

In Step With The Spirit

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[0 : 00] Our text this morning is from Ephesians chapter 4, verses 25 to 32. We're going to take a break from Ephesians, as I pointed out.

We'll pick it up again in September, when all of us are back together after all the summer moving around. Now, in this text, in Ephesians 4, 25 to 32, the Apostle Paul, as it were, shifts gears.

Many people feel that in this text, Paul finally brings the airplane out of the clouds and lands it on the field where we live 24-7.

In the section of the letter right before this text, Paul calls us to walk. To walk as the new humans, humans are becoming, because of and in relationship with Jesus Christ.

In that text, Paul calls us to lay aside the old self and put on the new self. He reminds us that in Jesus, Jesus is renewing our minds so that we can lay aside the old humans we were before meeting him and put on the new humans we are becoming since meeting him.

[1 : 19] In chapter 4, verses 25 to 32, Paul now, as it were, puts arms and legs on this calling. He's going to be very specific.

He's going to give us some concrete illustrations of what this laying aside and putting on looks like 24-7. Now, allow me to take just a moment to review.

The letter to the Ephesians is written in two halves. Chapters 1 to 3 and chapters 4 to 6. In chapters 1 to 3, we have this calling to which we've been called.

Paul introduces us to the new reality, the new life brought into being by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth. Then in chapters 4 to 6, he calls us to walk worthy of this calling.

To actually live in this new reality, walking in the ways that are inherent to the new reality. Chapter 4, verse 1, therefore.

[2 : 26] Chapter 4, verse 17, therefore. Chapter 4, verse 25, therefore. He will continue along those lines. Chapter 5, verse 1, therefore.

Chapter 5, verse 7, therefore. Chapter 5, verse 15, therefore. And then chapter 6, verse 10, finally. Now, as I get ready to read this text with you, this therefore of Ephesians 4, 25 to 32, I'm reminded of the story of a preacher at the beginning of the last century who was in vain against the besetting sins of his time.

He had preached against, although I don't like that phrase, preach against. Preaching isn't about denouncing anything. It's about announcing. It's about announcing the gospel.

Anyway, he had preached against racism and injustice and violence. And from the back of the sanctuary, the back pew, one of the elderly pillars of the church would respond to him by saying, preach it, pastor.

[3 : 37] He then started getting more specific and more concrete, as the apostle Paul is going to do in this text. He preached against gambling, for instance.

And from the back, preach it, pastor. He preached against the use of tobacco. Preach it, pastor. He preached against the misuse of alcohol. Preach it, pastor. And then he started preaching about gossip.

He paused, waiting for a response. Nothing. Until, now you've gone from preaching to meddling. Ephesians 4, verses 25 to 32. Therefore, lay aside falsehood.

Speak truth, each one of you. This version of the Bible is capitalizing these words, not to make special emphasis, but because Paul here is quoting the Old Testament.

[4 : 44] And here he's quoting from the prophet Zechariah, chapter 8, verse 16. Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth, each one of you, with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry, and yet do not sin.

Here he's quoting from Psalm 4, verse 4. Be angry, and yet do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. And do not give the devil an opportunity. He who steals must steal no longer, but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with the one who has need.

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ has also forgiven you.

Now I think you can see that Paul is developing this call, put aside the old, put on the new, around five sets of opposites.

[6 : 03] There are five sets of not, but. Five sets of not this, but this. It's much in the vein of the book of Proverbs.

And it's much in the vein of what Jesus is doing in his famous Sermon on the Mount. You have heard it was said, but I say to you. You have heard it was said, but I say to you. Not this, but this. As people in process of becoming new humans, not but. Not this, but this. Lay aside the old, not. Put on the new, but.

Five sets of not, but. Now I think you can also see that at the heart of the five sets of opposites, there are two more fundamental exhortations.

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit, and do not give the devil an opportunity, a place from which to work, a foothold.

[7 : 08] Verse 30. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. And verse 27. Do not give the devil, the diabolos, the slanderer, the accuser, a foothold.

