Think of Ned Flanders on *The Simpsons*. Half the power tools in Homer’s garage belong to Ned. Homer borrowed most of them a long time ago, but he never returned them. Nor does he have any intention of returning them. He even scratches out Ned’s name on some tools and writes his own. Still, Homer keeps asking Ned if he can borrow the latest gadget; and what does Ned unfailingly say in reply?  “Okely dokely, neighbor!” It is very possible that Ned overlooked Ephesians 4:26. “Be angry but do not sin.”

Well, here is a little secret, just between us. The Bible considers it *normal* for Christians to get angry. Nowhere, in all the many instructions Jesus gives to his disciples, will you find the command to be “nice” in the way Ned Flanders is unfailingly nice. It is a distortion of the New Testament to equate all anger with sin.

Jesus himself got angry. Mark reports: “[Jesus] looked around at [the Pharisees] with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart” (3:1-5). Why? Because the Pharisees objected to Jesus’ plan to heal a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath. The best-known example is Jesus’ cleansing of the temple. As Jesus strides through the temple courtyard, overturning the tables of the moneychangers, he cries out, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mark 11:17). Jesus is mad, and them’s fightin’ words!

The difference in these cases lies in the reasons for the anger. Often, when we find ourselves raising our voices and getting red in the face, it is because we feel personally injured or abused in some way. Somebody just squeezed into the parking place ahead of us. A co-worker just fired off a flaming e-mail. The person ahead of us in the express line has 16 items in the cart. We feel injured, so we respond by getting angry.

But when the Bible speaks approvingly of anger, the object of the anger is not our own precious sense of injury, but rather injury or injustice *inflicted on another person*. When Jesus gets mad at the Pharisees, it is because that poor man with the withered hand may not get healed. When he overturns tables in the temple, it is on behalf of all the poor, devout pilgrims who are getting swindled by a corrupt system.

Many of the great reforms in human history would never have happened were it not for righteous anger. Where would the descendants of African slaves be, were it not for the righteous anger of William Wilberforce who labored tirelessly until the English Parliament finally abolished slavery? Think of 21st century crusaders who fight human trafficking, standing up for women and children against their male aggressors. Think of the advocates who protest unfair housing laws, or fight the social stigma of mental illness, or stand against corporations on behalf of the environment? A Christian could be forgiven for getting angry in response to unjust situations like these!

Paul’s letter also supplies some practical advice on how to manage anger, righteous or otherwise. “Do not let the sun go down on your anger” (4:26). Do not hold on to anger obsessively, which is good advice for a marriage, as well as a social reform movement. If we don’t let the sun go down on our anger, if we make sure there are intervals of rest and peace, even amid a protracted campaign for social justice, we will find we have the staying power to stick with the cause for the long term.

**Talk That Builds Up.** Ephesians 4 says: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up…” (v. 29). The translation “evil” (as in “evil talk”) is a cleaned-up version, compared to the original Greek which literally means something like “putrid,” as in rotting fish. We might think this passage is about profanity or obscenity, but if we read on, we find that Paul has something very different in mind: “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice…” (v. 31).

“Bitterness” is a type of talk that keeps calling back to mind experiences of hurt or pain, some of which are better left alone. Some people go to their graves feeling bitter for the way their parents or their spouses or their children failed them. Or they castigate themselves for some missed opportunity decades in the past. Bitter talk, when it continues for a very long time without let-up, causes terrible emotional harm to the speaker and offers nothing but misery for everyone who must listen to their complaints. We must learn to let some things go, to cut ourselves some slack, and to offer others grace.

Next comes the word “wranglings,” which is a creative translation of a Greek word that means “shoutings” or loud outbursts. It is entirely appropriate for the Christian to “shout” in anger if he or she sees injustice perpetrated upon the weak or innocent; but such “wranglings” need to be of a focused, disciplined nature or they will not accomplish much.

