

December 2, 2012

Philippians 4:8-9 / Colossians 3:15-17 / Ephesians 4:29-30
Holiness Defined (#2): Uplifting Speech, Sin-Resisting Resolve

This past week I received a copy of "Leadership Journal" in the mail -- a magazine geared toward helping pastors or those in the ministry. And when I opened it up the very first article I turned to was entitled: **"*Breaking the Mold: Christian Formation Means Not Letting The World Press Us Into Its Mold*"** by Jon Tyson.

And interestingly the very first paragraph of his article said: **"*As a Christian leader I am grieved by statistics indicating that believers and non-believers live almost identical lives: Similar sexual ethics, spending patterns, and life-style choices. Despite spending millions of dollars on transformation campaigns, conferences, books, curricula, worship music, small groups, multimedia... and all forms of relevance and engagement material, Christians are remarkably like the world.*"** It's almost identical to the point I made just a couple weeks back.

Yet you know what happens when believers become virtually indistinguishable from the world? We become invisible. We fail to be noticed. We lose the ability to influence the world around us. We cease to be the lamp set on a lamp stand, or the city set on a hill, which Jesus called us to be.

When Christians are too much like the world, it's sort of like being in attendance at a stadium full of people with green t-shirts, and wearing the same green t-shirt ourselves! We lose the ability to be noticed. We lose the ability to catch anyone's eye. We so blend in with everyone else that anyone scanning the crowd could never pick us out!

Yet, what I think we sometimes forget, is that what Jesus asks us to do when He asks us to be holy, is to be different. To stand out. To be like a person, who in that sea of green, chooses to wear a red t-shirt. Because then, even in a crowd of many thousands, their eye would be drawn to you. You wouldn't have to wave or shout or do anything and you'd be noticed.

And LISTEN: I'm NOT saying we should try to be different simply for the sake of trying to be different. There is no virtue in being contrary, or abrasive, or going against the flow, simply to be contrary, abrasive and go against the flow! (Though I have seen that to be the case in some Christian circles.)

That's NOT what Jesus or Paul are asking of us! Their message is simple -- be holy and you will be different. Live in a way that seeks to honor and glorify God and you will be different.

And how do we do that? Paul tells us twice: We do that by trying to "be like God." In v. 24 he tells us: **"And put on the new self created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."** / And then he says it again in chap. 5:1 where he writes: **"Be imitators of God..."**

NOT "like God" or "imitators of God" in the SINFUL SENSE of wanting to usurp His place as God or His authority as God (as Satan did, or Eve in the Garden) and NOT by trying to "be God" or "play God" in the lives of other people, by telling them how we feel they should be or live.

Rather, we are to be, "like God" in His truthfulness (v. 25) / His pursuit of reconciliation (v. 26) / His determination to be always working, or doing something useful (v. 28) -- like carrying on to completion the work he has begun in each believer, remembering that laziness is contrary to holiness or the nature of God. And being like him in assisting those in need (v. 28b).

Yet that's not all. Because what Paul does today is give us TWO more ways we can "be like God" or "imitate Him" (in that good sense of the word) and thereby reflect His holiness to the onlooking world.

The **1st**) comes in v. 29 where we are encouraged to speak words that **"build others up"** and seek to **"meet needs"** and **"impart benefit to the hearer."**

And the **2nd**) comes in v. 30 where Paul tells us **"Do not quench the Holy Spirit of God with which you were sealed unto the day of redemption."** A command preceded by, and followed by, the very things that DO quench the Holy Spirit, thus requiring him to add: **"Therefore, rid yourselves of all such things as..."** and he goes on to list them.

That's what I need to say from the start. Paul is calling us as believers in Jesus, who have received the Holy Spirit from God, to live a life that "imitates Him" and "does not quench His Spirit in us" (or the Church)."

That's our purpose as Christians: To represent Him in the world and to the world. Not necessarily trying to be different, but simply trying to be like Him, and thus being different, often without even realizing it! Simply trying to be like Christ in a fallen world will make us stick out from the -- like that person wearing a red t-shirt in a stadium where everyone else is dressed in a green one.

