

Text: Ephesians 4:25-32

Title: “In Step With the Spirit”

(Series: Navigating An Alternative Reading of Reality)

In the paragraph of his letter to the Ephesians before us today – Chapter 4, versus 25 to 32 – the Apostle Paul, as it were, shifts gears. In this paragraph many people feel that finally Paul brings the plane down out of the clouds, and lands it on the field where we live 24/7.

In the section of his letter right before the text, Paul calls us to walk; to walk as the new humans humans are becoming because of and in relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul calls us to “lay aside the old” and “put on the new”. In Jesus we have been called to let Jesus renew our minds (4:23), so that we can lay aside the old humans (4:22) we were before meeting Him, and put on the new humans (4:24) we are becoming since meeting Him. In chapter 4, verses 25-32, Paul now, as it were, puts arms and legs on the call. He gets very specific with concrete examples of what laying aside and putting on look like where we live 24/7.

Allow me to review. The letter to the Ephesians is written in two halves: chapters 1-3 and chapters 4-6. Chapters 1-3: the calling to which we are called: a new reality and new life brought into being by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth. Chapters 4-6: Walking “worthy” of the calling; actually living in the new reality, walking around to the way inherent to the new reality.

Chapter 4, verse 1 – “therefore”. And Chapter 4, verse 17 – “therefore”. Then chapter 4, verse 24 – “therefore”. Paul will keep going along these lines. Chapter 5, verse 1 – “therefore”. Chapter 5, verse 7 – “therefore”. Chapter 5, verse 15 – “therefore”. Until chapter 6, verse 10 – finally.

As I get ready to read with you the “therefore” of Ephesians 4:25-32 with you, I am reminded of the story of a preacher, early last century, who was preaching on the besetting sins of that time. He had preached against – though I do not like that phrase “preached against”; preaching is not about denouncing, but announcing, announcing the Gospel. Anyway, he had preached against racism and violence and injustice. From the back pew, one of the elderly pillars of the church would yell out: “Preach it pastor!” He then started getting more specific, more concrete, as Paul is going to do in the text we are about to read. He preached against gambling. “Preach it pastor!” He preached against the use of tobacco. “Preach it pastor!” He preached against the mis-use of alcohol. “Preach it pastor!” Then he preached about gossiping. He paused, waiting for the elderly parishioner to respond. Nothing. Until, “Now you’ve gone from preaching to meddling!”

Ephesians 4:25-32 (NASB)

25 Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE of you WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another. 26 BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and do not give the devil an opportunity. 28 He who

steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need. 29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. 30 Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32 Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

I think you can see that Paul is developing the call, “lay aside the old, put on the new,” around five sets of opposites. Five sets of “not... but”. Five sets of “not this... but this.” Much in the vein of the book of Proverbs. And much in the vein of what Jesus does in His famous Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard it was said... but I say to you.” As people in process of becoming new humans, “not... but”; “not this... but this.” Lay aside the old – “not”. Put on the new – “but” (sometimes, “rather”). Five sets of “not...but”.

I think you can also see that at the heart of the five sets of opposites, are two more fundamental exhortations. “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” And “do not give the devil an opportunity,” a place from which to work, a foothold. Vs. 30 – “do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” Vs. 27 – “do not give the devil (the *diabolos*, the slanderer, the accuser) a foothold.” This is the only place in all of Paul’s letters where he speaks this way: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit”; “Do not give the devil a foothold.”

It turns out that the two exhortations are inter-related. When we give the devil a foothold, a launching pad for his diabolical work, it grieves the Holy Spirit. And when we grieve the Holy Spirit, the accuser is sure to try to take advantage, and begin to mess with our hearts and minds. At the heart of the five sets of juxtaposed exhortations, are these two fundamental exhortations. “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit.” “Do not give the enemy of Jesus a foothold.”

Now, whatever else we learn from the text, these two exhortations make us realize again that we do not live in a neutral universe. There are two “spirits” at work. Besides us humans. There are two “spirits” at work in every dimension of our existence. And especially in any relational context. One finite. The other infinite, thank God. Both at work. “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit.” “Do not give the devil a foothold.”

Because these two exhortations are so fundamental, I am going to suggest that we can rightly read them with each of the five sets of “not... but.” Paul writes the exhortation regarding the devil after the second set: “Be angry, and yet do not sin... do not give the devil an opportunity.” And Paul writes the exhortation regarding the Holy Spirit after the fourth set: “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for building up... and do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” I am going to suggest that because the two exhortations are so critical for our living as new humans in the new reality, Paul intends to two to be read with each of five sets.

