



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"New Life Together" (Worthy Series) - Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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Years ago, before I came to First Prez, I worked for the Bible Institute of Hawaii. One of the classes I taught was on Psalms. And one of my favorite portions of that class was to teach about the lament psalms. I enjoyed talking about those psalms because I felt that within them there was so much authenticity and realness. Contained within them were honest and tough words to God about pain, sorrow, and anger. And there were also some straight up words from God to people about sin and error.

When I can live in such openness, honesty, and authenticity in my speech it always gives me reassurance that I can move closer in relationship—whether it is with God or people.

One time we were studying Psalm 88, which is a psalm by a man who is experiencing much pain and trouble in life and is blaming it all on God. After reading this psalm, a woman in class said, "I can never pray that to God." "But," I said, "God wants us to speak truthfully to Him." She continued, "No, I couldn't do that. It just wouldn't be nice."

Sometimes in our life together as Christians the enemy of a good relationship is not something like conflict, but "niceness." I say that

because niceness never risks anything, never challenges anything, and thus, never really changes anything or grows anything.

One of the reasons for this is that niceness often hedges on the truth. And if we are going to have a real, deep, close relationship with God or people, then by definition things like Truth, Risk, Challenge, and Change will be part of the journey. As one writer put it, "The first rule of the spiritual life is accuracy—telling the truth." (Charles Williams).

Today we are going to continue in our study of Ephesians and what it means to live a life worthy of our calling. We are looking at how we should live in a manner that increasingly reflects God's intended purposes for our lives individually and communally.

We said last week that part of God's intended purposes for our lives is that we, "*become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...and to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*" (Ephesians 4:13 and 24).

A central issue for moving ahead into such important and lofty places is being those things—in and through relationships. Because the

fact is, to be like Christ is to be like Christ—with others. Let me be honest. When I'm not around other people I'm Mother Teresa in pants. But as soon as people get around me, then there goes my Nobel Prize...if you know what I mean!

Simply put, we cannot be mature in Christ or like God unless we are like God—with people.

Much of what Paul writes about here deals with things like love and compassion, but he also gets deep about anger and falsehood in community.

First of all he says in 4:25, "*Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.*" Note the "therefore." This refers back to what we have been talking about in all the previous verses. In other words, what he is about to say is based on and for the purposes of the great goals of pursuing maturity, attaining to the full measure of the fullness of Christ, and of being made new to be like God in righteousness and holiness. Live into these things.

Now one of the things I want to point out here is that we cannot build each other up into maturity apart from truth.

**P**aul already expressed something similar to this in 4:15 when he wrote, “*Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ.*”

Last week I spent a lot of time talking about growing up in all things, but a big part of the pathway there includes “speaking the truth in love.”

Actually, I should mention that the phrase “*speaking the truth in love*” slightly lessens the impact of the words in Greek. It is literally, in the original language of the New Testament, “*truthing in love we will in all things grow up into Christ...*” The sentence does not contain the word “speaking.”

The phrase “*truthing in love*” has the idea of maintaining truth in love in *both* speech and life. So we are not just *saying* truthful things to each other, we are *living* truthfully with each other. Without this going on we can hardly mature and grow deep emotionally, relationally, or soulfully—as God intended.

It has well been said that “truth without love is brutality, but love without truth is hypocrisy.” And this, I think, is part of what is behind some of Paul’s imperative in verse 25 when he says “put off falsehood.”

I like the translation “falsehood” instead of “lying” because this makes it harder for me to ignore what he is saying. It is very likely that few of us here are flat out liars very often; except, of course, when a woman asks, “Do I look fat in this dress?” Then we are all liars. But any and every human being struggles at some level with falsehood.

What makes putting off falsehood or speaking the truth in

love difficult? We all know it’s the right thing, but we all struggle with it in some degree. Anyone else struggle with being fully truthful?

Part of the struggle may be because few of us have seen this combination of truth and love lived out very well. So the lack of modeling does play a part.

Another reason is often “The Nice Factor” thing I mentioned earlier. We know that sometimes when we combine the two someone might get wounded. Sometimes speaking the truth creates negative feelings, and who ever wants people to feel bad?

