

Why do we compare ourselves?

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[0 : 00] The first reading this morning is found on page 1041 in the Church Bibles. It's from Luke chapter 7, verses 36 to 50.

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And behold, a woman of the city who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is, and who is touching him, for she is a sinner.

And Jesus, answering, said to him, Simon, I have something to say to you. And he answered, Say it, teacher. A certain moneylender had two debtors.

One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more? Simon answered, The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.

[1 : 20] And he said to him, You have judged rightly. Then, turning to the woman, he said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I entered your house. You gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair.

You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in, she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little. And he said to her, Your sins are forgiven.

Then those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins? And he said to the woman, Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.

So the second reading today is from Ephesians chapter 4, verses 17 to 5 to page 1176.

[2 : 24] Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardness of their hearts.

They have become callous and have given themselves to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way that you learned Christ, assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Let the thief no longer see it steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up as fits the occasion. Let it may give grace to those who hear.

[4 : 09] And 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, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thanks very much for reading. Let me add my welcome to you. My name is Simon Dowdy, and I am the lead pastor here at Grace Church, and it's lovely to have you with us this morning.

Why don't I pray and ask for God's help as we look at this passage in Ephesians together. Let's pray. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much for this reminder already this morning of your great love for us as your people. And we pray that we might be transformed by that love in the way we relate to one another as a church family.

[5 : 28] And pray, therefore, this morning, as we look at this passage in Ephesians, please would you help us not simply to be hearers of your word, but doers of it as well.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, the issue at the heart of this next section of Ephesians is the quality of our relationships as a church.

We had read from chapter 4, verse 17, although the sermon is actually on 4:25-5:2. I wanted just to remind us of what we saw last week.

And yet I wonder if, as we had that reading from Ephesians chapter 4, I wonder if for some of us it left us perhaps feeling rather flat. You know, it just sounds a little bit Sunday school-ish, doesn't it?

You know, speak the truth in love to each other, be kind to one another, share with those in need. Come on, you know, we're grown-ups. Do we really need a whole sermon on this?

[6 : 28] Well, may I say, if that is how we are feeling, then we have failed to grasp the massive significance of our relationships together as a local church.

So let's just back up for a moment and remember what Ephesians is all about. When former U.S. President George Bush died at the end of last year, one of the most evocative photographs in the media was of the Malta Conference in December 1989, when he met with the leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev.

George Bush announced the end of the Cold War. The leader of the Soviet Union said at the joint news conference, the world is leaving one epoch and entering another.

Well, in a far, far greater way, the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus marks the beginning of a new epoch in world history.

As we head for a day when there will be a whole new creation under the rule of Jesus Christ. That is the plan of God.

[7 : 44] It's there if you flick back a page in Ephesians 1, verse 10. Ephesians 1, verse 10. God's plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, that's in Jesus Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

That is the destination towards which our universe is heading. It is the destination towards which God is working. And the church should be an expression of that future destiny.

How? Well, as we saw last week in 417, it is by living distinctively. Have a look again at 417. Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their minds.

No longer living as the world around us does, but instead living lives that demonstrate that Jesus Christ is indeed Lord. Now today we're going to see what that looks like in our relationships as a church.

Because you see, our life together as a local church is going to demonstrate one of two things. It's either going to demonstrate that Jesus Christ is Lord and point to that future day in the new creation, or it's simply going to make a mockery of any claim that we make that Jesus is Lord.

[9 : 14] Can we now see how these verses, which, you know, just reading them, they look so kind of mundane and ordinary, don't they? But actually, can we see how very, very important they are?

And I hope too that if you're here this morning looking in on the Christian faith, I hope you might just get a glimpse of actually what a wonderful thing it is to be part of God's church.

Well, two simple headings. You'll see them both on the back of the service sheet there on the outline. First of all, walk in love. I wonder if you were here last week if you remember the change dynamic that we thought about last week, how change happens as the gospel, as the message of Jesus, renews our minds, so that we then think differently and live differently.

We thought, didn't we, about a student coming to work in London. Off come the tatty jeans and the worn-out trainers and the disheveled haircut is out, and instead in comes the new smart suit and the smart haircut and the shiny new shoes.

