

Speaking the Truth in Love

Ephesians

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Bible Text: Ephesians 4:11-16
Preached on: Sunday, January 4, 2009

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We read from Ephesians chapter 4. This morning, we're concluding the short series of messages from this section of Ephesians. We finish the section, it ends at chapter 4 verse 16. I want to read from chapter 4 verse 11 speaking of the risen Lord Jesus,

11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Amen. May God bless the reading and the preaching of his word to us all.

As I said, this is the last in a series of sermons preached on this section of Ephesians, and we've come to the end of this section; chapter 4, verse 17 marks a new division in the letter. I hope, God willing, that we'll be able to come back to that sometime in the future. And I want to take as our final meditation Paul's words in Ephesians 4:15, "Speaking the Truth in Love." Speaking the truth in love. We very much enjoyed having Raymond Blair as our speaker at our annual congregational conference. Raymond was speaking on our words, and in a great deal of what I'll be saying this morning, I'll be trying to echo and summarize some of the very useful points which he made. But we're going to focus on Paul's words here in the context, speaking the truth in love.

The Bible calls the tongue a fire, James chapter 3 verse 6. Fire is very useful and fire is also very dangerous. With fire, human beings can heat their homes, they can cook their food, they can carry on some of the processes of industry. It's a great blessing, a useful

thing to have but it's also potentially destructive, painful and it easily gets out of control. So this metaphor of a fire is a good one for our speech. Speech can do great good. Jesus of Nazareth can speak and his words can change the world. Adolf Hitler can speak and his words can turn a continent into a sea of blood. So potential for good and for evil by what we say. We created in the image of God have the unique ability to speak and with our speech we can bring warmth and pleasure and light and life to the world, equally with our speech we can create devastation and damage and pain. That's why the writer of the Proverbs says in Proverbs 18:21, death and life are in the power of the tongue. And it's perilously easy to speak. We just have to open our mouths and let the words come out.

So it's important for us to know how to communicate to the glory of God and that's our subject this morning, communicating in our speech to the glory of God. There's a huge amount in the Bible about our speech but I want to focus on these words in Ephesians 4:15 in the text and in the context, "speaking the truth in love." I want to look at five aspects of our communication with each other. First of all, the context of our communication, the context, and you find it in that little word at the beginning of the verse which can be overlooked, "Rather." Rather, or instead. This implies a contrast. Speaking the truth in love is an alternative to something else. Paul is saying we're not to do this, rather we are to speak the truth in love. In other words, there is something which is not speaking the truth in love and Christian communication is to be an alternative to that. It's to be instead of it, as some of our Bible versions have it.

Well, what is it? Paul tells us in verse 14. He calls it every wind of doctrine, human cunning, craftiness, and deceitful schemes. To sum it up in one word, lies. Lies. False, harmful communication. These believers in Ephesus have been affected by lies. The world outside the church has been telling them lies and false teachers inside the church have been telling them lies, and as we've seen in the passage, this has made them immature. It has arrested their development. They're just children. They have never grown up. And in this context of falsehood, Paul is saying, you've got to have God's rather, you've got to have God's alternative, speaking the truth in love.

So this is the Christian's alternative in the context of a world of lies. We are God's speech. We're the alternative message, the alternative communication. And just as the Christians in Ephesus, we today are living in a world which is drowning in a sea of lies. We're surrounded on all sides by anti-Christian propaganda, persuasive and powerful. The media are promoting untruth ceaselessly. The church has been infected by false teachings or at best half truths. We're living in the paradox of the Tower of Babel. The paradox is there is more communication in our world than there has ever been in the history of the world. Communication is quicker, it is easier, it is possible through more media than ever has been in the history of the human race. I can sit down at my computer keyboard and in five minutes, if I've got a hundred people on my address book and my email, in five minutes I can send a message to a hundred people or a thousand people. Communication. And yet less truth is being communicated. Less truth is being communicated. And so there has never been more need for Christian communication.

If we lived in a perfect world, a world of truth and goodness, you and I might be able to afford the luxury of keeping quiet but we don't. We live in a world of lies, falsehood, and nonsense. We need in this context to speak the truth. We need to communicate God's message to the world. We need to do it for our own sake and for our children's sake lest we're brainwashed, lest we're influenced by the lies, lest we're dragged away into error or mindless immaturity. If we don't speak the truth, we'll be affected. We'll be damaged. Our children will be damaged. We need to do it for the world's sake. Otherwise they'll be damned. They'll be lost. They'll not hear the gospel. If we don't tell it to them, they're not going to hear it. So there's an urgent pressing need for us to communicate as Christians, to take seriously God's rather, God's alternative. This is the context of our communication.