When the truth comes as encouragement then truth feels great. But when it comes to us as correction, challenge, confrontation—then not so great. Anyone know what I’m talking about?

Let me be honest about something. To speak what I would call Soul Truth—that is, truth that grows a soul, truth that is often tough truth, has always been a real challenge for me, even as a preacher.

This is mostly because I hate to make people feel bad. I wish I did this simply because I was a nice guy, but if truth be told below my “Niceness” is a deep struggle with people pleasing. And if I speak the truth to you about something that may need change, challenge, or correction, not only may you not like what I said, but you may not like me!

So my avoidance of *truthing in love* is not really about being nice. It’s about anxiety. It’s about ego and insecurity. It’s about the fear of my “likeability” stock plummeting. It’s

about worrying that if I speak the truth you might think I am a jerk. Some of you are thinking, “Steve, you passed jerk weeks ago.” My point is, if I’m honest, “*truthing in love*” can really cost you.

But what is the cost if we don’t speak and live the truth? What is the cost—to me as a person, or us as a community, or our friendships, families, marriage, and workplaces; our witness in the world—if we dance around the truth and live in falsehood?

Here’s reality. One of the real casualties when we hedge and dodge and avoid the truth between us is the death of *real* relationship.

Think of it this way: here’s something you’ll never hear, “My friends and I have these great relationships even though we are not totally honest with each other.” Or: “My marriage is really awesome even though we are not very real with each other.”

Just hearing that, you know in your gut that can’t be true or right. But we often live as if it can we can actually live this way. And the reason why such things cannot be true is because of love.

If you are in any kind of loving relationship be it friendship, dating, marriage, parenting, etc., then real love demands truth.

Listen to this quote by Christian writer, David Benner: “Love cannot ignore things that are self-destructive in the loved one...The true soul friend will not accept our self-deceptions, but will gently and firmly confront us with our soul blindness.

**S**oul friends want each other to settle for nothing short of becoming the whole and holy person they were called to be.”

Do you think he is on to something here? Can you now see why when I started this talk I was so down on niceness? Niceness would never go to these lengths for people. There is something vital to our journey toward wholeness and holiness that requires truth being spoken and truth being received and embraced.

When we come to value this idea; when such a value comes to characterize the ethos of our relationships—our marriages, family life, workplace, small groups, etc., we will have a way better shot of being like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Listen to Proverbs 15:31-32, *“The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. Those who ignore instruction despise themselves, but those who listen to reproof acquire understanding.”*

We all want to be “among the wise” or be people who “acquire understanding.” But sometimes that wisdom and understanding will come only through the life-giving reproof and correction of others. My question is, “Are you game for that?”

This is why I like the word coined by a psychologist: *Carefrontation*. We don’t normally hold caring and confronting together as partners. For some of us like me, who struggle with people pleasing, it sounds like a paradox. But the idea here is that we take the steps to confront each other because we care about the other. We care about their

growth, Christlikeness, their wholeness and holiness. We can “carefront” because we care about the health of our relationship.

For me, the most basic meaning for confrontation is simply this: Addressing what needs to be addressed. That’s really the whole basis to the idea. And we address what needs to be addressed so that greater health and growth is an outcome; that wrongs are righted and a strong relationship is created. It’s not at all about telling someone off or getting in someone’s face.

Reality is that when two or more people are gathered together, there you will have conflict. If there is more than you in the room you will have many opportunities for hurt, pain, misunderstanding, disagreement, etc. To avoid this you have to avoid people altogether. A healthy relationship is not one that is *conflict free*, but is *conflict faced*.

After all, Jesus was perfect and He still had conflict with those He loved, so conflict just comes with being in relationship. And when we don’t know how to do confrontation well—when we cannot put off falsehood or speak the truth in love with each other—then there is always a cost.

Listen to some research on this. In 2008 U.S. employees spent 2.8 hours per week dealing with conflict. This amounts to approximately \$359 billion in paid hours. And there is this: 25 % of employees say that the *avoidance* of conflict resulted in sickness or absence from work.

So what Paul is advocating is not only vital for church living, it is vital for business, for the workplace,

for life in general. For some of us, maybe many of us, confrontation is often associated with things like being mean or forceful. Or perhaps it often involves yelling, telling someone off, or perhaps shutting down and shutting off relationships, etc.

