Ephesians 4:29-5:2

Are You Burning Down Or Building Up Others?

Sermon

In Matthew 18, Peter asked Jesus how often he should forgive his brother or sister – "7 times"? Jesus said to him essentially, "don't even count." Jesus then told a parable of an unforgiving servant who was forgiven a debt that would be valued at approx. 20 years wages of debt by his master, but then he turns around and is unwilling to forgive someone who owes him what would be valued at approx. 3 months wages of debt. The point of the story is that I have been forgiven an insurmountable, unpayable debt to God…how wrong then it is for me to not be willing to forgive the debt of someone that is nothing in comparison! My sin against God is far greater than any debt anyone could ever owe me. Therefore, God's forgiveness towards me should motivate me to forgive anyone for any amount of debt – no matter how large! This is a radical, "gospel way of counting and measuring". This is gospel ethics.

God commands me to treat others as I've been treated by God! Rick talked about this last week…as God has measured to me grace, mercy, forgiveness, love…I am to imitate Him and measure to others the type, and quality, and intensity, and manner of judgment that God has measured to me. And yet so often I don't. And when I fail at this gospel ethic, the Holy Spirit within me brings great conviction as He is grieved within me and causes me to grieve over my failure to love others as God has first loved me!

Christianity is not, "do as I say", but "do as Christ has first done FOR YOU." This is the gospel ethic. Look again with me at 5:1-2:

> ***Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. [2] And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.***

Christ died for me! That changes everything! When I deserve harsh words, Jesus builds me up with words of grace and love. When I deserve God's blood to boil in wrath and anger against me, I cling to Jesus who absorbed that wrath for me on the cross. When I deserve the Holy Spirit to depart from me, He has sealed me and guaranteed my future redemption from sin. When I deserve unforgiveness and for God to turn His back on me, God forgives me and restores me. Listen to the lyrics we just sang together:

"***With every breath, I long to follow JESUS. For He has said that He will bring me home. And day by day, I know He will renew me until I stand with joy before the throne. To this I hold, my hope is ONLY JESUS. All the glory evermore to Him. When the race is complete still my lips shall repeat yet not I but through Christ in me***."

We were going around the room at your membership class yesterday and introducing ourselves, and someone said something very simple, and yet deeply profound, "I just came to a point where I decided to follow the one who loves me!" That's it! Christianity is not rocket science…it's following the one who loved you….imitate Him.

In our text Paul tells me that I am now to ***"be an imitator of God, as a beloved child".*** I am called to ***"walk in love as Christ loved"*** me. I am to lay down my life as ***"a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God"*** as my Savior has done. Christianity is not, "do as I say", but, "do as Christ has done for you." Paul in Ephesians is now in a section where he is giving a long series of commands…but every command is surrounded in front and behind by the example of Jesus first loving us in the way we are commanded to love. 4 things for us to see this morning as we see to "walk in a new way".

Don't burn down the house! (4:29,31)

> ***Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths… [31] Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.***

Paul tells us to not use ***"corrupting talk".*** It could be better translated, "***rotten speech".*** When something rots it spreads and infests – rotten speech produces rottenness. This word "rotten" is used in the gospels to speak of "rotting fish" that was separated and thrown away (Mt. 13:48). It's also used to speak of "rotting fruit". You've heard the saying, "one bad apple spoils the whole bunch". Jesus said, ***"No good tree bears bad*** ["rotten" – same word – σαπρος] ***fruit, nor again does a bad*** ["rotten"] ***tree bear good fruit." (Lk. 6:43).*** Where does rotten speech come from? It comes from a diseased heart. Our speech shows to others where our heart is. Jesus said, ***"out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." (Mt. 12:34). One of the best ways to discern where the heart and life of a person is to listen to what they SAY.***

Have you ever smelt rotting fish before? It is rancid! You've been around people who speak words that are just "rotten". Sometimes this is done to get a laugh. Sometimes it's venting speech that tears down someone else. But this type of speech spreads through a church body or a family or a work environment if it is not checked.

I had a friend who worked for the fishing boats in Alaska. He would be gone for several months and when he came home, he would stink for weeks! He didn't know he smelled like anything! He had been around the rotten smell of fish for so long he couldn't smell it anymore. We can lose the smell of rotten speech because we simply get used to it!

Now here in the context of Ephesians, Paul is probably talking about rotten speech that is given in anger. He spoke in vv.26-27 about sinful anger, and in v.31 Paul shows a progression of someone who begins with ***"bitterness",*** but then is filled with ***"wrath"*** and ***"anger".*** Like a fire that begins to burn and then grows and grows until it then turns into

"clamor" (which means "shouting") and ***"slander"*** towards those you are angry with. Your mouth is the ventilation outlet of the heart! You start to "slander" or name call. Maybe even worse you slander them to others. When someone comes to you and they are slandering others, know that "fruit" demonstrates something about their heart. Their heart is not filled with love, but "malice".

