

Ephesians: Living in Sync with Reality

Part 10: The Tears of the Spirit

May 19, 2024

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

In Ephesians 4:30 Paul says, ‘Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.’ He says this in a section describing all the ways we can tear each other apart—lying, anger, stealing, foul speech and malice.

When we are engaging in a lifestyle that fosters division, the tears of the Spirit fall.

Not Just ‘What’ but ‘How’:

Ephesians is divided neatly into two sections; chapters 1-3 are the ‘what’ chapters and chapters 4-6 are the ‘how’ chapters.

In Christian tradition, a great deal of tension is placed between ‘what’ and ‘how’. Some Christians emphasize the ‘what’, the truth of the Gospel, but can be criticized for doing it in angry and demeaning ways. Some Christians emphasize the ‘how’, the love of the Gospel, but can be criticized for watering down the exclusive truths declared in Scripture.

But the gospel is both a ‘what’ and a ‘how’.

Ephesians 4:25-6:9 is seen as a commentary on Ephesians 4:17-24, where Paul tells us to ‘take off’ our old lives and ‘put on’ our new lives. As in, don’t just conform internally to the truth, but show it.

In our communication, experts say that our words only account for 7% of communication, 38% is in the tone of our voice and 55% is in our body language.¹

Eugene Peterson once said that the pastoral task is saying God accurately.² This is true of all Christians and, to extend the metaphor, this means that our ‘tone’ and ‘body language’ will be a massive component in our communication of the truth of the Gospel.

When reading sections of scripture like Ephesians 4:25-32, we can be tempted to move quickly. But these practical sections are excellent places to do a bit of a ‘spiritual check-up’ on ourselves.

¹ Based on the research of Dr. Albert Mehrabian found in Chris Voss, *Never Split the Difference*.

² Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, pg. 172.

1. Lying

Each of Paul's encouragements follow the general form of giving a negative behavior, a positive counterexample, and then a motivation. He goes from what tears us apart to what brings us together and why we should do it.

Paul begins his admonitions on 'the new kind of life' with lying and truth telling:

"...each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body."

a. What is it about lying that tears us apart?

Compulsive liars are led to a place where they believe their own deceptions. This demonstrates the danger of lying, because it is not just a convenient avoidance of truth but spreading *unreality*.

In Jesus' primary teaching on the devil, He calls Satan the 'Father of Lies' (John 8:44). John Mark Comer once said:

"Lies, that come in the form of deceptive ideas, are the devil's primary method of enslaving human beings and entire human societies in a vicious cycle of ruin that leads us further and further east of Eden."³

Our society is steeped in lies, lies about what is good and what is evil, lies about God, lies about what a person is. And the result, that is tangible, is we are being torn apart.

b. What brings us together?

Speaking truthfully to our neighbors. It is not enough to not lie. The speech of a follower of Jesus is straightforward. Our yes is yes, and our no is no. We speak the truth to each other in love. And as we see throughout the Psalms, even those difficult feelings and experiences get airtime before God and before our trusted brothers and sisters.

c. Why?

Because we belong to each other. If lying is a cancer and we are a body, we spread the sickness of unreality collectively when we buy into it personally. Our greatest good, and the greatest good of others, comes when we deal with what is true—true about God, true about the world, and true about our own hearts.

So, the Spirit offers us an opportunity to reflect:

"Where are there vestiges of unreality in my life?"

³ John Mark Comer, *Live No Lies*, pg. 40.

2. Anger

A woman sits down beside a man on a plane. She sees him text his wife: “just about to leave, love you.”

But then he opens another thread with another woman’s name at the top and types: “just about to take off, can’t wait to see you, love you.”

The woman pulls out her phone and tells the man she’ll post his picture everywhere so his wife will find out.

The man replies: “yes, my wife will be disappointed to know I love our daughter.”

Paul admonishes believers:

“In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”

a. What is it about anger that tears us apart?

Paul’s little saying on anger deals with two distinct types—flare ups and slow burns.

Our ‘flare ups’, the moments when anger takes over our minds and bodies, are a result of a God-given defense mechanism. That anger can help us protect ourselves and our boundaries.

But each of our brains and bodies determines threat levels differently. We can overreact because of our past.

Slow burns are those moments when we flare up and instead of calming down, we put wood on the fire. We let the stories roll in our heads—“yeah, I’m mad and I’m right to be mad because she _____ or he _____.” And on and on.

b. What can bring us together?

Paul tells us not to let the sun go down on our anger. This seems to be an invitation to work on our anger, *right now*. To treat processing our anger as something of primary importance.

c. Why?

When we keep putting wood on our angry fires the devil gets an invitation into our hearts, our families, our cultures.

