



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Don't Let Anyone Fool You!

Ephesians 5:3-20

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May 3, 2026

The last three weeks we've been making our way through the fourth chapter of St. Paul's letter to the churches in Ephesus, just getting into the first couple of verses of Chapter 5 last Sunday. This is rubber-meets-the-road stuff. In Ephesians 1-3 Paul writes about what the church is and our part in God's plan to renew his creation. By the blood of Jesus' sacrifice at the cross, God has purified us from the stain of sin and death and set us free from their bondage. And then, having purified us and made us fit for his holy presence, he's filled us with his Spirit. He's made us—his church, his people—to be his *temple*. He has made us stewards of his presence and his wisdom and his life. Through Jesus and the Spirit, he has given back to us the vocation that Adam rejected. And now he calls us, as he called Adam, to be fruitful and to multiply and to fill the earth. And as we fill the earth, we expand the temple. We carry God's presence with us. We bring his light and life into the darkness. We confront the foolishness and injustice of the world with his wisdom. As I've said repeatedly, we are in the present God's working model of his future new creation. We—the church—are the architect's model meant to show what his grand project of renewal and recreation and resurrection will one day look like.

Which is why Paul has stressed, has said that it's vital to our identity as the church that we put off the old way of being human and put on the new—the new exemplified by Jesus who is the firstborn of God's new creation, the

new Adam and prototype of God's renewed humanity. God told Israel repeatedly: Be holy as I am holy. That's why he gave Israel his law. And this is why God has raised Jesus from the dead—to lead the way—and this is why he's filled us with his Spirit. Instead of a law written on stone tablets that our hearts would struggle to embrace, God has united us with his resurrected son and his Spirit has renewed our hearts and has written his law of love on them. It's still a struggle. The world, the flesh, and the devil do their best to make us forget our baptism. They do their best to drag us back into the slavery from which Jesus has freed us. But this is why Paul stresses at the beginning of this very practical part of his letter, in 4:25, "Put away lies. Each of you speak the truth with your neighbour."

Brothers and Sisters, that's what it comes down to. Jesus the Messiah, resurrect from the dead, is God's truth. The renewed creation he represents is the truth. Everything else is a lie. It began when the serpent lied to Adam and ever since Adam's disobedience, the world has been filled with pain and tears, darkness and death—because we chose the lie over the truth. But if we know Jesus, if we have been united with him in faith in our baptism, he is the truth—the truth and the way to life. Put off the lies and the old way of being human and embrace Jesus, embrace the truth, and be the new humanity God is making us.

And we saw last Sunday, that as Paul gets into the practical details of this he starts with our speech. It's not only that we shouldn't speak lies; he says to put away anger and vulgar speech and, instead, to be kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, *just as God forgave us in the Messiah*. Instead of letting the pain and brokenness of the world sweep us up into a storm of rage, instead of lashing out at those who hurt us, be God's new humanity, look to the example of Jesus. De-escalate, respond to wrongs with forgiveness, respond to anger with tender-heartedness, be kind.

Break the cycle. This is why we need our hope—that vision of God's creation set to rights, modelled by Jesus—we need that vision always before us. We need to remember that we are God's temple, the stewards of his presence and his wisdom, so that we can make him known to the world, so that we can expose the foolishness of the world with the wisdom of God—with his new creational way of life—with godliness, with holiness, with justice.

And I think Paul started with anger because even the most pagan of pagans knows—even if he won't admit it—that anger and wrath only make the world worse. They hurt others, they destroy our relationships, they make the darkness darker. Even though the pagans might laugh at the idea of being kind to your enemies and showing mercy to the weak—because that was loser talk to the Greek and Romans—when they looked at the church they saw a community of mercy and reconciliation, of kindness and peace that they had to envy. That witness made the Greeks and Romans constructively curious and won many to the faith. But, like I said, I think Paul starts with anger and wrathful words because—even if they confront our sins head on—it's hard to argue with him. And so he establishes that this is what God's wisdom for the world looks like. This is new creation and it's infinitely better than the darkness of the pagan world.