So, “laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with their neighbor... do not grieve the Holy Spirit, do not give the devil a place from which to work.” “Be angry, but do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger... do not grieve the Holy Spirit, do not give the devil a

launching pad for his destructive plans.” “Let the one who steals steal no more; but rather work with their hands... do not grieve the Holy Spirit, do not give the devil an opportunity.” “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word that builds people up... do not grieve the Holy Spirit, do not give the devil a platform.” “Let all bitterness... and slander... and malice be put away from you; be kind and tender-hearted, gracing one another just as God in Christ also has graced you... do not grieve the Holy Spirit, do not give the devil space to work.”

Now you’ve gone from preaching to meddling!

Why put it in the negative? Especially the exhortation relative to the Holy Spirit? Why “do not grieve”? Why not “do what pleases the Holy Spirit”? Is that not a more inviting way to put it? “Do what pleases the Holy Spirit”? It is certainly what Paul would say, right? Why then put it in the negative?

Because... sadly... the negative gets our attention in a way the positive does not. “Do what pleases the Holy Spirit.” And we would say, “of course... yes.” And likely move on our merry ways. But “do not grieve the Holy Spirit” arrests us. It makes us stop. And think. “Grieve”? “Grieve the Holy Spirit of God?” The Spirit of God can be grieved? Mere human beings can bring sorrow to the Spirit who created the world, who animated the life of Jesus of Nazareth, who gives us our breath? We can sadden the Spirit? We can cause pain for the Spirit? Paul expresses it in the negative to get our attention.

I think, however, that Paul wants to get us to the positive. That is, after facing the fact that we can grieve the Holy Spirit – the most Intimate Friend anyone can ever have – we will *want* to please Him. We will want to co-operate with Him. We will want to bring Him joy. Right?

So, I suggest that we best capture Paul’s deeper concern in Chapter 4, verses 25-32, by saying with each of the five sets of opposites, “walk in step with the Spirit.” Paul uses the word “walk” in the texts before the text, and in the texts after the text. So I suggest that his deeper call in this “not... but” text is “walk in step with the Spirit.” The text right after this text (which we will take up in September) begins “therefore, imitate God” (5:1)!

Walk in step with the Holy Spirit. And then even the negative exhortation regarding the devil can be rendered in a positive form. “Stay ahead of the devil.” Walk in step with the Holy Spirit and there will be no space in which the devil can get a foothold!

Lay aside falsehood and speak truth to one another. Walk in step with the Spirit, and “the father of lies” has no place to operate. Be angry but do not let the sun go down on your anger. Walk in step with the Spirit, and the divider has no junk with which to work. No longer steal, but work with our hands so we can bless others. Walk in step with the Creator Spirit, and the evil one has no place in the workshop. Let no unwholesome word proceed out of our mouths, but speak only words that build people up in the faith. Walk in step with the Spirit of the Word-made-flesh, and the distorter of words has nothing to play games with. Put away all bitterness and slander, and envision compassion and grace to one another. And we find ourselves dancing with the Holy One and the one who hates Jesus has no handle in the soul of the community.

“The Holy Spirit of God.” This is the only place in all of Paul’s letters, indeed, in all the New Testament, where this full title is used? “The Holy Spirit of God.” Elsewhere He, not it, the Spirit is a person, not an It. Elsewhere He is called the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9, 1Peter 1:11), the Spirit of Him-who-Raised-Christ-Jesus-from-the-Dead (Romans 8:11), the Spirit of Life (Rev. 11:11), the Spirit of life in Christ (Romans 8:2), the Spirit of glory (1Peter 4:14), the Spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry out “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15), the Spirit of holiness (Romans 1:4). But here His full title, “The Holy Spirit of God.”

Holy. I know many people bristle at the word. And in one sense, we ought to. For none of us is holy yet, fully holy. We are declared “holy” by the blood of Christ; it is the wonder of the Gospel! But none of us is in fact fully holy. So we bristle at the word. Rightly.