Do you know what is a common cause of house fires? Dryer fires. Do you know what often causes a dryer fire? Improper ventilation. "I am just venting."… can I tell you something about _____...I'm not gossiping, "I am just venting." God forgive me…because I have said this! We use that word "venting" as if all manner of venting is helpful, or right, or healthy. I mean after all…isn't it unhealthy to push down all that bitterness and anger? We have to vent it somehow or it might blow up within us. The problem is that there is a good way to vent and a poor way to vent. The poor way is "rotten speech". The poor way is "shouting"…I mean this is why we throw grown up temper tantrums…our blood is boiling, bitterness has moved to wrath and anger, and now "clamor"/shouting! I need to GET IT OUT! But improper ventilation will burn a whole church or a whole family to the ground! What would you do if you knew your house was on fire? How quickly would you act to extinguish or to get everyone out immediately! Some of you may be unwillingly burning down your own household with anger that burned out of control. James tells us that the tongue has the potential to burn everything around it to the ground:

> **the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!** [think about the damage that can be produced by such a small insignificant part of your body!] **6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. (James 3:5-6)**

Here is something that you can't do…you can't take back something you've said. You can't rebuild a tree that has been burned down…you can replant, and that takes time, and God can heal and the good news is that He can make something even better than before! But the reality is that the relationship may NEVER be the same. Don't burn down what matters most through sinful anger and rotten speech!

Don't grieve the Spirit of God! (Eph. 4:30)

> ***And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.***

Sandwiched in between the rotten speech in v.29 and the fire that burns out of control in v.31 is another command – ***"do not grieve the Holy Spirit".*** Of all the things that anger the

Lord it's sinful anger and rotten speech…especially in the home or in the church. The reason God is so grieved, as we talked about last time, is because *sinful anger* and *sinful speech* reveals *sinful idolatry*. Out of the mouth, the heart speaks. The word for ***"grieve"*** can mean "to insult, to provoke to anger, to vex, to irritate, it can even mean to cause severe emotional distress." Notice that the Holy Spirit is not a ***force***, but He is a ***person*** who can be grieved. He is The Spirit of God living within you, and when you use rotten speech you provoke the anger of God within you! But praise God for the good news that He is committed to you, Paul says the Holy Spirit has ***"sealed you for the day of redemption"***. Remember in 1:13-14 Paul spoke of our spiritual blessings IN CHRIST, one of which is that the Holy Spirit has ***"sealed us"*** (a mark of ownership) and He is the ***"guarantee of our inheritance"***. We can know that we have eternal life and be sure of that because in Christ the Holy Spirit seals us. Later in 5:18 Paul is once again going to use "filling" language (which he's used throughout Ephesians) to speak of the Holy Spirit filling us and producing in us worship, thanksgiving, and submission to one another. But Paul's point *here* is that we can grieve and deeply insult the one who has entrusted Himself to us and desires to produce within us worship, thanksgiving, and submission.

So how do we deal with the bitterness and anger we have towards one another in the body of Christ. What is the proper method of ventilation? First you need to go to God in prayer…but then…

Proper Ventilation God's way

When someone has something against you:

> **So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there *remember that your brother has something against you*, [24] leave your gift there before the altar and go. *First be reconciled to your brother,* and then come and offer your gift. (Mt. 5:23-24)**

When you have something against someone:

> **If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, *between you and him alone*. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (Mt. 18:15)**

Do you notice the one thing in common with both situations – proper ventilation means going *to the person* and *not to others*. Don't vent to another person, go to the person who has wronged you or who you have wronged. This is uncomfortable, this is challenging, but this causes healing. It's much easier to slander, it's much easier to vent to another person.

Don't burn the house down with anger, slander, and rotten speech, and do not grieve the Holy Spirit.

Build up others with words of grace (4:29)

Look again at v.29 – "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, *but* [rather…INSTEAD] only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear."

