

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 25, 2018**

**BLIND SPOTS (2)**

**Ephesians 4:17-5:2**

Wasn't the Choir's Easter cantata last Sunday fantastic? I'm just saying. Their music inspired us to "Lift Up the Cross" of Jesus – to remember, celebrate, and tell the world of His identity as the Son of God and Savior of sinners, His suffering and death on the cross, His resurrection from the dead, and what it all means for us.

Today, beginning with His triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the "Hosannas" of the people on Palm Sunday, we recall the events of the final week of Jesus' life, climaxing with His voluntary, vicarious death on the cross on Good Friday and His conquest of death in His resurrection on Easter morning. It was the most decisive week – and weekend – in all of human history. It was the weekend that changed the world.

These are things that are too important ever to forget. We need to remind ourselves and one another and the next generation of them again and again because they are too important to forget.

With the events of Holy Week and especially the suffering and death of Jesus for us as a backdrop, I want to talk with you again today about "Blind Spots," continuing our look at what it means to "live a life worthy of the calling (we) have received" in Christ (Ephesians 4:1). So let's turn again to Ephesians 4 and 5 and give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

[Read Ephesians 4:25-5:2.]

\* \* \* \* \*

Do you remember the snippet from Robert Burns' poem "Ode to a Louse" that I shared with you two weeks ago? Here it is again, in case you need a refresher:

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

It is the truth, isn't it? What a blessing it would be to see ourselves as others see us, because sometimes, while we have a certain view of ourselves, others see us in a much different way. Rightly or wrongly, we tend to judge ourselves on the basis of our motives or intentions (or what we want to believe our motives or intentions to be), while we judge others – and other people tend to judge us – on the basis of our actual words and actions.

We all have blind spots. It would be a gift from God that could potentially revolutionize our relationships if we could see ourselves as others see us. Even more, if we could see ourselves as God Himself sees us. Because He sees things (and us) as they (and we) really are.

Last time we talked about the first two rules or principles Paul articulates starting in verses 25 of Ephesians 4. They are:

1. Be done with falsehood of every kind and speak truth to one another (4:25). Lying in any of its many forms undermines relationships and destroys the unity and community God has given us in Christ. Truth and love are to be distinguishing marks of our lives. Truth in love.
2. Be careful not to let anger gain a foothold in your life (4:26-27). There is a time for anger, but you must not allow anger to lead you into sin. You must not allow anger to take root in your heart and become a monster that can devour you. You must not allow the devil to use your anger for his evil purposes, which he will, if you let him. Remember the exhortation in James 1:19-20 to “be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” Anger has been called “the hidden poison” of our planet (Patton Oswalt). I’m not so sure it is the *hidden* anger. It seems like it is out in the open, way more than it should be. Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to get angry is the Bible’s counsel: Quick, slow, slow. This is a good motto for all our relationships.

### **PRINCIPLE #3: STOP STEALING AND START GIVING**

Moving on, the next rule or principle is in verse 28, where Paul says: “Whoever has been stealing must steal no longer. You must work instead, doing something useful with your hands, so that you may have something to share with those in need.” In other words, do not pursue dishonest gain. Of any kind. In any way. Don’t confuse what Paul says here with the Robin Hood rule of stealing from the rich in order to give to the poor. That’s not it. The biblical rule is: Stop stealing (if you’ve been doing it) and start giving.

Stealing is not always wrong. In many sports, for example, stealing is permitted. In baseball, you are not supposed to steal the other team’s signals, but you are allowed to steal bases. Stealing the ball from the other team is permitted in basketball, football, soccer, and lacrosse, though “interception” or “turnover” may be used instead of stealing. The same is true in hockey, which uses a puck instead of a ball. You get the idea.

The word Paul uses in verse 28 is *klepto*. From it we get the word “kleptomaniac,” which refers to a compulsive thief. *Klepto* is the word Jesus uses when quoting the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment: “You shall not steal” (Matthew 19:18; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20; cf. Exodus 20:15). Paul uses it again in Romans 13:9 in talking about the commandments that are “summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” The verb is used 11 times in the New Testament, while the noun form *kleptes*, which means “thief”, occurs 16 times.

It may seem strange that Paul would think it necessary to include an admonition against stealing, since it seems so elementary, so basic, to a good, moral, God-honoring life. But the temptation to steal in one way or another can come at us from all sides.

Stealing can take lots of different forms, like shoplifting, cheating on your taxes, cheating on a test, plagiarism (claiming someone else's words or ideas as your own), cheating your employer, or cheating the people who work for you, as well as robbing a bank or stealing from a neighbor. Paul's exhortation means: Don't take (or keep) stuff that isn't yours. It also means: Don't bend rules or cut corners to gain an unfair advantage. Don't take credit for what someone else did. It means: Don't sponge off others. Don't abuse their generosity. Don't let an entitlement mentality govern your life and relationships. It means: Be scrupulously honest in all your dealings with people – without being legalistic.

