

Imitators of God
Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Wayne Eberly
August 9, 2015

The good news about our passage of scripture this morning is that it is really pretty easy to understand. Paul is writing about building up the Body of Christ, and basically the passage that is found in chapters four and five tells us to use words that build others up, watch out for our anger, and make ourselves useful, not giving in to the temptation to steal but to actually work and be productive. What we are being told to do is not unique to the letter of Ephesians, not unique to the Bible, and not unique to basic common sense. Ben Franklin compiled pithy and wise sayings and published them in Poor Richard's Almanac. About work and being productive he writes:

- “O Lazy-Bones! Dost thou think God would have given thee Arms and Legs, if he had not design'd thou should'st use them.”
- “He that waits on fortune is never sure of a dinner.”
- “Would you live with ease, do what you ought, not what you please.”
- “Be always ashamed to catch thyself idle.”
- “All things are easy to Industry, all things difficult to Sloth.”
- “None preaches better than the ant, and she says nothing.”

About our words:

- “Thou can'st not joke an enemy into a friend, but thou may'st joke a friend into an enemy.”
- “It is better to take many injuries than to give one.”
- “Hear no ill of a friend, nor speak any of an enemy.”
- “Wink at small faults; remember thou hast great ones.”
- “Don't throw stones at your neighbors' if your own windows are glass.”
- “He that scatters thorns, let him not go barefoot.”
- “It is better to take many injuries than to give one.”
- “Hear no ill of a friend, nor speak any of an enemy.”

- “You can bear your own faults and why not a fault in your wife?”
- “E’er you remark another’s sin, bid your own conscience look within.”
- “Glass, China, and Reputation are easily cracked and never well mended.”
- “Silence is not always a sign of wisdom but babbling is ever a mark of folly.”
- “Man’s tongue is soft, and bone doth lack; yet a stroke therewith may break a man’s back.”
- “Here comes the orator! With his flood of words and his drop of wisdom.”
- “A great talker may be no fool but he is one that relies on him.”
- “A slip of the foot may soon recover, but a slip of the tongue you may never get over.”
- “Tart words make no friends: a spoonful of honey will catch more flies than a gallon of vinegar.”

About anger:

- “Take this remark from Richard poor and lame, whatever is begun in anger ends in shame.”

Just as Poor Richard’s Almanac comments about work, words, and anger, the Bible has its own treasure trove of wisdom on these matters, a treasure trove known as Proverbs. Proverbs also directs our attention to the ant when it comes to work.

- Go the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of hands to rest—and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man. Proverbs 6:6
- Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth. Proverbs 10:4

- One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys. Proverbs 18:9
- A sluggard does not plow in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing. Proverbs 20:4
- The sluggard says, “There is a lion outside!” or, “I will be murdered in the streets!” Proverbs 22:13

About anger:

- A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult Proverbs 12:16
- A quick-tempered man does foolish things, and a crafty man is hated. Proverbs 14:17
- A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly Proverbs 14:29
- A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1
- A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension, but a patient man calms a quarrel. Proverbs 15:18
- 29:8 Mockers stir up a city, but wise men turn away anger. Proverbs 29:8
- 29:11 a fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control. Proverbs 29:11
- 29:22 An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins

About our words:

- With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor, but through knowledge the righteous escape. Proverbs 11:9
- A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue Proverbs 11:12
- A gossip betrays a confidence, but a trustworthy man keeps a secret. Proverbs 11:13
- Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Proverbs 12:18

- An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word makes him glad. Proverbs 12:25
- He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin. Proverbs 13:3
- A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1
- The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit. Proverbs 15:4
- A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word! Proverbs 15:23
- The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil. Proverbs 15:28
- Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. Proverbs 16:24
- A perverse man stirs up dissension, and a gossip separates close friends. Proverbs 16:28
- He who covers an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends. Proverbs 17:9
- Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out. Proverbs 17:14
- A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered. Proverbs 17:27
- Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue. Proverbs 17:28
- A gossip betrays a confidence; so avoid a man who talks too much. Proverbs 20:19
- An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips
- A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver. Proverbs 25:11
- Without wood a fire goes out; without gossip a quarrel dies down. Proverbs 26:20
- As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire, so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife. Proverbs 26:21

The Proverbs were written many years before the letter to the Ephesians. Poor Richard wrote his almanac many years after the letter to the Ephesians. Obviously Ephesians is not the first word on work, anger, and how we speak, and it is not the last. The wisdom that guided the writer of Proverbs and the wisdom that guided Ben Franklin and his Poor Richard's Almanac is good wisdom, tried and true. What is interesting to me is that the motivation for putting this wisdom into practice seems different when you look at Proverbs, Poor Richard, and the Apostle Paul.

Poor Richard's counsel is very practical: If you work you get dinner, if you don't cast thorns you don't step on them, if you don't cast stones your own windows won't get broken, and if you speak well of a friend you just might keep that friend. A good summary of Poor Richard is do unto others as you would have others do unto you. The Proverbs have more than a little of the do unto others mindset, but we also read in the first chapter that the Proverbs are for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young. (Proverbs 1:2) And of course the Proverbs are also written for the purpose that one would trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5)

While Paul's counsel is much the same as both Proverbs and Poor Richard, there is a difference in the motivation and a difference in the outcome. That difference has to do with the new relationship believers have in the Body of Christ. The encouragement Paul gives to the church concerning work, anger, and our words is in direct relation to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. It is only after the great gospel story that fills chapters one through three of Ephesians that Paul calls on believers to live a life worthy of the calling we have received. It is in direct response to the unifying actions of the cross, the actions that have torn down every dividing wall of hostility that Paul calls on believers to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. It is because Christians have been given a new identity in Christ

that we are called to act in new ways, to put off falsehood and speak truthfully to others, to use our mouths only to speak words that build others up. And these actions have a purpose, these actions are part of the calling we have received to live a life worthy of being disciples. We are called to be kind and compassionate to others because Christ has been kind and compassionate to us. We are called to live a life of love because Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. We are called to love others because others are no longer strangers and aliens, they are our brothers and sisters, they are fellow members of the Body of Christ, they literally belong to us as we belong to them because we all belong to Jesus Christ. It is in that context and that depth of relationship that Paul encourages believers in our work, in dealing with our anger, and in the use of our words.