Secondly, let's think for a moment of the content of our communication. What are we to communicate? Paul says, the truth. The truth. Now, what does he mean by the truth? There are at least three different levels in the Bible to which this word refers. It's often used simply of the gospel, of the message of salvation in Christ. It's described as the truth, hearing the truth, built up in the truth. Paul in Galatians 5:7 writes to the Christians in the churches of Galatia, "who hindered you from obeying the truth?" And the issue in Galatians is the gospel, salvation by faith alone in Jesus. So that is the truth that we're to communicate, the truth of the gospel. Sometimes it's used more widely, it's used of the whole world view of the Bible, that which is based on God and reflecting God, God's complete revelation, so that we look at reality, we look at life, we look at ourselves, we look at this world, we look at the world to come with God's eyes, all that God has revealed about himself and his world and ourselves. Paul writes in Romans 1:18 of the Gentiles who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. The truth of the being of God, of the accountability of man. And then sometimes, truth in the Bible means what it means usually for us, reality as opposed to falsehood. Paul can say in Romans 9:1, "I am speaking the truth in Christ. I am not lying." He's not here talking about the gospel. He's not here talking about the whole Christian worldview. He's saying, "I'm telling you what's real, what's accurate, what is true." Or again in 2 Corinthians 7:14, "everything we said to you was true."

So when we speak the truth, we're to speak the gospel, we're to speak of the whole Christian worldview, we're to speak reality instead of falsehood. This then is the context of our communication. It means surely that we are to speak freely and naturally and often about God and about God's word and about God's Son and about Christ's gospel. Do you speak the truth? Not just here, not just among your fellow Christians, but in the world? Are you a person who speaks the truth? Do people hear you talking about the message of salvation or the being of God and his will and his purposes in the world? Are we people who actually communicate the truth of scripture to our world? We need to know these things in order to speak about them. We need to study the word. We need to learn doctrine. We need to study scripture. If we are to communicate the truth, we must understand and know the truth and far too many Christians rarely, if ever, communicate the truth of the gospel or the truth of God's word into a world that needs it. But we also must be careful, and this is perhaps what Paul means in the context, we must be careful to speak truth as opposed to falsehood, never to lie. Never to lie. Never to lie to make life

easier, to escape from embarrassment, to gain an advantage. We need to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

It's not as simple as we sometimes think. How often do we pass on second-hand information? You hear something but someone else, you pass it on. Are you sure? Are you sure that that's true? You haven't tested it for yourself. You haven't examined it. It's just a piece of information that somebody has passed on. It may be true. It may not be true. Are you so sure that it's true that it's something you're going to pass on? How often do we impute motives to people? They did such and such a thing because... They said such and such a thing because... We don't know why they did it. We don't know why they said it. We can't read the heart. Only God reads the heart. And yet how often we take God's prerogative to ourselves, and we act as if we were all-knowing, and we knew what went on in that person's mind and heart that led them to do that thing. We may well be right, but we can never know. We can never be sure.

How often do we speak only part of the truth? Only part of the truth. Whenever I hear of trouble in congregations, and there's a lot of trouble in congregations, often the reason is that people are listening to only part of the truth. We should always ask ourselves, "Have I heard both sides of the issue? Have I talked to both parties in this dispute? It may be true, but is it the whole truth? Is it all the truth?" You can tell the truth, but if it's only part of the truth, it becomes an untruth. You can tell the truth, but the implication may be false. You could go up to someone tomorrow at work and say, "At church yesterday, our minister was stone-cold sober. There wasn't any smell of drink on him at all. And he walked out of the pulpit, he didn't wobble or stagger. He just walked straight to the door." That would be true. That would be absolutely true. But what impression would it leave in your hearer's mind? It would leave the impression that that was a rare event, that that was something unusual about that that deserved comment. You had spoken the truth. Everything you said was completely true but the whole truth would have been, "And he's always like that. He's never anything else." It's a ludicrous example but it's more difficult, friends, to speak the truth than we sometimes think. Can we bring our speech into God's presence and say, "Lord, everything I have said is the truth. It's the truth before you. It's the truth." The content of communication.

