

**Psalm 130:4-7:** I wait for the LORD; my soul waits for him; in his word is my hope. My soul waits for the LORD, more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. O Israel, wait for the LORD, for with the LORD there is mercy; With him there is plenteous redemption, and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

## Introduction

For 11 years, I was a stay-at-home parent. My favorite and least favorite part of being a stay-at-home parent was watching how my mannerisms, colloquialisms, and habits were reproduced by my children—for better or for worse. Somedays it would be Liza who would see to her duty of unpacking the pantry I just packed after a run to the store. Or it was Quinn who would use a spare calculator as a cellphone and walk around the house, like I did when I was on the phone, yammering to some unknown person while imitating my intonations and inflections. Or, in Jack's case, it was making use of my penchant and fondness for polysyllabic words.

Of all the stories I have about Jack's ability to command language and his artistic ability to render it to his will, my favorite was an encounter with our mailman on a warm summer day. Playing out in the gated front porch, both boys were busy with paints and bubbles. The mailman climbed the two flights of stairs to our mounted mailbox. As he was putting the mail in the mailbox, he greeted the two toddlers with a happy smile and a warm, "Hey guys!" Quinn, my shy extrovert, smiled and whispered a hello in reply. Jack, a little over two and wearing nothing but a bulky cloth diaper, looked at the mailman, pointed at him, and—assertive and confident—said, "Do not antagonize our cat, Joe Joe!" The mailman was a bit taken aback by both the prohibition and from whom it came. He laughed and assured my son, "Don't worry, buddy, I won't!"

It didn't take but a second to figure out where Jack had learned that polysyllabic word: me. Day in and day out I would use various words to exhort the boys to stop (verbally) fighting—some more colorful than others, but always words natural to the way I speak. And, "antagonize" was one of those words targeted at the boys locked in verbal fisticuffs. Thus, Jack had not only made note of it, he learned *when* to use it. He didn't need to memorize the word; he just heard it enough in specific situations to absorb it and imitate it to an innocent mailman making rounds.

## Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Let all bitterness and outbursts of negative passion and impulsive vengeance and clamoring against others and abusive language be removed from you with all malice. Now be kind with respect to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God forgave you in Christ. Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children and walk in love, just as Christ loved us and handed himself over for our sake, as an offering and sacrifice for a fragrant odor to God (Eph 4:31-5:2)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translation mine unless otherwise noted

The author of our love letter to Ephesus continues with the exhortative nature initiated at the start of chapter four. As we pick up in v. 25, neither lose the beseeching to walk worthy of the call to which you were called (v.1), nor the imagery of being the reborn children of divine Love. What we have in our portion from Ephesians today is a dive into what it looks like to walk in this worthy way, as those beloved children of God—heirs with Christ of the fulfilled promises—sealed by the Holy Spirit. Being reborn of God in and by love, we are to reflect that divine genetic material of love into the world; the old life being shed, we are new.<sup>2</sup> This new person and worthy walk, according to the author, is what it means to be a new person born into the reign of God in the world.<sup>3</sup>

What will this new life reborn of love look like? The first thing is removing falsehood from our language. This isn't about threatening others with condemnation if they lie; it's about pursuing what is genuine and real, rejecting what is in opposition to genuine and real.<sup>4</sup> We not only seek honesty with others, but we are *also* honest with ourselves. We live *in* reality and not in some mythical approximation that makes us feel comfortable. We can twist and bend our words and language about the world however we want, but this exhortation is about calling things as they are for what they are. We owe others truth because we are linked together with them in our humanity and as objects of divine love—both in and outside of our common gathering on Sunday.<sup>5</sup> In this way, to propagate falsehood does harm to us as it does to others. Perpetuating the myth and lie of the kingdom of humanity keeps us all trapped in complicity and captivity of the myth and lie.

Closely linked with putting aside untruth, we're exhorted to be angry in a life-giving way and not in a death-dealing way. As we're called to see things as they are, we will become angry when we see people suffering and being held captive by oppression and injustice perpetuated

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<sup>2</sup> Harold W. Hoehner *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002. 615. "Having established the believers position as a new person, the inferential conjunction *Sid* points to the desired application of this position. The lifestyle of the old person is integrally tied to the person and so the lifestyle and the position of the new should be integrally bound together. Once the new person had been put on at conversion, one's subsequent life should reflect what he or she is."

<sup>3</sup> Markus Barth *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 4-6* The Anchor Bible Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974 511 "In what follows Paul presents examples to show what specific deeds and attitudes are rejected when the 'Old Man' is castaway."

<sup>4</sup> Hoehner *Ephesians* 615-616, *Pseudos* "...in all contexts this word is used as the antithesis of truth.... Falsehood connotes that which is not genuine or real. The lifestyle of the old person was one of deception (v. 22). This kind of lifestyle has been laid aside."

