

*Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / June 23, 2019 / Pastor Jeff Harrison*  
Ephesians: Under Construction  
**At the Center** (Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2)

### **Coffee shop story shows our choices to be self or others centered**

Good morning friends. Our Church Family Growth Gathering is next Sunday, so sign up in the lobby today so we have plenty of dinner. There're great spiritual activities for the kids, and the film the teens and adults are watching and discussing speaks powerfully to our relationships with God and each other, so don't miss it.

Speaking of relationships, today is likely our last Sunday with Tom and Nesha Brown as they're in the process of moving to the Dallas area. Tom and Nesha, we'll miss you and so appreciate your many forms of service, with the food pantry, church office, as a deacon and elder and small group leaders, so thank you. Let's pray for the Browns and for God's help as we come to His Word...

I like going to coffee shops, to work, to hangout, coffee is my friend. Recently I tried a new coffee shop. So there I'm sitting on one end of a long bench with some tables in front of it, drinking my coffee and working on my computer. Eventually, I have to go to the bathroom. To my left is a lady sitting in a chair with a computer in her lap. It's kind of a tight space, and there's no one to my right on the bench, so instead of squeezing by the lady, I slide down the bench, get up and go to the bathroom.

When I get back from the bathroom, a guy had sat down on the bench, so I have to squeeze by the lady in the chair to sit back down. When I did, I barely bumped the table her iced latte is on. And to my horror, in slow motion, her drink teeters and then tips over. And I'm like, "no..." as some spills on her long skirt, which of course is white.

That lady suddenly faces a choice. Will she angrily yell at me? Or on the other end of responses, will she say, "Hey, I've spilled drinks too, don't worry about it."

### **Relevance: our choices to be self or others centered make a huge impact**

Like that lady, we all face choices each day to be self or others centered.

At the dryer, choosing whether to leave the lint for the next person or take it out of out the vent and throw it away.

In a group project for school or work, choosing whether to kinda coast on other people's efforts, or volunteer for the part of the project no one wants.

As your three-year-old cries in the middle of the night, deciding whether to pretend you're still sleeping and hope your spouse deals with it, or get up.

Here on Sundays, choosing whether to focus on if the service and people are meeting my needs, or building into other people's lives.

When things are escalating in a conflict, choosing whether to demand your hurt be addressed first or try to first understand how you hurt the other person.

We're all under construction, so none of us chooses well every time, but the direction we more often choose, self-centered, or others centered, makes a huge difference. It greatly matters to our families, friends, school, workplace, and church if we're more self or others centered. And it impacts the level of intimacy we experience with God, and even shapes the kind of person we're becoming.

When I spilled coffee on that lady, whatever was already inside of her, whether a more self or others shaped life, is what's going to "spill" out on me. The same is true for us. And I'm guessing I'm not the only one here who could use some help living more others centered.

### **Orienting to God's Word**

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the New Testament book of Ephesians. If not, we'll have the verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers, and we're in chapter 4 of Ephesians.

*Context* – As you're opening to Ephesians 4, let's review. Ephesians chapters 1-3 show that all followers of Jesus are united as one body, the church. And we the church enjoy incredible blessings in Jesus, now and forever.

Then starting in chapter 4, the author Paul explains how the church is to walk in light of the ways God has blessed us. The beginning of chapter 4 shows that we brothers and sisters are to love each other, seek unity, and use our gifts to build each other up. And as we pick things up in verse 25, we'll see many commands.

So if you're checking out church this morning, and don't like the idea of lots of commands, I want you to know that by the end of the message we'll see that rules are not at the heart of Christianity, so stick with us. Let's start, Ephesians chapter 4, verse 25.

<sup>25</sup> Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. <sup>26</sup> "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, <sup>27</sup> and do not give the devil a foothold. <sup>28</sup> Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

<sup>29</sup> Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

### **Teaching – Assessing if we're more self or others centered**

Conversations (4:25, 29) – These verses give negative commands ("do not's") and positive commands that help us see if we're more self or others centered. For example, verses 25 and 29 ask, "Who do our conversations serve?"

Verse 25 starts more basic, telling us not to lie, to instead always speak the truth. To not even tell those tempting so called "little white lies" that make you look better or keep you from feeling uncomfortable in a social situation. No, we're always to be honest.

As difficult as that is, verse 29 really raises the bar on our conversations. Look there with me. It says we should speak nothing unwholesome, so no "I told you so's" or "you always" or "you never". Instead, verse 29 says our words are to consistently build others up, to benefit them.

So when you, or I, am in conversation here at church, who are we serving? Am I thinking more about what I want to talk about and if you're listening and responding well to me; or am I thinking more about what you're needing and how I could build you up where you lack.