The old has gone, the new has come, and now as a new person, they have a new life to live. Well, that is the dynamic we now see worked out in practice in terms of words, and our words and our attitudes and our actions.

[10 : 44] Let's just think about each one in turn. First of all, our words, verse 25. Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

Now, this is more or less a quote from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah. Zechariah looks forward to God establishing a new community, a community of righteousness and truth in the new creation.

Well, if we put our trust in Jesus, we are that new community, members of God's church. We've been raised with Christ, seated with him in the heavenly places, and therefore we are to put away all falsehood and speak the truth.

So, unlike the world we live in, I guess, which doesn't really think twice, is it, about distorting the truth or telling lies or withholding the truth, whether it's for personal gain or just to make my life easier or to bolster our reputation.

And do you see how it's the message of Jesus, how it's the gospel that will change our speech? The gospel reason comes at the end of verse 25, for we are members one of another.

[12 : 03] It's just what we saw earlier, isn't it, in the letter? If we put our trust in Jesus, we are members of God's church. Chapter 2, verse 21. Being a Christian is not about me following Jesus on my own, but instead when I put my trust in Jesus, I become part of his church, members one of another.

And it's as that truth then gets into my mind, that that is going to have a massive effect on my speech. Because, of course, truth creates and builds the local church, whereas falsehood, lies, and pretense inevitably will destroy the church.

You and I cannot serve Jesus together properly if we don't trust each other. Hence, verse 29. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

That word corrupting means rotten. Think of the effect that rot has on a tree as it kind of eats away from it, at it from the inside.

And the whole tree, over time, becomes weaker and weaker and weaker. Now, I guess we could spend the rest of our time this morning simply thinking about the implications of this for our speech.

[13 : 49] And that would be a good thing, certainly, to do over coffee, wouldn't it? To talk together about what this might look like in practice. But here are some suggestions to get us started.

In church on a Sunday, or in jam on Sunday evening, if what you're about to say is not good for building up, then don't say it.

In growth group or prayer triplet, if it's not going to be helpful, then don't say it. In other words, you see, we don't have to say everything that comes into our minds.

The question is, is it helpful? Is it going to build up other people? Is it truthful? Perhaps there's a conversation you're planning to have with someone this morning over coffee.

But before you do so, ask yourself the question, is it going to be a truthful conversation? Is it going to be a helpful building up conversation?

[14 : 55] If not, then don't say it. Or say it differently. But of course, it's not just what I don't say, it's what I do say.

There may be that difficult conversation that you shy away from. But actually, you know that truth and love demand that you have it. What about our attitudes?

Verse 26, be angry and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Anger is so destructive, isn't it? Not just on television programs such as EastEnders or The Apprentice.

It burns and it festers. So says Paul, throw away your anger before it is given expression. I take it verse 26 isn't a command to be angry.

That would be rather perverse, wouldn't it? Rather, it is a command not to sin. And a recognition, perhaps, that a failure to forgive is so often more damaging than the anger that fled up in the first place.

[16 : 06] So don't let the sun go down on your anger. Sort it out the same day. The straight apology.

The rebuilding of the relationship. And although this is most heard in the context so often of marriage preparation, you know, don't go to bed angry with each other and that is good advice.

Remember, actually, this is addressed to the church. Yes, there does need to be that apology. It can't wait a week before you apologize to the person to whom there needs to be the apology.

Don't just hope the problem will go away and ignore each other for the next month. That's the way the world deals with anger. But we're not to be like the world.

Is there someone here within our church family who you need to apologize to this morning? We'll look at verse 31.

[17 : 14] Verse 31, notice, moves, doesn't it, from inner resentments, bitterness, wrath, anger, to the outward expression of those resentments, clamor, slander, and malice.

perhaps, as someone at church, you harbor resentment towards. Get rid of it. Put it away before the inner resentment becomes an outward expression of that resentment.

What about our actions? Verse 28, let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor doing honest work with his own hands so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

In first century Ephesus, where there was no welfare state, many people, perhaps, before they became Christians, might well have been stealing in some way. Perhaps, for those who were sort of hired laborers and simply hired to work for a day at a time, that might have been part of their behavior pattern.

