

“If You Can’t Say Anything Nice . . .”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
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**Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2**

What are some of the most memorable lessons we learned from our parents or families when we were children? “If you eat all your dinner, then you get dessert.” “Don’t go to bed without picking up all your toys in your room.” “We use words, not fists, to show our emotions.” “If you can’t anything nice about someone, then don’t say anything at all.”

That one was hard, wasn’t it? It was hard to follow when we were children, and it’s still hard to follow as an adult. I remember the only fight I got into at school - well, the only one I can remember - was when one of my classmates in elementary school said something derogatory about my mother. It wasn’t specific, like it focused on Joan Mansell. It was one of those stupid comments that 8-year-old boys say when they’re on the playground, like, “Your momma is so ugly . . .” I don’t remember if that’s exactly what he said, but it was something to that effect. Anyway, I hit him in the nose, and he hit me in the stomach. Clearly, I didn’t adhere to that lesson about using words instead of fists. I don’t think we got sent to the principal’s office, but I could be wrong about that. And the ironic thing was that he and I were actually good friends. But he said something bad about my mother, and well, I didn’t appreciate it!

And yet today, whether we are children, youth, or adults, we rarely follow this rule-to-live-by, do we? We are experts at zeroing-in on someone else’s faults, weaknesses, or inadequacies, and magnifying them for the entire world to see. It’s modeled for us in our hyperactive media, where the slightest misstep by a public figure is given no room for forgiveness. We notice someone who makes a mistake, and we tell our friend, our family member, our neighbor, our fellow Christian. It raises our own self-esteem by comparing ourselves to our fallen fellow human being. It is a rare thing indeed today to find someone “who doesn’t say anything at all” about the neighbor about whom they can’t say anything good.

And it’s been a problem for the human race, and especially for us as disciples of Jesus Christ, for as long as we can remember. As I read this passage from Ephesians, I could not help but think of this well-known, childhood phrase, for it seems as if Paul is saying to the church, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all!” Of course, it’s more than just that. It’s also more than just a list of “do’s” and “don’ts.” It’s actually a visible reminder of what the Christian community is called

to be – both for itself and for the world into which it is called to serve. In fact, these are the indelible marks of the new life we all have been promised through the waters of baptism.

Porter Taylor describes it in this way: At first glance, this passage looks like a list of rules for the new life of being a Christian. However, the key to the passage is at the beginning. The new believers are to “put off” or “strip away” the old self so that God can give them the new. This verb is also used in verse 22 of this chapter: “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self.”

We go from the old self to the new creation in baptism. As we go under the waters of death, the old self is killed off and we are raised with Christ into newness of life. In the first liturgies of the church, the baptismal candidates faced the west and renounced the forces of darkness. They then turned to the east at sunrise and proclaimed their allegiance to the light of the world. They literally stripped off their old clothing and put on the new garments of being adopted by Christ as children of God after they were baptized . . . Therefore, the works described by Paul are not merit badges set out for us to achieve. Rather, they are marks of the new life given to us in baptism (G. Porter Taylor, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 326-328).

This is not a “to-do” list that we all check-off as we accomplish each task on our way to salvation. Our salvation has already been achieved, thanks to God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. We have each acknowledged that promise when we received the waters of baptism – either as an adult, or as a child, with the confirming of those baptismal vows in our youth. This list, then, is not something we strive to achieve; this list is what marks us as baptized children of God.

As baptized women and men, we do not belong to ourselves, but “we are members of one another.” As baptized women and men, it’s alright to be angry, but we do not let our anger carry over day after day, so that there is no room for the devil. As baptized men and women, we seek to work for the betterment of the least in our midst, not solely for our own good. As baptized men and women, we “do not speak evil out of our mouths, but only what is useful for building up” one another, as well as offer grace and hope to those who need to hear it. As baptized women and men, we are “imitators of God,” and as such we do not wish to give God a reason to grieve his Holy Spirit, “which marked us with a seal for the day of redemption.” As baptized children of God, we do not use bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and malice. Instead, we are kind and tenderhearted to one another, forgiving one another in the same way God has forgiven us in Jesus Christ.