Being others centered like this doesn't mean our speech will always please us or the hearer, but that we seek to make it beneficial. So if we really want to give advice, but we sense the other person needs empathy, we listen and seek to understand and don't share our advice, no

matter how amazing it is. Or if in another conversation we really want to keep the peace, but the other person needs to be confronted about a destructive choice, we lovingly confront, even if things get uncomfortable.

*Relationship illustration shows self-centered conversations harm* – But this is difficult, I'd kinda rather focus first on me in conversations, and our culture also encourages us to put our happiness first. But the more we all focus on ourselves, the more we all miss out.

To illustrate, Pastor Tim Keller says to think of a romantic relationship. If both people approach the relationship with an attitude of “me first, my desires are most important here”, then eventually the relationship falls apart. On the other hand, if one person always says “you first” while the other always says “me first”, then the relationship becomes exploitative. Only to the extent that both partners say “you first” is there the potential for a great relationship. And the same is true in our church family. Only to the extent that we all say “you first” to each other do we have potential for life changing relationships.

And both the Bible and secular happiness research both confirm the importance of strong relationships for a meaningful life.<sup>1</sup> So God is not trying to be a kill joy with these difficult conversation commands in verses 25 and 29. No, God gives these commands because He wants us to have meaning filled lives in the long run, all the way into eternity. And He's telling us that when we try to get there by being self-centered, we sabotage ourselves.

But it's tempting to stay focused on self, a temptation that only grows when our conversation turns into a conflict.

*Conflict (4:26-27, 31-32)* – So God's Word even asks us to consider who we serve in conflict. Look at verse 26. I appreciate the Bible's realism here; it assumes you're going to be angry sometimes. The verse starts, “In your anger do not sin.”

When someone has hurt us, it's tempting to rehearse our wounds, allowing our negative emotions to fester and grow into what verse 31 describes as bitterness, rage, and anger that leads to brawling, slander, and malice, an ugly self-centered conflict.

Verse 26 instead calls us to not let the sun go down on our anger, or in other words, get started on the hard work of working through our anger. Doing things like asking God to help us to forgive the person, as verse 32 says. Rather than just avoiding the offender, or yelling at them, seek to be kind and compassionate, as verse 32 says.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Making Sense of God*.

*A warning that self-centered conflict responses harm* – For when we fail to work through our anger, verse 27 warns that we give the devil a foothold. Now we’re not talking about the red, pitchfork wielding Satan of popular culture. But we are talking about a real, evil spiritual being who loves to take advantage of us when we nurse our anger.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek, and I looked up this term *foothold* in a Greek to English lexicon. It’s primary meaning is a “place, position, or region” and it’s being used metaphorically here in verse 27. That when we nurse our anger, it’s like we’re giving the devil a place in our lives from which he can then exert his evil influence.<sup>2</sup>

So God’s Word warns us here, this is serious, you need to start working on your unresolved anger today. This warning may be why God has you here this morning. You’ve been nursing your anger against someone for weeks, even years, and today is the day to start working on it. Don’t let the sun go down, meaning don’t put this off for even one more day.

For when we put it off, what starts as a small foothold can turn into a stronghold in our life. As we nurse our anger and the devil works in that, our relationship can start sounding something like verse 31, with bitterness, rage, brawling, slander, malice.

We all know how hard it is to be others centered once we’ve allowed ourselves to become really riled up in a conflict. It’s too easy to say and do hugely destructive things, so verse 26 says don’t let the sun go down on your anger.

When we’re angry, especially if we’ve been nursing it, we need help, so the passage also gives us some powerful, God centered motivations.

### **Motivation – God’s Spirit motivates us to others centered living**

*God’s Spirit is building a community of blessing (4:25, 28-32)* – Let’s look at verse 30. It gives motivation about how God’s Spirit is building a community of blessing. The *you* in verse 30 is plural in the Greek, so in “Texan” verse 30 says:

“<sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom *ya’ll* were sealed for the day of redemption.”

Mentioning our sealing by the Spirit reminds us of the incredible spiritual blessings we share. Ephesians chapters 1-3 talk about how believers were chosen before creation, adopted in love, freely given glorious grace, redemption, and forgiveness, sealed by the Spirit together into

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<sup>2</sup> BDAG primary definition and Eph 4:27 definition for τόπος.

the Son's beloved relationship with the Father. Blessing not only in our relationship with God, as amazing as that is, but God also reconciling us to our brothers and sisters in Jesus. The Spirit building us into a community of blessing, together.

Look back at verse 25 of chapter 4. Why are we not to lie and instead tell the truth? The reason given is because "we are all members of one body." When we sin in our conversations, conflicts, or another area, we're utterly out of step with the community of blessing God's Spirit is building in the church.