And now he can move on to the thing that's going to get everyone's hackles up, that everyone's going to want to push back on: sex. And money. Mostly sex, but greed is a familiar friend of sexual immorality. Look at Ephesians 5:3-10 [page 1162 in the pew Bibles]: "As for sexual immorality, impurity of every kind, or greed: you shouldn't even mention them! You are, after all, God's holy people. Shameful, stupid or coarse conversations are quite out of place. Instead, there should be thanksgiving."

“You should know this, you see: no sexually immoral or impure person, no one who is greedy (in other words, an idolator) has any inheritance in the Messiah’s kingdom or in God’s. Don’t let anyone fool you with empty words. It’s because of these things, you see, that God’s wrath is coming on people who are disobedient.”

“Don’t let anyone fool you.” Brothers and Sisters, this is about truth—real truth—and it’s about God’s wisdom that will set his creation to rights. Again, ever since Adam believed the lie of the serpent that he could be like God, we humans have been making a mess of God’s good creation. Instead of living the truth of it and instead of living out the wisdom of God, we live a lie. We’ve rejected the true story about God and about his creation and about us, the one in which he is good and faithful and loves us; the story in which he created us to live in his presence and to know his generosity; the story in which he called us to care for his garden temple and blessed us with children (and with sex so we can make them) so that we could expand that temple and the place of his good presence until his glory filled the whole earth. But instead we’ve tried to write our own stories for ourselves. Brothers and Sisters, we weren’t created to do that. We’re terrible at it. Writing our stories for ourselves has corrupted God’s good creation. Our stories compete with each other. We hurt each other. We use and abuse each other. We even abuse ourselves. We deny the truth about God and worship idols instead. We deny the truth about creation. We even deny the truth about ourselves. And some of the most powerful stories we try to write for ourselves are about sex and money.

We write our own stories about sex to justify all sorts of awful things: to justify sex before we’re married; to justify affairs when we’re married; to abandon our spouses; to justify the use and abuse of others through pornography and prostitution; to use

and abuse our spouses when we are married; to abuse each other through unnatural relations, men with men and women with women; even to deny the reality of how God made us as men and women—writing our stories in which men are women, women are men, humans are cats—the most absurd denials of reality. And money. We write our own stories to justify taking and taking and taking, to justify stealing, to justify crushing others, to make ourselves rich, to put ourselves on at the top—idolatry—all the time forgetting the story God’s already written about his great goodness and his generosity. We write our stories instead of living in the grand story of love and truth and beauty that God has written for us and we make a mess of his creation and each other.

To be clear: Paul was a Jew, steeped in Israel’s scriptures. He knew that God created men and women to complement each other and, in that, to learn how to share and love and show grace in humility and to learn something about even the nature of God who exists as Father, Son, and Spirit in mutual love and harmony. Paul knew that God created sex and that sex is good. It’s the blessing God gave in order to fulfil his mandate to be fruitful and to fill the earth. Marriage and sex are part of the *reality* of God’s good creation. Paul was no prude. God’s first commandment was about something that results in more delight, physical pleasure, and the glory of mutual love than anything else. The devil can’t beat it, but he can corrupt and counterfeit it with lies. He’ll fool us into abusing God’s gift selfishly and in ways that hurt and destroy and that reject God’s purposes for it.

Brothers and Sisters, don’t be fooled by those lies. God’s word and God’s son, the firstborn of his new creation, show us the truth, the reality of his creation. So Paul says in verses 3 and 4 that as his people we have been given God’s Spirit that we might know the truth, the wisdom of new creation and model it for the world. This is

why truth matters. This is why Paul tells us not to tell lies. Sexual immorality means telling lies about God’s creation. It means misrepresenting the very new creation he’s give us the Spirit to live out.