Don't use rotten speech, but use speech that ***"is good for building up".*** Paul has consistently used "building" language to speak of the church in Ephesians: In 2:20 Paul said that the church is built with "persons" brick by brick (apostles, prophets, Christ the cornerstone). A structure of people who are now ONE, and reconciled to God and each other, and ***"joined together"*** and ***"grow together"*** into a ***"dwelling place"*** and ***"temple of God"*** (2:19-22). Then earlier in chapter 4 Paul gave this picture of a structure that is growing as each member is unified and using their gifts for the work of ministry, SO THAT ***"when each part is working properly"*** the church ***"grows so that it builds itself up in love"*** (4:16). So the church is built with ***persons***, the church is built with ***gifts and love***, and ***here we see the church is built with words.*** Your words can be used to build the church as occasion arises. We can speak truthful words – which may mean telling someone the hard thing that they need to hear. We can speak words of encouragement when a brother or sister is beaten down or the devil has been condemning them over their sin – we speak the gospel to them and remind them of God's unwavering love and maybe even remind them of the progress that you see in their life. We can speak words of prayer and intercession – we can carry one another before the throne of God's grace and pray.

Do you know who speaks words of grace? Jesus. In Matthew 12:20 there is a beautiful passage about Jesus. Perhaps some of you need to hear these words this morning:

> **a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory (Mt. 12:20)**

A reed was a very useful item in the ancient world. It could be used as a staff, it could be used as a pen, it could be used as a weapon, it could be used as a measuring rod. A reed can be used to make music, but if it's broken due to the harsh elements of this world, it really lost its use. Jesus does not break the bent reed. Jesus does not put out the candle that is barely burning because of discouragement, or sin, or fear. When I am broken, when I am barely burning, Jesus restores, Jesus causes me to burn brightly again.

The power of the tongue is measureless. May our church be built with words of grace…brick by brick, word by word…until we have a structure built on a history of grace words given between us to one another.

Finally, Cover one another's faults with Kindness and Forgiveness (Eph. 4:32)

> **Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (4:32)**

When a structure has become fractured and needs repair, a wrecking ball is a powerful force, but it demolishes everything it collides with. Our natural tendency when someone wrongs us is to take a wrecking ball to the relationship. Call it a day…move on.

There is another powerful influence. Snow fall. It's not like a wrecking ball. When you look out your window at the soft snow falling - its beautiful, its gentle, it dissolves in the palm of your hand - but overtime it covers everything and heavy snow can immobilize regions, paralyze cities, strand commuters, close airports and disrupt the flow of supplies and emergency services. God's forgiveness and kindness are like snowfall that falls persistently, gently, and overtime it has a powerful influence.

The word "tenderhearted" is the same word for "compassion" which comes from the latin "compati" which means "to suffer with". Like snow that falls gently and consistently, and at a steady pace God persists in forgiving me, persists in showing me kindness…until all of my faults and stains and sins and failures are covered.

We tend to think if someone has wronged us, we need justice to come crashing in like a wrecking ball. We tend to think if we forgive or show kindness or compassion we will appear weak and nothing will change. Paul tells us in Romans 2:4 that God's kindness can break the hardest of hearts into repentance.

We are told in Romans 12 how we are to respond to those who have done evil towards us:

> **Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." [this is my default…break out the wrecking ball and start swinging!] [20] To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:19-21)**

These are gospel ethics. God doesn't ask you to do nothing about the wrong they've done against you…because doing good, forgiving, showing kindness is NOT doing nothing. "overcome evil with good". Therefore be imitators of God brothers and sisters.

<u>Connection Group Questions</u>

1. **Ethics defined** – "*moral principles that govern a person's behavior or the conducting of an activity*". How we behave or act towards others is governed by our moral principles.

2. What are some moral principles or virtues that everyone in the world holds to universally? (The Chosen – “follow me and I will show you a new way to count and measure”)
3. **Read Jeremiah 31:33-34** – What are some moral principles that God establishes in the New Covenant? How do those principles govern the way God behaves towards sinful people?
4. **Read Romans 3:23-26** - How can God be merciful and forgiving while maintaining His virtue of justice towards sinners? (see Rom. 3:23-26)
5. **Read Ephesians 5:1-2** - How does the grace and mercy of God in the New Covenant change the way we should act ethically?
6. **Read Ephesians 4:29,31** – Why is “rotten speech” so destructive? What are some unhealthy ways we “vent” our anger? What are some healthy ways to vent our anger when it is burning within us?
7. **Read Ephesians 4:29** – What are some ways that we can build one another up with words?
8. **Read Ephesians 4:30** – What do we experience when the Holy Spirit is grieved within us? What is the danger of sinning but experiencing no grief within?
9. **Read Galatians 5:16-25** – what does it look like to walk in the Spirit and to walk in the flesh?
10. **Read Ephesians 4:32** – What is the difference between the power of a wrecking ball and the power of snow fall? Should we consider forgiveness and kindness towards those who wrong us as the same as “doing nothing” to correct their sin?
11. **Pray using Jeremiah 31:33-34 as your prayer text** - give thanks to God for the New Covenant. Ask God to help you to follow God’s example of gospel ethics.