

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 11, 2018**

BLIND SPOTS

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

In less than three weeks, our Haiti Mission Team will host a two-night retreat for ex-pat missionaries and their families who live and serve in Haiti. It will be my privilege to speak to these missionaries three times during the retreat. Starting this morning, I want to share with you some of what I hope to share with them from God's Word. So we're going to take a break from our study on the life and legacy of Moses until after Easter. This morning, I want to look with you at what the Lord says to us in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, beginning in Ephesians 4:17. I invite you to follow along with me in your Bible or electronic device. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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Mary Sue's father, who died at the age of 66 when our daughter Erin was just two years old, loved to quote poetry. One of his favorite snippets consisted of these lines from a poem by the Scottish poet Robert Burns entitled "Ode to a Louse." With slight alterations to the original, my father-in-law would say:

Would to God the giftie gie us
To see ourselves as others see us.
'Twould from many a blunders free us.

There is an important truth, I think, in these poetic lines. There are times when we would be surprised, to put it mildly, or even shocked to know how we are perceived by other people. Some of us are more intuitive, more aware of these things than others, but some of us can be clueless at times and have little or no idea how we come across to others in our interactions with them. This is especially true, I think, in our speech. Not only in what we say but in the way we say it, as well as in the way we communicate non-verbally, even if it is unintentional.

That is why, as Robert Burns makes clear, it would be such a gift from God to see ourselves as others see us. Because we all have blind spots. I know I do. I know it not because I see them, but because occasionally someone will let me know about it. Usually it is someone I've hurt or offended or embarrassed or disappointed by something I said or did, or by the way I said it or did it. That's not pleasant. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. But it is valuable – it is necessary – if the character of Christ is to be more fully formed in your life and mine.

It can be painful, not to mention embarrassing at times, to be confronted with our unattractive idiosyncracies and failings, especially if we are unaware of the negative way we come across to others or the hurt we cause.

If the videotape of my life were to be shown here today, I'm sure I would be horrified not only by having to see again all the times I know I've blown it, but also by seeing myself from another perspective – from the perspective of my wife or my kids or my neighbors or friends or elders or deacons or church members or the church staff.

Blind spots. I've got them. You've got them. All God's children have got them. We've got blind spots in our relationships with the people closest to us. Blind spots in our relationships with each other. Blind spots in our relationships with the people in our community who don't share our faith in Jesus Christ. Blind spots in the way we relate to or communicate with others. Maybe we have blind spots in our relationships with God, too.

As potentially painful or embarrassing as it might be, it would be a gift from God to see ourselves as others see us. Even more, to see ourselves as God sees us.

What Paul writes to the Ephesians about how to live together as followers of the Lord Jesus is elementary – it is basic and foundational – and essential for us to understand and apply in the nitty-gritty of our everyday relationships and responsibilities. So I want to look with you at these practical principles Paul says we need to work into our lives, so we can eliminate our blind spots; so we can eliminate any inconsistency between who we are and how we live as God's "dearly loved children" (5:1) in this world.

I almost said this "God-forsaken" world. Sometimes it may seem like a God-forsaken world. *But it is not.* God *has not* forsaken this world. God *will not* forsake this world. Much of the world, sad to say, has forsaken *God*. Lots of people have turned their backs on God. But that does not give us the right or the freedom to turn our backs on the world, a world God loved (and loves) so much that He gave His only Son to suffer and die for it, in order to reconcile the world to Himself through the sacrificial, atoning death of Jesus for us. *Jesus* is the proof that God has not forsaken this world. *Jesus* is the proof that God has not forsaken *us*.

Paul, however, does not sugarcoat the truth that many people in the world have forsaken God. That is essentially what he says in verses 17-19 where he describes what life is like apart from knowing God and experiencing His grace in your life. He frames it in terms of not living "as the Gentiles do," but he is not telling Gentiles to reject their ethnicity. In the Jewish way of thinking, there were only two kinds of people: Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). There were the Jewish people and *ta ethne* – the nations. Which means, of course, that almost all of us are in the Gentile category.

