

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH
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Heaven on Earth_ Ephesians 5 Live Not By Lies
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On February 12, 1974, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was arrested by the KGB and charged with treason. He had won the Nobel Prize in 1970. But this was no ivory tower intellectual; he had spent eight years in a Russian gulag. Why? Because he's one of those rare people who muster the moral courage to stand against what is wrong and to stand for what is right. He refused to bow to the powers that be, to the propaganda, to the intimidation tactics used against him and his family. And so, on the eve of his ex communication, he published one final plea to the Russian people, the title is an all timer – 'Live Not by Lies.'

What does that mean? Well why don't we start with what it doesn't mean? This is not virtue signaling. Virtue signaling is publicly sharing a point of view, often on social media, to enhance one's image or to garner praise from people. It's giving lip service without really doing anything about it. It is a subtle form of self righteousness. Living not by lies is something else all together. It's refusing to bow to cultural idols and ideologies, if they fail to pass the truth test. It's living according to Biblical convictions, even when it's countercultural. It's risking your reputation for what you know is good and right and true. It's disagreeing, freely, yet loving regardless. It's speaking the truth to power but it's speaking the truth, in love. Living not by lies, is a conscience that is taken captive by the word of God.

Let me push that envelope a little bit. There is a sin of silence. It's not saying what needs to be said and there is a sin of toleration. It's not doing what needs to be done. James 4:17 says it this way, "*If anyone knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, to them it is sin.*" More specifically, it's a sin of omission. Inaction is an action, indecision is a decision, you can do nothing wrong and still do nothing, right. Goodness is not the absence of badness. It's not enough to be colorblind; we've got to be color brave. It's not enough to not be part of the problem. We're called to a higher standard to stand in the gap as peacemakers, grace givers, and tone setters and it's a pretty big gap right now.

In political science, there's something called the feeling thermometer that pollsters use to gauge feelings towards the opposite political party. It's a scale from one to 100. One is stone cold hate, 100 is white hot love. In 1980, voters gave the opposite party a 45 on the feeling thermometer. By 2016, that number had dropped to 29. I'm not sure what it is right now but I wouldn't be surprised if it's half that. The feeling thermometer measures something called negative partisanship. It's partisan behavior that is not driven by positive feelings towards the party or candidate you support. It's driven by negative feelings towards the party or candidate that you oppose. The 2016 Pew poll 45% of Republicans 41% of Democrats view the other party as quote, "a threat to the nation's well being". In other words, half of one half of this country thinks that the other half is a threat to the nation's well being. Houston we have a problem. We identify more with party than with country and it fuels this polarization that feels on the present.

Let me talk about the elephant in the room or the donkey. Elections are incredibly emotional, incredibly personal. I'm not telling you anything you don't know this week. Years ago, I came across a study that found that the fans of sports teams experience a 20% drop in testosterone after a loss. If that's true in sports, it's even more true in elections. And I think it's compounded times 10 when you live in DC, because our local news is national news. And it's not just an election on the line, its jobs on the line, it's emotional, it's personal. It can't not be. But I want to offer two reminders up front this weekend. One, our citizenship is in heaven, and two our identity is in Christ.

Now I am not minimizing the importance of elections, politics matter, because policy matters because people matter. Proverbs 29:2 two says *"When the righteous are in authority the people rejoice."* We want God fearing, God honoring leaders in places of power so that power doesn't get used and abused. We want people whose character and whose policies line up with Kingdom values. We want people who do God's will God's way. Having said that, I'll say this politics are temporal, the kingdom is eternal. Jesus did not pray my party come. He said, *"Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* Was dreaming so much bigger, was thinking so much longer.

Now here's the irony. Usually, our ability to predict things goes down as timelines get longer. It's the exact opposite with the kingdom of God. Now, I cannot predict what the next four years will be like. Honestly, I cannot predict the next four days, okay. But I know how it ends, the kingdoms of this world. Revelation 11 and 15 are becoming the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ. Our citizenship is in heaven, our identity is in Christ. We've got to be anchored to this right now. Ezra Klein says, "When we participate in politics to solve a problem, we're participating transactionally. But when we participate in politics to express who we are, that's a signal that politics has become an identity." Now, I want to be careful right here and I'll tell you why. Over the years, we have had thousands of NCC'ers who work on the Hill who work at the White House, State Department, DOJ, fill in the blank. And most of us, okay, we're registered; Democrats or registered Republicans or registered Independent, there is nothing wrong with any of that. All of us have all of these different identities, right, race and religion, gender, geography, political party, marital status, right handed, left handed, and you've got a few others. I'm a husband, to my wife, Lora. I'm a father, to our children, and a new puppy named Pernella. I am a pastor, I am a writer. All of those identities are pieces of this puzzle but none of those are my primary identity. My primary identity is who I am in Christ.

