

Introduction

One of the delightful things about children is their predilection for mimicry. Kids quickly recognize their parents' common facial expressions or how they walk or how they react to, say, sports. They quickly recognize patterns and mimic those patterns. This is cute and adorable—until they mimic things you'd rather they not mimic. Whether it's how they express themselves in ordinary communication or how they react to negative experiences or how they express emotion in general, mimicry is quite revealing of parents. We see this in how kids respond to sporting events and how they respond to frustration and how they respond to receiving a gift. Much of this is learned behavior.

It's natural for children to mimic; this is how they learn! Long before babies are able to speak—or even comprehend words—they recognize the pattern of language. For example, when a baby is confronted with two strangers, one speaking the language of the baby's mother and the other speaking a foreign language, the baby will quickly lock on to the person whose language is familiar, even if unknown. The human brain is remarkable at detecting patterns and finding familiarity and then seeking to mimic and repeat that pattern.

Part of what it means to follow Jesus is mimicking a new pattern, following a new way to be. Like children, this entails repeating what we see, only rather than our human parents, we seek to be like our heavenly Father, the God who has given himself to us in Christ. This morning we're going to see what it means for us to be like God. We're in Ephesians 4, verse 25.

^{Eph 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. 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.

⁵ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 4:25–5:2

Old Self / New Self

The text we looked at last week is essential for understanding the rest of this letter. After spelling out the gospel of Jesus for the first three chapters, Paul calls the Ephesian believers to walk in a manner worthy of that calling, and that calling is to maintain the unity of the Spirit. He digresses a bit to explain how God has given gifts to his church. These gifts are people who are gifted in particular ways, that they might enable the church to do the work of ministry. This ministry has the maturity of believers as its intended outcome. This is the essence of making disciples.

All of this is possible because of a fundamental change in identity. Whereas the Ephesians had once been *Gentiles*, they had been adopted into the family of God and therefore constitute that new humanity God in Christ through his Spirit is creating. They are no longer Jews or Gentiles, but sons of God, adopted into God's family as his heirs. Clinton Arnold summarizes verses 17–24 quite well:

Changed behavior will flow out of one's new identity in Christ.
Clinton Arnold, ZECNT

The emphasis is not on the behavior. The emphasis is actually on the new identity in Christ. Changed behavior isn't the goal. Transformation is the goal. Transformation begins on the inside. It changes our heart, our *desire*. God causes us to be renewed in our inner being, as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4. Our inner self is being renewed. This is what is meant by transformation.

Transformation will result in changed behavior, but behavior can change without transformation. God is engaged in the work of transformation. Prior to his encounter with Jesus Paul's behavior was a model for his fellow Jews. He claimed he was blameless when it came to the law of Moses. This was not behavior that pleased the Lord, however, for while Paul's behavior was blameless, the sort of transformation God seeks is on the inside and Paul's heart was not changed. The transformation that pleases the Lord works from the inside out; it can never work from the outside in.

Just as we are justified by faith alone, so we are sanctified by faith alone. We become more like Jesus by trusting in the Lord and what he says is true of us. Remember Paul's words concerning our true identity in Christ. We are to put off the old self, which belongs to our former manner of life, and we are to:

Eph 4:24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.
Ephesians 4:24

When we say sanctification is by faith, we mean we must trust that the word of God here is true. When we trust in Christ we are adopted into God's family and receive *his* identity. That is, God himself says that all those who are in Christ are *created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*. This is who you are in Christ. This is your new identity in Christ.

We must walk in a manner worthy of our calling by maintaining the unity of the Spirit. We must put on the new self that is created after the likeness of God in true righteousness

and holiness. What Paul is saying to those who are in Christ is *be true to yourself*. Be you—the you that is created in true righteousness and holiness. Stop living a lie. You aren't the old you, so don't pretend to be the old you by acting like the old you.

In verse 25 Paul hits at this very point. “Therefore”, he says, “having put away falsehood”. What falsehood? The falsehood concerning their identity! They have put off the falsehood of sin and of shame. They have put off the falsehood of their former identity, the very identity that alienated them from the life of God and caused them to be dead in their trespasses and sins. The old has gone for the old was a lie! In Christ they *have* put away falsehood.

It is because they have put away the falsehood of spiritual death and have embraced the life of God in Christ through his Spirit, he says they must speak truth with one another. He doesn't mean truth in general, though surely he would insist on that as well. Given the context, he means the truth of the gospel, the truth of their new identity. He's referring to the truth he mentioned in verse 21: “the truth is in Jesus”.

Having put away falsehood, they are to speak the truth to one another and the truth is in Jesus. They are to hold forth the truth of their new identity in Christ as the only identity that truly matters, for their identity is that of “in Christ”.

