

Prayer

Lord God, sometimes the glory of Your presence seems distant; we flounder in our problems and fail to connect with You who alone can make sense of life. Put a stop to our wallowing in self pity, and lift us up to delight in the higher things of life. Bring us back to the heart of our faith, that we may trust again in You the Maker and Redeemer of all, and the One whose love will never end! Lord God, draw closer! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Read a psalm (e.g. Psalm 27), and use it as a basis for your prayers for yourself and others.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the United Nations.** Pray for the Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, and the many organisations linked to the United Nations.
- Pray for the defeat of corruption and greed in industry
- Pray for renewal within the church of God, in our time

Meditation

May your qualities be godly, well learned, considered and applied
May your strength be in peacefulness; which cannot be disturbed
May your capacity be for love, the more you give, the more you receive
May your vigour be in the way you think, always astute for the truth
May your assets be in the friends you keep, who cover you in prayer
May your might be in the words you speak, full of wisdom and faith
May your decisions be right, based on feelings and shrewd intellect
May your intentions be upright, because your love for all is pure
And may your blessing be complete, for you know in whom you trust. Alleluia!

Bible passage – Ephesians 4:25-32

²⁵ Therefore, having put aside falsehood, let each one speak the truth to his fellow believer, for we are all members of one body. ²⁶ Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your rage, ²⁷ and do not give ground to the devil. ²⁸ The thief should no longer steal, but must work, being productive with his hands, so that he might have something to share with the needy. ²⁹ Do not let any worthless speech come from your mouths, but only what is helpful for building up (as required), to be gracious to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, fury, anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of evil. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, and forgiving of one another just as God, in Christ, has forgiven you.

Thought for the Day

Text – Ephesians 4:26,27

'Be angry, but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your rage, and do not leave a space for the devil.'

Thought

You will have heard some of the phrases in this quote from Ephesians, but it is useful to see them all placed together, as they should be read. The letter clearly says that we should deal with any anger that arises within us because if we do not, then we give the devil a place within our souls.

So what do you do when you are angry? We all respond differently, but the message from scripture is that we must deal with it. James suggests one way of doing this, which is to speak to others about it and confess it (James 5:16f.). We may need to do more, but it is the right place to start.

Bible Study

Review

These words are deeply challenging. Paul has just told God's people that they must dispense with the futility of worldly living and '*put on ... a new self*' (4:24) in the image of God and the apostolic teaching of Jesus Christ (4:20f.). This moving and inspirational call is found at the end of yesterday's text; but what does this mean, and how do people live such a life? Most of the rest of Ephesians answers these questions, and our passage today begins to do this by describing the nature of this new life.

Paul explains six distinct features of the new life in Christ, and he does this mostly by setting out a contrast, though there is an exception to this. This is summarised below, for brevity:

1. Put away falsehood – and speak the truth (4:25)
2. When angry – deal with it before the day is out (4:26,27)
3. The thief must stop – and do productive work (4:28)
4. Stop bad and destructive speech – and speak constructively (4:29)
5. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit ... (4:30)
6. Get rid of evil activity – and replace it with kindness and forgiveness (4:32)

Each of these recommendations is relatively straightforwardly, but they have a challenging message for every generation and can be very difficult to put into practice. We would all agree that it is right to put away falsehood and speak the truth (4:25), for example, but experience tells us that people tend to be guarded about the truth. For example, when asked about our health, many of us will refrain from telling others when we feel unwell! Dealing with anger (4:26) is a perennial problem for many, though the wording of our text makes it clear that the sin lies not so much in our becoming upset in the first place, as what we do with these emotions. If we hold on to darker feelings beyond a day, then the devil will use them to claim ground within us (4:27). Next, the advice to refrain from stealing seems obvious and sensible, but we should be careful. We live at a time when the world's financial markets have lost the trust of many because of activities many would describe as 'theft', and these thieves do not go around at night with 'bags of loot'!

Everyone surely welcomes the advice of Paul to refrain from speech that is destructive, and this includes everything from the use of dismissive words to the use of clever speech to put people down. Unfortunately, the '*body of Christ*' is not immune to such language even today, and the challenge we all face is to use words to build people up and be gracious (4:29). The last piece of advice is a 'catch-all', asking God's people to get rid of every form of evil, and replace it with kindness and compassion. Moreover, Paul explains helpfully that true kindness and compassion is best shown by an attitude of forgiveness, the same forgiveness we have received from Christ, and by which we are saved. We cannot argue with this.