Thirdly, the components of communication. The components of communication. Now you might think reading the English that it's simple enough speaking the truth, and of course we have to speak, but there's much more to communication than speaking. It's interesting that there is, in fact, no separate word for speaking in this text, in this verse. There is in verse 25 where Paul goes on to say, "let each of you speak the truth with his neighbor," and he uses the verb there to speak, the regular verb. But there's no verb for speak in this verse. He uses a very, very unusual verb. It only occurs twice in the whole Bible. It's based on the noun truth. We could translate it trthing it or speaking-the-truth all as one word.

The commentator says it means possessing and professing the truth. It means our life, our behavior, our demeanor, our gestures, everything about us, communicating truth. Paul's talking about body language. Body language, and you can say a lot with your body. You

know the child at school who's just insolent, you look at them and the way they sit, the way they stand, the way they look at you, they're not saying a word, you couldn't pin them down on anything, but you look at that boy or that girl and you say, "That's trouble. That child is just oozing insolence." They used to talk about dumb insolence in the Army. In the British Army, the sergeant could do you for dumb insolence. "Don't look at me in that tone of voice," they used to say. And there's a lot of truth in that. People look at us in a tone of voice.

We can communicate by our actions, by our behavior, by our attitudes. We can communicate by a smile. We can criticize. We can condemn people by a smile. You say to me, "Well, the RP minister in Carragh, is Harry Coulter." And I say, "Oh, yeah. Harry Coulter." What did I say? Well, I said something very negative. I said something very negative and nasty, though I haven't said a word. I haven't said a word. But I've told a lie. I said something cruel and bad. And we can do that so easily. We can communicate in many, many ways, something that isn't true, and that's why Paul uses this word. It's not just a matter of our words, it's a matter of ourselves. All is to communicate truth. Communication, you see, begins in the heart. "Out of the abundance of the heart," says Jesus, "the mouth speaks." It all flows from our relationship with God, lips and life together. Communication is who we are and if we're to speak the truth we have to be possessed by the truth and governed by the truth.

Let me say something fourthly, and I want to spend a little bit more time in this and then a very brief fifth point about the character of communication. The character of communication. Speaking the truth is not enough. Speaking the truth is not enough. It must be truth in love. Truth in love. It must be motivated by love. It must be expressed in a loving way. It must have a loving purpose. John Stott comments, "Truth becomes hard if not softened by love. Love becomes soft if not strengthened by truth." You need them both together and Paul is constantly emphasizing in Ephesians the importance of love. Ephesians 3:17, rooted and grounded in love. Ephesians 4:2, bearing with one another in love. Ephesians 5:2, walk in love. These Ephesian Christians seem to need to be told again and again to love one another, to speak the truth in love.

You may ask, is it true that speaking the truth is not enough? How can we go wrong if we speak the truth? The answer is we can go terribly wrong. We can sin speaking the truth. We can cause great damage speaking the truth. The truth can be a devastating weapon. What about gossip, for example? Gossip, the plague of the Christian church, a plague of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. The gossip may be true, it may be absolutely true. You hear something, and it's to the discredit of somebody else and you satisfy yourself that it's absolutely true, but is it loving to pass it on? Ask yourself that simple question. Is it loving to pass it on? Why would you pass it on? What is your purpose in passing it on? And so often we pass on these juicy morsels of gossip; they're not always to the discredit of other people, they're just none of our business. They're just nobody else's business. What we do in our private lives, in our homes, in our families, in our work is largely our own concern. I sometimes think there's as much sin at the beginning of prayer meetings as there is in almost any other place in the church. "Let's just mention this. We'll make it a matter of prayer." And that gives a lovely coat of pious whitewash over something that

is just plain worldly gossip. You remember Raymond quoted Proverbs 26:20, "For lack of wood a fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases." It may be true, but is it loving?

What about very critical speech? Sometimes, of course, it is our duty to criticize those for whom we are responsible, but often it is not. The criticism may be true, but is it loving? James 4:12, who are you to judge your neighbor? Who do you think you are passing on that critical, just judgmental statement? Are you so perfect? Am I so perfect? Are we God? Why are we doing it? It's the devil.

What about arrogant truth telling? Arrogant truth telling, the sort of person who gets into a theological debate and they have to win and what they're arguing may in fact be true and it may in fact be biblical, but as you listen to them, you can't help thinking that they want to show you how much they know and how right they are and how wrong the other person is and the lust of battle takes over and they simply want to win the argument. They're speaking the truth but are they speaking it in love?