Notice carefully the reason for speaking the truth: “for we are members one of another”. Here he doesn't point to God's character as the motivation for truth, though that motivation is real and is a powerful motivator. Instead, as fits his overall context, the reason for speaking the truth is the Ephesian believers live in community together. The primary application in their lives, as evidenced by Paul listing it first and foremost in chapter 4, is the need to maintain the unity of the Spirit. They are called to live together in Christian community and so they must speak the truth that is in Jesus.

Be Angry and Do Not Sin

Without a transition Paul moves on to instruct them to be angry but to not sin. There is no break in thought here, no transition to signal he's moving on to other matters. He's sticking with his primary point! He's citing Psalm 4 here. This is very interesting because Psalm 4 speaks of anger over idolatry. When David wrote the psalm many in Israel were loving “vain words” and were “seek[ing] after lies”. The word translated “vain” is the same word in chapter 4 of Ephesians that's translated “futility”. David then writes this:

Ps 4:4 Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent. *Selah* 5 Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the LORD.
Psalm 4:4-5

John Chrysostom, writing in the fourth century, understood this psalm to be about idols. In verse 2 of the psalm David mentions those who love vain words and seek after lies. Chrysostom wrote,

“Vain” is the word used of that thing that is empty, when there is something in name but nothing in substance. The Greeks have many names for their gods but not a trace of substance...

... This is the very reason the inspired author is distressed, seeing such absurdity in life. I mean, it is like this: if you saw someone avoiding the light to seek

out darkness, you would say, “Why are you doing this strange thing?” So too the inspired author: “Why do you love vanity and seek falsehood?”

John Chrysostom, Commentary on the Psalms 4.6

It is in response to the idolatry of those around him he writes, “Be angry and do not sin”. Don’t let your righteous anger against sin and idolatry become sin and idolatry. Don’t let it become the thing you pursue. Don’t let anger for sin and idolatry become the thing that defines you.

There are plenty of such folk today. There are those who think their mission is to offer “discernment” to the broader world by criticizing anyone and everyone who may disagree with them. They have YouTube channels and post articles criticizing people constantly. They are all over social media, believing they are God’s gift to orthodoxy. They become defined by what they’re *against*, more than what they’re *for*. Don’t be that person.

Think of our text. Having put away the falsehood of your former way of life, let each one of you speak the truth to one another. The truth is, of course, the Lord Jesus. *Be angry* and do not sin. In other words, when you see your brother or sister struggling with the desire to cling to falsehood, be angry. Of course! Sin seeks only to steal, kill, and destroy. That ought to make you angry—but do not let it make you sin.

This is why he warns about dealing with it in a timely manner. Don’t feed your anger. Don’t dwell on it. Don’t nurture it. The danger is clear: doing so will give the devil an opportunity to reek havoc in your life, and since your life is lived in community, reek havoc in the life of the church. Anger can be quite destructive; don’t let it become so.

Because of the connection to idolatry in Psalm 4 and because Paul says in verse 31 to “let *all* ... anger be put away from you”, we must make a distinction. In verse 26 he means an anger directed toward sin and idolatry. When we see a brother or sister in Christ struggling with idolatry, we should be angry—at the idol, not the brother or sister. When a fellow believer is struggling with addiction, we should be angry at the addiction. When a loved one is struggling with sin in any way, we should be angry. Paul says *be angry—and do not sin*.

We must not allow this righteous anger toward sin linger. This is the point about not letting the sun go down on it. In the law of Moses the sun setting is given as a time frame for things such as paying day workers and returning a poor person’s pledge. The point is the thing must not be allowed to drag on. Feel that anger for the destructive power of sin but do not hold on to it and never let it be directed to the person.

Stealing and Nasty Talk

Paul continues without a transitional statement, indicating he’s still on the same topic. The thief must no longer steal. The counter to stealing is interesting. He says instead the former thief must “labor”. This word has the idea of exhaustion. “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him become weary through work”. There is something satisfying about the feeling of weariness after a good day’s work. Paul wants this for the one who once was a thief—but his instruction goes far deeper than this.

Yes, a former thief must work hard to the point of being tired at the end of a shift, but this work must also be “honest work”. Stealing is dishonest work. Honest work is work that

is good and provides a beneficial product or service. This is what the former thief must pursue, but see why: that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

How often is that a motivation for us? How many times have you heard of someone saying something like, “There are others in need; if I work hard and get that promotion, I could really help them”? Or maybe, “There’s a single-parent family with a particular financial need; if I work some overtime this summer, I can help them”? Oh, I know we all know to *add* that. When people are asked what they would do if they won the lottery they always answer with something about paying off debt and buying a home for a family member and they usually add something about giving to charity. *’cause you’re supposed to say that.* I promise you this: no one plays the lottery hoping to be able to support some charitable organization as their primary reason for buying a lottery ticket.

