



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Just as the Messiah Loved Us

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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Fourth of July weekend in 1998 I had to go on a service call to Friday Harbor on San Juan Island. I did not want to brave the ferries for a one-day round trip to Friday Harbor on a holiday weekend, but this print shop was desperate, so the owner suggested I bring my wife and daughter—Alexandra wasn't even two months old at the time—and they'd put us up for the whole weekend. That sounded a lot better. And, conveniently, the Episcopal church was literally next door to the place we were staying. Sunday morning we walked over for the service. The second lesson was from Ephesians—the part of Ephesians we're just now getting into today with Chapter 4. And their deacon got up to preach and said, "This morning's lesson was written by Paul. I don't like Paul very much and I know that's true for all of us. Paul says mean, nasty, bigoted things." He went on to pit Paul against Jesus as he described Paul as a "Pharisaical moralising Puritan"—like Paul had never really understood Jesus' gospel of grace and made it all about works instead—and a lot of "works" that are just plain offensive to modern sensibilities: stuff that comes up particularly in Chapter 5, like "don't let sexual immorality be named among you" or "wives, be subject to your husbands".

I bit my tongue after church as we filed past him. I really wanted to say, "It's not Paul who never grasped the gospel; it's you!" Because you can't separate the gospel from ethics as if living out the implications of the gospel is an optional add-on, or

something less important that we'll work on later, or a body of "rules" from which we can arbitrarily pick and choose based on the sensibilities of current secular culture and values—which is exactly what that preacher was doing.

That was the day I realised that even a lot of Christian don't understand the connection between ethics and the gospel. In contrast to that deacon, lot of us want to be obedient and we are obedient, so we do what God tells us in the Bible, but we don't really understand—maybe we've never even thought about—why right is right and wrong is wrong. We just think, "Well, God said so," and we do our best to obey. That's better than disobeying, but it would be better if we actually understood *why*. The church has often unintentionally fostered this sort of moralism. Back in 1560 Queen Elizabeth ordered that plaques be installed at the front of every church displaying the Ten Commandments. Most churches also included plaques alongside with the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. It sent a message: Do this, believe that, and pray this here." You could certainly do worse. Elizabeth was trying to help a people who were largely biblically illiterate. But then the local pastors need to do their part and show how what we believe—the gospel—makes sense of and ties together how we live and what we pray. And that often doesn't happen—or it doesn't happen very well. And people start to think that when Paul gives us a list of dos and don'ts, that this is just Paul, not Jesus, and, well, maybe his moralising isn't totally arbitrary, but it's probably culture-bound so we can feel free to pick and choose what seems right to us.

A big part of the problem is that we've sometimes got the gospel—and the *big story* of God and his people—wrong. Not totally wrong. But enough that we no longer understand why right is right and wrong is wrong and why it matters. I've talked before about two sorts of gospel worldviews that we

find in the church today. On the one hand is a view embodied by a famous quote from Dwight Moody. After surviving a shipwreck he preached, "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, 'Moody, save all you can.'" The other is a quote by Abraham Kuyper. It's worth noting that both these men were contemporaries, but came from very different church backgrounds. Kuyper wrote, "There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'"

Those are two very different understandings of God's plan. Moody, shaped by 19<sup>th</sup> Century Revivalism and Dispensationalism saw the world as corrupted, evil, a *problem* that God would one day destroy. The job of the church was to preach the good news and to save as many people as we can from the coming judgement so that we can go to heaven. At least the good news about Jesus, crucified and risen, saviour and lord is still clearly here. But Moody's thinking about the world and his vision of the future was basically gnostic—more pagan than biblical in many ways. In contrast, Kuyper understood that because God created the world, it is good. It's we who have fallen and put it in bondage to corruption and tears. And because God loves what he has made, he won't throw it away. To the contrary, God is very much in the process of redeeming and renewing it. And so in Jesus he provided a new Adam to lead a redeemed and renewed humanity, washed clean by his blood and filled with his Spirit, a new humanity to pick up where Adam failed. Kuyper knew that if Jesus has ascended and is now enthroned in heaven, he is the world's true lord and sovereign and he will not let one square inch of his beloved creation fall through his fingers.