Now, are we perfect in following this list as baptized children of God? No, we are not. We continue to talk about our sister or brother in Christ behind her or his back. We continue to allow anger to build-up

and carry over, not just day after day, but year after year. We continue to act selfishly, holding onto what God has provided rather than sharing it to build-up the Body of Christ. We continue to do all these things because we are human, we are fallible, and we are weak. We continue to do all these things because we see them as something to strive for, rather than something we already have the capacity to do as baptized “beloved children of God.”

But you know what? Despite our failings, our inadequacies, our saying things about others when we know we shouldn’t – God still loves us. It grieves God’s Spirit, to be sure, but it doesn’t cause God to reject us. God has loved us unconditionally in his own flesh and blood. God has said “Yes” when the rest of the world would say “No.” God has forgiven us when we are angry and cannot let go. God has forgiven us when we are bitter and hateful and cannot see the good in the other. God has forgiven us when we hold onto all that we have and cannot see how it all first came from God. God has forgiven us for not always living our lives as beloved baptized children.

When we accept that reality – God’s unconditional love for us in Jesus Christ – then we are moved to be tenderhearted and kind. Then we are moved to build up and encourage. Then we are moved to see our fellow human being as ourselves. Then we are moved “to live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.” Then we are moved to forgive.

I will be the first to confess that I am far from perfect when it comes to this list of Paul’s in Ephesians. I struggle mightily in many areas, and wish my actions would more genuinely reflect my knowledge of God’s love for me in Jesus Christ. Perhaps you share my view and acknowledge how difficult it can be to truly let go of what burdens you from the world, and be free to live in love, as Christ has loved us.

It is particularly hard for me to extend forgiveness when others have caused me pain or hurt, especially if they do not realize or acknowledge they have caused such pain or hurt. Perhaps you can relate to that predicament. I know we are called to forgive others, even when they have no intention of asking for forgiveness. But all I seem to hold onto is the pain and the hurt, and words like bitterness and slander and anger certainly come up in my vocabulary in those situations.

Earlier this year, someone I care about deeply did something that caused me great pain. That person screwed up badly, and knew it and apologized to me over and over again after it had occurred. I was so angry and upset, though, I put up what I call the “wall of silence,” and did everything in my power to either avoid or have very limited interaction with that individual. I was so bitter and enraged that I couldn’t think straight.

But this wasn’t some jerk who cut me off in traffic who I’d never see again. This was a friend, a fellow child of God. And I started to

realize that I did not want to feel this way. I did not like how this had trapped me in an emotional prison. I did not want this to define our relationship, to be a barrier that could not be overcome. This was not how I wanted to feel, and I'm pretty sure it was not how God wanted me to feel.

And so, after a few days, I came to that individual and we talked. I did not say, "It's alright, don't worry about it." I did not say, "I know you made a mistake, let it go." Instead, I said, "I forgive you." And with those words I not only felt an unburdening by my friend, but I felt a release on my heart. I felt a sense that I was no longer broken, since "we are members of one another." I felt a sense of peace that I could not have imagined. I was so glad God's Spirit moved me to let go and forgive, for it recalled for me how I have been forgiven by others for wrongs I have committed, and how I have been forgiven by God in Jesus Christ. Perhaps it will spur me to consider how I am called to forgive others, even when they do not ask or seek that forgiveness from me.

Is there someone you need to ask for forgiveness, someone you have caused to feel pain and hurt? Is there someone you need to forgive, for the pain and hurt you have experienced? Are you tired of feeling trapped in an emotional prison, and you wish to be freed to live in love, as Christ has loved you?

Perhaps it is time "to forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." Perhaps it is time to see your fellow sister or brother in Christ as yourself, "for we are members of one another." Perhaps it is time to "put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, and tenderhearted." Perhaps it is time to "live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us."

Perhaps it is time to recognize that you are already a beloved child of God, and as such you are an imitator of our living, loving God. Live everyday with that acceptance and assurance and trust, and you will never have to worry about checking anything off of a list.

Thanks be to God. Amen.