

“Change My Heart, O God”
Ephesians 4:25-5:2
March 29, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

It is the cry on the heart of every Christian. We long for God to change our hearts and lives to be what he has created us to be. The Holy Spirit is within us, and one result of that is that we want to be holy. But we are also torn, because another part of us wants to sin. This tension resides within every Christian and always will until the day we die. But in the midst of the tension God is at work to change our hearts, and Paul teaches us here how that happens. After giving some general teaching about that in the metaphor of taking off one set of clothes and putting on another, he brings up several practical areas where we are called to be like God. He mentions such things as lying, anger, stealing and damaging speech.

If a friend comes to you and confesses that he has been convicted of the sin of padding his expense account and asks you for help in changing this sinful pattern, how would you seek to help him? Most of us resort to a form of behaviorism in which we recommend focusing on the outward behaviors and leaving the inner attitudes unaddressed. The passage before us today is a common one used by Christian behaviorists, in which they focus on the put off, put on phrases. So the advice of the Christian behaviorist to the friend struggling with stealing through padding his expense account would be to try to recognize the presence of all forms of stealing in life, and immediately address them by putting on an alternative positive behavior. The alternative Paul recommends here is that of hard work with the goal of being generous. So a behaviorist would say, “Stop stealing and start giving to those in need. If you do that for three weeks, the power of this sin will be broken.”

While there is certainly nothing wrong *in* itself with the advice to stop stealing and start giving, there is everything wrong with that advice *by* itself. It leaves Christians worse off instead of better, because one of two things will happen. For the Christian who manages to actually change his behavior, he will feel proud of doing so. For the Christian who doesn't manage to change his behavior, he will feel full of shame and guilt, perhaps even wondering why Christianity doesn't work for him. I want to suggest to you that the behaviorist reading of Ephesians is a misreading. Paul is not telling us just to make a determined effort to change our behavior. Such an effort is necessary, but the critical requirement is that this effort be undertaken out of a heart of trust in the Lord. I want to state the essence of Paul's commands about our behavior by noticing three patterns present in the specific areas Paul brings up.

I. The Dirt of the Old Man Still Pollutes.

Paul names four specific sins here: lying, stealing, anger and what he calls corrupting talk. The assumption is that these sins do not magically disappear once a person converts to Christianity. We will still have to fight against such sins as these. Otherwise, Paul's commands here are meaningless. So let's begin by making sure we understand what these sins refer to. This is especially important since our tendency is to redefine sins so that we escape guilt merely by defining the sin in a way that leaves us guiltless. So stealing is defined as referring only to such things as robbing banks and shoplifting. Falsehood is defined only as something like perjury in a court of law, with all other lying being characterized as "white lies," by which is meant that they are permissible.

So let's start with the command to put away falsehood. Any deviation from the truth results in falsehood. The most common forms of falsehood are not overt lies, but subtle lies that are mixed with the truth, with the result that a wrong impression is given. By this understanding, exaggeration is an example of falsehood. Stating something with complete accuracy, while leaving out one small piece of information by which the wrong impression is given, is falsehood. The salesman who knowingly over-promises is being false. The employee who fudges the truth when asked by the boss if a certain task was completed is being false. Instead of answering truthfully by saying "No," he says, "Almost," when the truth is that he has barely even begun the task. Most of us lie out of fear or out of the desire to be seen as right. You would be shocked to know how many pastors regularly engage in plagiarism by preaching someone else's sermon without giving credit. Many are caught, while others are not. The more we explore this area, the more we see the prevalence of falsehood in our world. Kent Hughes tells the story of the baker who suspected that the farmer from whom he purchased his butter was giving him short weight. He carefully weighed the butter and discovered that it was consistently underweight by an ounce. He was incensed and had the farmer arrested. But the judge threw the case out when the farmer explained that he had no scales, so he used a one-pound loaf of bread purchased from the baker as his counterbalance.

Anger is addressed next, and then expanded down in verse 31. The English translation of verse 26, in which the command is given to **"Be angry, and sin not,"** is a little misleading in that it seems to command anger. John Stott explains that this is a Hebrew idiom from Psalm 4:4 that permits anger and then restricts it. It is true that not all anger is sin. After all, God himself is described as possessing this quality. Paul's focus is not so much on the permitted part of anger, but the forbidden. All of the sins listed in verse 31 relate to verbal abuse that arises from anger. This list addresses both the outburst of anger (indicated by the word "wrath") and the inner, seething attitude (the word "anger").

Stealing is the next sin Paul takes aim at. The word he uses, *klepto* in the original, refers to stealing secretly rather than to more violent forms of robbery. So in our context it would apply to such things as cheating on taxes, stealing from an employer by not giving a full day's work for a full day's pay, an employer stealing from employees by taking advantage of them financially, or overcharging for something just because you can. It could also be applied to things outside of money such as stealing someone's time through being chronically late.

Then last of all is what Paul refers to as "corrupting talk," a general term that means literally "rotten talk." Under this heading would fall a number of sins of the tongue, including gossip, unkind words and boasting words.

II. The Filth Is Worse than You Know.

One of our problems with sin is that we tend to minimize it. We are like the man who confessed to his neighbor that he stole his neighbor's rope, and he was now confessing that and returning the rope. A few days later, he came back and said that he still felt guilty, so now he was also returning the cow that was on the end of the rope. Another way of saying that is that our repentances tend to be shallow, and shallow repentances have no power to change us. They merely want to remove the consequences of our sin as quickly and easily as possible. So the husband who is chronically angry at his wife wants all to be restored with a quick apology, but is not willing to explore the deeper sins of the heart that are fueling his anger.