Many Christians speak of the decline of western society. But top of mind is usually issues of morality—sexuality, the loss of family values, and so on.

But what if the way the enemy was weaseling his way into our culture was not through the front door, but through the back.

What if it is our anger Satan is using to tear us apart?

Imagine what would happen if everybody just calmed down so they could have a real conversation. Imagine if our politicians didn't have to yell and scream to be heard. Imagine our church's ability to reach others if they find peaceful peacemakers.

The Spirit gives us an opportunity to ask:

“Where am I holding on to unprocessed anger?”

3. Stealing

Next, Paul admonishes us against stealing:

“Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.”

a. What is it about stealing that tears us apart?

Theft undermines a just society. It drives up prices for everyone.

Paul's statement isn't just about avoiding theft, it's about the dignity and generosity.

Everyone should do something useful with their own hands.

We are here to 'tend and keep' the planet (Genesis 2:15). We are not made just to take up space and get by, but to do useful things. This is part of our human dignity—not matter our age, stage, or ability.

But 'useful' is not defined in the worldly sense. The Greek used here is just 'good', do good things with your hands. Change diapers. Chop wood. Carry water. Hug. Hold the hurting.

b. What can bring us together?

Generosity. The result of our good work is to be able to give something to those in need.

Intriguing that Paul pairs this with an admonition against stealing. The difference between a generous life and a stingy life is the difference between justice and theft. Powerful. Our resources are not our own, they are on loan from God and for the good of others.

As somebody who has been a recipient of that generosity, when the body does this it is stunning.

The Spirit asks us:

Where am I denying my own dignity? Where am I being stingy with what God has entrusted to me?

4. Foul Speech

If you were to think of the physical attributes of a 'powerful person' what would you think of? Large biceps? Rippling quadriceps? Perhaps you are snarky, and you'd think of a big ol' noggin.

Scripture points to the tongue.

“The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” Proverbs 18:21

Paul gives us but a short sentence:

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

a. What is it about negative speech that tears us apart?

The phrase ‘unwholesome’ refers to rotten fruit or stinking fish. It’s about those names and words we use to destroy and tear down.

It may be an extreme perspective, but some Christian traditions go so far as to see any negative speech they are the recipients of as a ‘curse’. God created through language and as people made in his image, our words have power. Negative words stick to us. They do something, they make something evil in us.

b. What can bring us together?

To use our tongue to encourage each other.

c. Why?

Because just as easily as we can destroy with our words, we can build up.

The Spirit asks us to consider:

“How am I using my words?”

5. Malice

As nice as Canadians are supposed to be, one of the most popular political bumper stickers is an expletive and the name of our Prime Minister.

Paul admonishes us:

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

a. What is it about malice that tears us apart?

All the negative terms Paul has said until now get one overarching title: malice.

Malice is the opposite of love. To love is, biblically, to seek the good of the other. To harbor malice is to seek the ill of the other.

So, when someone dehumanizes someone else and treats them as the enemy, that's malice. When people rob, lie, and physically hurt, that's malice.

Now, absolutely, we can challenge someone's decision making. Don't get me wrong, the gospel is not a gospel of 'niceness'. You don't have to like everyone.

b. What can bring us together?

When we approach others with kindness and compassion. Compassion in Scripture is the word picture 'tender-hearted'. God the Father is tender-hearted towards us, He knows our faults, but He also knows they are there.

Like the Father, we should seek to understand and love others, even those we disagree with.

c. Why?

We have been forgiven so we should forgive. Our status as forgiven should bestow upon us the humility necessary to open our hearts to others.

The Spirit offers us an opportunity to ask:

"Where is there malice in my heart?"

Conclusion:

The greatest grief of the Spirit, the greatest blasphemy against Him, is to deny His work in our lives. This passage, as Pastor Dave said last week, is not 'self-help' it is 'God-help'.

So, wherever the Spirit has spoken to you, talk back. Ask for help. Trust His leading.

Discussion and Reflection Questions

Open Up

If you were going to list five things that grieved God, what would you list?

Dig-In

Read Ephesians 4:25-32.

1. How have you been taught to think about 'grieving the Holy Spirit of God'? At first glance, what would that phrase make you think of?
2. In the misguided tension between 'what' and 'how'—between 'truth' and 'love'—which direction have you leaned? Why?
3. Where have you seen lying, anger, stealing, foul speech or malice affect community negatively?
4. Give the passage another read, asking people to listen to the Spirit for themselves. What might the Spirit be saying to you? What is He encouraging you to consider or work on?
5. What does it look like to partner with the Spirit in your growth?

Prayer:

During prayer, consider leaving empty space for people to confess to the Lord where they feel they have not met the standard Paul is laying out. Pray for help to become more like Jesus.