

Parish of Central Saanich - St. Stephen's & St. Mary's

LENT 2018 - BIBLE STUDY SERIES

"What the Church Is All About"

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Ephesians Study #5: The Life of the Church (Chapters 4, 5, 6)

Opening Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, you have called us as a Church to proclaim the gospel and serve the world through the character of our communal life;¹ help us now, by your Holy Spirit, to grasp how to do this by building one another up and submitting to one another, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Introduction

We have come to the fifth of our studies in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Here is what he has said up until now: God has pulled off the greatest feat in the history of the universe - by the death and resurrection of Jesus, he has broken the curse of death and made possible the reconciliation of all things in heaven and earth. As believers, we have been reconciled to him and are now united with him. Not only that, we are united with one another as his body, the Church. It is in and through the Church that this unity and reconciliation is to be proclaimed and demonstrated. We respond to our blessings with Thanksgiving and heart-felt worship and we have seen the importance of unity in the Church. God is glorified – his loving character as a Trinity is shown – when people see it reflected in us as a reconciled community, a unified body. Then we saw that this unity works through diversity - every member using his or her unique God-given gifts to build up the body of believers. Today we move on to the nitty-gritty of all of this: reconciliation and unity must be lived out through our day-to-day relationships with one another. Paul says that this is done in two ways: in Ephesians 4:25-5:2, we do this by building one another up and in Ephesians 5:21-6:9 we do this by submitting to one another. Our over-arching theme is "The Life of The Church."

Building One Another Up

In chapter 4, Paul gets us to look at how we build one another up by doing two things: first, he always balances a negative prohibition with a positive command; second, he gives us a reason for the command, which is rooted in truths about who God is and what he has done for us. We, as a church, are no different from those first-century Christians. And so, we are going to look at four ways we hurt one another, especially through our speech, and four things we can do to build one another up.

¹ "It is above all by the character of [the church's] communal life that it witnesses, that it proclaims the gospel and serves the world." George Lindbeck, "The Church," in *Keeping the Faith*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 193, as quoted by Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pg. 90.

1. Truth and Falsehood: The first issue Paul addresses is truth and lies. "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body" (verse 25). Don't tell lies, but rather tell the truth.² This seems very obvious and you might wonder why Paul would think his fellow-Christians were lying to one another. Well, we do lie. How? Not necessarily by telling open falsehood, but by half-truths and insinuations. Often fueled by anger, we can manipulate our statements to put others in a bad light. Even our tone can cast a false impression, "Did you hear what *he* did to her?"

Another example is when we say we will do something, but we do not carry it out. Don't be afraid to say no if you can't. We think we are being nice by agreeing to things but are actually creating a false impression if we can't carry it through. There is also the lie of silence. When we do not speak up when we know something is wrong, we give approval. Be on guard to keep *all* your speech open and honest.

Why should we do this? Paul says because we are all members of one body. In the physical body, the senses and nerves pass messages to the brain. If it is a false message, e.g. saying that something is cool when it is really hot, then the body can be damaged. Cancer cells are those which give wrong messages. When we lie, it is like a cancer which not only hurts ourselves and those immediately involved, but spreads to the whole church. John Stott says, "Fellowship is built on trust, and trust is built on truth. Falsehood undermines fellowship, while truth strengthens it."³

2. Temper and Righteous Anger: The next area Paul touches on is anger itself. "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (verses 26-27). Don't lose your temper, but rather ensure that your anger is righteous. Paul is telling us that there are two kinds of anger. There is a right kind of anger and perhaps we as Christians are too unaware of it. Where is the passion against injustice that inflamed Jesus as he saw the transformation of the Temple into a shopping centre that prevented non-Jews from praying in the only area they were allowed? I am not strong on areas of social injustice, but one of the clearest personal experiences I have had of anger against evil was during a Leanne Payne conference when I heard the agonizing screams of people as they revealed the forces of evil that had kept them bound in so many ways.

Unfortunately, our anger is mostly of the unrighteous kind. We are self-defensive, we eagerly seek revenge, we so easily allow the unhealed anger within us to bubble over onto others. The particular reason we are not to do this, Paul says, is that it gives the devil a foothold. We are so oblivious to the fact that we are in a spiritual battle that we ignore the ramifications of our actions. The devil operates because we give him permission to - usually unwittingly. When we nurse anger, there is not only damage in the psychological sphere, but a gateway is opened for magnification of that sin by the forces of evil. Paul says the solution is "not to let the sun go down on your wrath" in the King James version - in other words, "don't go to bed angry." Keep short accounts; settle disputes as soon as you can and don't let anger fester. Unresolved anger is a further cancer in the body of Christ.