The day after the election, we did what we do we climb the stairs to the upper zoom. No better way to start the day than to pray. It's been a lifeline for so many of us. On Wednesday, Courtney prayed Jeremiah 1:5; it's one of my favorite verses. *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."* And Courtney prayed this prophetic prayer from God's vantage point. She said I knew you before I made you female. I knew you before I made you with brown skin. I knew you before you were born in the United States of America in

1972. I knew you before you were offered the identities of this world I knew you before those identities were imposed on you.

Can I bring this all the way back to bedrock? Ephesians one is all about identity. Can I remind you of who you are? You are blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. You were chosen before the beginning of time. You are blameless in the eyes of God. You are adopted by the Heavenly Father. You are redeemed by the blood of Christ. You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and you are stamped with the image of God. That's who you are. That's who's you are, would you receive that identity today? Our citizenship is in heaven, our identity is in Christ.

All right, let's double back and double down on Ephesians 5:10. And then we're gonna unpack verses 15 through 20. The Amplified Version says, "*Let our lives be constant proofs of what is most acceptable to him.*" Constant proof, it makes me think of apologetics. Now the dictionary defines it as rational arguments in defense of what we believe. Now I think of some of the apologetic classes I took in seminary. I loved them but the greatest apologetic is a life well lived. It's a relational argument, in defense of what we believe. You are the only Bible some people will ever read, you're the only church that some people will ever attend.

I keep coming back to something Lesslie Newbigin said, "We must live in the kingdom of God in such a way that it provokes questions for which the gospel is the answer." May your life provoke questions for which the gospel is the answer. Let your lives be constant proof says the Apostle Paul, of what is most acceptable to him.

Ephesians one all about identity. Ephesians five all about maturity, and this is a pretty good definition. It's aiming at what is most acceptable to God. It's not settling for what is permissible, it's striving for what is beneficial. It's going all in and all out. It's My Utmost for His Highest - Oswald Chambers.

Two questions; who are you trying to please and who are you afraid of offending? It's the same question two sides. If you're trying to please people, you will inevitably offend God. If you are trying to please God, you will invariably offend people. You can please all the people some of the time; some of the people all the time, but you cannot please all the people all the time. Do not live for the applause of people live for the applause of nail scarred hands.

Let's unpack verses 15 through 20. "*Be very careful then, how you live not as unwise but as wise.*" The Amplified Version says it this way, "*Look carefully then how you walk!*" Now we certainly need to look carefully at how we think. God has created us with this metacognitive capacity to think about how we think. And we certainly need to look carefully at how we talk words matter more than ever. Jesus said, "*Out of the overflow the mouth of the heart, the mouth speaks.*" In other words, words, are electrocardiograms which reveal the condition of our heart. And so how we think and how we talk is so

important but Paul goes next level. Look carefully at how you walk. Simply put, your life needs to be louder than your words.

Verse 16, *"Make the most of every opportunity."* Now I love this phrase. I love this word. It's the Greek word *kairos* and it can be interpreted time or opportunity. King James Version *redeem the time*, NIV *make the most of every opportunity*. Why? Because the days are evil. Well, that's a little depressing but it shouldn't be surprising. In the 20th century alone, we had the Holocaust in Germany, Jim Crow in America, the gulags in Russia, genocide in Rwanda, apartheid in South Africa. There is no denying that the days are evil. And I think it's easy to look at history and assume that we would not be complicit that we would have dared to be different. We would have voted this way or that way. We would have spoken truth to power. We would not have lived by the lies. You know what I think? Whatever you're doing or not doing right now as it relates to racism as it relates to polarization as it relates to cancel culture is exactly what you would have been doing or not doing then. "There is always this fallacious belief", said Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "that it would not be the same here. Here such things are impossible." Alas, all the evils of the 20th century are possible everywhere on earth.

I think what Paul is doing when he says *make the most of every opportunity*, because the days are evil, I think part of what he's doing is, come on, let's confront the brutal facts. Here we are. It is what it is. But we've got to step in with unwavering faith. Come on, we were born on a battlefield between good and evil. We live in a fallen world in a broken world. We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities. But I have some good news, some good news, the weapon we fight with are not the weapons of this world. We fight with weapons that have divine power to demolish stronghold. Do you believe that? I believe that and this is our moment to see those things expressed in the power of the Spirit. We are here for such a time as this. We are here for such a place as this to stand in the gap as those peacemakers, grace givers, tone setters. Make no mistake the kingdom of God is a coup d'etat against the powers and principalities in this world. We are the remnant. We are this creative minority that we talked about a few weeks ago. We are the ones who catalyze revival and reformation and renaissance in our nation and in our generation. "The church has its greatest relevance to the world", says Timothy Gambass, "when it is most unlike the world, in its corrupted forms".