The one piece of advice that stands out from the others is found in verse 30, which is '*do not grieve the Holy Spirit ...*', but what does Paul mean by the grieving of the Holy Spirit? This has been a matter of much debate, but I suggest that it refers to those who turn and walk away from faith, having once accepted Christ and the gifts of His Spirit, then. There is ample evidence in Scripture, from the Israelites in the Old Testament to backsliders in the New, to say that this is what grieves God most.

To conclude this part of the study, look at how this passage concludes each piece of advice with a positive message. Surely, this is our inspiration.

1. We are '*all members of one body*' (4:26)
2. We are to give no '*ground to the devil*' (4:27)
3. We work to '*have something to share with the needy*' (4:28)
4. We are to be '*gracious to those who hear*' (or listen – 4:29)
5. We were '*sealed for the day of redemption*' (4:30)
6. We are to be '*forgiving*' people (4:32)

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look further at each of the issues raised in this text:

- Speaking the truth (4:25)
- Dealing with anger (4:26,27)

- Productive work (4:28)
- Speech that builds up the church (4:29)
- Grieving the Holy Spirit (4:30)
- Replacing evil with forgiving love (4:31,32)

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V25 'fellow believer'

Greek 'plesios', meaning 'one who is close', possibly 'friend', but often translated 'neighbour'. Some who is close, in this sentence, means someone who is part of the 'body of Christ', and the English term 'neighbour' is not right here. I have translated the word as 'fellow believer' – see study.

V26 'angry ... rage'

Greek 'oridzo' (at the beginning of the verse) means 'to become angry', and the Greek 'paroridzo' (at the end of the verse) means 'being in a state of anger, rage or fury'. In most languages, anger is expressed by many different words, such as, anger, rage, fury, wrath, annoyance, ire, etc. I have used two different words, 'angry' and 'rage', because the text uses two different words, and this ensures that we do not focus on 'anger' as such, but the emotional state of distress implied by this Greek sentence.

V29 'worthless speech'

The Greek for 'foul' is 'saprois', which refers to decaying or rotten fruit that is unfit for use. The phrase therefore refers not just to 'bad language', but to speaking in a way that is destructive or caustic. There are a number of words that could be used to convey this general idea, and I have chosen 'worthless'.

Significant phrases

V27 'do not give ground to the devil'

Other translations:

'and do not give the devil a foothold.' (NIV)

'and do not make room for the devil.' (NRSV)

There are many ways to translate this phrase, but the Greek clearly refers to giving the devil space, in this case, in our minds. Because the Bible often uses metaphors of battle when speaking about how God deals with the devil (see Revelations 12:9, 20:2f.), the phrase 'giving ground' seems appropriate.

V29 'in order to be gracious to those who hear'

Other translations:

'that it may benefit those who listen.' (NIV)

'so that your words may give grace to those who hear.' (NRSV)

The Greek says literally 'to give grace to those who hear', however, the Greek word 'give' is a general word that can mean 'yield, permit, show, cause' and many other things according to context. Here, it seems to me that Paul is asking the speaker to speak in a manner that is gracious towards the hearers, and I have therefore reflected this in the translation.

Problems with the ancient Greek/Hebrew text

V28 'but must work, being productive with his hands'

Other translations:

'but must work, doing something useful with his own hands' (NIV)

'rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands' (NRSV)

The various ancient manuscripts are inconsistent. The word for 'productive' (otherwise 'good' or 'useful') is present in some manuscripts and not in others, and the same is true of the word

'own' (as in 'his own hands' – see NIV). None of this makes much difference to the meaning of the text. In earlier times, however, people did not regard manual labour (with hands) as being 'good' work, so this could explain why some manuscripts may have been changed. It is helpful to know that Scripture does indeed describe manual labour as 'productive' and therefore 'good'.

Going Deeper

Speaking the truth (4:25)

Some versions of the Bible (see notes above) say this; 'let each one speak the truth to his neighbour', and this puts a different slant on this verse. The word 'neighbour' tends to mean someone who lives next door or nearby, whoever they are, and because Jesus called on all people to love their neighbours, this text seems to add the advice to speak the truth to them as well. Now this may be perfectly right and commendable, but as I have explained above (see translation notes), it is not what Paul means here in this passage. His advice is that God's people should make the effort to speak the truth to each other at all times.