Paul is suggesting here that the ability to help others in need should be a primary motivation for work, rather than an add-on. We tend to think of personal budgeting as designating funds for our own needs and desires and then, if there’s extra, we “budget” for helping others with the leftovers. That’s not Paul’s point. The former thief should work to the point of weariness in order to have something to share.

He continues his point, and without a transition. No corrupting talk should come out of your mouths. No rotting or decaying talk. No putrid speech should come from you. As with not stealing, however, simply removing a bad thing from your life is not his primary point. It isn’t about eliminating bad behavior. Instead of corrupting talk, Paul says you should speak words that are “good for building up”. Your aim in what you speak should be what is in the best interest of others.

This is not a particular subject or topic of conversation, though the gospel should ever be on our tongues. He says “as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear”. As the situation requires, we should be intentional about speaking in a manner that is a gift to those with whom we are speaking. How often we do enter into a conversation with others with this on our mind? “How may I bless this particular person with my words today?”

Sometimes this means not saying what comes to your mind. Not every thought you think should be spoken out loud. The aim is to give grace to those who hear you. Our words should not tear down and should not drag down, but should give life to others. This is what he means in verse 31. There we should get rid of bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander and malice.

The temptation here is to pick apart these different words to find their individual nuance. That may be helpful, but what is the real point? Each of these characteristics stem from a lack of self-control, and this lack of self-control harms others. Your bitterness is experienced by others. Your wrath is experienced by others. Your anger and clamor and slander and malice are experienced by others. Paul’s point in listing these is they harm the community that is the church.

Notice the common thread here: a lack of self-control. It is no wonder fruit of the Spirit includes self-control. They must no longer walk as Gentiles walk, in the futility of their minds, or as Psalm 4 says, after vain things, but instead must walk in the Spirit. A person who is being transformed by the Spirit will be growing in self-control and a significant way we see this self-control is less and less bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice.

Do Not Grieve the Holy Spirit

In the middle of this he inserts an instruction that we've all heard before: "do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God". We've all heard this in the context of your personal walk with Jesus, but what does it really mean? And why does Paul include all these seemingly disparate instructions with no transitions between them, as if he were giving a single instruction? He is giving a single instruction!

What does it mean to grieve the Holy Spirit? We all get the idea of grief. It is to experience sadness or distress. We grieve over loss. We grieve for pain and suffering. How does the Spirit experience grief? He's God, so the experience isn't the same as what we experience, but Paul's emphasis is on avoiding the behaviors that cause grief and embracing the behaviors that do something very different. What is it, exactly, that causes the Holy Spirit to grieve?

We've all heard this made very personal. If you sin, even if only in your mind with bad thoughts, you're grieving the Spirit, right? What is the context? Throughout chapters 2 and 3 Paul has explained how the Gentiles were once separated from the people of God. Israel had received the law and the Gentiles had not and this had created a hostility between the two groups. To deal with this the Lord Jesus abolished the law of commandments with its ordinances, ushering in the new covenant. Thus he takes from both Jew and Gentile and is creating "in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace". We've been reconciled together *in one body*. There is one body, one Spirit, one hope.

This was God's "eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord". Unity in the church is the direct outcome of the gospel. It is part of the work Jesus came to do. After detailing the gospel for the first three chapters, Paul gets to applying the gospel in chapter 4. What is the very first thing he tells them to do with the gospel?

Eph 4:1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:1-3

The direct and immediate application of the gospel of Jesus is to walk in a manner worthy of our calling, and that calling is to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. What would grieve the Holy Spirit? Living in a manner contrary to the Spirit's work! What is that contrary manner? To live in a way that threatens the unity of the local church is to live in a manner that grieves the Holy Spirit of God!

Think through the instructions in our text. What links them? Each negative behavior specifically and directly harms community! We have put away falsehood by embracing our true identity in Christ, and we must speak the truth with one another. If we embrace falsehood, we are embracing our old selves, and this harms the church. Since Jesus is the truth, speaking the truth means to point one another to him. This builds up the church! This maintains the unity of the Spirit!

We should be angry, then, when a brother or sister is in sin, for sin destroys. We should not let the anger persist, however, for then it would be directed toward our brother or sister

rather than the sin. The thief should not steal because this destroys trust, and without trust there can be no community. Instead, by working hard so that he has something to share, he—or she—builds up the body of Christ. By living in a manner that puts others ahead of self, the community of the local church is strengthened.