Then comes the word “slander.” The Greek is *blasphemia*, from which we get the English word, “blasphemy.” Usually, we think of blasphemy as taking the Lord’s name in vain, but in the original Greek it means slanderous, gossipy remarks of *any* kind. Another Greek word for “slanderer” is the word *diabolos*, from which we get the word “diabolical,” meaning “devilish.” We heard this word earlier in the passage when we talked about not letting the sun go down on our anger: it says, “and do not make room for the devil” (vv. 26-27). Literally, “do not make room for the slanderer,” Satan, who is often referred to as “the father of lies.” To slander another person is to serve a diabolical purpose.

Scottish Bible scholar William Barclay’s description of slander is pure poetry: “There are reputations murdered over the teacups every day.” There is a universal human tendency to pass on a juicy bit of gossip, regardless of whether we know it to be true. We have whole new dimensions for doing this today through social media. The speed with which a slanderous remark can make the rounds these days is breathtaking, and some of those “urban legends” never seem to die. But such words are hurtful, deceitful, and can only destroy.

The final word on the list is “malice,” or hateful feelings. We see the damage such feelings do by people with weapons in their hands. From the shock-jocks of talk radio to the hate-speech of racism to the neighbor who perpetuates a feud against another neighbor, malice can kill.

**Be Kind.** The antithesis of all this is also found in Ephesians: “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (4:32). This is the true speech of the Christian! Positive, upbuilding talk is a counterweight to the anger, slander, and malice of the world. Grace, kindness, mercy, and forgiveness are the true building blocks of true Christian conversation.

Such words are not weakness, or sentimental niceness, or being a doormat. Rather, mouths filled with positive, affirming talk is a strong and grateful response to the forgiveness and grace we have ourselves received from Jesus Christ. Kind, compassionate, caring discourse is the rarest of commodities amid the sound and fury of soul-destroying hate speech all around us. This is the type of speech Christ calls us to utter. This is how to talk like a Christian.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me choose my words wisely. Help me speak life into those around me today: to be a source of encouragement rather than discouragement, of hope rather than pain. In the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen

**Source:** William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*(Westminster John Knox, 1976) 157.

**How to Talk Like a Christian**

Sunday, August 8, 2021 Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

It is a simple but reliable principle of human life: how people talk reveals a lot about who they are. The way we talk can also reveal something about how committed we are to being Christians. It has nothing to do with accent, or vocabulary or grammar. It has everything to do with how we use our God-given gift of speech. Do our words hurt, or do they heal? Do our words speak truth or falsehood? Do our words build up, or do they tear down? Such are the concerns we read about in Ephesians 4 and 5, where Paul offers instruction that helps us understand how Christians should talk to one another and to others.

**Put Away Falsehood.** Paul begins: “Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another” (4:25). That one sounds like a no-brainer. Christians are supposed to speak the truth. Everybody knows that! We like to imagine ourselves as fundamentally trustworthy people. But not so fast. What about the infamous “little white lies” we tell to spare another person’s feelings? What about when the dental hygienist asks whether we really do floss twice a day? What about the expenses we deduct on our tax returns? Telling the truth is not always so straightforward and simple.

Then there are the things we say to explain our actions. I'm only human. Everybody does it. I did what I had to do. It’s just business. If I don’t do it, somebody else will. It’s a victimless crime. I was only following orders. Nobody’s perfect. If we ever find ourselves rationalizing things this way, we are already in deep water. Speaking the truth, always and everywhere, is one of the most important ways to talk like a Christian.

**Be Angry, But Do Not Sin.** Here is something else Paul says about how to talk like a Christian: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil” (4:26). The reason that statement sounds so strange is that most of us are taught that anger is always un*-*Christian and ought to be avoided. We are taught that the most important characteristic of a Christian is to be *nice*, to not make waves, to smile a lot, to be soft-spoken, to be a doormat others can walk on as we turn the other cheek.