But the reality is that theft destroys trust. And therefore, instead, the thieving person is to work hard with his hands or with her hands to become a sharing person.

[18 : 41] It's a rather lovely little picture, isn't it, actually, of how Jesus Christ transforms someone from a thieving person to a sharing person.

A very beautiful thing. And then, verse 32, be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

And again, notice the gospel reason, as God in Christ forgave you. Words, attitudes, and actions.

let me ask you a question. As you drove or cycled or walked through Dulwich this morning on your way to this building, as you kind of looked around the place, did it look to you at that moment as if Jesus Christ is Lord?

Of course not. God in Christ. But as we live together as a church in love under the rule of Jesus, we point forward together to the future day when everyone will recognize that Jesus is indeed Lord.

[19 : 55] Do you remember chapter 3, verse 10? So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

It's as the spiritual forces and powers in our universe observe the church, observe the church composed of all sorts of people from all different backgrounds, all different personalities, united in Jesus.

It is as they see that, that they know that God's plan for a new creation under the rule of King Jesus is indeed on track. In other words, the whole cosmos, can you believe it?

The whole cosmos is watching us to see how we relate to each other, watching the church. And I take it that is what explains chapter 4, verse 27.

As Paul says, give no opportunity to the devil. I take it what explains verse 30 and do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God by whom you are sealed for the day of redemption.

[21 : 03] You see, Ephesians is going to finish by urging us to engage in the spiritual battle. Flick over to chapter 6, verse 10.

familiar words perhaps to some of us, finally be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. But you see, what is the spiritual warfare that every Christian is engaged in?

Well, it's simply this. it's the battle to be church and it's the battle to love each other. It's the battle to avoid getting angry, to speak truthfully and helpfully, to build up and not tear down, to forgive and not hold grievances.

It's in the day-to-day business of our Christian relationships together that the spiritual battle is fought out. Now, isn't that a really surprising thing?

[22 : 17] I imagine most of us don't associate spiritual warfare with the day-to-day reality of church relationships. Gossip, slander, backbiting, cliques, complaints and grumbles are all too easily accepted as part and parcel of church life.

But that is not how it should be. The devil, of course, delights it, delights when it is, because it makes a complete mockery of God's plan for all time to unite all things under the rule of the Lord Jesus.

It's why, verse 30, you see, it grieves the Spirit. The Holy Spirit, of course, not a force but a person. What is God doing in his church by his Spirit?

We'll turn back to chapter 2, verse 22. In him, in Christ, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

And so, of course, the Spirit is grieved when, through our words, our attitudes and our actions, the church is damaged and our unity is undermined.

[23 : 32] And yet, of course, it's so easy to excuse, isn't it? You know, the two of us never see eye to eye. We're from such different backgrounds.

She's always grumbling about something. It's just the way he is. things. But it's not okay for Christians in whom God's Spirit dwells to live like that.

Instead, we are to do all we can to build one another up and to demonstrate in our relationships together that Jesus Christ is Lord. Lord. And, of course, it's not only the spiritual powers and authorities in our universe who notice, but everyone around us does as well.

Here are two examples just in the last couple of weeks which I've heard about. Both, I think, very encouraging indeed. The first, the drinks party here in Dulwich just before Christmas, attended by many people who had been the previous week to our church wreath-making event.

And what was the topic of conversation at that drinks party amongst those guests, some of the guests who had been at the wreath-making event a week earlier?

[24 : 56] It's about the depth of love and relationship which they had witnessed at the Grace Church event. People notice. The second glimpse, a blog from a pastor whose wife lay dying in hospital in the first week of January in North London.

family being wonderfully cared for by their local church. And this is what he wrote. This is the local church.

A group of people saved by Jesus and committed to each other for each other's spiritual and practical good to the glory of God. It's like a little outpost of heaven on earth.

Which, by the way, it is, as we've seen in Ephesians. He continues, the nurses around my wife see this. They cannot believe the reality of our church.

They are seeing the glory of God. Walk in love. But secondly, walk in love as Christ loved us.

[26 : 03] Because I guess it's hard, isn't it, to disagree with the qualities we've seen in chapter 4, verses 25 to 32. Even our secular culture looks at this list and says, yes, this is how we want society to be.