Paul does not mean that we Gentiles should reject or be ashamed of our ethnic identity as Gentiles. What he means is that we are to reject the old pagan way of life associated with unbelieving Gentiles. He describes this way of life in terms of a darkened mind, futility in their thinking, hardness of heart, deadness of soul, and a life of "unhindered lust, unbridled promiscuity, and uncontrolled self-indulgence" (Swindoll, *Living Insights on Galatians and Ephesians*, 253). It sounds a lot like our world today. It sounds a lot like life in America today. If Paul were writing to us today, he might say: "You Americans must no longer live as Americans do in the futility of their thinking" (Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians: The NIV Application Commentary*, 242). Not to criticize or condemn our ethnic identity or national

heritage as Americans, but to reject the acceptance and celebration of brazen sinfulness and the forsaking of God in our culture.

“Futility” is a good word to describe life apart from God. The Greek word *mataiotes* means “meaningless” or “useless” or “worthless” or “empty.” It is the word used again and again in the Greek translation of the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, which declares that life apart from God and His gracious purposes is futility.

This, says Paul, is the way it was for us, before we came to know Jesus. This is the way we were, before the Lord opened our eyes and our hearts to the truth of the gospel. This is the way we were, before we were saved by God’s grace. This is the way we were, before we were adopted into God’s family as His dearly loved children.

Now that we have come to know Christ (4:20), though, now that we have been taught in the gospel to kiss the old way of life good-bye (4:22) and to “take on an entirely new way of life – a God-fashioned life,” as it says in *The Message*, “a life renewed from the inside and working itself into (our) conduct as God reproduces His character in (us)” (4:23-24, *MSG*), things are different. Things *must be* different. Our lives and conduct must be different. We must no longer live like “Gentile” (or American) unbelievers. We must no longer live like people who don’t know God. We must no longer live like people who don’t trust in Jesus for salvation and who don’t follow Him as Lord. Our lives and conduct and character must reflect our love for Jesus and our allegiance to Him.

That is why Paul lays out these practical principles for us, to show us, going back to Ephesians 4:1, what it means “to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” in Christ. These principles should be very straightforward and clear, but it is possible – it is just possible – that some of us may have blind spots in regard to some of these things. So let’s take a look at them. And let’s take a look at our own lives in the penetrating light of God’s Word.

One of the worst things you can do is to listen to this (or any) sermon and think: “You know, so-and-so really needs to hear this.” “I sure hope such-and-such-a-person is listening to this message, because he or she really needs to take it to heart.” “It’s too bad this-or-that-person isn’t here today, because this message is meant for her or him.” Maybe so-an-so does need to hear it. Maybe this-or-that person really could benefit from it. But the thing is: It’s not your place to worry about someone else’s blind spots until you’ve taken care of your own. It’s like Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: “Why do you obsess over the speck of dust in your neighbor’s eye and ignore the two-by-four in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3). For right now, don’t worry about what you think are someone else’s blind spots. Ask the Lord to show you your own.

PRINCIPLE #1; BE DONE WITH FALSEHOOD AND SPEAK TRUTH TO ONE ANOTHER

The first principle is stated in verse 25, where Paul says: “Therefore” – in view of what Jesus has done for you and what you have learned in Him – “each of you must put off falsehood and

“speak truthfully to your neighbor.” The principle is: Be done with falsehood and speak truth to one another.

There are many different forms of falsehood, different forms of lying, of course, from little “white lies” to out-and-out “whoppers,” from blatant contradictions of known facts to carefully crafted nuances meant to deceive and mislead. The falsehood Paul says we are to “put off” like an old, tattered and stained jacket includes such things as:

- Deception
- Exaggerating
- Telling half-truths
- Plagiarism
- Hypocrisy (which I’ll define as trying to impress someone by pretending to be something you’re not or trying to get others to think you are better than you are)
- Making promises you don’t intend to keep.

