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this way forward

MAKING YOUR DAY IN THE GODLY WAY: WITH OUR WORDS

Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

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Ephesians was written during a time of tumult, governmental corruption, economic hardship, and shifting societal norms. There were both internal divisions within the newly founded Christian community and cultural/ethnic tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The Gentile Christians lacked a proper understanding of appropriate sexual behavior and it was necessary for Paul to instruct them that stealing was not a good way to make a living as a Christian! In other words, in two thousand years nothing has changed.

Whereas some of this letter's solutions to cultural challenges are clearly problematic, most notably its treatment of slavery and the role of women, it still offers a tremendous resource for how to live as a Christian in a world that has strayed so far from God. Including how to resist the age-old human tendency to gossip, slander, and be overcome by the greed that lies within each of us.

For the rest of August, we will use Ephesians to guide our daily walk of faith. We will see how this letter can enable us to make use of the morning, afternoon, and night for the glory of God, how we can make each day in the Godly way.

Ephesians will show us how to use our words, engage the strength of our will, and make melodies with our hearts. It will help us be Godly in all our dealings with others, our disposition throughout the day, and give us a restful sleep at night knowing we have done our faithful best.

First, we begin with our words. For that we turn to Ephesians in the fourth chapter:

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.... 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...

A six-year-old can tell you all you need to know about speaking: "Teacher says if you can't say something nice don't say anything at all."

But the Bible has a tremendous amount to say on this matter. Not because it is complicated, but because it is important and hardly anyone gets this one right.

The premise is simple. We find it throughout the Bible: *Speak the truth*. Clearly a radical notion in our world today.

But, you can dramatically change your own life and the life of others simply by speaking the truth. Certainly, we can decry the falsehoods told across our society. But today, we are not talking about the world; we are talking about you and we are talking about me. And, if we are honest with ourselves, there are moments throughout each day in which we fail to live up to the challenge to speak the truth. Speaking the truth is different than not telling lies. You can be silent to avoid lying but to speak the truth you must open your mouth.

Though the idea is simple, the practice is complicated and hard. Finding a polite way to tell someone about that piece of lettuce stuck between their teeth is almost impossible.

Telling the truth is not just hard because it's awkward, but people can hate you for it. So today, we will explore how we can speak the truth that builds up and gives grace.

Speaking the Truth: Words of Truth Reflect Reality

To tell those with dreams that they are never going to be movie stars or rocket scientists or golfers because they don't have the talent, can be shattering.

But the truth is...not everyone is exceptional – at least not exceptionally good at something. But, we have become so enamored with the idea of

winning that everyone gets a trophy and everyone gets told they did great. Is that true?

By definition it cannot be.

We may think such white lies are harmless. Our intention is to make them feel good about themselves. But they're not harmless.

Because it sends the wrong message about what we are to strive for in this life.

Because it sends the wrong message about the purpose of our life.

Because it gives everyone the idea that life is about being talented - that talent is what makes us interesting, important, and of value.

I like the way Margaret Mead spoke the truth on this matter: *Always remember that you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else.*

The Biblical message, the Christian message, is not that we are all exceptionally talented but that we have an exceptional God. The challenge for Christians is not to convince themselves that they are exceptionally gifted, but instead to do exceptional things in the name of God with the gifts we have been given.

That is our calling and that is what pleases God.

Of course, speaking the truth is not as simple as saying everything that is factually accurate that comes into your head, such as...

"Your baby is ugly and no one wants to see any more boring pictures."

Or...

"Light travels faster than sound. This is why some people appear bright until you hear them speak." (Craig Marckwardt; *Mottos To Live By*)

Paul goes on to say, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouth." He knows you can speak the truth and still speak evil. Jesus knew speaking hard truths would make enemies, but so can speaking the truth harshly. Paul tells us it is not enough to speak the truth. We must do so in love. We must do so with the intent to build up.

Words of Truth that Build Up

Paul tells us to speak "only what is useful for building up." This doesn't mean the words will be easy to hear. But that the intent of the speaker must be for the good of those who will hear them, not to fulfill the speaker's need to vent their frustrations.

Words that build up. This is a fantastic metaphor. Just like in constructing a house, you must begin with a foundation. Before we can begin speaking the difficult truth, we must give people a foundation to stand on, as Beth Burris taught us so well. "You are a child of God." "You are of infinite value to our Lord." In one form or another, either by our actions our words or our nonverbal cues, we must convey to the other person we respect them.

Once this foundation has been established, we can build on it. The foundation makes people more open to hear the difficult truth. To build higher, one needs to hear words of challenge.

I remember my high school youth group's Bible discussions at Heritage Presbyterian Church in Fairfax, Virginia. They were led by students, who offered initial thoughts on the text and then opened it to the whole group to comment.

It's time for true confession... As a teenager I was never averse to letting somebody else know the fallacy of their opinions. And, more often than not, I was not as gentle as I should have been.

On one particular Sunday I must have been especially pointed in my critique. An adult advisor, Bill Sams, decided I needed talking to. He was right and he told me the truth.

Even though he agreed with the points I was making, I was not being helpful. In fact, I was doing the opposite of Paul's instruction to the Ephesians. My words were breaking others down rather than building them up, even though I was speaking the truth. I was not speaking it in love.

Instead, I saw everything as a competition, even Bible studies, and I played to win. I was not seeking to convey the glorious truth of scripture, so much

as I was really trying to convince the whole group how right I was at the expense of someone else. Let's face it. I was speaking to try to impress girls, not to share the good news. I suppose only a future pastor would think that would be a way to woo a woman!

The advisor called me out on it and the sting is still with me. But I needed to hear it. And I could hear it from him, because I respected him and, even though it stung, I knew he respected me as well. He cared for me enough to tell me the hard truth.

But there are no guarantees the truth will be well received. Speaking the truth got Jesus killed. It is easier sometimes to say nothing at all. But Jesus loved us too much to stay silent.

However, there is more to speech that builds up than the hard truth. Paul also calls us to speak those words that give grace.

Words of Grace Invite Us into New Life

Jesus said to the disciples, "Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men." They were forever changed after hearing those words, for they invited them to think differently about how they viewed the purpose of their life. Not to catch fish, to catch people. Their life would no longer be about using their vocation to further their own goals – to feed their family – but they will be used for God's purposes – to share the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The disciples' world centered around their village, their family, their fishing, and their God. If they lived in today's world, I imagine it would influence what news channel they watched, what politician they voted for, and how they interpreted the opinions and policies of those with an opposing world view.

Ephesians was written during a time of profound cultural, ethnic, gender, and economic divides. Within the early Christian community there were nasty disagreements. But Paul reminded them, and he reminds us, you are members of one another – that is, you belong to each other.

There might not be anything more critical to the health of our country than this fourth chapter of Ephesians. The caustic, tribal, prideful, self-righteous speech is not the product of one political party or person. It is a disease that has infected us. And, perhaps more than anything else, this caustic, invective speech draws lines between people.

The radical, world-changing message of Jesus was this: There are no more barriers; there are no more outsiders; there isn't anybody who doesn't belong; and there isn't anybody who doesn't belong to everybody else. This means everybody is your neighbor; everybody is your brother or sister; there is no longer a them and an us.

Paul is challenging each one of us to use our words to stretch our arms wider and wider and wider until our arms can encompass the whole world. Jesus' call is so radical that it breaks down all the artificial barriers that we have created. Everyone deserves to hear the truth; words that build them up rather than break them down; so that we might have grace as wide as the Lord himself. Amen.