Now this is the only place in all of Paul's letters where he speaks this way. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. And do not give the devil a foothold.

It turns out that these two fundamental exhortations are intertwined. When we give the devil a foothold, a launching pad for him to do his diabolical work, it grieves the Holy Spirit.

And when we grieve the Holy Spirit, the accuser is sure to take advantage of it and start messing with our hearts and minds.

At the heart of these five sets of juxtaposed exhortations are these two fundamental exhortations. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, and do not give the devil, the enemy of Jesus, a foothold.

[8 : 23] Now, whatever else we learn from this text, these two exhortations help us realize again that we do not live in a morally neutral universe.

There is no neutral space in the universe. There are two spirits at work in addition to us. Two spirits at work in every dimension of our human existence, and especially in every relational context.

One spirit is finite. Thank you, God. The other spirit is infinite. Thank you, God. They're both at work. Do not grieve the infinite spirit of God, and do not give this finite spirit, the devil, a foothold.

Now, because these two exhortations are so fundamental, I'm going to suggest that we can rightly read them with each of the members of these five sets of opposites.

Paul writes the exhortations about the devil after the second set. Be angry and do not sin. Do not give the devil an opportunity.

[9 : 40] Paul writes the exhortation about the Holy Spirit after the fourth set. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word that is useful for building up, and do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.

Well, I'm going to suggest because these two exhortations are so crucial for our living the new human in the new reality, that Paul intends for us to read the two with each one of the five sets of opposites.

Let me show you what I mean. Laying aside falsehoods, speak truth, each one of you, to your neighbor. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit. Do not give the devil a place from which to work.

Be angry, but do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit.

Do not give the devil a launching pad for his destructive plans.

Let the one who steals, steal no longer, but rather work with his hands. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit.

Do not give the devil an opportunity. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only a word that builds people up.

[10 : 44] Do not grieve the Holy Spirit. Do not give the devil a platform. Let all bitterness and slander and malice be put away from you. Be kind, tenderhearted, gracing one another, just as God in Christ has also graced you.

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit. Do not give the devil space to work. Now you've gone from preaching the meddling. But why put it in the negative?

Why put it in the negative? Especially this exhortation relative to the Holy Spirit. Why do not grieve? Why not say, do what pleases the Holy Spirit?

I mean, is that not a more inviting way to put it? Do what pleases the Holy Spirit? Certainly something Paul would say, right? Why then put it in the negative?

Because, sadly, the negative gets our attention in a way that the positive does not. Do what pleases the Holy Spirit.

[11 : 53] And we would all say, of course, yes. And then move on in our merry way. But do not grieve the Holy Spirit.

Arrests us. It stops us. It makes us think. Grieve. Grieve the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God can be grieved.

Mere human beings can bring sorrow to the Spirit who created the world and who animated the body of Jesus of Nazareth and who gives us our breath.

We can sadden the Spirit. We can cause pain for the Spirit of God. Paul expresses it in the negative to get our attention. I think, however, that Paul wants us to eventually move through the negative to the positive.

That is, after facing the fact that we can grieve the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is the most intimate friend anyone can ever have. After coming to terms with the fact that we can grieve this intimate friend, we want to please him.

[13 : 02] We want to cooperate with him. We want to do what brings him joy. Right? So I suggest that we can best capture Paul's deeper concern in chapter 4, verses 25 to 32 by saying, with each of the five sets of opposites, walk in step with the Spirit.

Walk in step with the Spirit. Paul uses this word walk in all of the texts before this text. He will use the word walk in the text to follow this text. So I'm suggesting that his deeper call in this not-but text is walk in step with the Spirit.

The next line, which we'll look at in September, is imitate God. Walk in step with the Spirit. And then, even the negative exhortation regarding the devil can be rendered in a positive way.

Stay ahead of the devil. Walk in step with the Spirit, and there will be no place in which the devil can find a foothold.

Lay aside falsehood and speak truth to one another. Walk in the Spirit, and the Father of lies has no place to operate. Be angry, but do not let the sun go down in your anger.