Paul deals with this tendency to be superficial in our repentance with what I call a sin amplifier. He does two things here. He states the positive quality that we are to put on and he gives a reason for the command. The positive quality serves to deepen our sense of sin by showing us what God requires. For example, he requires not just the cessation of theft, but more positively the presence of a generous heart. **"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"** (v. 28). Someone who steals looks to the community to serve his needs. Paul says that what God requires is a heart of justice, someone who sees himself as needing to serve the community. It's not enough to refrain from anger. It is required that we have hearts that genuinely desire showing kindness and words that reflect such hearts.

Wendy and I were riding bikes this week and chatting about her fitness goals as we were riding. I made the point to her that at our age, her improvements would quickly plateau if she could only get on her bike once or twice a week. That is, of course, a true statement. But it is not a kind statement, because it served to discourage my wife. There was no anger or falsehood in my words, but because they did not come from a heart of kindness

and love, they were sinful and harmful words. That is the force of Paul's positive commands in this passage.

After every command to put off and put on, Paul gives a reason for the command that serves to amplify the seriousness of violating the command. This counters the lie we often tell ourselves when we sin, the lie that little harm has been done. All of these reasons speak of harm that comes to the entire community when we sin. So he tells them to put away falsehood because **“we are members one of another”** (v. 25). Falsehood introduces distrust and erodes the intimacy of the whole body. Like a cancer, the ill effects of falsehood spread beyond the original tumor. If one person violates trust through falsehood, those who are the victims of that falsehood lose their trust not only in the one who lied, but to some extent in others too. The thought is introduced, “I’ve been lied to before; maybe I’m being lied to now as well.”

When Paul forbids sinful anger, the reason given is to **“give no opportunity to the devil”** (v. 27). Anger unlocks the door and lets Satan come in. And when Satan comes in, his work is always to lie and destroy. Imagine there is mass murderer in your neighborhood, and every night he comes to homes after midnight and enters any home where the door is unlocked. You know he will try every single night to gain entry into your house. If you know that, you will take extra precaution to make sure your house is tightly secured every night. Anger fails to secure the community against the murderous work of Satan. It is not true that anger only hurts the one who is angry. It also hurts the community of which that person is a part.

We don't have time to do anything more than note the reasons given in the other two areas. The reason not to steal is that the needy might be helped. The reason to refrain from corrupting talk is that grace might be given to those who hear the kind of speech from you that builds people up. When Paul uses the word “grace” like this, what he usually has in mind is the gift for ministry that God gives. In other words, good speech, in contrast to corrupting speech, helps others discern and be motivated to use their spiritual gifts in serving God.

Why does Paul raise the volume like this on our sin? Does he just want us to feel bad? He does so for the same reason the cancer surgeon brings pain to you by cutting your body, to bring the change and healing we need. As long as we think our sin is small, we will think that we can take care of it by ourselves. There is a false kind of repentance that just wants to put the painful consequences of our sin behind us and get back to normal. But this false repentance doesn't want to deal with the heart. Paul speaks so forcefully about our sin to move us into true repentance of deep heart sins. It is only when we see the great size of it that we will despair of help in ourselves and look instead to God. That brings us to our next point.

III. The Grace of God Transforms All.

We change by repenting of deep, heart sins, and by learning to love by receiving the love of God. This passage is full of the love and grace of God. Note, for example, this command not to grieve the Holy Spirit. It is an amazing side of God's love that he should allow himself to be grieved by our behavior. Any parent knows that when you have children, it is your deep love for them that opens you up to be so deeply hurt by them. God has so attached himself to us. And it is this Spirit who Paul says has sealed us for the day of redemption. As Paul said back in chapter 1, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit when we believe. What that sealing means is that God guarantees that he will finish the good work he has started with us. And this work will be finished on the "day of redemption," a reference to the second appearing of Jesus when he will complete his good work in us by giving us new resurrection bodies.

Then we have the statement of verse 2, where we read that **"Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."** In his excellent commentary on Ephesians, Frank Thielman points out that the phrase "fragrant offering" "was an Old Testament idiom for God's acceptance of a sacrifice because of the sincerity and wholeheartedness of the worshiper." Jesus wholeheartedly offered himself, and God accepted the offering. This offering is "for us."

CONCLUSION:

How does God change us then? We change when we repent of our sins, both the actions and the heart of sin behind the actions, and receive the love of God in Christ to the point that we become loving ourselves. In Psalm 32, David wrote, **"Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you"** (v. 9). The mule will not stay near you just because you want it to. You must either reward the mule or punish the mule to get it to stay near you, and David doesn't want us to stay near God for such motives. He wants us to stay near God because we love him. The only thing that will bring such a love for God is for us to be broken by our great sin, and thrilled by the great love of God for us.

We noted earlier that our sin hurts more than us; it hurts the whole church as well. When we learn to repent of sin and trust God, this process is reversed. We learn then to love and to bring the benefits of love to the whole community. That's what Paul means in verse 32 when he says, **"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."** We learn to reveal the heart of God to others as we experience the heart of God ourselves.