

## **Fissures of Men** Ephesians 4:25-5:2

I expected to hear from Barb about my glaring typo as soon as I gave her the title for this message. The more familiar phrase, “fishers of men” was the designation Jesus promised to Peter and his companions when He called them to be His disciples. He was talking about the Apostolic ministry of preaching the Gospel and winning disciples to Jesus for the Kingdom of God. But I didn’t mean fishers of men.

Our need to be fishers of men is an easier case to make than what I want to address, because the work of the church is much easier to process than holy character. “Tell us what you want us to do, Lord.” That’s more comfortable than asking, “Show us what you want us to be.” For a church to address the work of evangelism before it addresses character is to get the cart before the horse.

The character of the community of Christ that we call the local church is crucial to the cause of evangelism. Jesus told His Apostles: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). He prayed for us all: “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23). Jesus always considered a watching world when He spoke of His Kingdom:

14“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” - Matthew 5:14-16

We like to think that this magnificent witness just sweeps over a church unbidden, but we know better. Unity is never the normal state of people, even redeemed people. We still battle pride and selfishness. It is our nature to fly apart. Earlier in this letter, Paul spoke of oneness as a tiring task: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). As Christians, to benefit fully from the blessings, ministry and maturation that come from belonging to a community of faith, we must invest ourselves in the challenging work of oneness.

If we claim that we care about the lost, we must be one. For a church to be the effective witness essential to evangelism, a city on a hill, a community about which the watching world says “See how they love one another”, we must give ourselves to the pursuit of oneness. In other words, to be effective “fishers of men”, we must seal the “fissures of men” typical to people in community. These cracks in the wall of oneness must be repaired to ward off further deterioration.

Little cracks in our will-power, small fissures in our faith and tiny crevices in our thoughts can provide an entry for Satan himself into our souls and into the church. Our text addresses how believers are to relate to one another in community. But two intriguing phrases in the text address how we relate to two invisible and supernatural presences. One unwholesome action or attitude can, at one and the same time, “give the devil a foothold” (verse 27) and “grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (verse 30).

*Topos*, translated “foothold” means simply, “a place”. Figuratively, it can mean “an opportunity”. The devil does not need huge inroads into our lives or into our relationships with fellow-Christians in order to do great damage. A foothold, a chance, a tiny fissure is all he needs. On the other hand, “the Holy Spirit of God” is grieved, for one of His ministries in and for the church is undermined. Addressing a contentious issue in the church at Rome, Paul wrote: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

A casual drive-by glance at our sign could cause some to think that Abbeyville Road Christian Church is “that church that cain’t talk good”, but may those who examine matters more closely conclude, “How they love one another!” And, may the Spirit of God rejoice in finding that we are committed to the same evidences of His presence in the church that He is committed to. That means, of course, attentively patching the fissures in our relationships that give Satan a foothold.

## **I. Seal Every Fissure of Deceit (25)**

<sup>25</sup>Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.

### **A. Little Stigma Was Attached to Lying in the World of the First Century**

Lying was a severe crack, because it was not regarded as severe. The pagan culture surrounding the church in Ephesus taught that lying was a perfectly valid activity. Recently converted Gentiles needed to be taught that truth-telling was a unique mark of a true disciple of Jesus. Paul made His appeal to the fact that they were “members of one body.” Can you imagine the peril any human body would experience if its various parts sent unreliable signals to the remainder; if the eyes could not be trusted when danger approached, or if the hand could not trust the nerve endings that say, “Hey, that’s hot!”

Deceit grieves the Holy Spirit, Who Jesus called, “the Spirit of Truth”? An indifference to falsehood gives Satan huge footholds. A life of lies is complicated. Lying is a hard habit to break, and Satan has a field day in the lives of those who are caught in its snares. Party A always has to remember what he said to Party B and Party C and on what occasion. If Party A can stay on top of those lies, he also has to calculate what opportunities Party B and Party C have had to compare notes. Anyone who has ever been tangled in a web of deceit knows of the stress involved in trying to hold the house of cards together. Lives of lies are not lives conducive to the peace that the Holy Spirit desires to produce.

