**Ephesians 4:25-32, Things Are Different Now**

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Several theologians in America in the middle of the 20th century had the prominent status of public intellectuals, and were occasionally called upon to give commentary on the nature of politics, society, culture, and learning. Perhaps foremost among them was Reinhold Niebuhr, a theologian from whom I have learned much, though I since have come to disagree with him on much. In December of 1954, William Nichols, editor of *This Week* magazine, put the following question to Dr. Niebuhr in print: “If as a result of some cataclysm, it were possible to retain just one passage from the Bible – what would your choice be?” It is a fascinating question, perhaps it would be a useful exercise for you to think about that question yourself at home this afternoon. Coming up with an answer to that question will likely crystalize for you in your own mind what you think the central claim of Christianity is.

But the reason I tell you this story this morning is because Niebuhr had a ready answer, and he penciled that answer into the letter from Nichols as soon as he received it. A day or so later, he wrote out his entire response, and his one scripture passage comes from the text right in front of us today. Here is Niebuhr’s answer:

December 9th, 1954

Dear Mr. Nichols:

The passage of the Bible which I would choose is Ephesians 4:32, “And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”  I take it that the purpose is to find a passage of Scripture which will contain as much as possible of the whole message of the Bible.  I have chosen this particular passage because it combines the high point of the Christian ethic, which is forgiving love, with a reference to the whole basis of the ethic, which is the historical revelation in Christ.  We are asked to forgive one another.  The charity of forgiveness is, however, not possible as a duty.  It is only possible in terms of the knowledge that we are ourselves sinners, and that we have been forgiven.  It therefore combines the Christian Gospel with the Christian ethic in succinct form.

 Sincerely yours,

Reinhold Niebuhr

This passage contains “the high point of the Christian ethic.” But it does not include much difficult exegesis. Niebuhr is able to synthesize its main meaning in one paragraph. You will recall in this second half of Ephesians, what Paul is most eager to do is explain the ethical life of Christians, and our response should not be to study it so that we can return the practical, ethical teaching of the NT to the realm of academic theology; our response should be to obey it. We know that one way *not* to obey a command is to intellectualize it; so your temptation might be to say “ahh, Paul says in v.25 that we can be angry but sin not, but then in v.31 he tells us to put off all anger. A vexing theological puzzle! We must consult our Biblical commentaries!” Meanwhile, you continue to be the captive of uncontrolled rage at the people who have wronged you. That is not obedience. That is not a faithful way of reading the scripture.

So what is a better way of reading these parts of scripture, or listening to sermons on these parts of scripture? Before I say much more about this passage here in particular, I want to suggest a different way of listening to sermons that are heavy on ethics and light on theology. If you have been in church for some time, it is likely that the hundreds of sermons you have heard all mesh together in your mind; you might have two or three that really stand out to you, but most of them have receded into forgetfulness. And then when you hear a preacher start preaching on a theme you already know something about, your temptation might be to tune it out – especially if you’re not going to learn anything new. But perhaps that is not the best way to listen to sermons about themes that you know well.

When Paul tells you that you are to put off this vice, and put on this virtue, he is saying that you should undertake the process of character-formation last month in this series David used the title “Christian Education.” That is: you should become a different kind of person as you mature in your Christianity. But how are we supposed to do that? Well, there is a body of academics called “virtue theorists,” and several of them study exactly this question of character formation right now. Among the various strategies that they offer, one might be called (for lack of a better term) “mindfulness.” This strategy consists in simply paying attention to the virtues you want to inculcate, and paying attention to the vices that you know yourself to possess, and having frequent reminders of those vices/virtues in front of you day by day. According to this strategy, frequent reminders of what you already know are actually crucial to the task of having a new kind of character. So when we preach through these ethical texts in the New Testament, if you are a young Christian, you might learn something new. And if you are a seasoned Christian, you might just have reminders of the virtues and vices you desire to adopt for yourself.