This is how society should be. It's the kind of community I'd like to be part of, a truthful, honest, kind. I'd love to work in an office that is like that. I'd love my streets, my school, my family to be like that.

These are precisely the ideals our society has for the way in which people should behave and relate to each other. We talk about equality, we talk about dignity and so on, a respect for others.

And yet, of course, as a society, we don't have a clue how to bring it about. love of Jesus.

We don't have a clue of Jesus. Chapter 5, verses 1 and 2. Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children, and walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

[27 : 16] love. In other words, it is grasping and experiencing the love of Jesus Christ that then enables us to love others. I gather this is the only place in the New Testament where we are told to be imitators of God.

In many ways, of course, that is impossible. He is the creator. We are simply his creatures. But with regard to love, it is possible if we have experienced this love of God in Jesus Christ for ourselves.

Last month saw an event to mark the 80th anniversary of the Kindertransport program, which helped children to escape from Nazi Germany. And one of the children was Paul Willer, who was born to a Jewish mother in Bavaria, and he was interviewed, and he had spent several months on arrival in London living with Clement Attlee and his family, who was then the leader of the Opposition Labour Party.

After four months, he moved to Northern Ireland and never saw them again. But in this interview, he was asked, what was your most abiding memory, your deepest, fondest memory of living in the Attlee household?

And he paused, and he replied, cried, and said, I think the extraordinary love. And it is clear, 80 years later, how that was still with him, and how it had an impact on his life.

[28 : 57] Well, in a far greater way, Ephesians chapter 5, verse 1, therefore be imitators of God as beloved children. We saw, didn't we, that great love back in Ephesians chapter 2, how each of us is by nature spiritually dead, facing the judgment of God, and yet God being rich in mercy, because of his great love, Jesus died on the cross for our sin, a costly, sacrificial death, that we might be raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places.

It's why sacrificial, costly love for other Christians, should be the mark of our lives. It's costly, I take it, because it's not just loving those we find it easy to love.

It's costly because it's not just a superficial middle class niceness kind of love. It's costly, isn't it, to say sorry. It's costly to forgive.

It's costly to bite my tongue. It's costly to build others up. It's costly to be involved in each other's lives. Yes, it will be hard work.

Perhaps the temptation for some is simply to stay on the edge of church family life at Grace Church Dunwich. It would be so much simpler. And no doubt the devil would love us to do that.

[30 : 31] And they will only love like this if we have experienced God's love for us. After all, it's just what the Lord Jesus said himself, isn't it? That first reading we had from Luke chapter seven, the prostitute who'd experienced the forgiveness of sins that Jesus offers.

And so she comes to Jesus completely overwhelmed with emotion and she anoints his feet with an expensive jar of perfume. And Simon the Pharisee from the religious establishment is horrified.

And what does Jesus say to him? Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven for she loved much.

But he who is forgiven little, loves little. Which means, of course, that when you and I struggle to live like this, why we need to do business with Jesus before we do business with each other.

To be humbled by his love and to see the depths of the sin from which we have been forgiven. Many years ago, I belonged to a church where the pastor had a reputation for always explaining the cross in every sermon.

[31 : 54] that Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and at peace with God. And he always did so at some length. And I think perhaps for some the temptation at that point was rather to switch off and think, well, you know, this is the bit for people who don't yet know Jesus, who are kind of visiting and looking in on the Christian faith.

But look again at Ephesians 5, verses 1 and 2. the gospel is not just something that unbelievers need to hear.

Those of us who are disciples of Jesus need to hear it as well. We need to be reminded that we are God's beloved children. And as we experience the love of Christ, costly, sacrificial, he shows us what it is to demonstrate that same love to others in our relationships together.

Let's have a few moments in quiet. I shall then lead us in prayer. And then if there are any questions, we can take some questions. As a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for the big picture of your plans for eternity that Ephesians gives us. Thank you that the whole universe is heading for that glorious future day when everyone will see that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[33 : 34] And we pray, Heavenly Father, for your mercy on us, that in our relationships together as a church we would demonstrate that Jesus is Lord, that we would point to that future day, that we would be humbled by your great love for us, transformed and renewed by it, reflected in our life together.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.