And Paul casts a wide net. Sexual immorality—the Greek word should sound familiar: *porneia*. We get our word “pornography” from it—sexually immoral writing, literally. It meant any sexual activity outside marriage. And, of course, for the Jews—and anyone else in that world no matter how pagan they were—marriage meant a man and a woman. But just in case we might think of something that doesn’t fall under the heading of *porneia*—sexual immorality—Paul adds “impurity”—any kind of sexually deviant behaviour that would render one unclean or impure before God. Remember, the point of Jesus’ death, of his blood shed at the cross as a sacrifice for sin, was to wash us clean from the stain of sin—to purify us the way the priests in the Old Testament used the blood of the sacrifices to purify the temple—so that God can dwell with us, so that the Holy Spirit can dwell within us. We are God’s temple and the first rule of the temple has always been purity, holiness.

And it’s not like Paul was sheltered and didn’t know about sexual immorality. Sex was everywhere in the world of Greece and Rome. If you’ve ever had the misfortune of stumbling onto a Pride Parade—it happened to us once in Portland—and you see the open and proud displays not just of sexuality and nudity, but lewd, vile, grossness on shameless public display. Greece and Rome were like that everywhere every day. When we think of worship, we think of a church, a place that is quiet and holy. When we think of priests we think of sexual purity—even sometimes abstinence and celibacy. It was the opposite in the pagan world. The worship of fertility gods and goddesses involved ritual prostitution

and sex and raucous orgies in the temples. Priests were often ritual prostitutes. Wives were generally expected to be chaste, but men could and did have sex with anyone they wanted—male or female—just so long as it wasn't another man's wife. Slaves were fair game for rape. We know this from ancient literature and art. There were occasionally philosophers or emperors who wrote that maybe all this sexual licentiousness had gone too far and wasn't good for society, but the pagans weren't interested. People like their sexual immorality. Paul and the Ephesians knew all about this world. Most of the Ephesians, being gentiles, had been very much a part of that world. So they knew the power of the gospel. They knew the power of recovering the truth of God's creation. They'd been transformed by it. About a hundred and fifty years later, the famous doctor and philosopher Galen wrote about Christians and said two crazy things stood out about them: They believed in the resurrection of the body and they didn't sleep around the way everyone else did. He thought they were crazy, but he also respected them. They put off the old way of being human and put on the new way that Jesus taught them and the whole world noticed. Those two things: belief in the resurrection of the body and not sleeping around go together. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6 that the body is not meant for immorality but for the Lord and the Lord for the body. Just as God raised the Lord Jesus, he will one day raise us, so it's incumbent upon us to glorify God in our bodies.

The world will tell us otherwise. There were all sort of "empty words" in Paul's day, used to justify sexual immorality, just as there are today. As our culture has rapidly de-Christianised over the last half century or so it's been tempting for Christians and for the church to buy into those empty words. The world's empty words tell us we need to be more tolerant. And there is a place for toleration in the church. Thinking of 1

Corinthians again, Paul told the Christians there that they needed to be tolerant of their differences. Some ate food butchered in the pagan temples and other refused to. Paul told them to tolerate each other. That's what love does. But it doesn't work with everything. It doesn't work with lies. In that same letter Paul called them out for tolerating sexual immorality and incest. There's no place for that in the new creation. Saying so isn't hate speech. It's telling the truth. At heart, it's a warning against idolatry. In 1 Thessalonians 1 Paul calls us to "turn from idols to serve the living God". Brothers and Sisters, ethics, Christian morality, being pure and holy isn't just good advice. It's a call to worship.

This is why Paul warns in verses 5 and 6: the sexually immoral, the impure, the greedy—they have no place in the kingdom. These things are idolatry. It's because of these things that God's wrath is coming on the disobedient. This idolatry, these behaviours, this trying to write our own stories for our own benefit and to the hurt and detriment of others, this is why the world is broken, this is why it needs renewal, this is why Jesus died and rose again. When the day comes that the church, the temple has filled the earth with God's presence and glory, Jesus will finish his work of new creation. He will put a final end to sin and death. And that will mean that wiping from creation of anyone who still insists on disobedience, on sin, on writing their own stories. If Jesus sets the world right and leaves them, they'll just corrupt it all over again. And, I think, pointing back to Israel: Paul warns that you can't call yourself one of God's people and live in disobedience and impurity. That's like the Israelites setting up altars to Baal or Asherah and worshipping with cult prostitutes in the temple alongside God's altar. It doesn't work. Either you belong to God or you don't. Either you give him your full allegiance and obedience or you don't.

