

Traits of Kingdom Living: Speaking Truthfully
Ephesians 4:25-5:2, James 3:2-10
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One of the most effective tools in the world of advertising is the use of “before and after” testimonials. Have a diet product that you want to promote? Nothing will boost sales more than a picture of someone before they used your product, and a picture of them, 45 pounds lighter, after they’ve used it. Have a sure-fire way to turn ordinary Joes and Janes into millionaires? Nothing will have your tapes or books flying off the shelves faster than the personal testimony of Joe or Jane before and after they become wealthy using your tips. Television is full of “before and after” images that advertise everything from equipment that sculpts our bodies, to products that eliminate wrinkles or grow hair, to items that remove spots on our floors. And, I don’t mean to imply that these “before and after” stories are merely hype. We all know people who endure daily pain before a hip or knee replacement surgery and who live and move pain free afterward. Or, someone who gets a new lease on life after starting a new job, beginning a new relationship, or accomplishing a life goal. Our lives are full of “before and after” stories, many that mark major turning points—some good, some difficult and painful, but all of them milestones that shape and in some cases even significantly define, who we are.

In a similar way, our scripture passage this morning from Ephesians is calling our attention to the spiritual “before and after” nature of the life of faith. The life we live *after* we begin following Jesus is to be substantively different from life before we are part of his kingdom. Like other important “before and after” moments in our lives, knowing Christ and entering his kingdom alters us dramatically. Our identities change. Our relationships change. Our purpose changes. We are not the same people before Christ that we are after Christ, and as a result, we do not experience life the same ever again.

This idea of before and after is a common thread woven throughout the New Testament, and the various writers of these scriptures use a number of different ways to describe our new identity. For example:

Before Christ

Old Self
Of the Flesh

After Christ

New Self
Of the Spirit

In Adam
 Darkness
 Separation/alienation
 The world

In Christ
 Light
 Children of God
 The kingdom

The line of demarcation that Scripture is describing is not a simple matter of learning *about* Christ. It's not a purely cognitive exercise. Being *in* Christ and being kingdom citizens means that we put away or cast off our old way of life, and we put on new attitudes and actions. This putting off the old and putting on the new changes us from the inside out and results in new attitudes and behaviors. The Ephesians text lists some specific examples of what our new life as part of the kingdom will look like.

Put Off

Falsehood and lies
 Unwholesome talk
 Stealing
 Anger
 Rage
 Bitterness
 Slander
 Malice

Put On

Truthful speech
 Edifying language
 Useful work
 Kindness
 Compassion
 Forgiveness
 Love
 Sacrificial living

There are many lists of “dos and don'ts” in Scripture, but the contexts and the purposes for these lists vary. One thing that is striking about this passage is that the behavior that is being encouraged is not emphasized primarily for moral reasons. There are several lists for that purpose elsewhere in Scripture. But, Ephesians has a different reason for encouraging us to these actions: we are to refrain from lying and deceit because it injures the body of Christ. We are to avoid stealing so that we can share with others who have need. We are to renounce gossip and idle chatter because it is not edifying to our neighbor. Do you notice the connection in these? They are all concerned with our relationships with our neighbors, and as we know already from our study of the kingdom thus far, relationships within the kingdom of God are of primary importance.

But, it's not just our horizontal relationships that matter: we are to be cautious with our anger, because anger left unchecked gives evil a foothold into our hearts and lives. And, we are to watch our speech so that we do not grieve the Holy Spirit. Have you thought about what you say in that context? That it has the potential to cause grief to God? So, the concerns that are laid out in this text are

less a moral list of “dos and don’ts” and are really about our relationship with God and our relationships with others—or in the kingdom language that is becoming so familiar to us, love for God and love for neighbor is to be the motivation behind all of our speech and actions.

