

Highfield Rd Uniting Church

Ephesians 4:25 -5:2 “So what?”

I started last week on the book of Ephesians by entering at chapter 4. You will remember that after all the theology of the first 3 chapters, Paul says “Therefore” and launches into an explanation of what that theology means for how we live as the church – his first response to “So what?”. We now re-join Ephesians later in chapter 4. After a little digression – a reminder to the people about the futility of their former lives and the lives of many others around them – Paul says “Therefore” again. At this point he begins what is sometimes called the ethical section of the letter but is really his second response to “So what?”

Everything that God has done in Christ is captured in baptism, and the essence of baptism is a new life; not just a new religion to help you get the best out of your life, but a whole new life. New behaviour, new standards, new attitudes – because you are no longer imitating the ‘successful’ people around you, you are imitating God.

You will be familiar with this song from the ‘70s: *They’ll Know We Are Christians By Our Love*.

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord;
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord;
And we pray that all unity will one day be restored.
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,
yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.*

This song is most often associated with John 13, where Jesus actually instructs the disciples by saying “This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another.” But the same message can be found right here in Ephesians: “be imitators of God and live in love”. Paul is talking not just about affection, but about how we live with each other and the world. Verses 2 and 3 of the song talk about working together and walking together and making it clear to everyone that you are living a life guided and empowered by God.

Paul doesn’t confine his message to generalities of love and forgiveness; he spells it out in terms of the realities of daily living.

Speak to each other in truth.
Don’t let anger take hold of you.
Let your attitude to life be ‘how can I help others?’
Let your talk be positive and constructive.

And, most importantly,
Live in and through forgiveness.

Interestingly, these statements are not phrased or framed as laws. Although they are saying a lot of similar things, they are not presented as a new ‘ten commandments’. Paul doesn’t say “Do not lie”; instead he says “put away falsehood and speak truth to our neighbours.” He doesn’t say “Do not steal”; he says “labour and work honestly so you have something to share with the needy.”

As people captured by the grace of God and welcomed into a new life in Jesus Christ and the Spirit, we are no longer mere followers of a set of laws and caught up in that inevitable spiral of interpretation and judgement. Rather than an external set of laws, we have the Spirit internally leading us to love. Our baptism has opened us to this new way of living with God. Not as 'nice' people who don't want to cause any problems or frictions, but as loving people who want to get beyond our masks and protective behaviours to be real and in relationship as people won and governed by God.

Speak the truth, and in case you have some doubts about whether the truth is a loving thing to say, speak only what is useful for building up.

Be angry, but don't let that anger take hold of you and poison relationships. Deal with whatever has prompted the anger here and now, in love and with forgiveness.

Let your love and forgiveness be real and effective. Don't hold onto grudges and bitterness and old fights.

Why? Because to live any other way would be to grieve the Holy Spirit, the Spirit whose mark you bear from baptism and who is your guide and the strength you need to imitate God. There is nothing in this passage about a list of behaviours that must be followed in order to be acceptable to God. There's no mention of 'do these things or burn in hell'. Paul is writing after our salvation, after we have been declared acceptable through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the "So what?"; the meaning of salvation in the daily living out of our faith. All the workings of God's grace have made a new life possible and this advice from Paul shows us part of what that new life is to look like. Live in gratitude to the God of love and forgiveness by forgiving and being loving in every aspect of your life.

There is real power in the instruction to be imitators of God. If God, in Christ, has accepted all of us, how can we not accept each other? The realisation that we are all included in God's love is what brings to life the reality of sharing love and forgiveness. If God has dealt so lovingly with us, how can we not pass that on? Not out of demand, but in loving imitation.

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