

*The Truth in Love*  
*Part 3 in a Series on the Words we Speak*  
Ephesians 4:11-16

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ May 3, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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**<sup>11</sup> And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup> for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; <sup>13</sup> until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. <sup>14</sup> As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; <sup>15</sup> but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, <sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:11-16, NRSV)**

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I love this passage from Ephesians 4 for many reasons. For one, it gives a beautiful picture of that which is to be a central goal of the church. Paul writes that God has appointed leaders – people like apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – to “equip the saints [that’s all of us!] for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s that last phrase that always grabs me – “the measure of the full stature of Christ.” You see, the goal of the Christian life, lived out in the community of the church, is that we, individually and collectively, would come to resemble the character of Jesus himself. Dallas Willard has said that the most important thing about us in life is not the things we achieve but the people we become. We are to become people who are like Jesus in the way we think and speak and act and love and give and serve and trust. The qualities of Jesus’ character are, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to bear this fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.<sup>2</sup>

Let me personalize this. The most important thing about *your* life is the person you are to become and you are meant to become a person with the character of Christ. But as Paul points out here, you cannot become that person on your own. Christian maturity *always* occurs in the context of Christian community. Like a branch which cannot grow apart from the tree or a part the body which cannot grow disconnected from the other parts of the body, a Christian cannot grow to become like Christ unless he or she is connected to other Christians in the church. I hope you know this. We need each other to become what were meant to become.

So what happens when you see a brother or sister in the church who is failing to mature in Christ-like character? This might be somebody in your Life Group, or somebody you serve with on a team, or maybe even somebody in your own family. How do you respond when a fellow Christian has a tendency to speak harshly to others, or has demonstrated some addictive behavior in their life, or has chosen some destructive and immoral lifestyle, or is showing an unhealthy obsession with money or material things, or has begun to believe some false teaching which is outside the bounds of biblical truth? Or to turn the tables, what is somebody else in the church to do when they see you or me failing to mature in one of these ways?

Listen again to what Paul says. “Speaking the truth in love,” he writes, “we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Put simply, when we see error or sin in one another, when we recognize a failure or resistance to grow up in some way to maturity in Christ, we must bring this to the attention of one another. When you see sin in my

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 4:12-14, NRSV

<sup>2</sup> From Galatians 5:22-23

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 4:15, NRSV

life it is your obligation as my brother or sister in Christ to call it out. And I am obligated to do the same for you. We must speak the truth to one another about these things, but we must speak this truth in love.

And herein is the struggle. Here is where we typically make one of two errors.

To begin with, sometimes we speak the truth but we speak it without love. I tell you what is wrong with you but my motive for doing so is something other than love, something other than my genuine and selfless concern for your best interests.

Some years ago, when I was just beginning to work as a pastor, I had a man in the church make an appointment to see me one day because he wanted to tell me that he thought a decision I had made displayed a great deal of ignorance and arrogance. Basically, he told me I was a young pastor just starting out who didn't know much and who didn't know I didn't know much. In fact, there was some truth to what he was saying. I can see that now. The problem was that he was not speaking this truth in love. He was not happy with the decision I had made and his anger over not getting his way was what motivated his words. He spoke the truth to me but it was not truth spoken in love.

Why do we do this? Simply because we are selfish. At times we think too highly of ourselves and so we speak self-righteously to another person, condemning some flaw in their life that we cannot imagine would also be present in our life. At other times we think too lowly of ourselves and we point out some flaw in the life of another because it momentarily makes us feel better about ourselves. Either way, we're thinking too much of ourselves. And the problem with speaking truth without love is that it usually ensures that people can't hear the truth they need to hear.

I recently heard somebody compare our words to a kind of product, something you hope to sell to somebody else. Every product begins in the Engineering Department – that's where the original concept and design are developed. But once the design is complete, the product leaves Engineering and goes to Marketing. That's where products are packaged. And as every manufacturer knows, it's hard to sell even a great product without great packaging. You can't sell breakfast cereal in brown paper bags or exotic perfume in aluminum cans.<sup>4</sup> In the same way, you may have very valuable truth to tell me about some flaw in my Christian character, but if I don't hear that your motive in telling me is love then it is very likely I won't want to buy what it is you're trying to sell me.

The other error we make is that we decide not to tell the truth because we imagine that keeping quiet is the loving thing to do. I see some flaw in your Christian character but I have convinced myself that it is not loving for us to make judgments about one another in this way so I keep my words to myself. In love, I *don't* speak the truth.

Why do we do this? Once again, we do this because we are selfish. Honestly, sometimes we don't have the courage to speak the truth to another person because doing so is hard and uncomfortable and we don't want to do things that are hard or make us feel uncomfortable. Other times we don't speak the truth to others because, frankly, we don't want them to turn around and speak truth back to us. Live and let live, right? Finally, sometimes we don't speak the truth to others because we simply don't care enough about others. I may see an area of your life that is hurting you but I've got so much to worry about in my own life that I can't invest in your life as well.

