

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

25 So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. **26** Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, **27** and do not make room for the devil. **28** Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. **29** *Let no evil talk come out of your mouths*, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. **30** And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. **31** Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, **32** and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, **2** and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.



This morning's message is less a sermon composed by me than it is a collection of stories and quotes from other people connected together with a few bridging words from me. Sometimes God's message comes to us like that – parables, metaphors, aphorisms, sounds and words, truths and revelations.

Storytelling preacher Fred Craddock used this in a presentation once:

I am going to say a word. The moment I say the word I want you to see a face, to recall a face and a name, someone who comes to your mind when I say the word. Are you ready? The word is *bitter*. Bitter. Do you see a face? I see a face. I see the face of a farmer in western Oklahoma, riding a mortgaged tractor,

Out of Our Mouths

A sermon preached by
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Text:

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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burning gasoline purchased on credit, moving across rented land, rearranging the dust. Bitter.

Do you see a face? I see the face of a woman forty-seven years old. She sits out on a hillside, drawn and confused under a green canopy furnished by the mortuary. She is banked on all sides by flowers sprinkled with cards: "You have our condolences." Bitter.

Do you see a face? I see the face of a man who runs a small grocery store. His father ran the store in that neighborhood for twenty years, and he is now in his twelfth year there. The grocery doesn't make much profit, but it keeps the family together. It's a business. There are no customers in the store now, and the grocer stands in the doorway with his apron rolled up around his waist, looking across the street where workmen are completing a supermarket. Bitter.

I see the face of a young couple. They seem to be about nineteen. They are standing in the airport terminal, holding hands so tightly that their knuckles are white. She's pregnant; he's dressed in military green. They are not talking, just standing and looking at each other. The loudspeaker comes on: "Flight 392 now loading at gate 22, yellow concourse, all aboard for San Francisco." He slowly moves toward the gate; she stands there alone. Bitter.

Do you see a face? A young minister in a small town, in a cracker box of a house they call the parsonage. He lives there with his wife and small child. On Saturday morning there is a knock at the door. He answers, and there standing before him on the porch is the chairman of his church board, who is also the president of the local bank, and owner of most of the land round about. He has in his hands a small television. It is an old television, small screen, black-and-white. It's badly scarred, and one of the knobs is off. He says: "My wife and I got one of those new twenty-five -inch color sets, but they didn't want to take this

one on trade, so I just said to myself, *Well, we'll just give it to the minister. That's probably the reason our ministers don't stay any longer than they do. We don't do enough nice things for them.* The young minister looks up and tries to smile and say thanks. But I want you to see his face. Bitter.

Will you look at one other face? His name is Saul. Saul of Tarsus.

Saul of Tarsus – Paul the Apostle – a bitter man? I'm not sure where Fred Craddock went with that sermon, but the illustration made me wonder about Paul. Was he bitter because he felt like he was a man of status – a Roman citizen, a leader in his community, a teacher of the right way – forced to persecute this low-life Christian sect within Judaism? Was he bitter because he thought himself a man of virtue, a strict follower of the law, an observant Jew and therefore he despised anyone who he thought strayed from God's commanded law – those who believed the stories of Jesus the law-beaker and still followed him – Jesus who maybe claimed messiahship, who healed on the Sabbath, who plucked grain from the fields on the Sabbath, who ate with sinners, who defiled God's very being?

Was Paul bitter because he thought he was living right, obeying God, following the commandments to the letter of the law – and boom, God literally knocks him to the ground, blinds him, and turns his life-course a completely different direction? Was Paul a bitter man because once he experienced his revelation and became a follower of this same Jesus whose followers he had hated he found that they weren't too interested in what he had to say? He taught them all he knew – yet they strayed and did whatever they wanted anyway. The early Christians – that bunch – mismanaging their money, Jews versus Gentiles, bickering and quarreling, conflicts within, fightings without, peace and war, eating food that wasn't theirs, arguing over who is the greatest teacher among them. Sex or abstinence, slavery or equality, baptism and circumcision, anger and backbiting, back-sliding, debauchery, factions, arguments, envy, boasting, arrogance, rudeness. I'm glad Christians aren't like *that* anymore, huh?

In this letter to the Ephesians, probably composed not by Paul himself but by one of his students, anger and deceit within the fellowship had become serious concerns for Paul (vss. 25-27). People also seem to have been taking advantage of one another. Some may have been only partially reformed thieves (vs. 28). When people are riled up about issues, they often criticize and condemn one another mercilessly – “evil talk” that comes out of our mouths.

Bitterness. Paul knew it; Paul must have had it deep within himself. His thorn in the flesh perhaps? Or is it that thorn that even deepens his bitterness – toward God, toward the Christian communities, toward himself. Bitterness.

Fred Craddock said in another sermon, this time to one of Canada’s most prestigious congregations with a large radio audience, “Only those who have been hurt can be forgiving because they have been wounded and violated.”

Paul knew bitterness because he lived bitterness. “It’s been my experience,” said Abe Lincoln, “that people with no vices have very few virtues.” Paul could counsel his students about bitterness because he had tried to control his own bitterness. “Be imitators of God ... and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us.” Not that it’s easy, but it’s the correct path – the only way to live in the presence of God and each other.

