

"Imitators of God"

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The Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. 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. 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.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Prayer.

"Be angry, but do not sin,"

the Apostle Paul quotes the Psalmist.¹

In pre-Freudian days

Paul understands, as did the Psalmist,

The fact that anger is a normal, healthy human emotion.

"Be angry, but do not sin,"

This is not a call to anger, mind you,

Rather, this is a call to refrain from the sin that takes advantage of chronic, unresolved, festering anger.

If left too long, anger becomes the fertile ground for sin to grow.

As Paul write from the confinement of his underground dungeon cell

(which I visited this past February)

Out of sight, but adjacent to, the magnificent Roman Forum,

The very symbol of unity, power and strength,

He was envisioning with his mind's eye,

Drawing from his most fond memories of the players from the community of faith in far-away Ephesus,

The conflict and strife that resulted from the clash of cultures

- former Jews and former Gentiles -

¹ Psalms 4:4

being thrown together
expected to behave as Christians,
being told to hold hands and sing "Kum Ba Ya,"
living with the expectation that they will be like their master, Jesus.
The assumption was, and is today,
That if anyone should be able to get along, it should be Christians!
Disciples of Jesus, called to love, called to be united as one ...
Are supposed to exhibit better behavior
Than the rest of the planet.
Don't you think?!

Yet, Christ's disciples from a Jewish background
Are arguing that Christians must be circumcised and adhere to strict kosher law.
Other disciples, from a non-Jewish background
Argue that Christ frees us from the law by his grace,
So "eat, drink and be merry! Sin, sin, and sin again, because in the end, you will be forgiven."
Other Christians are so focused on the imminent return of Christ
- the second coming, or Parousia -
that they argue for urgent preparation,
to be ready for when Christ will fulfill his ascension promise:
to return to earth like a thief in the night
and to judge the quick and the dead.
From their point of view,
It is more important to be ready
Than to love your God, neighbor, and self.
Three cultures clashing not enough of a mess for you?
Then throw into the mix the Gnostic believers;
Those who ascribed to the growing mistaken belief that,
Simply put, Jesus wasn't God, rather, they believed he was wholly human,
And that one could attain salvation solely through intellectual exercise.
Throw in language differences – Greek, Latin, Arabic, Egyptian, Persian
Geographical differences – Christians brought together from all corners of the Roman empire by
this wonderful travel nexus, the port city of Ephesus;
And even to us western Americans,
Removed by two millennium and one ocean and sea,
We can understand the church in Ephesus
Was probably filled with division, discontent, and anger.

"Be angry, but do not sin,"
Six words to live by, don't you agree?
These words of the Psalmist work perfectly for the volatile situation in Ephesus
Just as they work well for us today.
Be angry about abortion, but don't kill a doctor who performs abortions.

Be angry about 9/11, but do not seek "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" revenge.
Be angry about the Bernard Madoff's of this world, but this doesn't give anyone a license to rob or steal from someone else.
Be angry at your spouse, your son or daughter ...
Be angry at your pastor, the church, or the bishop ...
Be angry at your party, your representative, or your congressman ...
Be angry, be angry, be angry ...
But do not sin.
Do not sin.
Don't sin.

What is needed is the discipline to bridle one's anger
To first allow it,
But then to reign it in and get it under control,
So it doesn't become chronic,
Seething,
Festering,
Ripe for temptation and sin to take root.
Where does this discipline come from? You may ask.
It comes from a life lived in the imitation of God,
The Apostle Paul rightly observes.
We examine carefully how God has acted in the past
And we use that information to serve as a guide for how we will act in the future.
We grow into the Body of Christ,
As we heard last week,
We live as he lived, die as he died, and rise again, even as he rose from the sealed garden tomb.
The Apostle looks back from his own experience as a Hellenistic Jew,
Blinded and converted on the Damascus road, in spite of the fact that he persecuted Christians,
He marries his experience with the scriptures he has carefully studied and learned since his conversion,
And he creates a road map for us, if you will,
Using these letters, these epistles as a guide
For how disciples of Christ should live and grow in faith.

Speak the truth to your neighbors, Paul correctly teaches.
Nothing undermines Christian credibility like a lie.
Likewise, watch what you say.
Clean up that potty mouth!
Don't let evil talk come out of you.
Use only words that build up,
That spread grace, the grace of God, with whomever you speak.
Don't let the sun set on your anger.

Limit it to no more than to the end of the day.
Don't obsess about it
Anger now has a deadline
... get over it! Move on.
Give up stealing.
When one takes something that doesn't belong to them,
They are essentially saying that "my leisure is more important than your labor."
Get over yourself!
Get to work and earn what you need,
work honestly with your own hands,
and willingly share with those in need.
Stop being bitter.
Stop acting out of pent up wrath.
Don't ascribe lies to others.
End the scheming to get even or one up.
Instead,
Be kind.
Be tender.
Forgive.
Love.
Just as God has shown kindness and compassion to you, loved you, forgiven you, and saved
you,
So too should you love, forgive, and extend the saving hand of Jesus Christ to others.

Paul's solution for working through anger
To become imitators of God
Is quite elegant, don't you agree?

We do this
Because we are disciples of Jesus
We are imitators of God
As a fragrant offering and sacrifice to our Lord.
This, my beloved,
Is the sacrifice acceptable to our God.
Amen.