[14 : 28] Walk in the Spirit, and the divider will have no junk with which to work in the community. No longer steal, but work with your hands so that you can bless others.

Walk in the Creator's Spirit, and the devil will have no place in the workshop. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouths, but speak only words that build up people in faith.

Walk by the Spirit of the Word made flesh, and the distorter of words has nothing to play games with. Put away all bitterness and slander, exercise compassion and grace to one another, and we find ourselves dancing with the Holy One, and the one who hates Jesus will have no handle anywhere in the soul of the community.

Am I making sense and how we put this together? The Holy Spirit of God. This is the only place in all of Paul's letters where he uses this full title.

The Holy Spirit of God. Elsewhere, he, not it, the Spirit is not it, the Spirit is a person, always addressed with personal pronouns. Elsewhere, he's called the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Him who raised Christ Jesus from the dead, the Spirit of life, the Spirit of life in Christ, the Spirit of glory, the Spirit of adoption who enables us to pray Abba, Father, and the Spirit of holiness.

[15 : 54] But here, his full title, the Holy Spirit of God. Holy. I know that in our time that word holy makes people bristle.

And in one sense, it ought to. Because none of us is holy yet. Fully holy. Right? I mean, you agree with that statement, don't you?

None of us is yet fully holy. We are declared holy by the blood of Jesus Christ. And this is one of the wonders of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But none of us is in fact yet fully holy.

And so we rightly bristle at this word. But we need not bristle. Holy is what the Spirit of God is. And holy is what the Spirit of God wants us to be. As I pointed out before this, word holy simply means pure and clean and full of light.

[16:55] Who does not want to be clean and full of light? Holy means whole. Who does not want to be whole? The Holy Spirit.

Spirit of the Holy God whose passion is that we know the Holy One Himself, Jesus Christ. Whose passion is that we become like the Holy One Himself.

To become pure like Jesus. And to become clean like Jesus. Oh, could that really be? Clean like Jesus? And to become whole like Jesus.

Jesus Christ. The good news is the Holy Spirit works in all kinds of ways to make this happen. I like how Margaret Clarkson puts it in her great hymn.

The Spirit woos us, subdues us, and seals us His own. From the earliest days of our childhood, He began to woo us. He's beginning to woo little Carter even now.

[17:55] He slowly breaks down our fear and our resistance. He slowly overcomes our stubbornness and rebellion. He slowly captures our hearts and then fills them with His life.

He slowly renews our minds so we can think accurately about Jesus Christ. He slowly draws us into this intimate friendship He has with Jesus and the Father. He slowly brings us into the friendship of the Trinity.

Blessed Holy Spirit of God. walk in step with the Spirit. Do not grieve the Spirit.

It grieves me to think that I can grieve such a friend. It grieves me to think that I can bring sorrow to this one who loves me so fully.

You can see then that Paul is opening up a very tender dimension of this new reality into which we have been called. The source of life in this new reality can be saddened when we think or speak or act in ways that are not congruent with the character of Jesus.

[19:10] The Spirit is deeply grieved and the unclean Spirit is given an opportunity to do His uncleanness. grieves. The Holy Spirit grieves because thoughts, words, and behaviors out of sync with the character of Jesus are eventually self-destructive.

festering anger, foul language, bitterness, laziness that leeches off of other people all slowly but surely eat at the center of the personhood.

And the Spirit grieves. The Spirit grieves because thoughts and words and behaviors out of sync with the character of Jesus give the destroyer a place to do His destructive work.

When we find ourselves then playing the game on the devil's terms, lies, deceptions, slander, and malice and we can never beat the devil on his own terms.

We will always lose and the Spirit grieves. And the Holy Spirit grieves because when we adopt ways of thinking or speaking or behaving out of sync with the character of Jesus, it means we're not trusting Him.

[20:25] It means we do not believe who the Spirit says Jesus is. It means that we think our way or worse yet we think that the devil's way is the way to get ahead in the world and the Spirit grieves.

Which is why we too end up grieving. not only because we feel sorry for what is happening to us, but because we begin to experience the grief of the only one who can give us life.