Of course, the problem with not speaking the truth out of love is that nobody ever gets to hear the truth they need to hear. When parents do this, when they fail to lovingly and appropriately call out and discipline character flaws they see in their own children we all recognize that they are being negligent parents. Love, rightly understood and practiced, does not always affirm what it sees in another. If I love you it means that I want God's best for you and that means that I will even be willing to sacrifice our friendship if that's what it takes to help you see how the way you are choosing to live now is not God's best for you. Your best friends – in fact, your only *true* friends – are the ones who have the guts to speak the truth in love to you. Your well-being is more important to them than even the friendship itself.

A writer named Tim Keller puts it this way: "Truth without love is imperious self-righteousness. Love without truth is cowardly self-indulgence." John Newton, the slave trader turned abolitionist who composed *Amazing Grace*, once wrote, "Our natural temptation is to say what we should not say, or to not say what we should say. One is cruel arrogance, the other cruel cowardice, and neither is love."

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<sup>4</sup> From an article by Tim & Joy Down, "Speaking the Truth in Love". See the Family Life Today website at [http://www.familylife.com/articles/topics/marriage/staying-married/resolving-conflict/speaking-the-truth-in-love#.VT\\_B\\_2d0yUk](http://www.familylife.com/articles/topics/marriage/staying-married/resolving-conflict/speaking-the-truth-in-love#.VT_B_2d0yUk)

Paul is right. If we are ever to become a community of people who are maturing fully in the character of Christ we must first become a community of people who learns to speak the truth in love to one another. I recently heard this likened to a gem tumbler. A gem tumbler, as you may know, is a machine used to polish precious stones. The raw stones are put together in the tumbler which is then rotated at a certain speed so that the stones are brought into constructive, creative contact with one another until the rough edges are knocked off and each gem comes out smooth and beautiful. The thing is, if you don't put a special silicon lubricant into the tumbler with the gems, the stones will bounce off one another without any effects or may even crack and shatter each other.<sup>5</sup>

We need to knock against one another with the truth if we are ever to become the Christ-like people we are meant to become. The church is meant to be a giant gem tumbler. But we need the lubricant of love and grace or we will end up hurting rather than helping one another. Truth which is *not* spoken because it seems unloving to speak only leaves us stuck with all our sharp edges. Truth spoken without love, however, beats us up. By and with God's grace, we must find a way to become a church that speaks the truth *in love* to one another.

With that in mind, let me just say aloud what you are likely thinking right about now. This is hard. At least it's hard to do well. And because it's hard to do well you know what most of us do? We opt for the second approach, convincing ourselves that it's unloving and judgmental to point out the sin in the lives of other people. Somebody, for example, continually speaks harshly to us and to others but we don't want to come across as judgmental so we put up with it or, at most, we complain about it others. But what eventually happens? At some point we can't hold it in any longer and we finally say something to this person but by that time we're so frustrated that even though the truth comes out it isn't packaged at all in grace and love and it ends up doing more harm than good. Anybody here ever had that experience? If you say you have not I may have to use this occasion to speak the truth in love to you!

Listen closely to what I'm about to say to you. The only way for us to be able to rightly speak the truth in love to our brothers and sisters in Christ is to first allow Christ to speak the truth in love to us. Let me say that again. *The only way for us to be able to rightly speak the truth in love to our brothers and sisters in Christ is to first allow Christ to speak the truth in love to us.*

In John 1 we read this beautiful description of Jesus. "The Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth."<sup>6</sup> Full of grace *and* full of truth. Jesus was full of grace *first*, but then he was also just as full of truth. With this in mind, what words does Jesus speak to us when he speaks to us? His first word to us is always a word of grace, a word of love, a word of forgiveness and peace. Because of what Christ accomplished through his death and resurrection, the first word that God speaks to you through Christ is the indelible word that you are his beloved son, his beloved daughter, in whom he delights. Jesus always leads with love.

This is, however, not the only word Christ speaks to us. As has been said, Jesus loves us so much that he loves us exactly as he finds us but also loves us too much to leave us there. Out of love, Christ is going to speak truth to us about our sin, about the times we choose to live selfishly in life, about the ways our character does not yet resemble his character. Read the Gospels and you'll see that Jesus pulls no punches when it comes to speaking truth. There is no pretending or posing when you come in to the presence of the Living God. Jesus is going to name what needs to be named.

And yet, if we have already heard his first word of love, then we are able to hear his second word of truth. Because I know that my identity and worth before God is not dependent upon my own goodness, because I know that nothing whatsoever can diminish God's love for me and his forgiveness towards me, then I find myself secure enough in that grace and love to hear even the worst truth about me that could ever be said. My sin may run deep, but the love and grace of Christ run infinitely deeper. In fact, the person who does not want to face the depth of their own sin is the person who is not yet secure in the even greater depth of God's love and grace.

When Jesus speaks to me he speaks to me the truth in love. When I receive the truth about myself in love from Christ, I then find that I am able to similarly speak to my brothers and sisters truth in love. The *love* of Christ frees me to speak the truth to you about your sin because I am no longer afraid that you will reject me for doing so. Even if you do reject

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<sup>5</sup> Tim Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York: Dutton, 2011), p.163-4.

