

Beyond Civility to Christian Speech

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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Ever since the shootings in Tucson, we have heard many calls for civility in our national life. President Obama invited us “to use this occasion to expand our moral imagination, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy, and remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together.” Our regular island visitor Jim Wallis of *Sojourners* has renewed an effort to get people to sign onto a civility pledge. One earlier effort to circulate a civility pledge was abandoned the week before the shooting. Mark DeMoss, a Republican, had asked politicians to sign a pledge saying only that they would be civil in public behavior, respectful of others whether they agreed with them or not, and stand against incivility. Only three members of Congress were willing to sign it. But maybe that will change. As if it were something remarkable, politicians are saying they will not talk about those who disagree with them as enemies or targets or Nazis. Tuesday night at the State of the Union address, they might even sit together.

Rich Mouw, the president of Fuller Seminary, published an updated version last year of his book *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil Culture*. I was dismayed to learn that he originally wrote the book in 1992, even before Bill Clinton was elected, after the culture wars of the 80’s. It’s been a long battle. But then I discovered that George Washington himself had copied out by hand before he was 16 years old a list of 110 “Rules of Civility.”

I’m of the opinion that the call to civility sets the bar awfully low. Being civil basically means acting civilized, treating the other person as a part of the same *civis*, the same city, as if he were a citizen rather than an enemy. Being civil means showing a bare minimum of respect for someone you may still hate, at least being polite. That would be an improvement over much recent behavior, I’ll grant you, but it doesn’t come close to the minimum standards for Christian behavior. It reminds me of the days my little brother and I were instructed to sit in the back seat of the car “and just don’t hit each other.” A pretty low standard.

Of course the issue is not just about politicians. It’s the meanness you see everywhere—in spite of the drastic drop in violent crime over the last two decades, in spite of progress we’ve made as nation against racism and homophobia, there is this thing we call the coarsening of the culture: the seven words you cannot say on television being said by little kids, mean girls terrorizing fat girls, athletes and Jets coaches trash-talking without penalty, reality television pretty much across the board, most hip hop and rap music, the way people use cell phones in public, passengers and flight attendants flipping out on planes... The merchants of hate on talk radio are just the part of the iceberg visible above the surface. Not to mention what goes on in churches and between churches, what we say about people who disagree with us. Having spent years in the trench warfare of the Southern Baptist Civil War, I can testify that there’s plenty of meanness and incivility in the church as well. In the interest of full disclosure, I should tell you that there’s still no one who can push my buttons faster than a fundamentalist who calls himself a Baptist. That’s not his problem; it’s mine.

Where do we look for a Christian standard? My first thought was to turn to the wisdom tradition, where there is plenty of advice about the danger of foolish and harsh talk. We read several of those verses from Proverbs, just a sampler. Here’s a translation I like of Proverbs

29:11—“A fool gives full vent to anger, but a wise person quietly holds back” (NLT). The book of James—another kind of wisdom literature—has a famous section warning about the tongue that draws from Greek proverbs as well as Jewish. James says “the tongue is a fire,” “no one can tame the tongue—a relentless evil, full of deadly poison.”

But most of the wisdom advice seems to boil down to trying to tame your tongue. In the words of Thumper the rabbit, “If you can’t say somethin’ nice, don’t say nuthin’ at all.” Or in the words of Archie Bunker, “Stifle yourself, Edith.”

But in the letter to the Ephesians I find something that is more helpful. (I’d like you to look at chapter 4 again.) It comes in the context of an admonition to live a new life as part of the body of Christ. Take off your old self; lay aside your old way of life as if it were a dirty, worn out set of clothes. Put on your new self, created to be like God. That is, put on that image of God which has been restored in Jesus and live into it.

In Ephesians 4:25 and following we find three rules for Christian speech.

1. The first rule is “Tell the truth.” A part of me wants to say “Why do you have to say that to Christians?” But then I think of all the ways over the years that I have pretended to be something I am not, or exaggerated the truth to make me look good, and how I’ve been a victim of outright lies told about the pastor to get the upper hand in church. I think of Christians who haven’t even been honest with their wives or husbands. So here’s a good place to start.

Tell the truth. When Becca and I were engaged and I was about to begin my ministry, a denominational worker came up to me at a bridal shower and said, “I just have one word for you: hold onto your integrity. It’s all you’ve got.” She was right. Tell the truth. How hard is that? Pretty hard, as it turns out. Paul’s Greek phrase here is more like “take off the lie,” take off that lie you’ve been wearing to protect yourself and start telling the truth to your neighbors. Why? Because we are all part of each other. We are all connected like organs of the same body. If you wear a lie you are disguising yourself to yourself, you are misleading yourself by misleading your neighbor.