But these things arise exactly because confrontation has been *avoided*. That is, these things arise because we have let the need for confrontation, the need for addressing what needs to be addressed lag so long that now we are so jacked up with negative emotions that we don’t confront. Instead we spew anger, frustration, hurt, pain, etc. Or we shut down, leave the small group, change jobs, change churches, etc.

This is why, in part, Pastor Dan always preaches about and lives out, keeping short accounts with people—not waiting until more negative emotions pile up and finally force us to speak up or act out in anger. The trick to all this is to be *immediate* with confronting someone, which will take courage, risk, and much self-awareness, but it is vital for our soul’s health and the health of a community.

So if we want to help each other grow up into the image of Christ we need to be truth speakers and truth embracers.

Now before we move on, let me ask this question for those of you in leadership (e.g. in church, business, education, law, medicine, home life, etc.). Do you create the culture, the ethos around you, where the truth can be spoken? Do you make it easy for others to speak the truth *to you*?

If not, it can lead to a culture of gossip and division and fear and walking on eggshells. Because here is the psychological deal beneath Paul's exhortation: people will express their differences, their pain, their hurt, their frustrations, etc. one way or the other. It is part of being human to be able to express these things.

And if we as friends, leaders, spouses and parents do not provide a means to do it in a healthy way, then it will come out in unhealthy ways. It may come out as sarcasm, closing off relationships, or creating relational distance, or passive-aggressive acts (like not showing up at an appointment that they made with you and saying they forgot). This is why it is vital to create a culture where truth can be spoken openly.

So whenever we uphold this value of speaking the truth in love, the Spirit of God is at work with us. But whenever we live in falsehood, then Satan goes to work. And he also goes to work, perhaps even more so, through our anger.

For the sake of time, I'm going to bunch the anger verses together so we can deal with all of them at once.

Let's read verse 26-27 and 29-31, *"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...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...Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, shouting and slander, along with every form of malice."*

Does anyone ever struggle with these at any time in your life?

To be honest, for me, (and you may be surprised by this) I'm a shouter. And I'm embarrassed to confess how my shouting in anger has created more than its fair of tension and anxiety and pain for my family. I could tell you a host of stories.

But for now let me just make a few quick points about anger. First, anger in and of itself is not a sin. Jesus got angry at the Temple and toward the Pharisees.

Anger is simply a basic emotion that if we shut off completely, in the name of "being godly", we will hurt our souls. Because sometimes it can be a very appropriate feeling. This issue is what we do with it that makes it good or bad. Do we express it like a bomb blowing off toward others? Do we turn it inward and let it burn a whole in our gut? These ways of dealing with anger are indeed wrong and unhealthy.

I believe we have been given the capacity for anger much like we have given the capacity for pain. In other words, it can be a healthy warning sign that now something is wrong and needs to be addressed. Anger can be a healthy emotional response to injustice.

It could lead us to acts of goodness such as protecting someone being abused. But it could also lead us to harm and lead to all that lousy stuff we see in verse 31.

Second, anger is very often a secondary emotion. What I mean by that is anger often comes out of other deeper emotions like hurt, sadness, anxiety, fear, or disrespect. It's like how we act when our kids come home too late at night. When

they come through the door we yell at them in anger. But the real issue fueling our anger is our fear, our anxiety about why they were late. When we get to the primary emotions we have a real chance of healing and change.

Generally speaking, when women feel fear, hurt, and sadness, they often move toward tears. When men experience those things they often move toward anger. This is why in order for us to get out of the funk of verses 26-31, we need to learn the discipline of what I call: face, embrace, trace, and replace.

**Face** – What I mean here is to be strenuously honest about your anger, bitterness, shouting, and unwholesome speech. As we said last week, "Maturity comes from confronting what has to be confronted in ourselves." (Esther DeWaal).

You see folks, if I don't face my anger and angry actions then everyone else around me will be wearing what I'm not be facing. Everyone at work, at home, in small group, etc. will be wearing my harshness, bitterness and unwholesome words—because anger always leaks out.