The plain meaning of what Paul says in verse 25 is that there is no place for dishonesty, no place for falsehood, no place for pretense or hypocrisy in the fellowship of God’s people. Among the things the Bible says that God detests (in other words, hates with a passion) is lying (Proverbs 6:16-19). A tongue that pours out lies is something God can’t stomach (Proverbs 12:22). Truthfulness – speaking the truth to one another in a posture and atmosphere of love and respect – not dishonesty is to be the hallmark of the fellowship of Jesus’ followers.

Make sure that you never divorce truth from love. Love without truth isn’t really love. Truth without love can be devastating. It can be brutal. You don’t have to be “brutally honest” in order to be truthful. People who take pride in being brutally honest probably enjoy the brutality as much as the honesty (Richard J. Needham). Maybe more. There is nothing loving about that. Think about this the next time you’re tempted to be brutally honest with someone.

You can speak the truth without being brutal or unfeeling. You can speak the truth tactfully. You can speak the truth winsomely. You can speak the truth respectfully. You can speak the truth graciously, as Paul counsels in Colossians 4:6, where he says: “Let your conversation be always full of grace.” That is a good goal to pursue.

Why is truth-telling such a big deal? Why is it so important to renounce falsehood and speak the truth in love? Just look at how the breakdown in truth-telling has damaged our society. We’re drowning in a sea of “fake news” as the media so often – habitually, it seems – shape, stretch, and spin “the news” to suit their purposes, to support their political viewpoint, to advance their particular ideology, to create a controversy where there is none, or just to improve their ratings. As a result, millions of Americans no longer believe much of the media, and millions more are misled into believing things that are not true.

This is not how Jesus wants His followers to live. This is not how Jesus wants it to be in His church. The reason truth-telling is so important for us is that “we are all members of one

body” (4:25). We’re family. We belong to one another. And deceit, deception, falsehood, and lies are all toxic. They are poison in the body of Christ. If unchecked, they can kill.

Healthy relationships in the church, like relationships in the family (such as the relationship between husband and wife, or between parents and children) are built on trust. And trust is built on truth. It is built on fidelity to the truth. So falsehood undermines relationships, and a mutual commitment to truthfulness in a posture and atmosphere of love can only strengthen our relationships.

Listen, people of Faith: If there is falsehood in our fellowship, if there is hypocrisy in our hearts, if you are projecting a particular image in public but living a different kind of life in private – if this is true of any of us or all of us, let’s renounce it. Let’s put it away. Let’s be done with it. Let’s learn to be honest with God, honest with ourselves, and honest with each other – *appropriately* honest in the spirit of Christian love. Not blasting others with both barrels in the name of honesty. Not giving indiscriminate voice to every thought or opinion. Paul has more to say about our speech in verse 29, which Jim Byrne spoke about a few weeks ago.

Have you put off falsehood? Have you renounced lying in its various forms? Can other people trust you to be a man or woman of your word? Do you speak truthfully in a spirit of Christ-like love and respect? Do you have a blind spot in this area?

PRINCIPLE #2: DON’T LET ANGER GAIN A FOOTHOLD IN YOUR LIFE.

The second principle is in verses 26 and 27, where Paul says: “In your anger do not sin.” That’s a quote from Psalm 4:4. Literally, what Paul says is: “Be angry, but do not sin.” It’s okay to be angry, at least in certain circumstances. So go ahead and be angry, if anger is called for, but do not let your anger lead you into sin. Then Paul says: “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”

The Message puts it this way: “Don’t use your anger as fuel for revenge” (4:26). The New Living Translation says: “Don’t sin by letting anger gain control over you” (4:26).

The problem with anger is that it is too often rooted in selfishness. We get angry when things don’t go the way we want them to go, when we don’t get what we want, or when we are not treated the way we want to be treated.