But we need not do so. Holy is what the Spirit of God is. And holy is what the Spirit of God wants us to be. To be holy is to be pure, clean, full of light. As I have asked before: who does not want to be clean? Full of light? To be holy is to be whole. Who does not want to be whole? Holy Spirit of the Holy God. Whose passion is that we know the Holy One Himself, Jesus Christ. Whose passion is that we become like the Holy One Himself. To become pure like Jesus. To be clean like Jesus. Please! To be whole like Jesus.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit of God works in all kinds of ways to make this so. As Margaret Clarkson puts it in her hymns: the Spirit “woos us, subdues us, and seals us His own.” From the earliest days of our childhood, He began to woo us to Jesus. He slowly broke down our fear and resistance. He slowly overcomes our stubbornness and rebellion. He slowly captured our hearts, filling our hearts with His life! He slowly renews our minds, helping us understand Jesus better and better. Slowly drawing us into the intimacy He enjoys with Jesus and the Father. Slowly bringing us into the Friendship of the Trinity. Blessed Holy Spirit of God!

Walk in steps with the Spirit. “Do not grieve the Spirit.” It grieves me to think I can grieve such a Friend. It grieves me to think I can bring sorrow to one who loves me as fully.

You can see then that Paul is opening up a very tender dimension to the new reality into which we have been called. The Source of Life in the new reality can be saddened. When we think or speak or act in ways that are not congruent with the character of Jesus, the Spirit is deeply grieved. And the unclean spirit is given an opportunity to work his uncleanness.

The Holy Spirit grieves because thoughts, words, behaviors out of sync with the character of Jesus, are, eventually, self-destructive. Festering anger, bitterness, foul language, laziness that leeches off of others, all slowly, but surely, eat away at the center of our personhood. And the Spirit grieves.

The Spirit grieves because thoughts, words, behaviors out of sync with the character of Jesus, give the destroyer a place from which to try to un-do the work of Jesus. We find ourselves beginning to play the game on the devil’s terms – lies, deception, slander, malice – and we cannot beat him at his game. We will lose. And the Spirit grieves.

And the Holy Spirit grieves because when we adapt ways of thinking, speaking, and acting out of sync with Jesus, it means we are not trusting Him. It means we do not think Jesus is who the Spirit says He is. It means we think “our way” – or, God forbid the devil’s way – is the way to get along in the world. And the Spirit is grieved.

Which is why we too eventually begin to grieve. Not only because we feel sorry for what is happening to us. But because we are experiencing the grief of the only one who can give us life, the grief of the Ground of our Being. We are experiencing His sadness and displeasure.

You have experienced this, have you not? I know I have. In do something that displeases Him, and it feels like the Spirit leaves me. It is awful. It feels like the Spirit has just up and leaves. Thank God, that is not the case! He does not leave. But, there is a relational strain – it feels like He left. As in marriage, or other close relationships. One partner offends the other, and the other withdraws. The marriage is not over; the relationship is not ended. But there is deep sadness.

So too with the Spirit of life. The relationship is not over. The Spirit does not dump us and walk away. As Paul says, the Spirit is “the one by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (verse 30). “Sealed”. He owns us. He is the down-payment on our future in Jesus Christ (1:14). He does not dump us. But there is real, objective grief. And a consequent loss of clarity, or loss of zeal, or loss of peace, or loss of joy.

On the Day of Pentecost, when the Risen and Exalted Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit upon the first “community following Jesus with a heart for the city,” we are told there was what seemed like wind and fire. Wind and fire. Refreshing wind. Cleansing wind. Invigorating wind. Purifying fire. Fire igniting passion for Jesus as Lord. Paul is telling us that it is possible to think or speak or act in ways that makes it feel like the wind has gone out of the sails, that the fire is dying down, or even, dying out.

And just as we can go through such times as individuals, so too can congregations. There is no wind. There is no fire. Because somehow the Holy Spirit of God has been grieved.

Walk through the five sets of opposites one more time.

Lay aside falsehood. The word is *pseudo*, the *pseudo*. Lay aside the *pseudo*. Why does falsehood grieve the Spirit? Because he is, as Jesus calls Him, “The Spirit of Truth.” In the section before this “meddling” text, Paul says that in Jesus Christ, who is the Truth, we are being freed from the futility of mind and being renewed into truth. To speak falsehood is to go back into futility. To speak falsehood is to enter into the deceiver’s playland. Where *pseudo* leads to more *pseudo* leading to more *pseudo*.

Get in step with the Spirit. Speak the truth. Each one of their neighbors. Especially to our neighbors who belong to the community shaped by and centered in the truth. “For we are members of one another,” says Paul. The word he uses – members – is never used for members of an organization; is always used for members of an organism. We are members of the Body of

Christ, organically bound to each other. The Body works when truth is spoken. “in love” as Paul adds.