When people talk about civility, they are talking about using less inflammatory language, less violent metaphors. But Ephesians points us to the more important issue of telling the truth. Frankly, I’m less concerned about political rhetoric than I am about outright lies. Repeating things you know are not true. Perhaps talking yourself into believing things you know on some level are false because they will whip up a crowd and raise money or produce votes. Don’t tell me that the ends justify the means. No one can serve God’s purposes by denying the truth. Live in reality. Tell the truth.

2. The second rule for Christian speech is this: “Don’t stay angry.” The verse says literally, “Be angry and sin not,” but most everyone agrees now that this is not a command to get mad. The first verb is conditional: *If* you get angry, don’t let that anger make you sin. I’ve heard way too many sermons that say this text tells us to express our anger and let it all out. That’s pop psychology, not Paul. Paul says a few verses later to put away all anger. Here he says not to let the sun go down on your exasperation. Don’t go to bed mad. Let go of your irritation quickly, because if you hold onto your anger you give the devil a foothold in your spirit. That little bit of irritation can turn into malice or bitterness or a grudge. Let it go. If you stay angry you’re going to say things you will regret.

If you are trying to get to sleep and you are still feeling angry, try this: start praying for the person you’re mad at. Think of what her needs are, her heartbreaks, her hopes. Think of what could change in her life to make her a happier person. Ask God to bless that person so much that

she will be a blessing to you. I don't think you can sincerely pray for a person for very long and still remain furious with him.

I'm going to skip over verse 28, which says to stop stealing. I do want you to stop stealing, but it's the one verse that's not about how we talk to each other.

3. The third rule for Christian speech comes in verse 29:

“No destructive talk, just helpful talk.” Christians are to be verbal pacifists. We don't attack people with words, even if they are attacking us. We don't use bad language and we don't call people names. We say things that will build up the other person. That doesn't mean just being nice, stroking the other person when he's doing something wrong. It means keeping the other person's spiritual growth as our primary goal. A part of me wants to say he's an idiot or a jerk, but what can I do to help him grow into a better person. How can I call on the better angels of his nature?

Do this, Paul says, “so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” Our words are to give grace—unmerited favor—to the other person. If they deserved our words, it wouldn't be grace. I have to think about my words: are they words of law or words of grace? Am I trying to punish them or help them? Sometimes I just want to tell people off. I feel I have the right to do so. It's a kind of accountability. You can't just let people get away with that stuff. But are my words going to build that person up? And will my words give grace to the other person? That's the Christian test.

Beginning with verse 30, Paul moves from the topic of speech to more general principles that underlie the way we talk to one another. I see four general principles there, and I can go through them quickly.

1. Don't make God sad. When we tear people down, when we break the connection that we have with one another in the body, when we get into wrangling and slander, we grieve the Holy Spirit. We want to be a source of joy and delight to God. We want God to be proud of us as his children. There's no talk about rewards or punishments here, just don't make God sad.

2. Be kind. Be compassionate. There's a little pun in the Greek, because the word for kind is *chrestos*. Be Christ to one another. As Christ has been kind to you, be kind to one another.

3. Forgive because you have been forgiven. This is the root of being able to forgive the person who is being mean—remembering the meanness in your own heart. Anger at the other person is usually a form of self-righteousness. I am all right and he is all wrong; I tell the truth and he tells lies; I am good and he is bad. But then you remember that you have been bad yourself and are even now a mixture of good and evil—and that God has forgiven you through Jesus Christ. Thomas à Kempis wrote in the 1400's, “Be not angry that you cannot make others as you wish them to be, since you cannot make *yourself* as you wish to be.” When we remember our own incompleteness, and when we remember the grace that we have received, we are able to extend grace to others.

4. Imitate Christ's sacrificial love. For the Christian, the cross is the model for all of life. Jesus loved us and gave himself up for us. His life was not about his own success or his own comfort. Bonhoeffer called Jesus “the man for others.” That is what we are to be: people who live not out of self-interest but out of concern for others.

That kind of love changes the way we talk to people. The readiness to forgive changes the way we talk. Kindness changes the way we talk. It goes beyond being civil. It means that our talk is intended to build the other person up and to strengthen the connection that we already have. In that memorial service in Tucson, the President—speaking I believe as a Christian from

his heart—was calling us to something more than mere civility. He called us like the apostle Paul “to sharpen our instincts for empathy, and remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together.” He said at another point, “We may not be able to stop all the evil in the world, but I know that how we treat one another is entirely up to us.”