

Speaking Truthfully

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Ephesians 4:25-32

**Sermon Series: The
Kingdom of God**

***Deception
hurts the body
of Christ.***

A man is driving through the backwoods of Tennessee when he sees a sign in front of a broken down, shanty-style house: Talking Dog for Sale. He knocks on the door. The owner appears and tells him the dog is in the back yard. He goes around to the back and finds a good-looking Labrador Retriever sitting there.

“You talk?” he asks.

“Yep,” the Lab replies.

After the man recovers from the shock of hearing a dog speak, he asks, “So, what’s your story?”

The Lab looks up and says, “Well, I discovered that I could talk when I was pretty young. I wanted to help our government, so I told them I was a talking dog. In no time, they were transporting me from country to country, sitting in rooms with spies and world leaders because no one figured a dog would be eavesdropping. I was their most valuable spy for eight years. But the jetting around tired me out. I knew I wasn’t getting any younger, so I decided to do undercover security, wandering near suspicious characters and listening to their conversations. I uncovered some really incredible stuff and was awarded a bunch of medals. I married, had a mess of puppies and now I’m just retired.”

The guy is amazed. He goes back to the owner and asks what

he wants for the dog. “Ten dollars,” the owner says.

“Ten dollars! This dog is amazing. Why on earth are you selling him so cheap?”

“Because he’s a liar. He never did any of that stuff!”

Today, our subject is speaking truthfully to one another. Last Sunday, our theme was passing judgment on one another. During Lent, we are talking about what it means to be kingdom people.

This passage in Ephesians seems initially to be a grab bag assortment of ethical imperatives. But what I discovered this week is a carefully-crafted series of five exhortations. Each exhortation consists of a negative command, a positive command and a motivating reason for the positive command.

The first exhortation (verse 25) contains a negative command—“to put away falsehood,” followed by a positive command—“to speak truth to our neighbor,” culminating in the motivation, “for we are members of one another.” Earlier in Ephesians, Paul likens the church to a human body (1:22-23). If, according to a 4th century church leader, John Chrysostom, the church is a body, does the eye lie to the foot if it sees a serpent, or does the nose lie to the mouth if it smells a deadly drug, or does the tongue lie to the stomach if it tastes something bitter? Deception hurts the body of Christ.

Paul argues for the quick redress of anger. Otherwise, it will fester and multiply.

A study conducted by a University of Massachusetts psychologist found that most people lie in everyday conversation, especially when they are trying to appear likable and competent. One hundred twenty-one pairs of undergraduate students participated in a series of ten minute conversations with other students, unaware that they were being videotaped. At the end of each session, the participants were told they had been videotaped and their consent was obtained to use the tape for research. They were then asked to watch the tape and identify any inaccuracies in what was said. They were encouraged to identify all lies, no matter how big or small.

The participants were surprised at the results. When the students watched themselves on videotape, they found themselves lying much more than they thought they had. Sixty percent of the students lied at least once during the ten minute conversation and told an average of two to three lies. The study also found that men and women lie in different ways. “Women were more likely to lie to make the person they were talking to feel good, while men lied most often make themselves look better,” Feldman said.

The second exhortation (verses 26-27) is the only one among the five that switches the order. It lists the positive command first—“be angry,” followed by negative commands—“do not sin,” culminating in motivating reasons, “so do not let the sun go down on your

wrath” and “do not give room to the devil.”

You may be surprised to discover that Paul regards anger as potentially something positive. Many of us would associate anger with negative, undesirable emotions.

God expresses anger. We call it “righteous indignation.”

Anger is not initially something we choose; more often it’s simply an emotion we feel. But when we nurse anger and allow it to develop into resentment, it becomes destructive. Poet William Blake put it this way: “I was angry with my friend. I told my wrath, my wrath did end. I was angry with my friend. I told it not, my wrath did grow.”