What about untimely truth-telling? untimely truth-telling. That may be a new idea to you. The Westminster Larger Catechism, among the sins which are forbidden in the Ninth Commandment, it lists as one of the sins speaking the truth unseasonably. Speaking the truth unseasonably. Our Lord said to the disciples In John 16:12, "I have still many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." You cannot bear them now. I remember a minister who went into a church and he decided that his people needed to hear the law of God, and for week after week and month after month, he thundered the law of God, the wickedness of the human heart, God's judgment on sin, the need for repentance, on and on and on. his people actually didn't need to hear that. They were good people. They were discouraged. They were downhearted. And as he went on and on, some of them got depressed, at least one of them got very, very seriously depressed to the threat of his health, a man I'd known all my life, and the minister was earnest and he was zealous and what he was saying was true, it was true, but it was unseasonable. It was untimely. There are truths and there are times when we don't need to hear them, they're not the right truth at that point. Proverbs 25:20, "Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day." If somebody has just had a tremendous grief or disaster or tragedy in their lives, at that moment they don't need to hear that all things work out for the best in the providence of God. There will be a time to tell them that truth, but just go and put your arm around them, tell them you love them, tell them you'll pray for them, and shut up because that really is all they need. Untimely, untimely truth-telling, and sometimes we're so insensitive and we don't understand.

What about cruel truth-telling? Cruel truth-telling. You're angry with someone. Someone you love, you're having an argument with them and your temper is raised and you say something about them to them that's true, it is true, it is true, but at that moment you want that truth to be a dagger to stick it into them and to hurt them, and that's why you're saying it. You're saying it to hurt them. And the better you know them, of course, the easier it is to hurt them and to choose the truth that will hurt them. You could say, "Well, I spoke the truth." Yes, you did speak the truth but you didn't speak the truth in love. We

have to search our hearts. We have to search our hearts. Why am I speaking the truth? Am I speaking it from a heart of love? Am I speaking it in an atmosphere of love? Am I speaking it for a loving purpose? "Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth. Keep watch over the door of my lips."

And then lastly, and very briefly because our time is gone, let me say something about the consequences of communication. The consequences of communication, and you find them in the context. We are to grow up in every way into Christ. The body grows so that it builds itself up in love. Paul's theme in Ephesians 4 is the unity of the church and it is as people speak the truth in love that the church is bound together and kept together, and how much that is needed today.

Another consequence, the conversion of the lost. The lost aren't going to be reached by gimmicks or by spectacles or by entertainment. There's only one way, speaking the truth in love, people who love them enough to go and tell them about Jesus and about their lost estate. It means that we're salt and light in the world. Our society is being rotted by lies. We need a recovery of truth, a generation of truth speakers.

By speaking the truth in love, we encourage others. Proverbs 16:24, "Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body." To come to somebody who's downhearted, depressed, vulnerable, lonely, sad, to encourage them. To encourage them. Not to pry, not to question, but to speak words that will be warm and loving and up-building. What a ministry that is.

I've quoted before Larry Crabb's story about the first time he ever prayed in public. He was a young boy at a church meeting. He was so nervous and confused that his prayer was, he said, was stumbling nonsensical heresy from beginning to end. He thanked the Holy Spirit for dying for us on the cross. He made mistake after mistake. Eventually, he petered out into complete embarrassed silence. He stood there in the verge of tears. He walked out of the church, and as he walked out, he was saying to himself, never again in my life am I going to pray in public. And the senior elder of the church was waiting at the door and he said, "Larry, I want to speak to you." And Larry Crabb's heart sang, "Oh, what am I going to get now from this elder?" He put his arm around his shoulder. He said, "Larry, I just want you to know that whatever you do for the Lord, I'm behind you 100%." And he says, he went home that day and all the embarrassment and the shame had gone away and he was just filled with new love for Christ. The power of an encouraging word. We all need encouragement.

What a challenge, what a challenge, speaking the truth in love. You can have an impact like this on people's lives. Will you give yourself to being someone who speaks the truth in love? What may God do through us if we give ourselves to this ministry.

Let us bow in prayer.

O God, we thank you for the gift of speech, and we must ask your forgiveness for many times when we haven't spoken the truth, when we should have spoken it but didn't, for

many times when what we spoke was not the whole truth, it was not nothing but the truth. And then, O Lord, for times when we did speak the truth, but it wasn't loving, it wasn't from love and it wasn't for love. Forgive us, we pray. Help us to resolve today that we will be those who speak the truth and who speak the truth in love, that we may be united and encouraged, that men and women may be helped by the words that we speak and brought to him who is the truth and who is the love of God incarnate. We ask it in his name. Amen.