CS Lewis, in *A Grief Observed*, reveals some of his true feelings about the death of his much beloved wife. Much of his grieving and sorrow comes out in anger and bitterness. He kept a journal following her death.

Are these jottings morbid? I once read the sentence ‘I lay awake all night with toothache, thinking about toothache and about laying awake.’ That’s true to life. Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery’s shadow or reflection: the fact that you don’t merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer. I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief.

Feelings, and feelings, and feelings. Let me try thinking instead. From the rational point of view, what new factor has H.’s death introduced into the problem of the universe? What grounds has it given me for doubting all that I believe? I knew already that these things, and worse, happened daily. I would have said that I had taken them into account. I had been warned -- I had warned myself -- not to reckon on worldly happiness. We were even promised sufferings. They were part of the programme. We were even told, “Blessed are they that mourn,’ and I accepted it. I’ve got nothing that I hadn’t bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not in imagination.

It hurt. For a very long time C.S. Lewis was in constant and continual emotional anguish. Nothing and nobody was going to console him. His bitterness grew deeper and deeper. The only thing that got him through was his willingness to speak the truth to himself. He journaled the truth into the world – he opened himself to God even at times when he felt abandoned by God – he yelled at God and told God of his bitterness and hate and anger. It was the only thing that got him through.

Eventually, much later, he was able to reveal that God had indeed brought him through. In his later book, *Mere Christianity*, Lewis wrote,

Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor, act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.

The truth speaks the truth. Love and be loved. Hate and be hated. Choose which is God’s direction.

“When in doubt, tell the truth”, said Mark Twain.

Paul tells us to speak the truth. Do not let the sun go down on your anger, do not make room for the devil; don't continue stealing, live honestly; Let no evil talk come out of your mouth, only use words that build up each other, that give God's grace to each other. Put away bitterness, wrath, anger, slander, malice. Be kind, forgiving, tenderhearted, loving.

Sometimes the words we say just don't make any sense – once they're out of our mouths we wish we could reel them back in. During a Miss USA contest a few years ago, the host asked this question of Miss Alabama: “If you could live forever, would you and why?” Miss Alabama answered: "I would not live forever, because we should not live forever, because if we were supposed to live forever, then we would live forever, but we cannot live forever, which is why I would not live forever."

But usually the words that come out of our mouths speak the feelings – conscious or not – of our hearts. My favorite saying is a slight modification of the old sticks and stones cliché: “Sticks and stones might break my bones, but *names* will *really* hurt me.” Choose your words carefully. Choose the words that speak the truth and buildup, not the half-truth which can tear down.

In her book, *Riding the Bus with My Sister*, Bryn Mawr college professor Rachel Simon tells of her experience with her adult sister Beth who has mental retardation and lives independently in a different town. Rachel recalls how much she loves words and how she is very aware of what words can do to others. Words can be more devastating than sticks and stones. Rachel writes about her teen years:

I like words people use.

I like words. At night I go up to my room, and after I've called my friends, I write lists of words as I hang out

under this big blue clear plastic peace sign that I won at a county fair.

But there's one kind of word I never write down. Kids in the halls at school use it, and teachers who talk about John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. I don't need to write it because it bangs around every day in my head:

DIMWIT, HALF-WIT, SIMPLETON, IDIOT, REJECT, SPAZZ, IMBECILE, GALOOT, MORON, DEFECTIVE

And especially:

RETARD

They'll say these like it's nothing ... I go along because what else can you do?

I hear the words that hurt me. My children hear the other children make fun of their sister, Lindsay. Some of those very same words, in fact, cut through us like knives, bruise us like sticks and stones. You hear the words as well – use them even. Racial slams that someone thinks are funny when they tell a joke; sexual-orientation words that stereotype the way someone lives his or her life; ageisms that denigrate the elderly; words that put others down because of one's own insecurity.

And you know there are words said about you too.

We all use them – maybe we try not to but we have them in our vocabulary. They come out of us as if we're hypnotized and have no control, as if we have a momentary lapse of integrity, as if we have glosilalia, that tick in some people with Tourette's syndrome that allows them to say things that we might think but usually suppress.

Richard Halverson, once chaplain of the US Senate, once said [I'm using “words” where he used “ideas”]:

You may treat [words] ideas as bullets ...or seeds! You may shoot [words] ideas ... or you may sow them! You may hit people in the head with them, or you may plant them in their hearts. Use them as bullets, they kill inspiration and neutralize motivation. Use them as seeds,

they take root, grow, and become a reality in the life in which they become planted. The only risk taken when seeds are planted is that they become a part of the one in whom they grow.

Good words or bad words; evil words or kind words; critical words or loving words; truthful words or deceptive words. Either of those juxtaposed kinds of words will get planted, take root, grow and become reality in someone's life. Choose carefully which words you'll use. Let the words of your mouth carry the message of your God.