Paul offers wise counsel about what to do with our anger: “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger.” Sundown was considered the ideal time to pay wages to laborers and to give back what was held in collateral for the poor. Sundown is also a fitting time to put an end to anger. Paul argues for the quick redress of anger. Otherwise, it will fester and multiply.

I remember watching the 2006 World Cup. Arch rivals Italy and France were playing for the championship. France scored first on a header from its superstar, Zinedine Zidane, one of the greatest players in World Cup history. The Italians then evened the score. The game went into overtime. In overtime, Zidane engaged in a verbal confrontation with Marcos, an Italian defender. In his final act as a soccer player, Zidane, who is known for his short temper, wheeled around and rammed his head into the player’s

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chest, knocking him to the ground. The referee issued him a red card, ejecting him from the game. There, for all the world to see, was displayed what can happen to someone who cannot control his temper.

Indulging in anger is the surest way to give the devil a foothold in our lives. Anger is the devil's playground.

The third exhortation (verse 28) contains a negative command—"thieves should not steal," followed by a positive command—"let them work and labor with their own hands," culminating in the motivation for the command, "so as to have something to share with the needy."

The trajectory of this third exhortation has a wider range than simply stealing other people's stuff. We can steal someone's reputation by slander. We can steal someone's good name by malicious gossip. We can steal someone's heart by dishonesty or manipulation.

The fourth exhortation (verses 29-30) contains a negative command—"let no evil talk come out of your mouths," followed by a positive command—"but only what is useful for building up," culminating in a motivation for the command, "so your words may give grace to those who hear."

Obscenity, abusive speech and malicious gossip have the capacity to wound people. Yet, when we act in a way that harms our brothers and sisters, God is hurt. This is what is meant by the phrase "grieve the Holy Spirit."

Aristotle portrayed God as an unmoved mover. But here in Ephesians, God grieves when we speak hurtful words against each other. God calls us to speak encouraging words to one another.

The fifth exhortation (verse 31) serves as a sort of catch-all exhortation. Paul wants to make sure that no one can claim you never told me not to do this or that. This exhortation contains a negative command—"put away bitterness, wrath and slander, together with all malice," followed by a positive command—"be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another," culminating in the ultimate motivating reason, "as God in Christ has forgiven you." God's forgiveness becomes the paradigm for our mutual forgiveness.

Which one of these five exhortations do you need to address: lying, resentment, stealing, evil talk or malice of any kind? This sermon is for those among us who need it the most and for those who think they need it the least.

When I am confronted with my failures, my first instinct is to resist. But when I finally accept responsibility for my failures, I am determined to try harder. Yet trying harder alone will not get the job done. We do not get rid of these vices by an act of willfulness alone. Change is possible only through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

Grace is allowing God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We talk a lot in the church about obedience, as well we should, since obedience is a critical component of the Christian life. But take a step

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back. The Christian life begins by surrendering to God. Obedience can be sheer, white-knuckled human determination. Surrender is relaxing our grip and letting go. Surrender is the soil in which obedience can take root. Surrender is offering our lives to God. It is allowing God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

In 1974, Lt. Hiroo Onoda was the last World War II Japanese soldier to surrender. He had been left on an island off the Philippines in 1945, with the command to carry on the mission even if Japan surrendered. Three other Japanese soldiers were also left on the island when Japan evacuated. One soldier surrendered in 1950, and the other two were killed in skirmishes with local police. Onoda continued the war alone. All efforts to capture him or convince him to surrender failed. He ignored messages announcing Japan's surrender. He lived off the land and raided the fields of local citizens. He was responsible for killing at least 30 nationals during his 29-year personal war. A half million dollars was spent trying to locate him and force his surrender. Thirteen thousand men were used to locate him. Finally, on March 10, 1974, Onoda surrendered his rusty sword after receiving a personal command from his former superior officer, who read the terms of cease fire. Onoda handed his sword to then President Marcos, who pardoned him. The war was over.

We are not talking merely about self-improvement. We are talking holy transformation. God's transformation starts with surrender.