Brothers and Sisters, *that* is the good news. It's about God reclaiming what he's created and what belongs to him. We've seen already that this theme of

new creation and the temple run all through Ephesians. The church is the working model of God's new creation. And the church is the temple in which God dwells. And that just absolutely shouts "Genesis!" at us. Go back to the beginning and make sure you've got the story right to start with. Consider how the story begins. God creates human beings, Adam and Eve, and he places them in his garden to live in his presence and to steward it. The garden is God's temple. Humans are his stewards, his image bearers who represent his sovereign rule there. And not just that, but his only command to them—and it's more blessing than it is command—but he tells them to be fruitful and to multiply and to fill the earth. In other words, keep having children who will have children who will have children who will steward the garden and grow that garden until it fills the whole earth. Until, to use the language of the Prophet Habakkuk, the glory of the Lord fills the earth as the waters cover the sea."

That would have been an easy task for Adam and Eve. All they had to do was steward the garden and have children. There was no sin, no death, no tears, no brokenness, no opposition. Just fellowship with God, take care of the garden, make babies and the mission takes care of itself.

But no. Humanity rebelled and broke everything. Now the least of our difficulties in accomplishing the mission are weeds and pain in childbirth. We've become sinful, rebellious, self-centred, angry, greedy, idolators. We not only lost our knowledge of the mission, we even lost our knowledge of God. So in he stepped, into the darkness, and called Abraham. And through Abraham he created a people to be light in the darkness. And he gave them a law. Not arbitrary rules, but a way of life meant to teach the people his character and to keep them pure and holy so that he could live in their midst. Preparing a people to become his temple. God

was taking the first steps toward creating a renewed humanity to whom he could restore Adam's vocation and mission to fill the earth with his presence and his glory. And that's just what he's done in Jesus. We've seen in Ephesians: In Jesus, God has taken on our flesh, he has died and been resurrected to be the new Adam, *to be the firstborn of God's new creation*. And he calls us to himself and he purifies us with his blood and once we're clean and fit for God's presence, he fills us with God's Spirit. And he makes us the temple: the place of God's presence, a people called to be stewards of God's wisdom—of his good and just plan to renew his creation.

Brothers and Sisters, our vocation, our mission is Adam and Eve's vocation and mission: to serve as the priests and stewards of God's temple, to proclaim and to live out his wisdom, and to be fruitful and to multiply—through our own children and through the proclamation and living out of the good news—until God's presence and the knowledge of his glory cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. Until that day when creation no longer groans under the weight of corruption, because the sons and daughters of God have accomplished the task entrusted to us and finally been fully renewed—resurrected—ourselves.

Of course, the difference is that the mission should have been easy for Adam. Ethics didn't matter. Just steward the temple and have children. It's so very, very hard for us. We've filled the world with sin and corruption and they push back. The false kings and the false gods we created will not go away easily. And we ourselves, face the daily challenge to, as Paul put it in last week's lesson, to put off that old way of being human and to put on the new one that we've learned in Jesus.

And all of this, Brothers and Sisters, is my long way of helping you to understand that ethics, that right and

wrong, that how we live as Jesus' people is bound up in that mission and in our vocation as stewards of the gospel, of God's presence, of his new creation. You know how architects build models so that people can see what the finished building will look like? That's what the church is supposed to be: God's working model today of his coming new creation. The world should be able to look at us and know—or least get a pretty good idea—of what God is planning for the future. Ethics—the way of life in God's new world—is *not* an add-on to the gospel. It's at the heart of the gospel. And it's why we cannot pick and choose or cobble together our own ethical codes. Because there's the fallen world, as Paul said in 4:17-18, cut off from the life of God, foolish-minded, ignorant, and darkened in understanding—the fallen world that cause all the pain and tears—and there's God's new creation, the world set to rights as God's wisdom and justice give it shape and direction. The two aren't compatible. It's light and wisdom or it's darkness and ignorance. It's God's way which leads to life or it's pain and tears and ultimately death. We will never accomplish the mission God has given us if we compromise with the dark foolishness and ignorance of a fallen world that does not know him. This is why the church cannot take its moral cues from secular, unredeemed culture.