I would encourage you to try to adopt these virtues one at a time. Let us say that you find yourself impatient and unforgiving. Well, then it might make sense for you to write on two notecards these two phrases, from 1 Corinthians 13: “Love is patient” (1 Cor 13:4) And “love keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Corinthians 13:5). And you repeat those phrases to yourself as you drive or walk to work, or you place them in front of your computer or on your bedside. Then, when ethical situations arise in which you need to be patient or be forgiving, you are already primed to respond in the right kind of way.

We that, we turn to our passage here. I have titled this sermon “Things Are Different Now” because in this passage Paul continues his theme of putting off the vices of the old, and putting on the virtues of the new man. That is, he is giving you the specifics of how you are to be conformed into the image of Christ. The pattern of the text is a negative statement of the duty (“put off”) followed by a positive statement of the duty (“put on”), followed by the motivation for the duty. So, v.25: “having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.” Or v.28, “let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.” And v.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.”

This put on/put off theme is a common one for Paul, and it reflects the fact that Christianity is an ethical religion; it contains claims about the kinds of people that we ought to be. And the motivation clause demonstrates Paul’s conviction that how we live follows from what we believe in true of the world. This has three effects: (1) it allows reasons to be given for why Christians act as we do to those who might (rightfully, hopefully) find our lives strange; (2) it ties together our beliefs with our practices so that our moral and intellectual lives are united; and (3) it allows us to know when we might not have internalized a piece of Christian teaching. So, if we continue to deceive one another, it might be because we do not think that we are members of one another. If we pollute the air with corrupting talk, perhaps it is because we do not think we are supposed to build up and give grace to those around us.

Let’s look more closely at the command not to lie. In the motivation clause, Paul returns to a theme that he has repeated throughout this letter: we are one body. He made that claim in order to show our unity with God, to show the unity between Jews and Gentiles, and not to show the obligations we have toward each other. The disease is eradicated in the west now, but one of the effects of leprosy was to dull the pain receptors all over your body. So you may have an open, gaping wound on your foot and not know it because you feel no pain. Your arm may have just gotten jammed in a door, and you would not know it. What it means to have leprosy is that you cannot trust your own body to tell you the truth. And what Paul says to us here is: if you persist in deceiving each other, it is as though the one body into which you have been united is leprous; it is unreliable and untrustworthy. And if that is how our very own body treats us, where else will we be able to flee if even our own body deceives us? If we lie to each other, does it not demonstrate that we have not learned the theology of the first few chapters of this book?

Next, let’s look at the command about anger. And there is a minor difficulty in understanding here, and I already alluded to it. In v.26 it seems that some kinds of anger are permitted, provided we do not sin. And this is a quotation of, or an allusion to, Psalm 4:5, which says the same thing. But in v.31, it seems all kinds of anger are prohibited. So previous generations of Christians have had to make a distinction here, and the distinction they will make is between anger against injustice, sin, and evil – what they call “zealous anger”[[1]](#footnote-1) and “irrational anger.” You will notice that what anger does is it motivates you to act; this is a desirable and good response to injustice. We do not want to be complacent in the face of evil. In fact, the Greek church father John Chrysostom said “he who is not angry, when he has cause to be, sins.” And even Jesus, the gospels tell us, feels anger at the unbelief of the Pharisees (Mark 3:5) and at the existence of death itself when he is at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:33, 38). These are praiseworthy types of anger; if you find yourself to be a complacent person, I encourage you to pray for these kinds of anger against the evil in the world.

But as anyone who feels anger often can tell you, it is a powerful emotion and therefore must be carefully regulated. Failure to regulate even righteous anger will inevitably be destructive, therefore Paul tells us that we are not to “let the sun go down upon your anger” (Eph. 4:26). This seems to mean that we are not to delight in harboring anger, but are to resolve to deal with the reason for it, so that we might be freed of it. The people of God ought not make a habit of dwelling long in even justified anger. This is how bitterness arises, and bitterness is ruled out in v.31. So it is a wise principle to, if at all possible, reconcile as soon as possible; if you take this passage literally, reconcile before you go to bed – though that might be impossible. What is commanded is reconciling before the Lord’s Supper. The New Testament never condones the practice of coming to the Lord’s Table unreconciled to your brothers and sisters; that makes the Lord’s Supper tell lies about the kinds of unity that we have with each other. Not only that: anger that is unresolved is taken into the soul and our character forms around it. Perhaps you have seen a tree that has grown next to a fence post for so long that it begins to wrap itself around that fence post. That is a fitting analogy for bitterness. Bitterness is anger that the bitter person has built their character around. What it is to be a bitter person is to let anger permeate and color your interaction with the entirety of the world precisely because you have allowed your character to form around that bitterness, rather than resolving it and being freed from it. So the practice of suppressing the vice of bitterness is: do not let the sun go down upon your anger.