We begin to experience the grief of the ground of all being. We are experiencing His sadness and displeasure. You have experienced this, have you not?

done. I know I have. I'll do something that displeases the Holy Spirit and it feels like He leaves me. It's awful. It feels like the Spirit just up and leaves. Now thank God that's not true. He doesn't leave.

[21:30] but there is this relational strain and it feels like He's left. As in a marriage or other close relationships, one partner offends the other and there's this distance.

The marriage is not over, the friendship's not over, but there is this deep sadness. And so with the Spirit of God. The relationship is not over, the Spirit does not dump us and walk away.

As Paul says, the Spirit is the one by whom we are sealed for the day of redemption. Sealed. We belong to Him. He owns us. The Spirit Himself is the down payment on the future we have in Jesus. So He does not dump us, but there is this real objective grief. And there's a consequent loss of clarity, loss of zeal, loss of joy, loss of peace.

On the day of Pentecost, when the exalted and reigning Jesus poured the Holy Spirit on that first community following Jesus with the heart for the city, we are told that there was what seemed to be wind and fire.

[22 : 40] Wind and fire. Refreshing wind. Cleansing wind. Invigorating wind. Purifying fire. Fire that ignited passion for Jesus' Lord.

Lord. Paul is telling us that it is possible to think and speak and act in ways that makes it feel like the wind has gone out of the sail.

It makes it feel like the fire is going down, if not dying. And just as we as individuals can go through such experiences, so can congregations.

There are times when there is no wind. Times when there is no fire. Because somewhere, someone in the community is grieving the Spirit.

Now, walk through the five sets of opposites one more time. Lay aside falsehood. The word here is pseudo. The pseudo.

[23 : 41] Lay aside everything that's pseudo. Now, why does falsehood grieve the Spirit? Because he is, as Jesus says, the Spirit of Truth.

In the section just before the one we've read today, before this meddling text, Paul says that in Jesus Christ we find truth. He is the truth who is renewing our minds, taking them away from the futility of mind, and renewing them into the truth.

To speak falsehood is to go backwards into the futility. Where pseudo leads to more pseudo to more pseudo. Get in step with the Spirit.

Speak the truth. Each one to your neighbor. Especially to those neighbors who are in this community centered in and shaped by Jesus Christ the truth. For we are members of one another, says Paul.

It's interesting, this word member that he uses is never used of members of organizations. It's only used of members of organisms. It's Paul's way of reminding us that we as the members of the body of Christ are organically related to one another.

[24 : 48] And what goes on in our individual souls affects the whole soul. The body of Christ works where truth is spoken. In love, as Paul adds. Be angry and yet do not sin.

There are times when it is right to be angry. Read the four gospels. On a number of occasions, Jesus, the man of compassion, gets very angry. The trick is to be angry for the right reason, the right time and in the right way.

In the English translation of our text, Paul uses the word angry twice. But in the Greek, he uses two different Greek words. The first time, be angry, is the word thumos.

Now, thumos refers to this anger that suddenly comes up but easily subsides. The second time, do not let the sun go down in your anger. The word is orge.

Orge refers to the anger that does not subside. It's anger that is settled because it's not dealt with. It just sits there and it festers and it stews.

[25 : 53] Get in step with the spirit. Be angry. There are times to be angry but do not let the sun go down on your anger. Do not let it fester.

Festering anger grieves the spirit and worse yet, it gives the enemy a major foothold. The enemy loves orge.

He feeds on orge. He loves to fan the flames of unresolved anger. He likes to get us to the place of bitterness. A number of years ago, I was serving a church in California.

And over a period of months, I was getting more and more concerned because I sensed that there was something blocking the new move of the spirit in this congregation.

On Sunday mornings, it seemed that there was something off over on the right side of the sanctuary in the second service. I'm not talking to you folks. Nothing off over here. Believe me, I know most of you and there's nothing off that I know of.

[26 : 53] But there was something off in that part of the sanctuary. Whereas the people in the other parts of the sanctuary sang the songs with great joy and gratitude, these people, well, they didn't sing.