3. Unwholesome and Unhelpful Talk: Paul now moves on to other ways of hurting people with the tongue. "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, 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" (verses 29-30). Don't use

² These opening summaries are from John Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1979), pgs. 184-190.

³ *Ibid.*, pg. 185.

your mouth for evil, but rather to build up. Here Paul is probably including all the ways we use speech in a vulgar or disparaging way.

There is a way of speaking that tears others down. For example, jokes that pick on or demean certain races or groups - Newfies or blondes and especially women. It sounds funny, but what if we were one of those being poked fun of in a disparaging way? Then there is, of course, vulgar language – obscene or crude talk that soils the good things God has given us in creation such as sex, spiritual things or even God himself. We may think vulgar language or jokes impress others, but what does it do really? It plays to our lower nature; it debases the goodness of God's created order. Paul's deeper insight is that it grieves the Holy Spirit - in other words, the very presence of God within us as individuals and a church is hurt by unholiness. He strives so much to bring us out of destructive harmful behaviour and attitudes and when we focus ourselves right back in them it hurts him deeply. By "sealing us for redemption" he is giving us opportunity to grow into Christlikeness, not the opposite.

The answer then, is to say things that will build people up and benefit them. Is what we are going to say for their people's encouragement and growth? Is it going to promote their becoming more like Jesus? Is it helpful? Will what we say please the Holy Spirit and not grieve him? He yearns to see wholeness and unity. Think about what you say.

4. Bitterness and Forgiveness: Finally, Paul summarizes all his admonitions as he urges us not to be unkind or bitter, but rather kind and loving. "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. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 4:31-5:2). In other words, don't be unkind or bitter, instead be kind, compassionate and loving.

These negative aspects we are to avoid include a sour spirit and sour speech, passionate rage, sullen disposition, a quarrelsome spirit, speaking evil of people (slander) and general ill-will. Most have their source in unresolved anger. Another author has summarized them as "silently harboured grudge, indignant outburst, seething rage, public quarrel and slanderous taunt."⁴ I could go into these in detail, but will touch only on one - slander.

Slander is a form of gossip that is malicious and destructive. All gossip is unhelpful, but slander, however, is particularly so because it vents our anger at the expense of another by damaging their reputation. It is destructive both to the individual slandered and the one who slanders – as well as to the hearer of slander. My friend Alex Cameron has said, "There is nothing we would like better than to think poorly of someone who has hurt us. And why shouldn't others know what an unspeakable, vile person he or she is? In fact I'm doing a public service by letting others know. Gossip and slander medicate the wounds of our heart and soul. We feel better for a time. But then the wounds are not healed. They will need more medication. Slander is not a public service; gossip is not stuff to inform our prayers."⁵ I have been the subject of slander and yet, while I try not to, I too, am guilty of speaking about people in ways that I should not. Slander is a sure way to cause disruption in the body of Christ.

⁴ G. B. Caird, as quoted in John Stott, pg. 190.

⁵ From a talk, "Forgiveness", given by the Rev. Alex Cameron at the Isaiah 40 Foundation Healing of the Whole Person Seminar, St. Mary's Church, Chatham, NB, May 25, 2000.

Paul's solution? To imitate God - to relate to one another as God relates to us - with forgiveness and compassion – “just as in Christ God forgave you.” When you hear negative things, do not react with instant hostility and pass them on. Find out what lies behind them. If there is genuine wrongdoing, then still forgive. Work through the issues; do not let your tongue get away with you and cause dissension in the body. God loves us dearly as his children and so we love one another as brothers and sisters.

• Summary

Don't tell lies, but rather tell the truth; don't lose your temper, but rather ensure that your anger is righteous; don't use your mouth for evil, but rather use it for building up; don't be unkind or bitter, but rather be kind and loving. How do we do all this? By being indwelt and empowered by the same Spirit that indwelt Christ and enabled him to “love us and give himself for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” As we live in this love God has for us, then we will be able to live out this love in our relationships with others, especially through our speech. In this way the Church will indeed become a place to be built up and bear witness to God's reconciliation plan.

Submitting to One Another

So, having heard Paul speak about practical ways of demonstrating our unity in Christ by building one another up in chapter four, we move on to the end of chapter five where Paul goes on to speak about how that unity is lived out and expressed through mutual submission of ourselves one to the other.:

Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:18-21).

In the original, the verbs after the first one, which is a command – “Be filled,” are all present participles: speaking, singing, thanking and submitting. In other words, the key to doing all these things, especially submitting, is being filled with the Spirit – everything else flows as a result of that. John Stott notes the following points about the phrase, “Be filled with the Spirit”:⁶

- i. It is in the *imperative mood* - it is not an option for the Christian, but a command.
- ii. It is in the *plural form* – it is addressed to the whole Christian community; the fullness of the Spirit is not for an elite
- iii. It is in the *passive voice* – “let the Holy Spirit fill you” – being open and removing barriers is our job, filling us is his.
- iv. It is in the *present continuous tense* – we are to go on being filled.

