clear summary statement of all he's been teaching the Ephesians believers: Follow God's example. Some translations say "be imitators of God."

Jesus' sacrificial love of giving Himself up for us, brought us not only our **entry** into a relationship with God, but also our **example** for how we should relate to one another. We are called to WALK in the way of love JUST LIKE JESUS. Walking just as Christ did is a sacrifice because it costs us something. It costs us our own comfort. Our own conveniences are set aside for the sake of those whom God calls us to love. It is unlikely that any of us will be called to literally hang on a wooden cross but all of us are called to sacrifice for one another. We are called to make the daily choice to die to ourselves and walk in the way of love for those around us. As we walk in the way of love, we discover what it truly means to live lives worthy of the calling that we have received.

And, when we see a fellow Christ-follower who is living in the way of love, we should rejoice with them. We should cheer them on by saying something like: "Wow, that's awesome! You are walking just like Jesus. Way to be. Press on!"

⁷ These are reflexive and reciprocal pronouns – see O'Brien p. 351, note #338.

⁸ Galatians 5:22 teaches us that the fruit of the Spirit is Kindness.

⁹ 2 Cor. 1:3-4, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us... so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."

¹⁰ Col. 3:13, "Bear with each other and forgive one another... **Forgive as the Lord forgave you.**"

1 John 2:3-6 says, “We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.”¹¹

For me, this is one of the greatest evidences for the existence of God. When I desire to live in godly ways AND when I’m actually able to live that way, I know it must be God at work. It’s certainly not me. There is a supernatural power at work that first compels and then completes godly behavior in Christ-followers. Walking in the way of love is supernatural. Our old self strains against it but our new life in Christ thrives in it.

Back in Ephesians 4:24 we learned of our need, “...to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” Galatians 2:20 ties in so well here, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Some of you may know that old song, “It’s no longer I that liveth... but Christ that liveth in me.”

Christ is not only our **example** of how to live, He is also our **resource** for living in a godly way. And, He is our **motivation** for godly living:¹² since Christ loved us and gave Himself for us, now we want to be like Him and to walk the way He walked.

Rather than grieving the HOLY SPIRIT, we find that our lives becoming a fragrant offering to God. This idea of our lives becoming a “fragrant offering” grabs my attention. We don’t do much in our church with fragrances. In some religious traditions burning incense is common. In our American culture aroma therapy, scented candles, and certain essential oils are becoming more popular lately.

I must admit that when I was doing some research on Frankincense, I ended up really liking the scent. In fact, a friend of mine recently gave me a small bottle as a gift.

The idea of a fragrant offering goes back to the sacrifices that were offered to God in the OT. Whenever God’s people would offer up a sacrifice that was pleasing to God, it was referred to as a pleasant aroma. This is a figurative way of highlighting the things that were pleasing to God

So, for example, in Genesis 8:21, God smelled the pleasing aroma of Noah’s sacrifice after the Ark had come to rest after the flood. The Bible indicates that the aroma of this sacrifice touched God’s heart; he was pleased by Noah’s offering. In a similar way, Ephesians 5:2 teaches us that Jesus’ loving sacrifice of giving His life to purchase our salvation was a fragrant offering to God.

The application for us today, is that when we as Christ-followers, choose to walk in the way of love, to love sacrificially like Jesus loved, then our lives become a pleasing aroma before God. God’s heart is moved when He sees His children talking and walking in godly ways.¹³

Brothers and sisters in Christ, may the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in God’s sight; our Rock and our Redeemer.¹⁴

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on October 23, 2016 by Pastor Jerry Johnson.

¹¹ This word “live” can also be translated “walk.” Back in college I memorized this verse and took a permanent marker and wrote this verse on my shoes; one of my very favorite pairs of red Converse Chuck Taylor’s.

¹² (kathos) = “just as” and also “since” in Ephesians 4:32 and 5:2

¹³ See Phil. 4:18. When Paul receives financial aid from the Philippian Christians he says, “...I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.”

¹⁴ Ps. 19:14