

## How to Act

### Ephesians 4:25-5:2

<sup>25</sup> So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. <sup>26</sup> Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, <sup>27</sup> and do not make room for the devil. <sup>28</sup> Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. <sup>29</sup> Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, <sup>32</sup> and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. <sup>1</sup> Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, <sup>2</sup> and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

This is the second in our series of messages from the book of Ephesians. Last week our scripture was about how Christ has prepared us for ministry by giving us gifts through the Holy Spirit. At first glance, this passage looks like a list of rules for the new life of being a Christian. Echoing the Decalogue or Ten Commandment, Paul lists acts that are prohibited to Christians before he tells the behaviors Christians are to embrace. However, the key to the passage is at the beginning. The new believers are to "put off" or "strip away" the old self so that God can give them the new. This idea is used in verse 22 of this chapter: "You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self." This fundamental repentance and renewal comes at baptism and is a prerequisite to doing these tasks listed by Paul. The behavioral changes coming from our conversion is the theme of today's scripture.

We go from the old self to the new creation in baptism. As we go under the waters of death, the old self is killed off and buried with Christ and we are raised with Christ into newness of life. In the early practices of church worship, the baptismal candidates faced the west and renounced the forces of darkness. They then turned to the east at sunrise and proclaimed their allegiance to the light of the world. They literally stripped off their old clothing and put on the new garments of being adopted by Christ as children of God after they were baptized. They were then brought into the community of faith.

In baptism the old self is killed off, and the new self is raised. In baptism, the self-centered life is set aside, washed away and a new life of trust in God begins. The Episcopal liturgy expresses this process in the following prayer: "We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit." Because we are reborn, the habits of the old self have no dominion over us. The Holy Spirit enables the baptized to put off the "evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God" as well as giving the inclination and will to "put your whole trust in [Jesus Christ's] grace and love." **G. Porter Taylor**

The passage lists virtues and duties that mark the transformed and transforming community. First we must be as truthful with each other as we are with ourselves. The call to truth as a hallmark of community is a call to honesty about the individual and corporate self.

Another hallmark is how we deal with our anger. [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) currently lists more than forty thousand religious book titles that touch on the subject of anger. That number testifies to the level of difficulty we have with this emotion. "Be angry" (v. 26) is not an imperative; it is an acknowledgment that anger will be present. The ways to deal with anger without sinning begin with dealing with it today (before sundown). The reconciled community must practice reconciliation especially when this frightening emotion is raised, and that reconciliation begins with naming it.

Another concern for community is stealing. Former thieves are to invest their time and energy in self-support so that they may be in a position to join the community's care for the destitute. The work ethic itself is transformed into participation in Christ's ministry.

Another trait for Christians is to cease speaking evil. What is spoken is to be for building up, for occasioning grace.

Isaiah 63:10 warns God's people that their rebellion has "grieved his holy spirit." Paul told Christians not to grieve the Spirit because it is the Spirit that seals them. The Spirit marks us as Christ's property as surely as the tattoos of slaves or soldiers marked them.

We are to be reconciled to each other, in so Christians have the opportunity to participate in the work of Christ.

As Christ's surrender to God was motivated by love, so Christians are invited to follow suit. We offer our attitudes and behaviors to God from a desire to respond pleasingly to the love of God. We offer ourselves in imitation of the divine rescuing love and the sacrificial love of Christ. **Paul V. Marshall**

The works described by Paul are not merit badges set out for us to achieve. Rather, they are marks of the new life given to us in baptism. If we are a thief, we are to turn away from stealing and turn toward "working honestly with their own hands" (v. 28). We are to strip away all "bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice" and instead we are to put on being "kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another" (4:31-32).

We are to do these things for at least three reasons. First, we are a new creation. We have come through the waters of baptism and are commanded not to go back to the slavery of sin. Once the baptized person puts on the new white garment, the old clothes are cast away. In like manner, Paul is calling for the new Christians to remember who they now are in Christ and to focus on the way to life, instead of turning back to the ways of death. As we recollect what Christ has done for us, we remember the continuing work of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to stay focused on the light. God gives us the capacity to turn around as well as to refrain from turning back. Of course, we have free will, but we no longer make our choices alone. Again, the Episcopal baptismal liturgy reads: "by the sealing of your Holy Spirit you have bound us to your service. Renew in these your servants the covenant you made with them at their Baptism. Send them forth in the power of that Spirit to perform the service you set before them."

Second, we are now part of the body of Christ, and that membership gives us strength to do what is set before us. As part of this body, we encourage one another and help one another to live out our baptismal promises. Paul says, "Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another" (v. 25). That is, we all are in this enterprise of being church together. Therefore, we are to learn from each other and help each other.

Paul was calling for those early Christians not merely to worship God in Christ, but through the Holy Spirit to imitate Christ in their own behavior, for the sake of the Christ's church and the sake of the world. They were to forgive as they had been forgiven. They must turn from wrangling and slander and turn instead toward kindness and forgiveness for Christ's sake. We imitate Christ in hopes that through the Holy Spirit we will grow into the likeness of Christ and that God will use us as instruments to bring in God's realm of peace, justice, and mercy.

Finally, Paul called upon them not to "grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (v. 30). Christianity is an ongoing encounter with the living, loving God in Christ Jesus. The nature of love is to love and to grow in that love. No one willingly disappoints the beloved; certainly no one makes the beloved grieve. We do not wish to do anything to grieve God, because of our love for God in Christ. Therefore, we joyfully turn toward those acts that bring God joy and away from those that do not, because our individual and corporate focus is to serve Christ by pleasing him.

Therefore, while at first glance this passage resembles a long list of prescribed and proscribed behaviors, in actuality it is centered on the converted life of the baptized. **G. Porter Taylor**

Throughout our passage, the author has set up contrasts: avoid doing destructive behaviors (lying, stealing, evil speech); rather, do edifying behaviors (truth telling, working to contribute, edifying speech). These scriptures enjoins us to discard spiritual clutter to make room for the spiritual collectibles. The six discards cause discord: wrath,

bitterness, anger, clamor, slander, and malice. They act as a suit of armor protecting the real flesh-and-blood us. But church is not a gladiatorial event. In contrast, kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness facilitate unity and cooperation, the way a flesh-and-blood body works (4:15-16) or a healthy family. Armor less, we are more vulnerable, but we finally have a real shot at intimacy, at knowing and being known.

There is no doubt that intimacy will involve hurt; hence, the necessity for forgiveness. No meaningful relationship can function without it. Why should we forgive? We could make a list of possible psychological and sociological benefits, but it comes down to the fact that this is what God does in Christ (4:32). As God's "beloved children" (5:1), we do not just love God, praise God, worship God, thank God. We also aim to imitate God (5:1), minding and then closing the gap between God's behavior and our own.

To imitate God, only one thing is needful: kenotic love (5:2), love that sacrifices for the good of others. If we get that, we get it all. **Jaime Clark-Soles**

Like those of old, we are to show the world that we are members of the body of Christ by the ways we act!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).