I know too many churches where people do not know what is going on or who is in charge, where people are afraid to speak out about something wrong because they fear offending people, and where decisions are taken on the basis of advice given by people outside the church fellowship. Notice how Paul ends this advice by saying '*for we are all members of one body*', which means that if we recognise our unity in Christ, there can be no room for hiding things from each other, or solving our problems outside the church. As God's people, we must speak the truth to each other plainly, not as we feel, for our feelings are not the judge of what is right, but according to what is right before God. In addition, we should accept that the truth is to be found within 'the body' and though truth may sometimes be found outside (because God is surely at work throughout His world), the church is a people who find their truth in Christ, the Head of the body.

Dealing with anger (4:26,27)

Anger is a difficult subject. The difficulty with verses 27 and 28 arise because people think of these verses as offering three different pieces of advice:

1. Be angry but do not sin
2. Do not let the sun go down on your rage (anger)
3. Do not give ground to the devil

Although each phrase can be useful in its own right, these three are interdependent, and if we read them carefully, we will see how they work together. Firstly, no one can claim to be immune from anger whether it is justified or not. Quite rightly, Paul says that no one can avoid having such feelings, but they must not be allowed to lead to sin. So the question then arises, how can this be dealt with? We all know that anger in all its various shades, clings powerfully. The starting point for any of us who have to deal with anger is to make sure that we intend to remove it; as Paul says, '*do not let the sun go down on our rage*'.

Anger is like a cancer, and if we allow it to fester then it will grow inappropriately and twist our souls, and this is why Paul goes on immediately to say '*do not give ground to the devil*' (4:27). Verse 27 does in fact follow on directly from what Paul says about anger in verse 26. This means that our intent to refuse anger the space to loiter within our souls is what keeps the devil out. Now, we may have to do all manner of things to achieve this end, but this must be our aim. James advise prayer and talking to others about it (James 5:16), but the important thing is to resist, for as James also says (James 4:7), the devil will then flee.

Productive work (4:28)

If we open our eyes to the fullest meaning of stealing and theft (see above), then Paul's advice is welcome and wise. The trouble with theft is that people who steal become used to getting what they want without the same level of work others do to get money and goods in the first place. Paul goes to the heart of theft when he says, in effect 'go back to work'.

It is likely that Paul addressed these remarks to people who came into the church, whose past life had been spent in crime. So this Scripture teaches that crime must be left when entering the new life in Christ. Interestingly, Paul does not say that the thieves should work in order to get for themselves what they need (instead of stealing it as they did in the past), rather, he said that the motive for work must not be 'self', but others; they should be ready to '*share with the needy*'. Because the root of the sin of theft is the selfish one of 'I want', Paul's advice directs the soul outward so that it does not focus on itself, so as to be tempted again.

Speech that builds up the church (4:29)

There is a great deal in Scripture about speech, and notably, James say a great deal about the use of the tongue (James 1:26, 3:5f.). There are two important points within this verse. Firstly, the measure of speech

used by Paul is whether it builds up or pulls down. Note that Paul is not against speaking the truth or being honest, but all of us have mannerisms of speech that indicate to others the attitude with which we speak. For example, we can all say 'I love you' in a different ways, each one saying something about ourselves irrespective of to whom we are speaking. In the same way, our mannerisms of intonation, facial expression and speech, these all say something, and we need to be in control of this aspect of how we speak. We must all accept the task not simply of using the right words, but communicating with others, in the full sense of the word, so as to build them up rather than pull them down.

So the aim we must have when talking to one another must be to build up, or as Paul puts it at the end of the verse, 'to be gracious to those who hear' (see notes above, and the literal Greek which says 'give grace to those who hear'). What we say affects people, and none of us can escape the consequences of our speech. When we speak, whether chatting about a service at church or holding formal discussions in a meeting, our positive aims must remain. This is much harder to do than to say!

Grieving the Holy Spirit (4:30)

I have already stated above what I believe to be the sin of 'grieving the Holy Spirit'. It is not very different from what Jesus calls the 'sin against the Holy Spirit' (see Mark 3:29), a phrase He used against the Pharisees who had already rejected Him as Messiah, and who had rejected all the prophetic evidence of Scripture that testified to Him. The reason Jesus came to die for our sins was because the people of Israel as a whole had failed in their God given task to bless the world, and they eventually rejected Jesus, a fact that is hammered home in all the famous sermons reported in the book of Acts (see Acts 2:22f. 3:17f. 7,13:46 etc.). Because of this, people like Paul and the other apostles were keenly aware of the consequences of knowing God but rejecting Him, for this is what the Jews had done, and in the early days of the church, when they saw Christian people turning away from Christ and backsliding, they would have been horrified.