Corrupting talk harms others. It tears them down. It feeds the old self and strengthens falsehood. Instead, we must speak words that build up the body of Christ, that strengthen the truth. In this way we give grace to one another. This is why bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander and malice have no place in the church: these things *only* destroy. We must not grieve the Holy Spirit by working against the unity he has created in his church.

Walk In Love

There is a better way. The command guiding all of chapters 4, 5, and 6 is this: walk in a manner worthy of your calling, and that calling is to unity in the church. This walking must be rooted in sitting. That is, the truth of God in Christ as spelled out in the first three chapters must be the very thing we rest in, or we *sit* in. We don't sit in this truth just to stay there; we continue to sit in the truth of the gospel that we might walk in a manner worthy of that calling. Look at the final three verses of our text again.

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

5:1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 4:32–5:2

Do you see how grieving the Holy Spirit fits into the context of unity in the local church? Paul's aim here is not sin management. It isn't primarily to get them to stop sinning, but to live in a way that reflects the reality of what God in Christ through his Spirit is doing. This requires they stop sinning, but merely enforcing good behavior is not his goal. You can do the right thing for the wrong reason; this doesn't please the Lord. His goal for the church in Ephesus is that they would become more like Jesus. They must become like God himself.

The standard is not a list of rules. Why must they be kind to one another? Why must they be tenderhearted and forgiving? The reason *why* is seen in *how*. Notice *how* they must be forgiving: *as God in Christ forgave you*. Do you understand what this means? God in Christ forgives us even though one and only one in that relationship has been offended. God has never wronged any person in any way. God has never sinned against you or anyone else. The offense is entirely one-sided, yet the offended party is the one who forgives.

This is how we live in community! This is how we maintain the unity of the Spirit. This is how we do not grieve the Holy Spirit. We love as we are loved. As John says in 1 John, we love because he first loved us, and we see here we must love one another in the manner in which we are loved. God in Christ has forgiven us, though the offense was great—requiring the death of the Son of God to reconcile us to God. That's how we are to love one another!

In verse 1 of chapter 5 he tells us to be imitators of God. We must love what God loves and we must hate what God hates. We must conform our desires to God's character, but see the motivation: *as beloved children*. We don't imitate God out of obligation or out of duty; it's natural for a child to take on the characteristics of a loving parent! Children who are beloved long to be like their parents, so it is only natural for God's beloved children to desire to be like him.

In verse 2 Paul gets at his primary application of the gospel of the Lord Jesus in the lives of his people: walk in love. As Christ loved us and as Christ gave himself up for us, so we must walk in love for one another. Hear what he's saying. Christ's love is a sacrificial love. We must love one another sacrificially! This means, at a minimum, that we give up time and resources and comfort for one another. To walk in love is to give one's self up for the good of others, just as the Lord Jesus did. Clinton Arnold wrote:

Abundant and self-sacrificial love is in the very nature of God himself. Paul thus calls believers to emulate their God and display the likeness of their Father, which Christ himself has already shown us how to do.

Clinton Arnold, ZECNT

Once again we see Paul's point: we must become like Jesus. It is because of God's abundant and self-sacrificial love that we can become like him. We see our heavenly Father be like this and we, his beloved children, mimic him, desiring to be like him.

Application

Sometimes the application of a given text is straightforward. In our text the apostle is calling us to walk in love. New Testament scholar Klyne Snodgrass wrote:

None of the commands in this passage can be followed as long as the primary interest is oneself. Only when our attention is shifted to something greater than ourselves can we escape the prison of self-interest. If we are conscious that the Spirit is in us, marking us as belonging to God and therefore under his direction, service to self is blocked off. Similarly, awareness of oneness with other people will not permit inattention or mistreatment of them. If other people are diminished, we are diminished; if they prosper, we prosper with them.

Klyne Snodgrass, NIVAC

To walk in love is to be like Jesus and to be like Jesus is to live a life that is focused on others rather than self. Think of what Paul wrote to the Philippians.

^{Phil 2:3} Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:3-4

Then what does he say? Be like Jesus, who, though he was God in every way, didn't go around acting like he was the most important person in the world. Church, *he literally was the most important person in existence!* He didn't go around acting like it, though. Not only did he demonstrate humility with his life, Paul says he further humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, and not just any death—death on a cross.

This is who our God is. This is his character. This is his nature. We see this nature on display in this letter to the Ephesians, for the Lord Jesus gave himself for us, that he might unite us together in Christ. He then calls us to become just like him. We, the beloved children of God, have been granted a new identity in him. Paul declares our new identity is that of being created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. We must become like him.