

We're continuing with our summer read through the Book of Ephesians, which, as we've said all along, isn't a book at all in the traditional sense of the word, but rather a letter, written to the followers of Jesus who lived in and around the city of Ephesus sometime in the late first century of the common era.

We're picking up the text today just after the midpoint of the letter, so in a sense, it's like we're coming into a room and listening in on one end of a conversation that's already been in progress for a while. So in order to help us get a better sense of the conversation, some reminders are in order.

Ephesus was an important commercial and political center in what is now modern-day Turkey, but in the first century, Ephesus was a thoroughly Roman city. Most of the people of Ephesus worshiped many gods and goddesses. In fact, one of the civic points of pride in Ephesus was an enormous statue in the city of the Greek goddess Artemis.

So the followers of Jesus to whom this letter is addressed were a minority among their peers. And on top of that, most, if not all, of the followers of Jesus in Ephesus were Gentiles. That is, they were women and men who were raised outside of first century Judaism. But nevertheless, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they too were coming to believe that this Galilean Jew named Jesus of Nazareth was not just another prophet, not just another moral teacher, not just another revolutionary, but that Jesus was

and is the Christ – the Messiah – the one to whom the Hebrew Scriptures point, the in whom all of human history and all of human destiny are somehow tied together.

And so much of the first half of the letter is concerned with issues of their religious identity. The writer reminds the Ephesians that once, they were a people cut off from God and without hope, but in Christ, God has adopted them and reconciled them to God and to one another. Most of the first half of the letter is centered on what God has done for the Ephesians, and by extension, for us.

But now that we are in the second half of the letter, the content shifts – from what God has done for us in Jesus Christ – to what we should do and how we should live in response.

So now I invite you to listen for a Word from God from 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, tender-hearted, 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Years ago, there was a popular book called, “Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.” The basic premise of the book was that life would be a lot better for everyone if adults would abide by the social norms and expectations we teach young children. For example, wait your turn, keep control of your body (including your mouth), share with others, and the list goes on.

And as I sat with this list of dos and don’t from the letter to the Ephesians this week, I wondered – why did the writer find it necessary to remind the Ephesians of these basics. I mean, doesn’t everybody in every society, Christian or not, have these same basic social expectations of each other? Doesn’t every religion or moral philosophy have some version of the golden rule – do unto others as you’d have them do unto you? Don’t even people who practice no faith in particular know that you should try not to be a jerk?

Why did the writer of this letter feel like he needed to take time to spell this out? What’s at stake here for the first-century Ephesians? And more

importantly, what’s at stake for we 21st century Athenians?

The answer, I think, lies in the end of the passage. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, *as God in Christ has forgiven you*. Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, *as Christ loved us*.

To me, that’s the bite of this text. Yes, all people should be moral people. Yes, it goes better for everyone if we’ll just remember what we learned in Kindergarten.

But for us, for followers of Jesus, our motivation is different. We are to forgive others not because it’s socially or politically expedient, but *because we have been forgiven by God in Christ*. We are to live in love toward our neighbors others not in hopes of achieving some sort of social utopia, but *because Christ first loved us*.

My friend, God loves you far beyond your or my ability to comprehend or understand. Did you see the photos this week from the James Webb telescope? The God we worship and serve made all that is, seen and unseen. There may be twice as many galaxies in the universe as we previously believed – billions upon billions of stars. And yet God also knows how many hairs are on your head.

There’s nothing God wouldn’t do for you, and nothing God wouldn’t give for you, up to and including God’s one and only Son.

And you didn't do a single thing to earn it. In fact, you can't earn God's favor, because you already have it. God loves you not because of anything you did or didn't do. God loves you not because of anything you said or didn't say. God loves you simply because in life and in death, you belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to yourself, but to your faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

The writer of Ephesians implores you to forgive others, because God in Christ has forgiven you. Live in love, because Christ loves you. You are to put away bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and malice not because it will make your spouse or your boss or your teacher happy with you (although it almost certainly will). You are to be tender-hearted and kind not just because it will improve your relationships with your friends and colleagues (although it almost certainly will). As a follower of Jesus, you are to do those things *because of what God has done for you in the life and ministry and resurrection of Jesus Christ*.

You, my friend, have been sealed by the Holy Spirit. You have been claimed and marked as Christ's own forever and ever. So for heaven's sake, act like it. Remember who and whose you are. Do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God, not because you are fearful of what might happen if you don't, but because you are so filled with joy and gratitude for what God has already done for you in Jesus Christ.

That's the difference for the Ephesians, and for we Athenians. We practice forgiveness because God in Christ has already forgiven us. We are to walk in love because Christ first loved us.

Walk in love.

This way of life that we have been called to live in response to God's love in Christ is not an easy one. Oftentimes bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and malice seem like they'd be much more effective and expedient and satisfying.

But we walk this road, because Christ walked it before us. We imitate God, because God set an example of perfect humanity before us in Jesus. It is a journey, not a destination.

As our theological ancestor Martin Luther once put it,

This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.

Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.