This, I believe, is why Paul does not labour this point beyond offering a strong statement of the spiritual consequences of becoming a Christian, 'the Holy Spirit ... with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption' (4:30). The Holy Spirit is God's gift to each one who has accepted Christ and been 'born anew' in Christ (John 3:3f.), so how, say Paul, is it possible for someone to reject God's gift of His Spirit? He does not say any more, possibly because the whole idea is so dreadful.

Replacing evil with forgiving love (4:31,32)

The last two verses of our text are similar to many other passages in the letters of Paul that appeal to God's people to reject evil and accept godly ways. For example, we can find such contrasts in Romans (13:12), and in Galatians (5:16-26 – including the 'works of the flesh' and the 'fruit of the Spirit'). What Paul says here has one unique feature, which is that he compares the evil life not just with certain properties, like '*kindness and compassion*', but with '*forgiving one another*' (4:32).

At this point, we must remember that in the New Testament, forgiveness is not just one theme of godly living amongst many. Forgiveness is practical love, and this is because the love of God is shown in the fact that God forgives sins, as Paul emphasises in this same verse (4:32). Jesus Himself told a famous parable about the servant who was forgiven much, but was unable to forgive those who owed him only a little (Matthew 18:21f.), and it is hard to read this passage of Ephesians and not recall this teaching.

By His own life and death, Jesus has forgiven each of us, and we either receive what He has done for us or reject it. It is God's intention that we should receive this forgiveness just as the first disciples received it, by the breath of Christ and with the gift of the Holy Spirit (see John 20:22,23). In reality, these are the only means by which evil is defeated in this world, for they are endemic in the human soul without the power of the Holy Spirit to resist. Forgiveness renders '*bitterness, fury, anger ...*' (4:31) irrelevant because it draws the sting of all such emotions.

Application

A passage of Scripture such as this has plenty of comments that speak directly to our hearts. All of us know something of what it means to grapple with speaking the truth, anger, selfishness, the manner of our speech, and being forgiving, for example. Few can read these words without feeling condemned for one reason or another, but I am not sure that Paul intended those who read this passage to feel condemned. It seems to me that what Paul wanted was for the early church to read this and be encouraged to build each other up in forgiving love. The forgiveness he speaks about at the end of the passage is the key to conquering many of the evils of the world, even those that persist within us, whether anger, wrongful speech, or indeed, grieving the Holy Spirit. Paul does not offer any condemnation here of those who grieve the Holy Spirit, he simply appeals to us not to do it.

Most people who read this will respond in one way or another to one of its themes, but if we can face the call to forgive as Christ has forgiven us, then we will surely walk a long way towards overcoming the other ills, and begin to build others up rather than tear them down. Forgiveness works, for Christ has shown this in His life and death, yet so many people, even Christians, harbour unforgiveness. One of the hardest pastoral tasks is to help people to see that holding on to unforgiveness blights the life of one who is wronged, and people do not wish to forgive because they feel it somehow justifies the sin committed against them. Forgiveness does not right wrongs, it overcomes them and sets people free, but only those who are able to do it, and we can only forgive others through Christ, who has forgiven us.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which of these themes touches you and affects your life? How does this passage of Scripture help you overcome problems?
2. Which of the sins and problems mentioned in this passage are most prevalent within society today? How can Christians escape these sins?
3. Are there any situations in which forgiveness is not appropriate, and if so, why?

Topics covered by text

- *Speaking the truth, anger, stealing*
- *The use of words and various evils*
- *Grieving the Holy Spirit*
- *Forgiveness*

Personal comments by author

This is one of those passages of Scripture where it would be possible to take each verse and do a complete study on every single subject mentioned. However, this might dilute Paul's message, which is intended to be one of hope. He is saying that in Christ, we may overcome all these things, and this is amazing! The more I have read this passage, the more it has made me hopeful rather than depressed. There are indeed always problems within the body of Christ, but where Christ is the head, they can be overcome.

Ideas to explore discipleship

- *Think carefully about the life of your own church, and compare what happens within it with what is written in this passage. What does this suggest to you about the nature of the body of Christ today?*
 - *Read this passage a few times and seek to apply its truths to your own life. Which of these subjects touches your own life? Seek to deal with any problems by using the teachings of Scripture.*
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Final Prayer

Bring us peace this day, Lord Jesus, bless us with peace, love, joy, hope, and all the good things of faith which sustain us through the ups and downs of life. You are our helper and our guide, and You are our King, and for this, we praise Your Holy name: AMEN