Being filled with the Spirit is the prerequisite which enables us to submit to one another – we cannot submit until we are filled. What's more, we are to do it “out of reverence for Christ” – a person who is submitted to Christ is able to submit to another. It is only by allowing the Holy Spirit to have full reign in our lives that we can possibly hope to reproduce his love in our human relationships. It is only when we are first of all submitted to Jesus, to the one who gave himself totally for us - to do his will, to be filled with his power - that we can submit ourselves to one another. Now, we turn to looking at how “submitting to one another” is to work out in our more personal relationships – as husband and wife, parent and child, employer and employee.

⁶ John Stott, *ibid.*, pgs.208-209.

1. *Husbands and Wives*

Paul's comments in chapter five about submission in marriage are seen today as one of the most controversial passages of the Bible. I have a book of ecclesiastical cartoons called *The Adventures of Father Faber*.⁷ One of them shows Father Faber in his pulpit, completely surrounded by a protective shield with a small slit for his eyes, and the caption reads - "My sermon for today is from Ephesians, chapter five: "Wives submit to your husbands." In addressing these verses, this is just what I feel like!

The seemingly offensive passage reads:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

And then it continues:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church... (Ephesians 5:22-25)

I am sure many of you - especially the women - are saying, "How old fashioned! How can you talk about wives submitting to your husbands with all our modern ideas of equality and liberation? This is from the dark ages. And what does he know about it - he's a bachelor anyway!"

It is very true that these verses have been misused in times past and even in the present to hold women in a position of subservience to their husbands and even to sanction abuse. This misuse has obscured what is probably one of the most beautiful and workable descriptions of the marriage relationship in the whole Bible. I would like to wade into the difficulties of this passage because, when seen correctly, I believe it describes God's blueprint for a happy marriage and a demonstration of his plan for the reconciliation of all things.

- ***Mutual Submission in Christ:*** The key to it all is found in the opening verse of our passage: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (verse 21) – in other words, mutual submission. This is the kind of attitude we need in all our relationships - not dominance or subservience or manipulation, but an attitude that respects the other person and seeks out his or her interests ahead of your own - that's what submission means. As we just mentioned, the controlling factor in all of this is found in the words, "Out of reverence for Christ" - it is Christ who is to govern and control our relationships - he is to be the model.

This most important factor is the one that is most often lost when people look at this passage. Men (and some women!) can hear the words, "Wives submit...the husband is the head as Christ is the head of the Church...as the church submits to Christ, wives should submit to their husbands", and feel that men are given first-class treatment here and women end up second-class or even in the baggage compartment! We men like the job title: "Head" - it flatters our egos. But the problem is, we have not looked at the job description!

This is found in the next verses, where the husband's responsibility is given in much greater detail. The husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church (verse 25). Now what did Christ do for us? He gave up everything! He gave up the glory and security of heaven, the power and position of the Son of God for obscurity, misunderstanding, suffering, and finally death. This is the job description for husbands! This is what they were to do for their wives! In the ancient world where,

⁷ Robert Portlock, *The Adventures of Father Faber*. (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1984).

in Judaism women had no rights whatsoever and in Greek and Roman society marital fidelity was non-existent,⁸ men would have found this totally revolutionary.

So now we have a clearer picture. The basis for relationship in Christian marriage is not control or domination, but love - self-sacrificial love; love that is like that of Jesus for us: patient, kind; not envying, not boastful, not conceited nor rude; never selfish nor quick to take offence (see 1 Corinthians 13). Love has also been defined as "seeking another's greatest good."⁹

So the passage comes out like this: Wives submit: they put their husband's interests ahead of their own; husbands love: they seek their wives' greatest good at whatever expense to themselves. This is what "mutual submission" means in the marriage relationship.

2. Children and Parents

We now turn to how submission works out in family relationships, between parents and children.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honour your father and mother"...Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord. (6:1-2, 4).

Here we note that the key concepts are obedience for children and loving nurture for parents.

