

August 9, 2009

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

“Cracks in the Foundation”

A few weeks back my husband and I accompanied our son on some second viewings of homes for sale. We are all very excited about this step- as he and our grandson will be moving out after living with us for over seven years. They’ll be on their own, but still nearby.

As we looked at homes, my husband was diligent about looking in the basements. Every parsonage we have lived in has had issues with water in the basement. So, I did my best to help him. “What should I look for?” I asked. “Cracks,” he replied, “and water stains”. We hoped to help our son avoid the “water in the basement” problem if at all possible.

There were lots of cracks. I learned some kinds of cracks were more problematic than others. The cracks that might indicate instability in the foundation were the deal breakers.

Cracks are never good. Cracks allow moisture to eat away at surrounding substances. Eventually the integrity of the structure is fully compromised, and it crumbles and collapses.

Sometimes there are little cracks in non-material items, like the human conscience. Our Scripture for today addresses this issue. Certain dynamics in our lives and in the Christian community produce cracks in the foundation of our personal lives and in the foundation of the church.

The letter to the ancient church in Ephesus “is dedicated to detailing how new and different life in the church as the Body of Christ should be from the pagan life previously led by Gentile Christians,” according to Bible commentator K. Elizabeth Rennie. The church is a living body with Christ as its head. This vision calls us to very high standards. Ephesians provides us with specific and concrete examples of what our lives should look like, if we are truly living as Christ directs us.

We are cautioned to guard against five behaviors which can begin the process of crack formation in our lives and in the community of faith. Keep in mind that none were deemed “wrong” or “bad” in the pagan world—but were permissible and even expected in certain situations.

First: Guard against lying and dishonesty.

Ephesians needed to spell this out because first century Christians had been taught lying could be the right thing to do. Plato said, “He may lie who knows how to do it in a suitable time.”

What’s our excuse? After 21 centuries of Christian teaching verse 25’s command to “put away falsehood” is still needed today. A 1997 study of teenagers revealed that 75% admitted to cheating at school. Time magazine once did a guide entitled “How to Tell When a Politician is Lying”:

When politicians cite statistics-don’t believe them. The more precise the statistics, the more suspicious one should be. When politicians deny something- don’t believe them. The more precise the denials, the more likely they are hiding something. And when politicians begin a sentence with “Let me be perfectly frank...”- don’t believe them. They are telling you they aren’t telling the truth. (“Lies, Lies, Lies”, TIME Oct. 9, 1992)

We lie to each other and we lie to ourselves. What we may not remember is that, because Jesus taught “Whatever you do to others, you do to me”---we end up lying to Christ. Which is really, really stupid, since God is omniscient and knows everything. The best practice is just to quit lying, period---- then we won’t end up tangled in an impossible and futile effort to keep track of our lies. Lying makes a crack in our lives and communities that breaks wider and wider as our falsehoods continue.

So. **Don’t lie.**

Second: Be angry, but don’t sin.

Why this phrasing? Why not simply say, “Don’t get angry”? This is because there is such a thing as justifiable anger, rage over injustice and cruelty, and so forth. Jesus got angry. He drove the money-changers from the Temple. He declared those who put stumbling blocks in the path of the vulnerable to be better off dead. But Jesus did not rage at Judas, swear at Peter, shout at Pilate, or yell at the cursing crowds as he walked the road to the cross. In Leonard Sweet’s words: “On Good Friday afternoon, the sun did not go down on an angry Jesus. The time for righteous wrath had passed; the time for love crucified had begun.”

Anger was what got things done in the ancient world. Stories of pagan gods had them zapping their powers in fury all over the place. Anger made men strong warriors. Anger wasn't seen as a bad thing at all.

We might not be that different. We like being outraged and angry. We love to rant about things not being "fair". We keep our boiling pot bubbling on and on and on. We cling to our anger as a friend. We get energy, even exhilaration and power from feelings of anger. THIS makes cracks in our lives and communities that grow larger and larger with the flame of fury. Ephesians addresses this process, warning us that we need to "cool off" from anger, and not let that cooling off go on forever.