The result clause of this command about anger is “give no opportunity to the devil.” What does this mean? First we notice that it is presumed the devil looks for a way to steal and kill and destroy. And we are not to give him a way. How might he take the opportunity presented by anger? We can see this most clearly in his other title, Satan, which simply means “the accuser.” The most important sense of this word is that he accuses us before ourselves and before God. But there is another sense in which I think he accuses us before each other. Have you ever had the experience of receiving a fault from someone about whom you had no strong feelings beforehand? But then after that fault, every single thing that person did annoyed you? Or perhaps you received a fault and you were angry, but then your anger began to spread to everything and everyone else in your life for that day? That seems to me to be the work of an accuser; the object of your anger is expanding out of proportions through the accusations of Satan. And the way to ensure that this does not happen is: do not let the sun go down upon your wrath. Put it to rest early, and it will not grow.

The inclusion of theft here feels strange to us because it is an escalation over the others. It feels dramatically more grave than the other sins discussed in this list. So then, why is it included? Probably because Paul knows that at the church of Ephesus, there were new believers. Some of these new believers may have had a criminal history and habituation, and they – like the rest of us Christians – were in need of the acquisition of new virtues. So the two new habits, which directly target the prior vice are: work and generosity. “Let him work, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.” I mention that here in this sermon because I think it is right and just for us to remember that Christianity believes both that nobody – not even criminals – are beyond the reach of God’s grace, but also that all of us, when we mature in the Christian faith, will have to form new virtuous habits to suppress

The last particular command that follows our pattern concerns our speech. This is a straightforward command. I pause only to note the motivation clause here: “that our speech may give grace to those who hear it” (Eph. 4:29). We are used to thinking of God as the giver of this kind of grace, and indeed he is. But it would be wise for us to consider here that Paul believes we individual Christians can, through the words that we speak to each other, be the channel of that grace to each other. We might speak to each other differently if we dwelt long on the fact that our words can grace or curse the people who hear them.

The concluding three sentences sum up the entire foregoing chapter, and transition us into chapter 5, which will also be heavily concerned with ethics. I suspect the most difficult passage here is that we are not to “grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (v.30). But this is rather easily explained; throughout the book of Ephesians, Paul has consistently emphasized that the Spirit of God is a Spirit of unity. But all of these sins and vices described in this passage today are sins *against* unity; lying puts your mind and the mind of your neighbor against each other. Anger blocks your sister out from your emotions. Stealing causes you to conceal your intentions and your stolen possessions from your neighbor. That is to say, all of these sins foment disunity. But if the Spirit of God is a Spirit of unity, then He will be grieved when we violate that unity. Therefore with this command not to grieve the Spirit, Paul is showing us what is truly at stake in our sinning against each other. The Spirit has set his mind to unifying us Christians together. Will we set our minds against His work of unification? Will we match our strength against His?

That is what we once did – when we were alienated from God, strangers to the covenant, enemies of God’s people. But Paul says: if you are in Christ, things are different now. We must not wound our brothers and sisters any longer. We must not grieve the Spirit of God by clutching at disunity. Instead, we are to be kind to one another. Tenderhearted. Forgiving one another. Each of these entails a posture of openness, of welcome, of receptivity to our brothers and sisters in Christ, and to the Spirit of God that dwells within them and among us. We are to join our powers to God’s Spirit and seek unity with each other. We must do this if we are Christians. Because we are in Christ. And things are different now.

1. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, Q158, A1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)