Either you're part of his new creation or you're not.

So Paul goes on in verse 11: "So don't get involved in the works of darkness, which all come to nothing. Instead, expose them. The things they do in secret, you see, are shameful even to talk about. But everything becomes visible when it's exposed to the light, since everything that is visible is light. That's why it says..." And here Paul quotes what appears to be an early Christian hymn, "Wake up, you sleeper! Rise up from the dead! The Messiah will shine on you!" So take special care how you conduct yourselves. Don't be unwise, but be wise." Brothers and Sisters, that's the nature of being the working model of God's new creation. Wisdom is the way God intends his creation to work. And as his new humanity, his wisdom is what we're called to live out in the midst of the foolish darkness of the world. "Make every opportunity you have," Paul goes on in verse 16, "because these are wicked times we live in. So don't be foolish; rather, understand what the Lord's will is. And don't get drunk with wine; that way lies debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit!"

Again, think of those pagan temples. Ephesus was full of them. Where people would go to worship their gods in drunken orgies with priests and priestesses and who were prostitutes. It was the idolatrous lie taken to extremes. In contrast, picture the temple in Jerusalem. A place purity. Its priests forbidden to drink in its precincts lest they lose their inhibitions and become like the pagans. A holy place where heaven and earth overlapped. The place where humanity could go to meet God—and know his glory. Everything about it a reminder of the garden that Adam had forsaken, but also everything about it pointing forward to God's new creation and the day when his presence and his glory will fill the earth. And now Paul tells us, leave behind that old, corrupt way of life

and its lies and *be* God's temple—a temple not of bricks and mortar, but a living temple. Never forget that he has filled you with his holy Spirit.

The devils and the world won't like our challenge to them. They will throw their lies at us. They will even threaten us if we won't go along with the lies. They always do that. In the days of the Maccabees, the Greek king made the eating of pork a loyalty test for the Jews. To many it didn't seem like such a big deal. There were other more important points of the law to keep. But the faithful Jews knew, it was a symbolic compromise. To give in was to reject the living God for the paganism of the Greeks. And just so in the early centuries of the Church. Caesar would not tolerate the challenge of Jesus, the world's true Lord. He could tolerate Christians doing just about anything, so long as they acknowledge him as lord with a pinch of incense offered at his festivals or in his temples. But those early Christians knew, even though it seemed like a small thing, it meant *everything*. And just so today. The world increasingly insists: honour the rainbow, use the pronouns. And it might seem like such a small thing. We can keep going about all our other Christian business. But Brothers and Sisters, that's the lie. And to capitulate, to offer that pinch of incense on the rainbow altar is to give up everything.

So remember the truth of new creation embodied in Jesus the Messiah who died and rose again to lead the way. Do not capitulate to the lies. And, as Paul says in verses 19 and 20: Being filled with Spirit, "speak to each other in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and chanting in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus the Messiah."

Brother and Sisters, encourage one another. None of us can stand alone. We were never meant to. You can't

build a temple out of a single stone. God has brought us together to be his temple and together we fill it with his praises, giving thanks for what he's done. Giving thanks that he hasn't left us to languish in a lie that brings death. Giving thanks that he's given himself to die to deliver us from that lie and to wash us clean from its stain. Giving thanks that he rose from the grave to conquer the lie and to reestablish the truth of his good creation. Giving thanks that he's filled us with his Spirit to make us the firstborn of his new and renewed world. Sing his praises with each other. Sing his praises to each other. Drown out the lies, drown out the idolatry with the truth of his glory as you give thanks for his mercy and grace, as you give thanks for his lovingkindness, as you give thanks for his goodness and his generosity and his faithfulness. Remind each other of his glory so that we feel no need to live in any story but the glorious one that he has written for us.

Let's pray: Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the many and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen*.