<sup>5</sup> Allen Verhey and Joseph S. Harvard *Ephesians Belief: A Theological Commentary* Louisville, KY: WJK, 2011. 188, "Truth is owed to the neighbors because of our social solidarity with them. It is also a bit surprising that the text does not say that we are members of the 'body'. The 'body' is not mentioned. Perhaps it is also too obvious to mention. But perhaps the reference the 'body' is left out because 'the neighbors' to whom we are to 'speak the truth' evidently include those who are not members of the body, not members of the church. The exhortation was not simply that we should tell the truth 'to one another.' Truthfulness is not just owed to other members of the church, but to any and all neighbors.' The 'truth' in Jesus of our social solidarity, that 'we are members of one another' points beyond the church to the universal community that is God's plan."

by the myth and lie.<sup>6</sup> In this righteous anger over pain and suffering,<sup>7</sup> we're to aim at the mark: remedying the situation and not exacerbating it. We are prohibited from missing the mark ("sin"), thus in the negative prohibition is the positive command: do the right thing, fight for those who need to be fought for, ally with those who are being pressed and killed by greed, and overturn violent institutional and systemic oppression as if they were tables.<sup>8</sup> Concurrently, we must prevent our anger from festering for too long and becoming septic.<sup>9</sup> This is why it's important to channel the energy of anger toward life; festered and septic anger brings death.

The next two exhortations—to work with hands and not steal and the call to speak edifying words and not “worthless” words—address the orientation of heart of the new person as the beloved child of God. Both exhortations are directed to the neighbor. While we may think thievery is anyone who steals what they have not purchased, it's more than that. It's about greed. A poor person steals bread to eat because they have a desire to eat; a rich person steals not for lack but because of a desire to satisfy greed. A loquacious person may speak many words, but not all of them will be edifying. In both commands the heart of the believer is exposed. We must keep watch over ourselves and our tendency to fall prey to the myths of our society that convince us we can say what we want and take what we want to the detriment of the neighbor. We must remember that our material existence and the material of our words are not ours; rather, they are of God because we are reborn of divine love.<sup>10</sup> We use both our work, our material existence, and our words<sup>11</sup> to benefit those in need, bringing the love of God

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<sup>6</sup> Verhey and Harvard *Ephesians* 190, “Anger at injustice is permitted. Indeed, an injustice not only prompts anger; it requires it. When we see the poor oppressed, we should get angry. When the ‘other’ is demeaned or insulted, we should get angry. But anger can be an occasion for sin, for seeking revenge instead of justice, for holding a grudge instead of seeking reconciliation. It is sin that is renounced.”

<sup>7</sup> Barth *Ephesians* 513, “Among the saints who are ‘God’s imitators’ (5:1) such anger cannot be excluded any more than in God himself (Rom 1:18; 2:5, 8; 5:9) or in the Messiah (Mark 3:5, etc.). ‘Wrath against a brother’ draws judgment upon the angry man (Matt 5:22; cf Gen 45:24), but ‘indignation on behalf of others is one of the common bonds by which society is held together.’”

<sup>8</sup> Hoehner *Ephesians* 619, We Anger “Since the word sometimes is in reference to God’s anger it cannot be said that anger is intrinsically evil. Hence, the next command is important. The imperative is from ἀμαρτάνω, meaning in classical Greek ‘to miss the mark’ such as when throwing a spear or ‘to miss’ the way. Generally it means ‘to fail to accomplish one’s purpose, go wrong.’”

<sup>9</sup> Hoehner *Ephesians* 623, “This is why Paul does not want believers to give the devil an opportunity by their anger. The devil twists and distorts the truth. If there is no quick restoration between parties, further anger mounts and dissension and revenge often result.”

<sup>10</sup> Verhey and Harvard *Ephesians* 192-193, “There is the sort of theft to which the poor and powerless are tempted, but there are also the subtle forms of stealing that tempt the rich and powerful. It is a kind of theft when the rich get richer at the expense of a decent wage for laborers or by taking advantage of slaves. It is a kind of theft when merchants ‘make the ephah small and the shekel great’ (Amos 8:5). It is a kind of theft when a judge takes a bribe. And it is a kind of theft when the wealthy do not recognize that what they call “their own” is really God’s and an opportunity to practice justice and generosity. It is a kind of theft when the rich ignore and dismiss the legitimate claims of the poor upon them, when they do not share with the needy what is due them by God’s justice. It is likely that the latter sorts of theft are in view here in Ephesians rather than the first. Then one need not suppose that there were a lot of petty thieves and shoplifters in the churches of the Lycus Valley.”