And we need to do it! Because when we're too much like the world, we lose our power to influence or change the world. By allowing it to squeeze us into its mold, we cease to be that lamp stand, or city on a hill, and turn our backs on our divine calling.

As Kenneth Kantzer has rightly pointed out: "***In the 70's and 80's evangelical Christians had very little popularity, but much influence. Now we have the popularity, but have very little influence.***"

Why? Because we compromised with the world in our attempt to be popular or accepted by it.

So, let's look at these two additional aspects of holiness, beginning **FIRST** with uplifting or edifying speech, which meets needs and benefits those who listen.

"Do not," says Paul in v. 29, ***"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."***

And although that IS a fair or valid translation, there are FOUR helpful insights we can gain, when we take a closer look at the Greek.

1st) The phrase, ***"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths,"*** should actually be translated, ***"Do not let any unwholesome word come out of your mouths...."*** (the term "word" or "logos" in the Greek, being in the singular, and thus pointing to each specific word we speak).

Paul is NOT simply referring to the general gist our conversation, or the topics we talk about, or our speech in general, nor even certain words that are vulgar or profane words, but every single word that comes out of our mouths at any time!

As Hoehner points out, ***"it means that every (or) each word that comes from the mouth is to be wholesome... The emphasis throughout this verse is that every word is to be accounted for... Care must be taken that each word is not useless or unprofitable, but beneficial for building up the body."***

Then **2ndly**) the word translated "**unwholesome**" essentially means "useless" or "unprofitable" or "having no value" -- that is, when it comes to making someone more whole or complete. It goes far beyond mere swearing or profanity (which is the way I have always heard this text preached).

And I'm not saying it doesn't include vulgarity or profanity, for profanity does nothing to "build up" or "edify others." But both the word and the context make it clear that it goes much further than that, to include any speech that does not build others up, seek to meet a need, or impart some type of benefit to the hearer. Words, we could say, are very powerful -- they have the power of life or death, says Solomon -- so don't waste a single one.

You see, one can easily engage in "unwholesome talk" without EVER using any profanity or swears at all. All one has to do is speak poorly of someone / or gossip / or put someone down / or speak about surfacey and irrelevant things, when we can clearly see someone is hurting, wrestling with something, or in need of earnest counsel.

"Unwholesome talk" is any talk that does not make others more whole or complete as a result. Talk that does not build them up / never addresses their needs / or speaks about trivial and inane things when something of utmost importance needs to be addressed.

Sort of like the movie I saw the other night where a young lady had done something terribly hurtful to her former fiancé, and they meet years later to talk - - evading the real issue for hours -- until he finally interrupts and says: ***"We're saying a lot, but we're really saying nothing."***

That's an example of unwholesome talk. It benefits no one and evades addressing the real needs at hand -- in most instances without ever using profanity, vulgarity or swears.

The word "**sapros**" (translated "unwholesome" here in the NIV) is else-where used when referring to: "**rotted wood**" (which lacks the strength to hold any weight) / "**withered flowers**" (which lack the fragrance or beauty of freshly picked ones) / or "**rancid fish**" (which has no nutritional value, can make one ill, and gives off a putrid smell).

Or as Hoehner points out, "***It usually refers to people or things that are worn out, or useless, or to that which is of little worth [or value].***"

Which means that the key to "wholesome conversation" is to see that every word we speak is helpful / has value / addresses a need / or builds others up -- being instructive (or constructive) rather than destructive. It's to see that every word we speak benefits someone / encourages someone / serves the godly purpose of building up the individual or the Church / or meets a need in someone who is struggling.

That's the **3rd**) thing Paul does. After telling us what type of words we shouldn't use, he then tells us what type of words we should use: "***Only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs...***"

Which means that our words must be purposeful and planned. Because I must always seek to be conscious, aware, or sensitive to what people need / what they're going through / what they're struggling with / and then so frame my words with Spirit-led wisdom, that they help address that need / build that person up / encourage them / or in some way benefit them.

