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Cincinnati, Ohio
Preached on August 16, 2009
Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

Through the Telescope: A Study of Ephesians

Once upon a time two brothers, who lived on adjoining farms, fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of farming side by side, sharing machinery, and trading labor and goods as needed without a conflict. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

One morning there was a knock on the older brother's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's tool box. "I'm looking for a few days' work" he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there I could help with? Could I help you?" "Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you."

"Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor; in fact, it's my younger brother. Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer to the river levee and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll do him one better."

"See that pile of lumber by the barn? I want you to build me a fence --an 8-foot high fence -- so I won't need to see his place or his face anymore."

The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation, sir. Show me the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you."

The older brother had to go to town, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing, and nailing. About sunset when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job.

The farmer's eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. It was a bridge -- a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! A fine piece of work, handrails and all -- and the neighbor, his younger brother, was coming toward them, his hand outstretched.

"You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge, and then they met in the middle, taking each other's hand.

They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox onto his shoulder. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother.

"I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, but I have many more bridges to build."

This is the fifth Sunday in a seven part sermon series working our way through the book of Ephesians.

We've been using the image of a telescope to help us better understand the topics that Paul covers in this letter.

The first week, we started way out in the depths of outer space. We learned that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Universe, and the King of Creation. We learned that it was God's plan to gather everything in creation up into Christ, even before God began to create!

The second week, we learned that we human beings love to separate ourselves into groups, creating groups of "us" and "them". But we also learned that it is God's plan to break down the walls we are so inclined to build, and to create one human family through Jesus Christ.

The third week, we explored what it means to be a part of a family—specifically what it means to be part of the family of God.

Last week, the passage and sermon focused on unity and oneness in Christ. The churches in Asia Minor were trying to faithfully live out the unity they had found in Christ. We heard words of encouragement from Paul to the churches for them to continue growing and maturing in Christ. He urged them to keep leading lives worthy of the calling to which they had been called. He encouraged them to bear with each other in love, with all humility and gentleness, and to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We reminded ourselves that in the same way that those words were written to encourage the Christians in Ephesus, those words are meant to encourage Christians today, to keep on doing the same things to seek unity and oneness in Christ.

We started in the far reaches of the heavenly places with our telescope image as we were somewhere on the distant edges of our galaxy.

We got closer to home as we zeroed in on our own solar system.

We got even closer to home as we zeroed in on our home planet Earth.

And we got even closer as we zoomed in on our city.

Now today, the telescope zooms in even closer, and we find us peering at our own neighborhood. And just like on Google Earth in those famous, historic, high resolution places, we can see people walking around, and those people are us! You and me!

Have you ever watched a movie or a television program, and halfway through it, it got just a little too close for comfort?

Maybe it portrayed something you'd experienced firsthand with just a little too much reality.

Sometimes I wished I'd gotten some advanced warning when that happens.

In some ways, I think this week's and next week's passages from Ephesians should come with just such a warning label!

Warning! This is going to hit close to home!

Warning! This is going to make you uncomfortable!

Warning! Here is where the rubber really hits the road!

You heard today's passage read just a few minutes ago. In it, Paul gives Christians the "Rules for the New Life" in Christ.

Before we begin to unpack these verses, I want to back up few verses, and hear how Paul contrasts the Old Life and the New Life. I am beginning with verse 17:

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to cloth yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

And here we begin with today's verses: *So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.*

Paul is saying that the Old Life was living in the way of falsehoods. The New Life demands that we walk in the truth. We know that in order to live God's way, we must tell the truth. Ever since God gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, telling the truth has been part of the deal. The Ninth Commandment tells us, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." And in the New Testament, we learn that Jesus himself is truth, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," Jesus said. John 14:6

But in this verse, Paul makes a very interesting further point, I think. He does not instruct believers to tell the truth just because it is the law. And it isn't even just because Jesus, our Lord is truth. No, we are to tell the truth, "*Because we are members of one another.*"

Remember from last week? We learned that there is only one body. Believers are the body of Christ! We have been unified in Christ. God has made us one in Christ! If we lie to one another, we lie to ourselves as well—because believers are all one body. And, if we lie to one another, we lie to Christ himself, because believers are the body of Christ. This is much more, and goes much deeper than simply telling the truth because it is the nice thing, or even the right thing to do!