<sup>11</sup> Hoehner *Ephesians* 631, “Paul states that believers are accountable for what they say. In fact every word is accountable. Care must be taken that each word is not useless or unprofitable but is beneficial for the building up

to them in real and tangible ways. Thus, the Holy of Spirit of God (in you and in whom you are sealed<sup>12</sup>) rejoices and is not grieved.<sup>13,14</sup>

## Conclusion

We are to remove from us a bitter attitude, negative outbursts of passion, destructive anger, clamoring against each other, and abusive language. In other words, our attitude, disposition and manner of speech,<sup>15</sup> must resist participating in death-dealing. This is the way of humanity, bent on its desires to consume until everything is gone, bent on its own destruction, bent on gain and greed even if it means the end of the world, of humanity, and of themselves. Rather, we are to pull close to our divine parent, to gaze upon God in Christ. We are to look so ardently and listen so well (*shema*) that we, like the beloved children of God that we are, mimic Christ in the world. The more we gaze upon Christ, the more we hear about God's activity and speech manifest in Christ for us and the entire creation and cosmos, the more we *will* reflect those things into the world and all for the love of God and for our neighbor.

The more we understand God's compassion for us and the world, made tangible in Christ, the more compassion will take root, grow, and flourish in our hearts, minds, and bodies in word and deed.<sup>16</sup> As we see and hear God weep with us in our grief and sorrow, so will we weep with others who grieve and sorrow. As we see and hear God relieve our hunger and thirst, so will we relieve the hunger and thirst of others. As we see and hear God present in our pain and suffering, so will we be present in the pain and suffering of others. As we see and hear God ally with us in our captivity and get angry about it, so will we ally with those who are being held captive and be angry about it. As we see and hear God forgive us for missing the mark, we will

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of the body. While the preceding verse dealt with the physical needs of believers, this verse speaks to their spiritual needs."

<sup>12</sup> Hoehner *Ephesians* 633, "In conclusion, verse 30 revolves around the person of the Holy Spirit. Believers are reminded that he has sealed them for the day of redemption. They are warned against the use of worthless words because they not only hurt the body of Christ but also grieve the Holy Spirit."

<sup>13</sup> Verhey and Harvard *Ephesians* 194-195, "The motive here, the motive to do an honest days work, is not simply to earn a living for oneself and one's family, honest enough motives, to be sure. The motive is surely not to accumulate enough possessions to pretend one has achieved by oneself and for oneself security and an identity. The motive, rather, is simply 'to have something to share with the needy' (4:28). That will include those who do not have work."

<sup>14</sup> Barth *Ephesians* 522, Blaspheme "This term may have been chosen in order to show that one's fellow man is under God's protection: he who reviles his brother by using profane speech shouts obscenities against God."

<sup>15</sup> Hoehner *Ephesians* 636, "To summarize, first noun 'bitterness' in verse 31 deals with attitude. The next two nouns 'anger and wrath' deal with disposition, and the last two 'shouting and abusive' refer to the manner of speech."

<sup>16</sup> Verhey and Harvard *Ephesians* 200-1, "Compassion (*eusplangchnos*; NRSV 'tenderhearted') is the second in this triad of virtues. Compassion is a visceral response to the suffering of another. It is to share the suffering, to 'suffer with' (*com*-passion) another. Compassion will seek to relieve the suffering of another, even if the only way to relieve it is to be present to it, present to the sufferer, lest the sufferer be abandoned to the desolating loneliness of suffering..... In solidarity with that Christ, we hope for the day of resurrection, the day when death will be no more, when there will be no more suffering. But meanwhile we share in Christ's death. And if we share in that death in baptism and the Supper, then to refuse to share the suffering of another is quite unfitting, quite unworthy of our new identity and community."

forgive others who miss the mark, too. As we witness by eye and ear God's gracious and free gift of Grace in Christ to us, we will reflect this free gift of grace into the world.<sup>17</sup>

Like beloved children of Love, let us know God's love for us and the cosmos in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit that we can't do anything else but mimic and imitate this divine love into the banality and monotony of daily life, boldly communicating this profound love to others in word and deed...even to the unsuspecting mailperson making their rounds on a warm summer day.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Verhey and Harvard *Ephesians* 206, "Nevertheless, the broader meaning should not be neglected here. Both God's forgiveness and the practice of forgiveness within the church are, after all, works of grace. Moreover, kindness, compassion, and forgiveness—and the whole set of renunciations and exhortations in this section—find their final motive and basis in the grace of God made known in Christ Forgiveness, surely, but also kindness and compassion, follow upon this affirmation of the gospel, that "God in Christ has been gracious to you."

<sup>18</sup> Verhey and Harvard *Ephesians* 206-7, "Love is the mark of God's own life, both in the relations of the Trinity and in God's creative and redemptive relationship with God's creation. But here, no less than in John's epistle, 'we know love by this, that he laid down his life for us' (1 John 3:16). We are to imitate God by living in accord with Christ's love. We imitate God by following Christ; we are to 'walk [peripatetic] in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God' (Eph. 5:2). Here, no less than in John's epistle, the implication is that 'we ought to lay down our lives for one another' (1 John 3:16). That imitation of God, that following of Christ, may mean first; as in 1 John, something as mundane and commonplace as helping the needy in the community (Eph. 4:28; c£ 1 John 3:17)."