### **B. Every Day in Our Age, Lying Carries Less and Less Stigma**

For centuries, the virtue of integrity has been honored in the world, and as is the case for so many basic virtues, the world should thank the rise of the early Christian church. Sadly, however, it is doubtful that truthfulness is held in particularly high esteem anymore. In March, 2002, *Reuters News* reported: “As many as 31 Students at Ottawa's Carleton University were caught submitting essays plagiarized from the Internet. Not unusual, perhaps, except that the essays were for an assignment on ethics.”

Falsehood in the church breaks down trust, but perhaps the most poignant result of deceit is the breakdown of ministry. Not every lie is malicious. Some are part of our old defense mechanisms. We each battle with sin. The church is the best place in the world to find people who will help us to carry our burdens. Still, we prefer to wear masks that hide our struggles from the very people who would help us. Other times, we are less than candid with people when candor is called for, hiding behind what is falsely called love, but which is in reality, timidity. Love confronts error. How can it not?

## **II. Seal Every Fissure of Anger (26)**

... <sup>26</sup>“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry ...

## **A. Paul Does Not Say, "Never Be Angry"**

The text literally says, "Be angry and do not sin." Anger has a place. The obvious questions are "When?" and "Where?" Jesus became angry when foolish Pharisees concluded that a man could not receive healing for his shriveled hand on the Sabbath. "He looked around at them in anger..." (Mark 3:5). Clearly, He was angry when He cleared the temple of merchandisers and money-changers.

Chrysotom, a great preacher of the early church said, "He who is not angry when he has cause to be, sins." Unreasonable patience can be as much a cause of harm as sinful impatience, for there is a fine line between patience and permissiveness. Many times, under the guise of holy patience, apathetic negligence fails to uphold that which is holy and looks the other way. There is such a thing as "righteous anger," but we are human, and incapable of keeping our anger righteous for very long.

## **B. Unresolved Anger at a Brother Is Sin in that It Leads to More Sin**

Unresolved anger inevitably produces bitter feelings, poisoned attitudes, slanderous words and evil actions. That is why Paul warned his readers to figure out how they were going to resolve their rage before day's end or before the sun goes down. And, do not overlook the fact that unresolved anger always cripples your fellowship with and worship of God. Still, I am in awe of how many believers, who know the Word of God, choose to deceive themselves on this matter by ignoring the foothold into their lives and relationships that they have granted to the devil. Something in us seems to just love reliving our grievances. Anger makes us feel powerful. There something almost exhilarating about it.

Love is supposed to cover a multitude of sins, but sometimes it's a challenge to not get irritated over things that are little more than a different kind of a personality. If a brother has objectively sinned against you, he is bound by scripture to set things right, and there is even a biblical process spelled out for the offended party to work toward restoration. But, are we not each duty-bound by the demands of love and unity in the body of Christ to work on our anger regardless of who sinned against whom?

On the day Christ died, the sky turned black. The most justifiable righteous anger in creation covered the land. But the darkness passed. Holy wrath gave way to love crucified. Stitches of forgiveness and love mend tears of anger. A believer who will not tend to his rage is a disservice to his church, which can never enjoy perfect health when somewhere, a fist is clenched. Satan smiles, and the Spirit grieves.

## **III. Seal Every Fissure of Greed (28)**

... <sup>28</sup>He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

### **A. Theft Seems Too Obvious to Address**

It bothers us to think that modern Christians would need to be told, "Don't steal!" but some Christians do steal. Theft was an even greater problem in the first century church. Many Christians were poor or had come out of slavery. If they needed something, they took it. There were laws against stealing, but there are laws against speeding today. Theft was ingrained in the Gentile poor from birth, and a poor believer carried that part of himself right into his Christian walk. To "not steal" had to be learned.

## **B. At the Root of Theft Was a Vice that Spans Centuries and Cultures**

Many Americans suffer from an inability to distinguish a quality of life from the quantity of their things. Every year, we piously lecture ourselves against turning Christmas into a consumption ritual. However, is it not interesting that December 26 is the second biggest retail day of the year? We're not just in the mall to exchange that hideous tie from Aunt Mary. We're lured by the promise of 50% off of all sorts of goodies. In his book, *Couplehood*, comedian Paul Reiser confesses to being a consumer sucker:

“I was in this stereo store, looking at this VCR/CD player/laser disc/pants presser combination thing. I wasn't even thinking of getting it; I was just playing.

“Salesman comes over. ‘You know that CD player'll hold up to 20 discs at a time’ ... ‘That's at least eighteen hours of music.’