It also means: Don't cheat God by holding back from Him. Don't cheat God by being a self-centered spiritual consumer, always focused on what you can get from God or the church, instead of with what you can give and how you can serve. Don't cheat God by letting other people carry the share of ministry God intends you to carry. Don't be content to let other people do the work of ministry while you just sit back and watch.

To stop stealing in any and all its forms is only part of Paul's principle here. It is a two-edged sword. The other edge is the admonition to give or serve in order to be a blessing to others. In the strength the Lord provides, in the opportunities He gives, the Lord wants each of us to carry our share of the load. He wants you to do the best you can with what you have in order to share with those in need.

This has implications not only for the decisions we make on a daily basis. It also has implications for the vocational choices we make. The 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan pastor Richard Baxter gave this advice, which remains valuable today: "Choose that employment or calling in which you may be most serviceable to God. Choose not that in which you may be most rich or honorable in the world; but that in which you may do most good, and best escape sinning." Baxter is not saying that wealth and honor are bad in themselves. But if you make wealth or honor or prestige or pleasure or comfort or fame the goal of your life, you will have missed the point of your life. You will have missed out on the purpose for which God made you and the joy of serving His purposes with your life.

One problem in the church today – not just ours, but in the Christian church around the world – is that too many believers have more of a consumer mentality than a servant mindset or a Great Commission focus. Too many church members seem interested only in what the church can do for them, not in what they can give or do in the work and mission of the church.

I'm not talking about giving money. Not just about money, anyway. I'm talking about investing your time and energy and love, as well as your money, to strengthen and build up the body of Christ, to extend the reach and influence of the gospel.

Too many Christians are happy to sit on the sidelines and watch others do the work of ministry. Too many people come to church (or jump from church to church) only to receive. They are content to be takers.

Is this true of you? I hope not. I hope it is not true of any of us here at Faith. But it is a question each of us should ask as we examine our own lives and involvement in the life and ministry of the church. Stop stealing, says Paul, and start giving – of yourself. Start serving. And keep on giving and serving, to be a blessing to the church and to others in need, in the name of Jesus.

Is it possible that you have a blind spot in this area?

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

#### **PRINCIPLE #4: WATCH WHAT YOU SAY**

The fourth rule is found in verses 29 and 30, where Paul says: “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. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

Simply put, the rule is: Watch what you say. Or, to say it another way: Use your mouth for good, not evil. Jim Byrne preached on this verse back last month, so I don't need to talk about it in much detail. But I'll add at least my 2-cents' worth to what Jim said.

Richard Halverson was Chaplain of the U. S. Senate from 1981 until his death in 1996. Before that, he was pastor of our sister church, Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, for 23 years. As Senate Chaplain, he once offered this prayer: “Lord, help them appreciate the power of words – to edify or offend, to strengthen or weaken, to give hope or to frustrate, to purify or pollute, to build or destroy.”

That is a great prayer. Not just for the U. S. Senate, but for all of us. For our nation as a whole. And certainly for us in the church. It is exactly what Paul is talking about in verse 29.

The Bible says that the tongue has the power of life and death (Proverbs 18:21). Words can kill. Or they can nourish life. The Bible also says that “reckless words pierce like a sword” (Proverbs 12:18). Whether you've been on the receiving end or the giving end or both, I suspect you know what it means: Mean, thoughtless, reckless words *do* pierce like a sword. They can cut right to the heart.

James in the New Testament also reminds us of the immense power of the tongue for good or evil, for tearing down or building up, for praising or cursing (James 3:1-12).

So watch what you say, and use the power of words for good.

In the fellowship of God’s people, Paul says, there is no place for “unwholesome talk.” The word “unwholesome” is *sapros*, which is used to describe *rotten* fruit or *stinking* fish.

The unwholesome or rotten language Paul denounces is not just profanity or taking the Lord’s name in vain, as unbecoming of Christians as these are. It also includes things like gossip, spreading rumors or half-truths, slander, and malicious criticism. It involves anything calculated to hurt or divide or tear down.

Not only does this kind of talk injure others, Paul says in verse 30 that it grieves the Holy Spirit, because using words as weapons to attack and hurt one another, or speaking to one another or about one another in an unloving way is incompatible with the kind of life God calls us to live as followers of Jesus Christ. To grieve the Holy Spirit – to bring sorrow to the heart of God – is not a trivial matter.

Gordon MacDonald tells of a conversation with a friend in which the name of a mutual friend came up, and MacDonald said something unkind about that person. The friend with whom he was talking stopped and got in MacDonald’s face. Then he spoke these words very slowly: “Gordon, a man who says he loves God would not say a thing like that about a friend.”

Ouch! Is this a rebuke or a reminder you need to hear? There are things that a man who says he loves God, or a woman who says she loves God, or a girl or a boy who loves God, would not say to or about another person who is loved by God.

Watch what you say. “Let your conversation,” as Paul says in Colossians 4:6, “be always full of grace.” Always.

### **THE FOUR-WAY TEST**

Here is a test to apply to your words *before* they come out of your mouth. Before you speak, before you say whatever it is that is on your mind, ask yourself these 4 questions:

Is it true?

Is it helpful?

Is it necessary?

Is it kind?