In terms of our work, it is not simply that we work to be productive or that we work to have the safety and security of a place to live and a meal to eat. We work because in our work we can build up the Body of Christ. When Paul says to work with your hands, the reason is so we may have something to share with others. Our work is not to build a better world for ourselves it is to build a better world for others, a better world for all. To that end I find it useful to add to what the Proverbs say about work the words Proverbs says about being generous with what we earn and produce.

- Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. Proverbs 3:9
- Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to do act. Do not say to your neighbor, “Come back later; I’ll give it tomorrow”—when you now have it with you. Proverbs 3:27
- One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. Proverbs 11:24
- A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed. Proverbs 11:25
- He who despises his neighbor sins, but blessed is he who is kind to the needy. Proverbs 14:21

- He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done. Proverbs 19:17
- A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor. Proverbs 22:0
- He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses. Proverbs 28:27

But Paul is not only talking about working and building up the Body of Christ by sharing with others. He also addresses anger and our words. Anger and words can do the exact opposite of building up the Body of Christ. Anger and our words can tear down the Body of Christ, can destroy relationships within the Body of Christ, and they can wound others and hurt them and cause the very divisions Christ died to overcome.

Jesus tells a very short parable that I think is important at this point. We are talking about our anger and our words in relation to the new thing Christ is doing in our lives, in relation to our new identity as members of the Body of Christ, in relation to the forgiveness and love God has given us through Christ. In Christ Jesus there is new creation, the old is gone. Jesus tells a short parable about a house being cleaned out, but he then says if it is not filled with something new the old demons will come right back and with a vengeance. The scripture not only says the old is gone, it says the new has come. If you struggle with anger and with words that are hurtful and tear others down, don't waste the new beginning that Jesus gives. He sweeps your house clean. Now live in a new way. Fill that house. It used to be full of anger and words that hurt. Commit yourself to filling your thoughts and shaping your attitude so that anger is replaced with patience and gentleness and hurtful words are replaced with constructive, supportive, encouraging, helpful and hopeful words. And if you feel stuck, ask for help. Seek out ones who will support you in the change, seek out counseling to deal with anger and the use of your words, fill your mind with God's word, pray, have daily devotions, and allow God to change your life. The new beginning in Christ Jesus is a precious gift. The old is gone. People of God, let us commit ourselves to living into the new life we have been given.

I came across a story called “There’s a hole in my sidewalk.” It is written by Portia Nelson, and she calls it an autobiography in five short chapters. I think it might be helpful in terms of the new beginning we have in Christ Jesus.

“There’s a hole in my sidewalk” Autobiography in five short chapters,
by Portia Nelson

Chapter One

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter Two

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend that I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in this same place.
But, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter Three

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I *see* it is there.
I still fall in ... it's a habit ... but, my eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is *my* fault.
I get out immediately.

Chapter Four

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.

I walk around it.

Chapter Five

I walk down another street.

We all have holes in our sidewalk. With the help of Jesus Christ maybe we will learn to walk down another street. With the help of Jesus Christ maybe we will learn to be imitators of God. With the help of Jesus Christ maybe we will learn to live a life of love, just as Christ loved us. Maybe with the help of Jesus Christ we will learn to put off falsehood and speak truthfully to our neighbor, for after all, we are all members of one body. Maybe with the help of Jesus Christ we will learn to control our anger, so that we can be angry but not give way to sinning. Maybe we will learn not to let the sun go down while we are angry. And maybe we will learn not to let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths. Maybe we will learn to let the only words that come out of our mouths be words that build others up. Maybe, just maybe we will learn to be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ Jesus God forgave us.

Two women went to a service for healing and wholeness. It was at the beginning of Advent, that season in the church year when we prepare our hearts for the birth of the Messiah, for the coming of the Messiah, for the new beginning that comes when God takes on the name Immanuel, the new beginning that becomes real because our God is truly with us. Two women went to a service for healing and wholeness and these two women were stuck. A few years before they had a conflict. Hurtful words were shared. A relationship was broken. We had some time for prayer at this service for healing and wholeness. We lit some candles for people we cared about at this service for healing and wholeness. We heard a nice message about God's love at this service for healing and wholeness. We broke bread and shared the cup of Jesus Christ at this service for healing and wholeness. And then at the end we had a benediction and our pastor said, "May the peace of Christ be with

you.” We responded, “And with you also.” The pastor then said, “Let us pass the peace of Christ.” People started greeting one another with a handshake or a hug, and they exchanged those words about peace. At one point a very interesting thing happened. These two women in conflict had sat at opposite ends of the sanctuary. Now as they were giving and receiving the blessing of peace, they drew near to one another. I noticed it, but they were so busy giving and receiving the blessing they did not notice it. Finally, the two came together. They looked at each other. At that moment they had both walked down a sidewalk with a hole in it for a long time. They knew the way down that sidewalk. But at that moment not only was it time for the old to be gone, it was time for the new to come. They hugged each other. They whispered, “May the peace of Christ be with you.” “And with you also.” The old was gone and the new had come. Because of Jesus Christ these two women found they were able to walk down another street, a new street. I wonder if in that moment our Lord Jesus Christ was smiling and saying, “That is what it looks like to imitate God.”