So, Be angry, but don't let the sun go down on your anger. Let go of it when the day ends.

Third: Guard against greed; don't steal.

In the ancient world theft was a matter of perspective. Market scales were loaded—everyone knew the rule was "buyer beware". Slaves were expected to steal from their master in order to survive. There was no "Aid to Dependent Children". People stole to live; people stole to have something they coveted and didn't really need. And all were viewed the same. If you could get away with stealing, it was fine. If you couldn't, you were punished. There was no distinction made between thievery to survive and thievery based on greed.

And today? I really do think we believe "more" is "better" in general. We have great difficulty drawing lines and saying "enough". We don't need a house with 3,000 square feet even if we can afford it. We don't need a television in every room. We don't need all the clothes jammed in our closets. Friends, we don't see this as THEFT—but I believe it often is greed.

Ephesians tells us not to steal, but greed is a form of stealing. When we accumulate what we do not need, we don't have as much available to share, to give to those in need. The Bible here clearly states: ***Let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.*** Our blindness to our greed, our stealing, breaks cracks in our lives and in the entire world, as we consume far more than our share of resources. This blindness permits little cracks to break open wider and wider.

Comedian Paul Reiser has a routine that is based on the compulsive greediness and never satisfied neediness that marks our culture:

The problem is, they keep coming up with technology nobody asks for. They believe we want....clocks that make coffee and cameras that talk. We don't want that. You know what I want? I just want to lie down. That's really all I want. If I could lie down for half an hour, I'd be so happy. I want to write a letter. "Dear Japan, STOP!!! We're fine. This is plenty of stuff. Why don't you stop with the [electronics] and work on diseases. Go cure a disease----I'm going to figure out my [new] phone.

So. Guard against greed. Don't steal.

Fourth: Guard against evil talk.

You probably learned, as I did as a child, the saying, "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me." That's a pearl of wisdom we can throw out. Words break our hearts. Words define who we are, when we let them.

I think this area is the absolute worst for most of us. And we know that talk, gossip, hurts people. We know that talk hurts our community of faith. Every church is full of talk that is absolutely poisonous. We need to ask Christ to help us zip our lips. It's so easy to blurt out whatever comes to mind. It's so easy to repeat what we've heard from others. And so much of what we say is just false! It's not even true!

Our Scripture, in verse 27, says *Do not make room for the devil*. The Greek for devil here is also used to describe a "tale-bearer", a "whisperer", a "backbiter", in other Bible passages. So, the verse could be translated, *Do not make room for the Prince of Lies*". Lies may be the most diabolical instruments of all. Lies make the most little insidious cracks in the foundation of everything that matters.

So. Guard against evil talk.

Fifth and Finally: Guard against a stingy spirit.

A stingy spirit cares only about itself. A stingy spirit cannot do what Ephesians commands us. A stingy spirit can't be kind or tenderhearted. A stingy spirit can't forgive. A stingy spirit can't live in love.

A stingy spirit might not do anything overtly WRONG, but it can't do the RIGHT God expects of us. This attitude devastates a community that is trying to do what this passage teaches us: to be imitators of God. A stingy spirit can produce cracks in the foundation of a life, or a community, that lead to the utter destruction of both.

So. Guard against a stingy spirit.

This passage ends with these words: *Live in love, as Christ loved us, and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* It's so easy for us to brush that directive away as impossible. But Paul knows how easy that is for us. So, in this letter, he tells us how to do it, he spells it out, he gives pointers and specifics. That's a start, isn't it? We can start with these five:

Don't lie.

Be angry, but don't sin.

Guard against greed.

Guard against evil talk.

Guard against a stingy spirit.

So, let's give it our best. The Spirit of Christ himself is with us to help us. May we lean on Christ and trust his power. Amen.