So, now that I'm halfway through the sermon, let's pick up with our text in Ephesians 4, at verse 25. [Page 1161 in the pew Bibles.] Again, Paul's just said that if we have been renewed by the Spirit, we need to put off the old way of being human and to put on the new, displaying genuine justice and genuine holiness. *Showing the world what God's future looks like*. Now he goes on: "Put away lies, then. 'Each of you, speak the truth with your neighbour,' because we are members of one another. 'Be angry, but do not sin'; don't let the sun go down on you while you're angry, and do not leave

any opportunity for the devil. The thief shouldn't steal anymore, but should rather get on with some honest manual labour, *so as to be able to share with anyone in need*. Don't let any unwholesome words escape your lips. Instead, say whatever is good and will be useful in building people up, *so that you will give grace to those who listen*.

“And don't disappoint God's holy Spirit—the Spirit who sealed you for the day of redemption. All bitterness and rage, all anger and yelling, and all blasphemy—put it all away from you, with all wickedness. Instead, be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God forgave you in the Messiah.”

Notice where Paul's going here. He's going from old humanity to new humanity, from dark, fallen world full of sin and death to new creation full of light and life. From lies and rage to kindness. A lot of people, when they think about “ethics” or “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not”, they immediately think of some kind of moralising killjoy—like that deacon who said that Paul was just stuck in his Pharisaical puritanism and never got his head around the concept of grace. I want to ask, “Did you even read what Paul wrote?” Because I just can't figure how you get “killjoy” or “puritan” out of someone whose saying we need to leave behind anger and wrath to embrace kindness and tender-heartedness, to leave behind the darkness of sin and death and to embrace light and life—and grace—God's new creation.

“Be angry, but don't sin.” Paul quotes straight from Psalm 4:4. He knows that we're all going to deal with anger from time to time—sometimes even righteous anger over sin and wrong and injustice. But don't let it smoulder—righteous or not—because letting it fester like that leaves the door open for the devil to come in and do his work. And don't steal. I assume that if Paul's warning about

something specific, that specific thing must have been a problem. Maybe some of the very poor in the church or some who were recently freed slaves were stealing to get by. No, says Paul, that's not what new creation looks like. But he doesn't just say: Stop stealing. He tells them to get an honest job, so that they can give to the poor. Because, you see—and this is really important, Brothers and Sisters—new creation isn't just an absence of sin; it's also the positive presence of goodness and virtue.

But what Paul has to say to start with is mostly about speech, about words. He starts with telling the truth in verse 25 and then there's the bit about being angry but not sinning. Being angry isn't always about words, but I bet for most of us it usually is. That's the old humanity that Paul's told us we need to put off. Instead, he's saying in verse 29, as someone redeemed by Jesus and full of God's holy Spirit, consider that every time you open your mouth it's an opportunity to speak grace to someone. Again, just as with the bit about stealing, living out new creation isn't just the absence of sin. Living out new creation is about positively stewarding God's grace to others. So, he says, we shouldn't be squandering that chance to speak grace by wasting our breath on unwholesome words.

“Unwholesome words” is a broad category, but that's why he puts it that way. *You* fill in the blank with whatever kind of unwholesome words you're inclined to speak. No, Paul goes on, don't disappoint, don't grieve the Holy Spirit who has marked you out as God's new creation. Don't just leave unwholesome speech behind. Put away—verse 31—put away all bitterness and rage, all anger and yelling, and all blasphemy. Paul describes this crescendo of sinful speech that starts maybe with dirty jokes, casual jibes, or swearing through outbursts of rage, shouting matches, and finally blasphemy—blaspheming God or blaspheming a fellow human who bears his image—

either way, that's the worst way you can abuse God's gift of speech. Brothers and Sisters, if we're going to be living out and modelling God's new creation, we've got put away all behaviour—starting with speech—that hurts and destroys, that tears apart relationships, families, churches. Put aside anything that makes the darkness around you darker, anything that's going to bring pain and tears to others, and instead use your God-given faculties of speech to build others up.