Be angry, and yet do not sin. There are times when it is right to be angry. Read the four Gospels: on a number of occasions Jesus the Man of Compassion gets very angry. The trick is to be angry for the right reason at the right time in the right way. In the Ephesians text Paul uses the word “angry” twice. But each time he uses a different Greek word. The first time – “be angry” – the word is *thumos*. It refers to a sudden flare up of anger that soon subsides. The second time – “do not let the sun go down on your anger” – the word is *orge*. It refers to anger that does not subside, anger that has settled. Because it is not dealt with; it just sits there, festering, stewing.

Get in step with the Spirit. Be angry. There are many reasons to be angry. But do not let the sun go down on the anger, do not let it fester. Festering anger grieves the Spirit. And gives the enemy a major foothold. He feeds on *orge*. He loves to fan the flames of festering anger. He loves to get us to a place of hardened anger.

A number of years ago I was serving a church in California. Over a period of months I sensed something blocking the work of the Spirit in the congregation. On Sunday mornings I sensed something “off” in the right hand front section of the second service. Whereas there was much joy and gratitude being manifested in the singing in other sections of the sanctuary, the right-hand front section felt “sour,” even dead. As I prayed about this, I became aware that two men in the section were angry with each other. And had been so for twenty years! They would not talk to each other. I spoke to them about it, pleading with them to let some of us help them resolve the anger. They would not budge. So I went from preaching to meddling, and told them they were missing out on the new work of the Spirit. And their festering anger was unknowingly affecting others. One of them finally said he would at least pray about it.

Get in step with the Spirit. Do not let the sun go down in *orge*. It is worth it to say up all night to resolve conflict.

No longer steal. Why bring this up? Apparently some of the believers in Ephesus had lost their jobs – maybe because of their allegiance to Jesus as Lord – and in needing to take care of their families, had given into the temptation to steal. And apparently some of the believers were shopkeepers in Ephesus, and were cheating their customers. Either possible scenario grieves the Spirit. Why? Well, for one thing, stealing violates the other person; it is saying that my needs, or desires, are greater than the other’s needs, or desires, or dignity. But, for another, stealing implicitly says, “Sorry, Lord, You can’t be trusted to help me; I have to take life into my own hands.” And such a move of the heart delights the devil, for it gives him the opportunity to nurture further idolatry in our hearts.

But work with your hands. Get in step with the Spirit, the Creative Spirit, who delights to enable us to make a contribution to our common life. Even if we do not get paid for it, we find dignity in being able to work in a way that blesses other people!

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth. The word Paul uses is too politely rendered “unwholesome”. It is used of rotten wood, and whitened flowers (Hoehner, 628). Jesus uses it of worthless fruit (Matthew 7:17-18) and rancid fish (Matthew 13:48). Unprofitable is a better translation. Putrid, is better. Foul, better still.

Why do such words grieve the Spirit? Because they hurt those to whom they are addressed. And because they reveal the condition of the heart from which they emerge. And because the unclean spirit loves to work with such uncleanness. And because the Holy Spirit who dwells within us wants to wash away all such filth.

Speak words that edify, says Paul. Get in step with the Spirit. Use words the way He uses words: to build people up, to bring grace to people’s lives.

And put away all bitterness and wrath and clamor and slander and malice. It all gives the malicious slanderer a hey day. He loves such a cesspool. And it grieves the Spirit because it is all so contrary to His character. It is what Jesus Christ came to rescue us out of.

Instead, get in step with the Spirit. Be kind to one another. It is the word *chestos* related to the word *christos*, Christ. Be like Christ, who is *christos*, kind, gentle.

And be tender-hearted. It is a deeply visceral word, used of Jesus. *Splanka*. Guts. Bowels. Jesus sees the crowds wondering like sheep without a shepherd... and He is moved in His guts. Jesus sees the lepers and He’s move to want to heal. Jesus sees the widow whose son has just died and His heart breaks for her. Get in step with the Spirit. Let your guts get ripped up and care for others.

And forgive each other. The word Paul uses here is not his normal word for “forgiveness”. The word he uses (*charizomenoi*) literally means “bestow grace”. Heap grace on one another. Go around gracing one another, says Paul, just as God in Christ goes around gracing you.

Justice – giving others what they deserve. Mercy – *not* giving others what they deserve. Grace – giving other what they *do not* deserve. Grace one another, says Paul. There is a time for justice. There comes a time for mercy. But it is always time for grace. For grace is unmerited, undeserved. There is never a time when any of us merit God’s favor; there is never a time when any of us deserves God’s blessings. Go around giving one another what we have not earned... just as God in Christ goes around giving you what you have not earned.

Walk in step with the Holy Spirit of God.