The word "**oikodome**" (translated here as "building others up") is a very common, everyday, Greek word that was used when speaking of, "building a house, or building any type of building or structure."

And what Paul does, is simply take that word and use it in reference to people -- as if we believers are "buildings" under construction or "houses" in need of repair.

That's what he wants us to know. We are ALL "under construction." None of us is a finished work. We are ALL "in process." We ALL have more work that needs to be done on us! Growth in Christ or being built up in the faith or what we call sanctification is a life-long process.

In CITIES you can drive through and see buildings or bridges that are under construction / and buildings or bridges that are finished. But in the Church, there are no completed buildings! Not one! Not in THIS life! Looking at the Church is like driving through a city where every building and every bridge always remains UNFINISHED! You never see a finished building this side of heaven!

Yet we're still called to work toward the goal of completion, despite the fact that it isn't until death (or better yet, the resurrection of the dead) that the building which is US gets completed! Even though we KNOW God's work in us will never be completed in this life, we are still called to patiently and persistently and with unbending resolve work toward that end.

And the key thing we need to remember is this: That in the process of building or constructing us, God sometimes does the work Himself, while at other times He uses people -- and especially their edifying words -- to assist Him in that work.

In Peter's life God sometimes worked directly, and alone, like the time He gave Peter that vision of the sheet descending from heaven with all the unclean animals on it (on the rooftop in Joppa in Acts 10:9-16) and told him to eat them. A vision where the unclean animals represented Gentiles and Peter's refusal to eat them represented his prejudice against them.

Yet on a later occasion, He used Paul to personally confront and rebuke Peter for being two-faced -- for acting one way when circumcised Jews were present / and another way entirely when they weren't. Remembering as we must, that even a rebuke falls under the umbrella of edifying words if they are spoken seeking a person's growth.

The same was true with Paul. On the road into Damascus Jesus Himself knocked Paul to the ground with a blinding light and spoke to him directly with His own voice. Yet only a few days later He chose to have Ananias do it.

Though He could have done it Himself, He sent Ananias to pray that Paul's eyes be healed, and to give Paul the message that he was God's specially chosen one to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles.

And the same is true of us. Sometimes GOD Himself does the construction and other times He chooses to use people in the process -- and in particular, their building or uplifting words, spoken with the aim of meeting a spiritual need within us and imparting grace to those who hear.

So, just as we might see a person living in a house with shattered windows and seek to help repair them, or see them living in a house with a gaping hole in the roof and do what we could to help patch it, so also, when we see a brother or sister in Christ struggling (or anyone else for that matter) our aim should be to speak words that encourage them, build them up, repair that wound, or help heal that problem.

Which brings us to the **4th**) part of v. 29 where Paul says of our words, ***"that it (that is, each word) may benefit those who hear."*** Or literally in the Greek: ***"That it [each word] may impart grace to the ones hearing."***

And as I've mentioned so many times before, "grace" as is both "undeserved favor" (including things like pardon, forgiveness, eternal life, etc.) / and "undeserved enablement" (such as the power He gives through His Spirit to enable us to be and to do what we could never otherwise be or do).

And here in this verse, the "grace" he's referring to is the grace of undeserved enablement or empowering, conveyed to the hearer through words spoken to build them up. And in my opinion it's best to retain the use of the word, "grace," instead of "benefit," since "grace," unlike mere "benefit" (and I think this was purposeful on Paul's part) emphasizes the idea that this enablement that comes through our words is "undeserved."

That is, our words aimed at meeting a need or building others up are NOT something they must EARN! They are to be given to others simply because they belong to the family of God -- period. Too often (in any Church) words of praise or encouragement are withheld until we think a person deserves them.

But that's counter to what Paul is saying. For his point is that even if a person stumbles, or messes up, or falls short, or does wrong, we are still to speak words with the intention of strengthening them in their walk with God.

For they are spoken with the intention of imparting "grace" to the hearer -- NOT deserved, or merited, or earned favor or enablement, but undeserved or unmerited favor or enablement.