**Embrace** – What I mean here is to own and take responsibility for what is there. As I teach people often, don't *B Dr. Me*. This is an acronym that means: Don't **blame**, **deny**, **rationalize**, **minimize**, or **excuse** your anger.

For example, "I'm not angry! I'm just a little frustrated!" (minimizing). "If you would stop nagging me I wouldn't be angry!" (blame). You get the idea.

**Trace** – Reflect *deeply* about what may be beneath the anger. Get at what's really feeding it. Is it from a bad day at work, feelings of anxiety, sadness, hurt, rejection, feeling disrespected, etc.? And then, replace it.

**Replace** – Replace your verse 31 behaviors with right actions. For example, confess your sin, ask for forgiveness, seek reconciliation, meet with an accountability partner, get counseling, etc. Speak the truth to others about what is there. Share your sadness, anxiety, or hurt feelings of disrespect.

For example, speak the truth and say to a friend who offended you: "When you made that sarcastic remark about me being late again to a meeting, that hurt pretty good. Can we talk about that?" To the one you offended: "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Will you please forgive me?"

Satan can't get a foothold when facing, embracing, tracing, and replacing, becomes a soulful habit.

Furthermore, Paul said in verse 29, *"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."*

If you want helpful, wholesome, benefitting words to come out of your mouth than take advice from James. James 1:19-20 says, *"You must understand this, my beloved: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."*

Remember how earlier, in Ephesians 4:24, we read that part of our purpose in life is "to be like God

in true righteousness and holiness." Well, apparently quick listening and slowness to anger is vital to living into that righteousness.

Why is being quick to listen and slow to speak so vital? Let's put it this way, have you ever been the victim of "quick speaking"? Have you ever had an argument or dinner conversation or a meeting where the other person talks over you? Or tries to "fix" or advise you before you fully finish sharing? Or finishes your sentences for you (I do this all the time to my wife—it drives her crazy!).

I see this all the time in couples counseling. I ask the spouse a question and as they are answering the other jumps in to correct or explain further what "really happened" in a situation. You know, in all these years of pastoring and working with couples I have never heard a spouse say, "Sweetie, thanks so much for talking over me. It's really helping us right now."

My point is, quick listening is vital because it gives space and time for other things to come into play—besides our anger, besides our deep need to defend ourselves, besides our need to make a point. But quick listening gives us instead, the opportunity to make peace. God does not need us to be "point-makers." He wants us to be "peace-makers."

Proverbs 18:13 may help us here: *"If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame."*

If you want benefit others, build up others, then listen first and listen fully. Listening first and listening fully sends the message to the other that what they are going through, what they want to say to us is important.

Folks, it is impossible for people to feel valued if they don't feel heard.

When I was first engaged, my wife and I got premarital counseling. In one of our first sessions the counselor asked me about my background. As I began to tell my story his head started to bob up and down. In a very short time he simply fell asleep! After a bit, his head snapped back up and he said, "Well, Steve, thank you for sharing that."

I couldn't believe it. As you can imagine, trust went down and my walls came up. All because I didn't feel valued because I was not heard.

Bottom line: The writers of biblical wisdom understand that listening has a tremendous role in: Calming hostility; healing wounds; resolving conflict; and creating relationship.

As a people of God, we are called, as Paul says in 5:2, *"...to live a life of love."* As theologian Paul Tillich once wrote, *"The first duty of love is to listen."*

It's funny, but I know so many people who will take a bullet for their families. They would move mountains to provide for their family, but won't make the simple effort to really listen to them. Being a good listener can take any relational endeavor to the next level. And they make our words, as Paul says, helpful, wholesome, and beneficial to others.

Brothers and sister, live a life of love. Let the love of God not only give us warm and fuzzy feelings, but let such love empower us to speak truth when it is difficult to do so. Let it give us the courage to face ourselves and deal with the reality of

our soul's condition. Let it give us strength enough to let go of our anger even when we feel like we have the right to hang on to it.

And may the love and power of God shape in us into being quick listeners and slow speakers so that people feel truly experience the love of Christ through us. Because when we do such things, we do indeed live a life worthy of our calling to which we are called. Let's pray.

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*Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org). The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*