If it doesn’t pass this 4-way test, don’t say it. If you say what is untrue or unkind, or if you say in unkindly, you do serious damage to your witness as a Christian.

Of course, what goes for conversation also applies to social media. Do not use social media to lob verbal grenades or fire missiles at unsuspecting targets from a safe distance.

### **COMMANDMENTS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA**

Thom Rainer (Lifeway) offers “Ten Commandments for Pastors, Politics, and Social Media.” But they are not just for pastors. They are for all of us. And it does not apply just to politics. Among his Ten Commandments are these:

1. You shall remember that you are an ambassador for Christ. All of your written and spoken words should be a reflection of Him.
2. You shall not be a stumbling block to unbelievers.
3. You shall refrain from posting when your emotions are high. If you don't (refrain), you will likely regret it later.
4. You shall remember that your words are permanent. The moment you post, your words are out there, even if you delete it later.
5. You shall understand that some members of your congregation (or some Christians, more generally) (may) have a different view than you. Is what you post (or say) worth the disunity that may follow?
6. You shall not be a distraction to the gospel. Politics are often an easy detour from what matters most.

Watch what you say. Or send. Or post. Or tweet. Or whatever else you can do on social media. Ephesians 4:29 applies. As does verse 30. Our misuse of the gift of words, our abuse of the power of words, our abuse of others by what we say and how we say it, grieves the Holy Spirit and harms the body of which we are all members. When we unfairly criticize or attack or hurt or slander another person in or outside the church, or cause dissension or division in the church by our careless or intentional words, we bring sorrow to the heart of God.

**PRINCIPLE #5: MALICE TOWARD NONE, AND KINDNESS TOWARD ALL.**

There is one more rule in this passage for us to work into our lives. It is found in verses 31 and 32: “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. (Instead) Be kind and compassionate [*eusplanchnoi* – tenderhearted] to one another, forgiving [*charizomenoi* – showing grace to] one another, just as in Christ God forgave [*escharisato* – showed grace to] you.”

To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln's 2<sup>nd</sup> Inaugural Address, the rule is: Malice toward none, and kindness (or grace) toward all.

Make no room for even the smallest traces of the poisons Paul identifies in verse 31:

- Bitterness: The same word is used in Hebrews 12:15, which urges us to “see to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root (or root of bitterness) grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”
- Rage (which is out-of-control anger).
- Anger or wrath: Remember what Paul has said in verses 26 and 27, as well as James' admonition in James 1:19-20.
- Brawling: The word Paul uses (*krauge*) does not refer to physical violence or rioting. It is more like making a scene with a lot of noise, with shouting and loud cries.
- Slander: The word is *blasphemia*, which means, well, blasphemy or speaking evil of another person.
- Malice, which has to do with any actions born of evil intentions.

These poisons will attack and weaken and possibly even destroy your relationships in God's family and with others in your life. So do not tolerate them. Do not allow them in the house. Get rid of them. Excommunicate them from the fellowship.

Where any of these viruses remain or intrude, we need to confront one another in love and call one another in repentance. And treat one another with kindness and compassion, with a spirit of grace and forgiveness, because that is the way God treats you in Christ.

I love Dairy Queen. Probably too much. I came across a story about a young man named Joey, who worked at a Dairy Queen somewhere. One day, as he was serving customers their food, he noticed that a blind man had dropped a \$20 bill on the floor. A woman standing in line quietly reached down and put the \$20 in her own pocket. Joey approached the woman and asked her to give the \$20 bill back to the blind man. She refused, indignantly claiming the \$20 was hers. Then Joey did something quite out-of-the-ordinary. Without a word, he pulled out his wallet and handed the blind man a \$20 bill of his own. The man accepted the money gratefully, and the DQ resumed normal business.

A customer who saw it all sent an email to the DQ management, reporting Joey's act of kindness and generosity. When DQ posted about it on Facebook it went viral. A few days later, Joey got a call from billionaire Warren Buffet, a big DQ investor. (Apparently he likes DQ, too.) He thanked Joey for his act of kindness and invited him to attend the next DQ investors' meeting. Warren Buffet wanted him there as an example of Dairy Queen's core values.

A simple act of kindness and generosity: What a terrific testimony. And what a contrast to the actions of the woman who pocketed the blind man's \$20.

Malice toward none. Kindness toward all. Tenderheartedness. Graciousness. Forgiveness. Are these what people see in you? What would the people who know you best, who interact with you and watch your life closely, say about you? What would God say?

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

Even better, to see ourselves as God sees us.

### **PRINCIPLE #6: IMITATE GOD**

What it all comes down to is what Paul says in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 5. This is the unifying principle that ties it all together: In all your relationships, in all your labors, imitate your Heavenly Father. Imitate God.

Listen to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of these verses in *The Message*: "Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with Him and learn a life of love. Observe how

Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of Himself to us. Love like that.”

The more we imitate God and live a life of love, just as Jesus loved us and gave Himself up for us, the less we will need to worry about blind spots in our lives.

Lord, let it be so in us. To the honor and glory of Your name. Amen.