In fact, its good to remember that its often when we stumble, and fall, that we need to hear those words of grace the most! Meaning we are not to wait until people to perform up to par or measure up to our standards, before we encourage them with our words! They are not to be rewards, but gifts. They are not earned, but bestowed freely. They are grace, not merit badges! So take anyone and impart grace to them with your words!

And then **LAST**, we come to Paul's admonition, "***Do not quench the Holy Spirit, with which we have been sealed unto the day of redemption.***" The word "quench" (lewpeo) conveys the idea of grief or sorrow. But it can also convey the idea of quenching a burning fire by throwing water on it.

And how does one quench the Spirit? By sinning.

Actually, this verse looks back to what Paul has already said and forward to what he's about to say, showing us that we quench the Holy Spirit by lying or speaking falsehoods (v. 25). We quench the Holy Spirit when we refuse to reconcile with a brother or sister in Christ (v. 26-27). We quench the Holy Spirit when we steal instead of working hard with our own hands (v. 28). And we quench the Holy Spirit when we speak unwholesome words, rather than constructive, building, grace imparting words aimed at meeting a need (v. 29).

And listen: *It quenches the Spirit whether anyone else knows about our sin or not! Because God knows about it, and He is grieved by it, even if no one else EVER finds out about it.*

And I say that as a pastor who has walked into all my churches on certain Sundays, and felt (as soon as I walked in) that something was quenching the Spirit. Sometimes I'm sure it was me.

In fact, one time I even had to stop the service, and publically apologize to Nancy from the pulpit because I had had an argument with her the night before, and said some things I shouldn't have, and I couldn't preach without first doing it. I was the one quenching the Spirit.

But other times its been the sin of someone else (or a few someone else's): They've watched something they shouldn't have the night before, or they gossiped about someone else that week and have not sought forgiveness, or they've judged another brother, or refused to forgive, or come in still angry with their spouse, or for taking out their frustrations on out the kids.

It could be anything! Lying, stealing, laziness, lust, or refusing to reconcile with a brother or sister. And so long as it is not dealt with, or so long as sin goes unaddressed, unconfessed, or unresolved, it quenches the Holy Spirit of God in our midst -- whether anyone else knows about it or not.

And what is Paul's command? ***"Do not quench the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you've been sealed unto the day of redemption."*** So, we're not talking about sin causing us to lose our salvation. Paul makes that clear -- we can quench or grieve the Spirit, but we can't lose the Holy Spirit, because we've been sealed with Him -- "unto the day of redemption."

No. Even when we sin our salvation is secure. But that doesn't mean that our sin has no ill-effects. It has plenty. It quenches the sense of His presence. It diminishes the joy He comes to bring and robs both us and the church as a whole of the strength and power it could be walking in.

It makes the atmosphere seem lifeless and dull. And it can make it seem like God is a million miles away, or nowhere to be found.

So don't do it, says Paul. That's why he also goes on to say, ***"Rid yourself of all bitterness, rage and anger."*** Why? Because they quench the Spirit! The same is true for, ***"brawling, slander, and every form of malice."***

Get rid of it, says Paul, every single bit! For those things quench the Spirit, and thus spoil the work God seeks to do with and among His people.

That's why I say to everybody here today: ***If you are doing or harboring any of those things in your heart, your salvation may not be at risk, but your growth is / and your enjoyment of sweet fellowship with God is / and your walking in the fullness of the Spirit and His power is. / Unhindered joyful times of worship are / and the blessing of a clear conscience before God is / and your prayer life is / and the unity of the church is / and the free flow of the life of God in the Church is!***

You see, our sin doesn't simply affect us. It affects us and everyone around us.

So I say that to everyone here. This is serious stuff, because it has an impact on the church, and God loves His Church. And He loves you too, and wants you to experience all the blessings of the salvation He has purchased for you -- but you can't if you're doing things that quench the Spirit.

***So, be rid of them now.
Repent of them now.
Do it now and don't delay.***