But when we live others centered lives, in step with the Spirit's purposes, He loves to work through that to spread the blessing. As verse 28 says it, don't steal. That's selfish, you're disadvantaging others to advantage yourself. Rather, work a job so that you can share with those in need, God spreading blessing through your finances.

Or as verse 29 says, our conversations here are about us building into each other. God working through these other centered conversations to fill up what is lacking in each of our lives, to richly benefit us all. Even in our conflict, as verse 32 says, we seek to be kind and compassionate and forgiving to each other, because that's how God has blessed us.

A blessing we'll fully experience on the day verse 30 calls the day of redemption. It's that glorious day when God dwells among His people and everything wrong with the world and with us is made right, no more sin, pain, or death. On that day we'll experience the loving, life-giving, pure, honest, pain-free, sin free, guilt free, relationships with God and each other that we long for. Amen, that's where God is leading us.

*Barista illustration encourages us not to grieve God's Spirit* – Back when I spilled some latte on that lady's white skirt, the two baristas saw my clumsiness.

As I'm apologizing profusely and trying to help the lady clean up with these flimsy napkins, I also ask her what's she's drinking to buy her another one.

As I'm getting the lady's cup, before she's even answered, one barista takes the cup from me and says she'll make a new one at no charge. The other barista has come over with towels and gives one to the lady and then starts cleaning the drink off the table and floor.

I made the mess. I should be paying for the new drink and cleaning things up. But the baristas did, and not with a spirit of "I'm so tired of cleaning up after stupid customers." Rather, while one barista is on his hands and knees cleaning my spill off the floor, I say to him, "Thank you for literally cleaning up the mess I made." And he responds, "I'm glad to help."

Now while the baristas make a fresh latte and clean up my mess, imagine if I snuck over to their tip jar and stole money out of it. That would just be so wrong. I wouldn't want to grieve these people being so kind to me.

God's Spirit has been so kind to us, sealing us, Northwest, for the day of redemption. So let's not grieve Him with self-centered living. There this great positive cycle for us instead: that the more we think on and experience the Spirit's blessings to us, the more motivated we are to bless with others centered lives.

Now let's turn to chapter 5, where we see even more blessing and motivation to live others centered.

### **Worship – Jesus dearly loves us (5:1-2)**

5<sup>1</sup> Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children<sup>2</sup> and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Jesus is the ultimate example of others centered living. In conversation, He was willing to give a gracious or challenging word, whatever was the need of that moment, regardless of what it cost Him. And in conflict, He was full of love, grace, and truth. Even as He's unjustly beaten, mocked, and crucified, He shows compassion, even asking the Father to forgive those crucifying Him.

Jesus did all this, as verse 2 of chapter 5 says, because He loved us. I don't know how you were feeling about yourself as you walked in here today, but look at verse 1, and hear what it says: we are "dearly loved children." Jesus really loves you dearly, His arms open so wide that He let them be nailed open for you.

*Gospel* – And if you don't yet know Jesus, our heart for you here at Northwest is for you to join us in God's blessed family through faith in Lord Jesus. Trusting that Jesus came and lived a perfect life, in your place, on your behalf, and then on the cross took the penalty for all your self-centered living. His arms stretched wide open for you in love on the cross, beckoning you to become one of His dearly loved children, freely adopted into this community of blessing, and then walking in His others centered way.

This morning we've received the challenging call to be others centered in our conversations, conflicts, and the rest of our lives. Motivation for this call comes as we see how

God's Spirit is building us into a community of blessing and how dearly Jesus loves us, literally dying to love us, arms nailed open wide.

### **Next Steps**

Big idea – And so our big idea this morning is that God centered people don't center on themselves. Rather, they're motivated by the indescribably wonderful things God has done for us, is creating in us, and will do for us in glory. Motivated by God's generosity to live others centered lives. God centered people don't center on themselves.

Application - And so our next step this morning is to be God centered every day this week.

Coffee shop conclusion inspires our next step – When I spilled some latte on that lady's white skirt, and I'm feeling terrible and apologizing, she tells me that it's no big deal and not to worry about it and how only a little got on her skirt and it didn't get on her computer or anywhere else.

The mess was my fault, and I felt terrible when it happened, but then they took all the cost and gave me grace. The lady, who graciously forgave and even put me at ease right after I made things uneasy for her. The baristas, who made another drink for free and cleaned up my mess while saying they were glad to help. Their other centeredness filling with me gratitude and inspiring me to be others centered too.

So the more God centered we all become here, the more our church family will be a place of others centered love. Blessing flowing between us and inspiring us to put off our selfishness and put on others centered love. I really hope all of us follow through on our next step to be God centered every day this week. As we all center more on God, who knows what kind of impact He'll be pleased to make as He continues building us into a community of blessing.

So before we conclude our service, let's invite God to be at the center of our lives as we stand and sing *Center* again. As the Worship Team comes up now to lead, let's pray...