It was dour and sour and it felt dead. As I prayed about it, I became aware that two men who sat two pews from each other were very, very angry at each other.

And they had been angry with each other for 20 years and were in leadership in the church. They would not talk to each other.

I spoke to them about it. I pleaded with both of them separately on a number of occasions. Won't you let some of us help you guys work out this anger? And they would not budge.

And so I decided it was time to go from preaching to meddling. And I said to both of them, you are going to miss out on the new work of the spirit in our city.

[27 : 59] And worse yet, your festering anger is inadvertently affecting other people on worship. One of the men finally did say to me, okay, okay, okay, at least I'll pray about praying about it.

Get in step with the spirit. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. It is worth staying up all night to find a way to resolve it.

No longer steal. Why bring this up? Apparently some of the believers in Ephesus had lost their jobs. Maybe because of their allegiance to Jesus as Lord and because they needed to take care of their families, they were tempted to steal.

Also, apparently some of the members of the church in Ephesus were shopkeepers and apparently they were cheating their customers. Either possible scenario grieves the spirit. Why?

Well, for one thing, stealing violates the dignity of the other person. When I steal from you, it's saying that my needs and my desires are greater than your needs and your desires and your dignity.

[29 : 07] But for another, stealing implicitly says, sorry Lord, but you can't be trusted. I'm going to have to take my life into my own hands. And that move of the human heart gives the devil the opportunity to nurture even greater idolatry in the heart.

But work with your hands. Get in step with the spirit, the creative spirit who delights to enable us to make a contribution to the common good.

Even if we do not get paid for it, we find dignity when we can do something with our hands that blesses other people. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth.

The word Paul uses is too politely translated unwholesome. It refers to rotten wood and to withered flowers. Jesus uses it of worthless fruit and rancid fish.

Unprofitable is a better rendition. Putrid is a little better. Foul is the best. Now why do such words grieve the spirit? Because they wound the person to whom they're spoken.

[30 : 21] And because they reveal the condition of the heart out of which the words emerged. And because the unclean spirit loves to work with such uncleanness.

And because such words go against the character of the Holy Spirit of God. It's the very filth Jesus comes to free us from.

Speak words that edify, says Paul. Get in step with the spirit. Use words the way the spirit uses words. He uses words to build people up. To bring grace to people's hearts.

So, finally, put away all bitterness and wrath and clamor and slander and malice. It all gives the malicious slanderer a heyday.

The enemy of our souls loves this kind of stuff. And it grieves the spirit because it's all contrary to the spirit's character. Again, it's what Jesus Christ came to free us from.

[31 : 29] Instead, get in step with the spirit. Be kind to one another. The word is krestos, related to Christos, Christ. Be like Christ.

Be krestos. Be kind and gentle. And be tenderhearted. It's a deeply visceral word that's used of Jesus. It's splunk, the word Bob loves.

It means guts or bowels. Jesus sees the crowd. They're like sheep without a shepherd. And his guts get ripped up. Jesus sees a leper. And he's moved to want to bring healing.

Jesus sees the widow who's just lost her son. And his heart is broken for her. Get in step with the spirit. Let your guts get ripped up by caring for other people. And forgive each other.

This is not Paul's normal word for forgiveness. The word he uses literally means to bestow grace. Keep grace on one another.

[32 : 28] Go around gracing one another, says Paul, as God in Christ goes around gracing you. Justice.

Giving people what they deserve. Mercy. Mercy. Mercy. Not giving people what they deserve. Grace. Giving people what they do not deserve.

There is a time for justice. But soon on the heels of that, there is a time for mercy. And it is always time for grace.

For grace is unmerited. It's unearned. There will never be a time when anyone in this room merits God's favor. There is never a time when any one of us has earned God's blessings.

Go around giving one another what you did not deserve. Because God in Christ gives you what you did not deserve.

[33 : 36] Do not grieve the Holy Spirit. Do not give the enemy a foothold. Get in step with the Holy Spirit of God.

Let us take just a few moments to be still. And respond to whatever the Spirit has been stirring in your heart and mind this morning.