<sup>6</sup> John 1:14, NRSV

me I am not rejected because my Father in Heaven claims me as his beloved Son. At the same time, however, the *truth* of Christ constrains me to speak truth to you *in love* because I have come to see, in humility, that the sin I see in you is no worse than the sin I have already been shown in myself. Because I am loved I can now speak truth. Because I have heard the truth I am humbled to speak truth in love.

In Matthew 7 Jesus addresses this very issue when he speaks about our tendency to judge one another in self-righteous and hypocritical ways. “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye,” he asks, “but do not notice the log in your own eye? Don’t be a hypocrite. First take the giant log out of your own eye so you can then see clearly enough to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.”<sup>7</sup>

Too often this passage is misinterpreted. Too many people wrongly believe Jesus is telling us here never to judge others, never to point out the sin in the life of another. But that’s not what Jesus says. According to Jesus we should help our neighbor with the speck in his eye, but just not until we’ve addressed the log in our own eye. Speak God’s truth to one another, yes, but only after you’ve heard God’s truth about yourself. Because Jesus has spoken the truth in love to me now I am able, in turn, to speak the truth in love to you.

This doesn’t work out so well in the world, by the way. Even if we are motivated by love I don’t think we’re called to go around to everybody we meet pointing out to them the ways their lives are not conformed to Jesus. Remember, people outside the church do not yet know the love of Christ. That means that they are not ready to hear the truth of Christ because you must hear the love of Christ before you are able to hear the truth of Christ. When we get that order reversed we will always come across like judgmental hypocrites. Truth poorly packaged will never be received.

This is why Paul’s teaching here to the church is to be applied *within* the church. As followers of Jesus we ought to have already heard the truth in love from Jesus so that we are freed to now speak the truth in love to one another so that we, individually and collectively, can grow into the measure of the full stature of Christ. In fact, one of the most beautiful skills we can learn as Christians is the ability to tell the straight, unvarnished truth about what one another has done, or is doing, and then, completely, unself-righteously, and joyously express forgiveness and grace and love without a shred of superiority so that we do not make the other person feel small.<sup>8</sup>

So here’s the question. Do you have people in this church, or even Christians you know from another church, who are willing to speak the truth in love to you to help you grow in the character of Christ? Do you have *even one person* who is willing to do this? Sadly, many of us may not. Tragically, sometimes our own spouses, or parents, or best friends won’t even do this for us.

With this in mind, perhaps the most important step we can take in this regard is to invite somebody to be a person in our life who is not afraid to speak the truth in love to us. Who is somebody in this community that you know already loves you, somebody you know genuinely wants God’s best for you? If you have not done so already, give that person permission to begin to help you see how you are failing to resemble Christ in your life.

Perhaps not all at once. None of us wants to hear everything that is wrong all at once. But over time, as you rest secure in the love and grace you know Christ will always have for you, allow Christ to use others to help you see how you can grow in him. Ideally, of course, they will invite you to do the same for them as this is never a one way street. No one of us is superior to any other one of us when it comes to how much we need Jesus to conform our lives to his character. We’re all gems with rough edges and so we all need to come into constructive, creative contact with one another until the rough edges are knocked off and each of us comes out smooth and beautiful in the end.

The world out there is full of people who speak the truth without love in terribly destructive ways. The church, sadly, can be equally full of people who keep from speaking the truth because they have misunderstood that to be the loving thing to do. That is an equally terrible error. May we, by the grace and truth of Christ, learn to be a community that speaks the truth in love to one another in ways that help us each grow to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Paraphrase of Matthew 7:1-5

<sup>8</sup> I’m borrowing words from Tim Keller here in *The Meaning of Marriage*, p. 165.



**The Next Step**  
**A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application**

1. Read James Ephesians 4:11-16 once again. How would you summarize the message Paul is trying to communicate in this passage?
2. Paul declares that the goal of the church is to grow together to “the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” In your mind what does this look like? Describe a person who fits this description.
3. Paul tells us to speak the truth in love to one another in the church. Instead, some people tend to speak the truth without love. Other people tend to *not* speak the truth because, as they put it, they just want to love and truth is judgmental. What is your tendency? Are you somebody who is often willing to speak the truth in love to others in the church?
4. Tim Keller says, “Truth without love is imperious [i.e. arrogant, domineering] self-righteousness. Love without truth is cowardly self-indulgence.” What does he mean? Is he right?
5. Read Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:1-5. Some people have concluded that Jesus is telling us here never to judge one another. Is that right? What is Jesus actually telling us here?
6. Have you had Jesus speak the truth in love to you?
7. Why must we first hear Jesus speak the truth in love to us before we can turn and do the same for others?
8. Is there currently a Christian brother or sister in your life who will speak the truth in love to you and name for you the sin they recognize in your life? Who is one person you trust enough that you could invite to speak the truth in love to you about ways you are failing to grow in Christ-like character?