We all know about road rage. Maybe you’ve been on the receiving end. Maybe you’ve been on the giving end. A recent (2016) study by the AAA showed that nearly 80 percent of U. S. drivers expressed significant anger, aggression, or road rage behind the wheel at least once in the previous year. Approximately eight million U. S. drivers engaged in extreme examples of road rage, including purposely ramming another vehicle or getting out of the car to confront another driver. Other common types of behavior included purposely tailgating (51 percent), yelling at another driver (47 percent), honking to show anger or annoyance (45 percent), making angry gestures (33 percent), and trying to block another vehicle from changing lanes (24 percent). (Source: Tamra Johnson, AAA News Room, 7-16-16.)

Does any of this resemble you?

There is also what you might call “spiritual road rage.” It’s not really road rage. It’s a kind of spiritual rage or anger directed by Christians at people who disagree with us, whether on social or political issues, or on theological issues, including those non-essential matters of the faith in which we have liberty as followers of the Lord Jesus. Depending on where you go on the internet, on the blogosphere, on what preachers and teachers you watch on TV or listen to on the radio or on podcasts, you can encounter angry, venomous, sarcastic, judgmental attacks on other people that are just totally unbecoming and way over the edge for anyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus. Don’t allow yourself to be sucked in by this attack-dog mentality. Don’t be taken in by self-appointed leaders who are like the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. The Pharisees, you know, took pride in the fact that they were not like other people (Luke 18:11). They were, they thought, morally and spiritually superior to everybody around them. But they were wrong, as Jesus made clear (18:14).

There are two kinds of anger: the right kind and the wrong kind. There is righteous anger and there is unrighteous anger. The problem is that we tend to get angry for the wrong reason about the wrong thing in the wrong way at the wrong time. Which is why the Bible urges us to be “slow to get angry, because human anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:19-20).

Anger is not always wrong. Sometimes it is wrong *not* to get angry. There are certain things in this world that should make us angry. Not self-righteously angry. There is no place for that. But angry at injustice. At abuse of any kind. At things that violate the dignity of people made in the image of God. At falsehood. At anything that grieves the heart of God.

In verse 26 and 27, Paul lays out three qualifications for dealing with anger:

1. Don’t sin. He says: “In your anger don’t sin.” Don’t sin by letting anger gain control over you. Make sure your anger is not motivated by malicious thoughts, selfish pride, bitterness, resentment, or the desire for revenge. Remember what the Bible says about this in Romans 12: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of all people. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Never take your own revenge, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written: ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay’, says the Lord” (Romans 12:17-19). Don’t let your anger lead you into sin.
2. “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger” (4:26). Which means: Don’t allow your anger to fester. Don’t hold onto it. Don’t let it become a monster that can swallow you up and destroy your relationships. If you can resolve it before you go to bed at night, do so. If that’s not possible, resolve not to allow your anger to be a barrier between you and someone else. Deal with it as quickly as you can. It is one thing to be angry about something. It is another thing to be an angry person.
3. Don’t let the devil use your anger for his evil purposes. Don’t let him use your anger to gain a foothold (or even a toehold) in your life (4:27). Give him an inch, and he’ll try to take a mile. He’ll try to use it to take over your life – to rob you of the blessings of God’s peace and joy in your life, to sabotage your relationships, to neutralize or

even destroy your witness. He'll use it to seek to divide and conquer. Don't let him do it.

Is there unresolved anger in your heart? Is anger part of the baggage of your life? Is it possible that you have a blind spot in this area? Would people who know you well describe you as an angry person? As someone who seems to get angry (or be angry) at the wrong time for the wrong reason?

Would to God the giftie gie us,
To see ourselves as others see us.

Even more, to see ourselves as God Himself sees us.

There are more principles for us to examine here. But for today, I will close with this: When you think about how God sees you, remember that while He sees your blind spots and He knows all your sins and shortcomings, He looks at you through the lens of His redeeming love. He is, as the Bible reminds us again and again, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. If you trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, your sins – all of them – are forgiven and your guilt – all of it – is washed away. You are a dearly loved child of God (Ephesians 5:2).

Live like it. Live like it this week. In the power of the Holy Spirit, live like it as long as your heart keeps beating. To the glory of God. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.