“‘Okey-dokey’. And he wraps it up ... I hadn't done the arithmetic. Eighteen hours, sure. Who wouldn't want that?

“Then I got home and realized, ‘Wait a second! I'm not up eighteen hours. When would I use this? The last four hours will actually be keeping me awake ...’”

The remedy for discontent is work and generosity. Paul tells his thieving brothers to do something useful so that they might have something to share. Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Even believers can become so caught up in the materialism of the age that we can barely keep from snickering. But, thinking like the world thinks in such matters only robs believers of a new venue into joy. Ministry suffers. The Spirit grieves. Only Satan wins. Seal the crack of greed.

## **IV. Seal the Fissure of Careless Words (29)**

<sup>29</sup>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.

### **A. Any Speech that Injures Another Is Unwholesome**

“Unwholesome” means that which is rotten or causes rottenness. All corrupting speech is forbidden: criticism, gossip, divisive speech, judgmental language, disrespectful language. Even biblical “debates” over non-essential issues are rotten when spirits become too dogmatic. You see, the devil just wants one little crack. When a believer fails to guard his tongue, slips and says just one biting thing, Satan has damaged his ability to build up, which is, in fact, the Divine objective behind the gift of speech.

Encouragement builds. Kindness builds. Supportiveness builds. Speak those things. Then, on that occasion when a hard word is needed, even the hard word will build, because the a foundation of good will and concern has already been laid. A person can trust that even the hard word is rooted in love when all of the speech that has gone before it has been wholesome and edifying.

### **B. We Are Naïve to Deny the Destructiveness of Unwholesome Words**

“Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Who ever came up with that idiotic limerick? It was probably written in some place of painful solitude and bathed in tears of denial by someone wanting to minimize the pain caused them by someone's brutal, insensitive or uncaring word. Words do not break bones, but they do break hearts. They do destroy reputations. They do shatter self-images. They do sever relationships. If words were incapable of hurting us deeply and permanently, then there would be a lot of therapists in this world looking for other careers.

We must close that potential foothold opened by the rationale that “words are just talk.” Once words escape from our lips, they take on a life of their own. Words of cruelty, harshness, criticism and prejudice implant themselves in the hearts of others and begin to fester. Flapping gums may be the devil’s favorite foothold into our lives and in the church precisely because it is so easy to be careless.

## **V. Seal Every Fissure of Bad Disposition (31, 32)**

...<sup>31</sup>Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup>Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

### **A. The First Set of Words Sums Up a Spirit of Meanness**

A man who cannot see beyond himself takes little joy in others. Life becomes a contest for primacy. Paul describes mechanisms by which a mean spirit keeps others at bay. “Bitterness” means pungency. An unforgiving spirit can put off a bad odor, not a literal scent, but an air of unapproachability. “Rage” is “hot-headedness”, something we minimize by blaming our personality type. Some personality types need to be repented of and worked on. “Brawling” literally means “the raven’s cry”. This is all talking and no listening. At its worst, it is the attempt to “shout down” the opposition. “Slander” is any speech about another that can injure them. “Malice” is any evil attitude towards another.

Any man guilty of all of these would be quite a prize, would he not. But the point is that no Christian should be complacent about harboring any of these things. They are ugly words, but they should be, for they describe a spirit found to be ugly when God’s light is shed upon it.

### **B. The Second Set of Words Sums Up A Kind and Christ-like Spirit**

Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving as Christ is forgiving. Too often, we parrot the world’s rhetoric of self-preservation and looking out for #1. Let us listen carefully to ourselves and be determined to model Christ. Otherwise, we will freely grant footholds to the devil, dangerous cracks in our own characters and disastrous tears in the fabric of the Lord’s church. In the meantime, the Spirit grieves.

## **Conclusion (5:1, 2)**

<sup>5:1</sup>Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children <sup>2</sup> 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.

“Imitators” was a word used by those who taught oratory. The idea was, “Watch the masters and learn.” Everything we have ever seen of God in Creation, in His dealings with the Jews, or in Jesus reinforces the truth that we are loved. As we have been loved, we must imitate God toward one another. Worldly patterns for dealing with truthfulness, anger, greed, loose lips and our selfish fallen natures are of no value to us. They only provide cracks through which the devil sows harm. When we imitate God in our relationships, we step outside of the stingy, natural man and learn how to serve others. The Body is built up. The devil runs. And, God’s Spirit sings for joy.