Frederick Beuchner wrote this definition of "word":

In Hebrew the term *dobar* means both "word" and "deed." Thus to say something is to do something. *I love you. I hate you. I forgive you. I am afraid.* Who knows what such words do, but whatever it is, it can never be undone. Something that lay hidden in the heart is irrevocably released through speech into time, is given substance and tossed like a stone into the pool of history, where the concentric rings lap out endlessly.

Words are power, essentially the power of creation. By my words I both discover and create who I am. By my words I elicit a word from you. Through our converse we create each other.

When God *said*, "Let there be light," there *was* light where before there was only darkness. When I say I love you, there *is* love where before there was only ambiguous silence. In a sense I do not love you first and then speak it, but only by speaking it give it reality.

"In the beginning was the Word," says John, meaning perhaps that before the beginning there was something like Silence: not the absence of sound because there was no sound yet to be absent, but the absence of absence: nothing noth-inged: everything. Then the Word. The Deed. The Beginning. The beginning in time of time. "The Word was with God, and the Word was God," says John. By uttering himself, God makes himself heard and

makes himself hearers.

God never seems to weary of trying to get himself across. Word after word he tries in search of the right word. When the Creation itself doesn't seem to say it right—sun, moon, stars, all of it—he tries flesh and blood.

He tried saying it in Noah, but Noah was a drinking man. He tried saying it in Abraham, but Abraham was a little too Mesopotamian with all those wives and whiskers. He tried Moses, but Moses himself was trying too hard; tried David, but David was too pretty for his own good. Toward the end of his rope, God tried saying it in John the Baptist with his locusts and honey and hellfire preaching, and you get the feeling that John might almost have worked except that he lacked something small but crucial like a sense of the ridiculous or a balanced diet.

So he tried once more. Jesus as the *mot juste* of God.

"The word became flesh," John said, of all flesh *this* flesh: holy hick, whore's hero, poor man's Messiah, savior as schlemiel. Jesus as Word made flesh means take it or leave it: in this life, death, life, God finally manages to say what God is and what man is. Means: just as your words have you in them—your breath, spirit, power, hiddenness—so Jesus has God in him.

God's words. Our words. They all mean something. They all create something. They create something between us. Paul knew it and he tried to get the early Christian communities to understand it. "Do not let evil talk come out of your mouths." But we just don't get it, do we?

Søren Kierkegaard told a parable of a community of ducks waddling off to duck church to hear the duck preacher. The duck preacher spoke eloquently of how God had given the ducks wings with which to fly. With these wings there was nowhere the ducks could not go. With those wings they could soar. Shouts of "Amen!" were quacked throughout the duck congregation. At the conclusion of the service,

the ducks left commenting on the message and waddled back home. But they never flew.

We need to listen to Paul and carry through on what he tells us. Move beyond bitterness and anger and resentment. Use words wisely in the knowledge that they carry hurt as well and beauty. Let no evil talk come out of our mouths. "Be imitators of God ... live in love ..."

I conclude this morning with a story of a little girl who heard and understood and believed the words she heard. And she reminded a bunch of adults of the reality of words – and the reality of God's word. Out of the mouths of babes ...

A little girl had been shopping with her Mom in Wal-Mart. She must have been 6 years old, this beautiful red-haired, freckle-faced image of innocence.

It was pouring outside. The kind of rain that gushes over the top of rain gutters, so much in a hurry to hit the earth it has no time to flow down the spout. We all stood there under the awning and just inside the door of the Wal-Mart. We waited, some patiently, others irritated because nature messed up their hurried day.

I am always mesmerized by rainfall. I got lost in the sound and sight of the heavens washing away the dirt and dust of the world. Memories of running, splashing so carefree as a child come pouring in as a welcome reprieve from the worries of my day. The little voice was so sweet as it broke the hypnotic trance we were all caught in "Mom, let's run through the rain," she said.

"What?" Mom asked.

"Let 's run through the rain!" she repeated.

"No, honey. We'll wait until it slows down a bit," Mom replied.

This young child waited about another minute and repeated: "Mom, let's run through the rain."

"We'll get soaked if we do," Mom said.

"No, we won't, Mom. That's not what you said this morning," the young girl said as she tugged at her Mom's arm.

"This morning? When did I say we could run through the rain and not get wet?"

"Don't you remember? When you were talking to Daddy about his cancer, you said, 'If God can get us through this, he can get us through anything!'"

The entire crowd stopped dead silent. I promise you, you couldn't hear anything but the rain. We all stood silently. No one came or left in the next few minutes. Mom paused and thought for a moment about what she would say. Now some would laugh it off and scold her for being silly. Some might even ignore what was said. But this was a moment of affirmation in a young child's life. A time when innocent trust can be nurtured so that it will bloom into faith.

"Honey, you are absolutely right. Let's run through the rain. If God lets us get wet, well maybe we just needed washing," Mom said. Then off they ran. We all stood watching, smiling and laughing as they darted past the cars and yes, through the puddles. They held their shopping bags over their heads just in case. They got soaked. But they were followed by a few who screamed and laughed like children all the way to their cars. And yes, I did. I ran. I got wet. I needed washing.

Receive God's word. Live God's word. Speak God's word. Go in God's word.

Amen.