As James points out, we wield incredible power by how we use our mouth. This past week was full of opportunity to use our words for good: to mentor and encourage a child or grandchild or someone at work; to offer words of comfort and support to someone who is experiencing loss or grief; to deal thoughtfully and kindly with one another in the midst of stress and deadlines, physical or logistical challenges. Each and every day we have the opportunity to affirm the divine image that resides in other people, no matter how different or even difficult they may be. We have the chance to express care to the elderly; to differ with a co-worker or a family member but do it with respect; to say “I’m sorry” when we blow it, and “I forgive you” when someone else blows it; to say “I love you” or “I’m here for you,” or “how can I help you?” These are ways we speak truthfully and lovingly and do justice to the new life we are called to live in God’s kingdom.

Is that always easy? comfortable? natural? Hardly. In both Ephesians and James, Scripture recognizes the challenge of speaking graciously and lovingly with one another. In fact, James says, the tongue is the hardest part of the body to keep in check. It’s small but deadly, and it gets away from us and out of control as quickly as a spark sets an entire forest ablaze—especially when we’re angry.

When we’re angry, it’s so hard to wait, and think, before we speak. It’s hard to hold back and not say everything that’s on our minds. It requires a self discipline that we often lack, and to make matters worse, we sometimes excuse our undisciplined behavior by saying that “we were only telling the truth.” Anger that is vented in hurtful or demeaning language or that we fan as fuel for revenge, even if there is a kernel of truth in it, is not the kind of speech that has any place in the kingdom. Speaking truthfully, kingdom-style, doesn’t use truth as a weapon, isn’t used as a verbal assault to gain an advantage or win an argument. Speaking truthfully as kingdom citizens means that we are in control of our tongue and our emotions—and if, in the heat of the moment, we are not, then kingdom love says that it is not the time to speak.

When the truth is spoken in love and with compassion, it may, indeed, on occasion cause pain. There are times when a spouse, a parent, a friend or a brother or sister in Christ confronts us with the truth, and we see ourselves—and what we see isn’t pretty. We recognize our failures, we see the impact of a careless word or

deed, or we need to take ownership of a difficult area in our lives. But, telling the truth, kingdom-style, does not destroy persons or relationships, but always seeks healing and reconciliation. The truth is always spoken with respect, and with a genuine desire to support and build up, not tear down. Kingdom love asks us to speak to others as we would want to be spoken to.

If we return to the two questions we asked last week—what is the good life and who is the truly good person?—it becomes clear that the good life is the life where relationships are cherished, nurtured, and protected. Relationships—not things or status or power—take center stage in the kingdom of God, not just with lip service but in attitude, action, and speech. The good person is the one who stays in control of him or herself so that what one says is edifying, not damaging, encouraging, not angry or harsh, so that relationship is always maintained with love, respect, and dignity.

I couldn't help but wonder as I read this passage what the letter to the Ephesians might sound like if it were written today. The original writer in his wildest dreams couldn't have imagined in first century Asia Minor the havoc and destruction that can be wrecked with the single push of a "send" button in our contemporary culture. A posting on a blog or Facebook, one tweet on Twitter, a single text message, an email forwarded to an entire address book, a video on U-Tube: the communication mediums we have at our disposal are lightening fast and global in reach. That means that we have, literally at the touch of our fingertips, incredible power that we can use for good or for ill. We can do immense and far-reaching damage when we react to an individual or circumstance in anger, dashing off a stinging email or posting a hasty note on social media in the heat of the moment. In just seconds we can irreparably harm a reputation, inadvertently spread gossip or rumor, or knowingly repeat information that is not positive or uplifting. Now more than ever, the admonition to not allow our anger lead us to sin needs to be heeded. A modern day version of Ephesians might read:

Do not tweet in anger.

Put that email in the draft folder and sleep on it, before you hit the send button.

Check your facts—and the source of the facts—before you repost.

Text only what you'd want Jesus to read.

Don't forward information that maligns, calls names, distorts or tells only part of the truth.

As kingdom citizens we are to imitate God's extravagant, radical love. When we love one another like Christ loves us, our speech will reflect the value we place on relationships—whether we're standing face to face or conversing in an internet chat room. We will speak truthfully, honestly and lovingly with one another, but most of all, our lives will speak the real truth about us and whether we have a before Christ and an after Christ story of our own to tell.

Thanks be to God. Amen.