Paul makes this point really dramatically. Again, he works up this crescendo, from bitterness to rage to anger to yelling and finally to blasphemy. You can feel the rage storm getting stronger. Most of us have been there—sometimes more than we'd care to admit. You get angry and then things get worse or someone says something that just throws gas on your rage and you explode. But then in verse 31, the rage storm blows itself out and Paul shows us, in stark contrast, what new creation and the life of the Spirit are like. The rage storm stops and everything is calm: Kindness, tender-heartedness, forgiveness. I like how Tom Wright reflections on this. “Feel the sigh of relief. Then cherish that feeling. Then reflect on what brings it about. Then make a habit of it.”

But why? It's not *just* about the sigh of relief that comes with new creation. Paul says to do these things—and here he zeroes in on forgiving others “just as God forgave you in the Messiah”

And we might not realise it, but this idea of imitating God would have been absolutely radical to these gentile Ephesians. Not quite so much to Jews. God had been telling them for centuries through the Old Testament: Be holy, for I am holy. That made the Jews unique. But few if any pagans would ever have thought that the world might be a better place if we imitated the gods. No way. Because the pagans were just like us, but with unlimited power to unleash those rage

storm, to abuse people for their whims, to kill and to destroy. But the God of Israel, revealed in Jesus the Messiah is different. A God who is himself holy and, even more radical, a God who gives himself for the sake of his people. A God who gives his life that he might set sinners to rights. Look at 5:1-2 and we'll close with this. Paul writes, "So you should be imitators of God, like dear children. Conduct yourselves in love, just as the Messiah loved us, and gave himself for us, as a sweet-smelling offering and sacrifice to God."

Again, it can't be stressed strongly enough just how radical this idea was to First Century pagans. Not only were their gods unworthy of imitation, the way the pagans viewed the world gave no hope. Some saw everything as a never-ending and inescapable cycle. Others saw the world as a shadowy and bleak existence from which death releases us into the "real" spirit world. No one had a hope the world actually being set to rights, of a world without sin and sorrow, pain and tears, let alone a world delivered from death. And no one would have dreamed that a god would love us so much that he would give his own life to do this. Until the good news about Jesus began to spread. Until the pagans began to see these little churches popping up around the world, churches full of people who not only believed in this Jesus and this God of redeeming love, but who lived out that love—who stopped the rage cycle with kindness and forgiveness; who refused to use and abuse other people; who weren't greedy and selfish, but instead gave generously to others; whose families and households were overflowing with love. A people who lived in hope of a world set to rights full life and light instead of death and darkness. And the pagans took note.

Just before we moved here they tore down the Palace Theatre downtown. I'm glad I had a chance to see it before it was just a vacant lot. But for what,

sixteen or seventeen years, there was just a vacant lot where a wonderful historic building had been. And everyone knew that wasn't right. And after a few years we all started to wonder, "Will this ever be made right?" After a while you start to lose hope. Will it be a vacant lot with a fence around it forever? But then a big sign when up and on that sign was an architect's rendering: a fancy new building full of businesses and homes. And you'd see it as you walked past that corner on Fifth Street and it started to feel like things might get back to the way they're supposed to be in that spot.

Maybe that's not the best illustration. It's just a building. A vacant lot isn't that big of a deal and neither is a new building—unless of course you live or work in it. But it does highlight what Paul wants us to understand here. In the midst of a world filled with darkness and death, the church is meant to be the sign showing the world that God is at work to set it all to rights. We are the sign meant to show the world what the project will look like when it's finally done. As we embody the gospel and God's new creation, we ought to be an attractive advertisement that draws the world in—making them constructively curious, showing them a God they never could have fathomed, and hope they never dreamed of. To be God's temple. Paul closes this part here with more temple language. As Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was a sweet-smelling sacrifice and offering to God, so our life together imitating him should be too. And, Brothers and Sisters, if our life together is a pleasing sacrifice to God, we can be sure that we're on mission to bring God's presence to the world, to carry his glory to the ends of the earth.

Let's pray: Almighty God, you show to those who are in error the light of your truth, that they may return to the way of righteousness: Grant to all those who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion, that

they may reject those things that are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*