

August 8, 2021 – Ephesians 4:17-5:2

Since the founding fathers of our nation wrote the first amendment, some 229 years ago, our country has debated whether or not there are any limits to our freedom of speech. The Supreme Court, for example, said that you can't shout "Fire!" in a crowded theater, because your words could literally kill someone.

More recently we've debated such things as hate speech, wikileaks, satire, and misinformation. We've scrutinized the dangers of fake news and we've confronted the reality of cancel culture ruining lives by digging up long forgotten words. And I have to think that a great many of those of us here are frustrated with it all. Do we have freedom of speech or not?

Well, as Americans, we definitely do. But where those boundaries should be drawn around our speech is largely a matter of politics. And I'm not here to preach about politics. I'm here to preach about God's Word. And God's Word says that, as Christians, you definitely do NOT have freedom of speech.

Paul himself spells it out for us this morning: "*Let no corrupting talk come out your mouths.*" There are things that you, as a Christian, should never say. There are boundaries to what you can talk about. I think you can probably think of a few of those boundaries. Several of them involve four letter words. But there's more to it than that. And our Epistle lesson for today helps us see that.

This passage is a very common type of passage that we see in Paul's letters. His epistles very often break down into two sections. The first section addresses one or more topics of deep theological significance. Some particular doctrine or doctrines that his readers are getting completely wrong or need more teaching to fully understand.

And then, there's the second section. Where he dives into more practical matters. Matters of Christian living. Matters of church order and discipline. Matters of stewardship and service and prayer. The type of pastoral advice that is useful to us on a day to day basis. But it's also often overlooked. Because there's just so much thrown out to us all at once.

This passage falls into that second category. As I mentioned several weeks ago, the church in Ephesus has a large contingent of Greek converts to Christianity. Gentiles who did not grow up in the rigid legalism of Judaism. And there has been some tension revolving around how these two groups fit together. Particularly involving their behavior and lifestyle.

Now, Paul certainly doesn't want to see these Greek converts become legalists and Pharisees. But he also doesn't like some of the behaviors he's seeing in the members of this church. Because they are calling themselves Christians. They have put their faith in Jesus Christ. By baptism, they are a new creation in him.

But they're not acting like it. They're acting just like they did before. And, in particular, they're speaking just like they did before. But he's not concerned about whether or not they're swearing or cussing.

No, he's concerned about the fact that they're lying to one another. Speaking falsehoods and not the truth with their neighbor. He's concerned that they're angry with one another. And that they're holding onto this anger, day after day after day. He's concerned that when they speak to each other, they tear each other down without any grace for their brother's mistakes. He's concerned that their conversation is filled with bitterness and slander and malice.

In short, Paul's not just concerned about whether or not they're swearing or cussing or being vulgar. No, plenty of "corrupting talk" can come out of your mouth without ever saying one of those four-letter words.

And that's a problem. It was a problem for the Ephesians and it's a problem for us. Because when that happens, when you let the speech of the world spill out of a mouth that has learned to speak as Christ spoke, you demonstrate a callousness, an ignorance, and a hardness of heart that belongs only to an unbeliever.

And you know what? That grieves the Holy Spirit. That's what Paul says. Sandwiched between two exhortations to clean up how we talk to one another, he writes, "*And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*"

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit. That's kind of an archaic expression. We don't really talk about grieving people anymore. But basically all it means is, "Don't make the Holy Spirit sad. Don't make him disappointed in your behavior. Don't insult all the work he has done in you."

You were sealed with the Holy Spirit in baptism. The sign of the cross was placed upon your forehead and upon your heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. And then you were washed with living water that welled up inside of you to eternal life. And now the Holy Spirit lives within you as a guarantee of your inheritance.

An inheritance that cannot be taken away. An inheritance that will never perish, spoil, or fade. You are a new creation in Christ Jesus.

So don't act like the old creation. Don't talk the way the world talks. Don't walk the way the world walks. The Holy Spirit is with you and He has brought you to this very building. To hear this very message. You are being renewed at this very moment in the spirit of your minds.

And yet, if we stand up at the end of this service and our talk is filled with lies or anger or judgment or slander, then what have we gained? If we *come* to church week after week, but we don't *talk* like a church, then we are alienating ourselves. Both from each other and from God. We are members, one of another. When we hurt each other, then we hurt ourselves.

No, to be renewed in the spirit of our minds means to forgive one another, as God in Christ forgave us. To forgive as God in Christ forgave even those who nailed him to a cross. To forgive as God in Christ forgave even the man who denied him three times with swearing and curses. To forgive as God in Christ forgave even Paul who persecuted his church.

To be renewed in the spirit of our minds means to be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ, God's own beloved child, loved us and gave himself up for us. To be renewed in the spirit of our minds means to live a life that has been made a fragrant offering to God because of the one who first loved us and gave himself up for us.

And no, we won't do it perfectly. We are sinful human beings. Filled with deceit and anger and judgment and slander. These sinful things come all too naturally to us.

Which is exactly why we need forgiveness to break the cycle. You can't simply sit back and say, "I'll forgive him when he stops hurting me. I'll forgive him when he stops giving me a reason to forgive him." No! That's not forgiveness. That's the opposite of forgiveness. That's the exact bitterness and wrath that Paul speaks against. And yet, that's how so many of us think.

No, forgiveness means saying, "You hurt me, but I forgive you. You keep hurting me, but I still forgive you." Think about how often you sin. That's exactly how often God forgives you. And now remember what Paul says: Forgive one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

It's not easy. And we will fail. But if we forgive as we are forgiven, then the failures won't matter. Because they'll be forgiven too. And we will have true freedom of speech. For our words will not be bound in sin. But free in the love and forgiveness of Christ.

Our words matter. Do we speak words of falsehood, or words of truth? Words of anger, or words of grace? Words that build up, or words that tear down?

Our words to each other matter. Just as God's words to us matter. The God who spoke this world into existence, chooses to say to each of us, "I forgive you." And so we who speak as part of this congregation of faith choose to say to each other, "I forgive you too." Amen.