Moving on, verse 26: *Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.*"

We know that we are only human, and there are times we get angry. Even Jesus exhibited righteous anger when he saw the moneychangers making God's temple into a den of thieves. However, before we begin thinking that since it's ok to be angry, it must be okay to hold onto anger, hear Jesus' own teaching from Matthew 5:22 ff, *"I say to you that if your are angry with a brother or sister, (translate that 'believer') you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift on the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*

Jesus tells us to come to terms quickly with a brother or a sister. Paul tells us not to let the sun go down on our anger; patch things up the same day.

When we have a problem with a brother or sister, we are to go to them directly and talk things out. Chances are you will discover a misunderstanding. At the very least you will hear directly from the one who has offended you his or her side of what happened. Sadly, we often don't do this.

But, when we delay, and when we hang onto our anger, it allows bitterness to develop. It allows plans to get even to hatch. It allows the devil to gain a foothold in our life, from which he can wound the flesh of the body of Christ. Sometimes the devil gains such a foothold that Christ's body becomes dismembered. Lord have mercy!

Moving on to verse 28: *“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.”*

Here again, as in the rule to tell the truth, we go back to the Ten Commandments. The Eighth Commandment is, “You shall not steal.”

Some people steal for the thrill of it. Some people steal because they are dared to do so. But some people steal very regularly, as a dishonest means of getting money that rightly belongs to someone else.

Paul teaches us that the New Life in Christ involves working honestly with our own hands. But again, Paul gives this teaching an interesting twist, I think. He doesn't teach us to work to earn our own income simply because it is better than stealing. (Although I'm positive he means this as well.) Instead, the reason we are to work and earn money with our own hands is so we can give some of what we earn to the poor. We are to share with needy!

Wow! Giving up the Old Life to Live the New Life doesn't just mean turning away from our past selves or even our human inclinations---it means living a whole, brand new way, doesn't it?

Okay, so maybe you have a pretty good handle on your anger. And maybe you're not a thief and never have been; or if you once were, you've given up that life.

But Paul doesn't stop there; he goes on.

“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.”

How many of us can say that we never let any evil talk come out of our mouths?

Paul doesn't say exactly what 'evil talk' is in this verse—hang on, he will in verse 31. But, it seems clear from the rest of this verse that 'evil talk' also includes 'idle talk'.

For, not only are we not to let evil talk come out of our mouths, but we are only to let words come out of our mouths that are useful for building up. That means the words that come out of our mouths must have a useful purpose for building up the body of Christ. Our words are to give grace, to be gracious, to anyone who hears them.

In verse 30 Paul says, *“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.”*

As mentioned already, Paul is writing this letter to believers. He is writing to believers who have been baptized. He is writing to believers who have been marked with the seal in the waters of their baptism.

In baptism, these believers have been united with God in Christ. They've been adopted as God's children. They have received an inheritance in Christ.

Remember in Ephesians 1:13-14? *“In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.”*

Paul inserts verse 30 here, because continuing to live the Old Life, or according to our human inclinations, does grieve the Spirit, who teaches us all things, and leads us into all truth. (John 14:26)

Now Paul moves on with his admonitions, *“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.”*

Paul returns to his earlier admonishments not to let anger lead us into sin, and not to let what is evil come out of our mouths. He uses a string of near synonyms to say what kind of talk and/or actions we are not to participate in.

Then he contrasts these with Christ-like behaviors: “be kind to one another”, “be tenderhearted”, and “forgive one another.” And why? Because Christ has forgiven us.

Finally, in the last two verses of today’s reading, Paul returns to last week’s theme of growing up, or maturing to be more and more Christ-like. He instructs us to be *“imitators of God”* and *“to live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*

My brothers and sisters in Christ, following Christ both forms us as men and women, and it transforms us into the likeness of Christ.

When we make the decision to follow Christ, we become part of the body of Jesus Christ. We become one with all other believers, and especially so with the believers in our own church.

Being a Christian isn't easy. Believe me, I struggle with the same struggles you do—the same struggles that Paul has instructed us on today.

But, there's only one way to be a Christ follower—and that is to keep on following Christ all of our days. When we fall down, we get back up. When we stumble, we get back on track.

We keep trying and trying, and we get better.

We keep growing and growing, and we become more mature.

We keep loving and loving, until our life, like the life of Christ, becomes a sweet, fragrant offering to God our Father, to whom be the glory! Amen.