- **Children are included:** Before we unpack those concepts, we need to notice something revolutionary for the times: Paul speaks directly to children in his letter – this means that children were present when the church gathered to listen to this. Whole families were expected to be at worship together. Children were not excluded or ignored; they were part of the church, Jesus' body, his family. Children and young people are not the Church of tomorrow - they are the Church of today. In the Roman Empire, where unwanted babies were abandoned, weak and deformed ones were killed, and even healthy children were seen as a nuisance by many, this reveals a new attitude towards children which was demonstrated by Jesus himself. He said, "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:14), and "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Matthew 18:5). This means that we should treat a child with respect and care just like we would an adult. This includes being open to God ministering through children. Peter Wagner, one of my professors at Fuller Seminary reported to us that, at a world conference on prayer, there was a special children's group which ministered to the leaders of the conference by praying for them and laying hands on them.
- **Mutual respect:** Now we move on to how submission works out in the family through mutual respect. Children are to obey their parents "in the Lord" (6:1) and parents are to bring them up in the training and instruction "of the Lord" (6:4). What does this mean in practice? Children are to see their parents as being used by God to help them, and so they must respect them and obey them. Parents are to give children both love and limits. The object is that when children submit to rightly-exercised parental authority and experience their love, they will come to obey and know God and his love for them. Parents are to see their children as a trust from the Lord, not as possessions. They are not to exasperate them by harsh discipline. If parents want their children to have self-

⁸ For a picture of marriage in the ancient world, see William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible; The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, Rev. ed. (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1976) pgs. 168-171..

⁹ Bishop Stephen Neill.

control, then they must have self-control as well. Don't discipline your children when you have lost your temper!

When both parents and children recognize they are both reconciled through Christ and accountable to him, they can submit to one another. This brings health to those within the family. However, it is also important for the rest of the world. With the breakdown in family life, it is essential for people to have examples of how God designed families to be. By preserving a healthy family structure, we demonstrate God's plan for reconciliation of all things.

3. Employees and employers

The final area where we live out mutual submission is in our daily work between employee and employer, or, in the context of Ephesians, between slaves and masters:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey...as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people...And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him. (6:5-9)

- **Respect one another:** As with children and parents, we see that mutual respect is the key in labour relations. "Slaves obey your earthly masters...masters, treat your slaves in the same way" (6: 5, 9). Now we no longer have slaves and masters. It was through teaching such as Paul has here: "you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him." (verse 9) that the foundations of the slave system were eventually, after much resistance, destroyed in so-called Christian society. How could you own someone else if you were both brothers and sisters in Christ? Even though slavery was not abolished until much later, the effects of this teaching were seen in the early Church. Around 110 AD, Pliny, the Roman governor of part of what is now Turkey wrote to the Emperor Trajan asking him what to do about this new religious group called Christians.¹⁰ He mentions two church leaders who were slave women. Male Roman citizens would not have found being led by slaves (and women at that!) acceptable but the Church did!

However, the same principles Paul lists for slaves and masters apply today to relationships between employers and employees. Because we are to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ," employees are to be respectful (verse 5) to employers, with sincerity of heart and no hypocrisy or ulterior motives. They are to do it, "just as you would obey Christ" (verse 5). Relating to employers as people and submitting to their right use of authority is rooted in submission to Christ. For the same reason, masters are not to abuse their authority and power: "do not threaten them" (verse 9). There is no class distinction with God, no favourites, all are equal before him. Again, the supremacy of Christ is the key "He...is both their Master and yours" Workers are not pawns for employers to do with as they please but children of God just as much as they are. Mutual respect in the work place is a working out of mutual submission.

- **Do your work for Jesus:** Secondly, being the body of Christ affects how we do the work we are given to do. Paul urges us to "serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord" (verse 7). Yet again, it is submission to Christ which is the key. We do not work to please others, but Jesus.

¹⁰ See Pliny, *Letters* 10.96-97, found on <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html>

John Stott tells us, "It is possible for a housewife to cook a meal as if Jesus were going to eat it, or to spring-clean the house as if Jesus were to be the honoured guest. It is possible for teachers to educate children, for doctors to treat patients, and nurses to care for them, for lawyers to help clients, store clerks to serve customers, accountants to audit books and secretaries to type letters as if in each case they were serving Jesus Christ."¹¹ All work Christians do, even if it is routine or boring work, can be transformed by doing it "as if you were serving the Lord."

Our mutual submission in the body of Christ will affect how we relate to one another in the work place and how we carry out our daily work. This is yet one further way we demonstrate God's plan for reconciliation of all things.

Conclusion

The reconciliation and unity God has achieved through Christ is to be lived out through our day-to-day relationships with one another in the Church. We do this by building one another up, especially in our speech, and by submitting to one another in the crucial areas of marriage, family life and daily work. This is part of what the Church is all about.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you that in Christ you have forgiven us and reconciled us to yourself as your Temple and Body; help us by your Holy Spirit to submit to one another in all our relationships and to get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice, and to be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, and so imitate you and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, his Bride. Amen.

(Adapted from Ephesians 4:32-5:2, 21)

¹¹ John Stott, *ibid.*, pg. 252.