I love the way my friend Carrie Neuhoff says this. "A blaming culture needs a confessing church. A divided nation needs a unified church." Here are the brutal facts. Only 12% of churches in America are multicultural. In other words, less than 80% of their congregants are of the same ethnicity. I mean, let's be honest, it's just it's easier, surrounding yourself with people who look like you and think like you and vote like you. This is just not that church. David Grizzle said it this way a few weeks ago, he said, "Unity among dissimilar people". I think that means Jews and Greek, slave, free, male, female, Republican, Democrat. "Unity among dissimilar people serves the purpose of being indisputable proof that God is in the house." Come on, this is our moment. This is our opportunity to represent. We are not going to settle for this facade called uniformity. We have a multicultural vision, we have a multicultural team. We know where we're going as a church from diversity to unity to this beloved community that

God has destined us to be. That is our apologetics that is our witness to the world and if we get it right, guess what? It provokes questions for which the gospel is the answer.

Let me share three versus three ways to live not by lies.

- One, understand the will of God. You have got to understand the will of God.
- Two be filled with the Spirit of God
- Three prophesy your praise.

We're gonna go fast. Verse 17, *"Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord will is."* Okay, we have more fake news, more false narratives, more false idols more hashtags, algorithms, echo chambers than ever before. It is awfully easy to just feed your confirmation bias whatever it wants. It's not as easy sifting through what is false and discerning what is true. We need the spirit of wisdom and revelation. That said; let me demystify the will of God just a little bit because no matter how confusing things get, no matter how chaotic it may be, we know the will of God.

1 Thessalonians 5:15 through 17 *"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."*

You know, we tend to think chronology or geography - should I do this or that here or there now or later? And listen, God is in the business of strategically positioning us in the right place at the right time? Aren't you grateful for that? But the will of God is a lot less circumstantial and a lot more attitudinal. Maybe it has a little less to do with winning and losing. Maybe it has a little bit more to do with being humble in victory and gracious in defeat, because that will provoke questions for which the gospel is the answer.

Verse 18, *"Do not get drunk with wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."* Present imperative verb right here. In other words, keep on being filled with the Holy Spirit. I've never found myself in a place where I felt more daily dependence on the Holy Spirit, every day. I need to be Spirit filled, and Spirit led. The Spirit of God cannot fill you if you're full of yourself. You've got to put your pride and prejudice on the altar; you've got to put your offense on the altar. Then and only then will the Spirit of God come and not just fill you, but will stretch you and create new capacity within you. I mean, we just say, "make room". I could barely start preaching because I was still singing that song. Now maybe you just need to go back and listen to that song one more time. Would you make room? And if you would make room the Spirit of God would come and invade your life?

I have a theory of everything. You know what it is if you've been here for a while? The answer to every prayer - more of the Holy Spirit. Oh, but Pastor Mark, I need wisdom. I need healing. I need faith. Those are gifts of the Spirit. Yeah, but I need love and joy and peace. Those are fruit of the Spirit. In other words, we need more the Spirit that produces more of the gifts and the fruit in our lives.

So much incivility, so much shaming so much demonizing happening in culture, we're called to operate in the opposite spirit. I think all nine of the fruit of the Spirit are so countercultural and so counterintuitive. Let me pick one piece of fruit that seems in short supply because I think it's undervalued, underappreciated, underestimated. It's not a personality trait is a measure of maturity. Jonathan Edwards called it a distinguishing disposition. I'm talking about gentleness. Do not equate it with weakness. It takes a whole lot more strength to restrain yourself and to not react, but to pro act with the help of the Holy Spirit. The writer of Proverbs said a gentle answer turns away wrath.

In 1754 a young militia officer named George Washington got into an argument with a man named William Payne. Washington 6' 2", well built, Payne was much smaller, so he used this stick to knock Washington down. It was the kind of offence in the 18th century that would typically result in a duel to the death and that's probably what Payne was expecting when Washington is invited him to a tavern the next day. Instead, he found Colonel Washington, sitting at a table with a decanter of wine and two glasses. Washington was the bigger man in more ways than one, he apologized for the quarrel. The two men shook hands, and the argument was over.

This is a moment for an extra measure of grace. This is a moment to bear each other's burdens. This is a moment for random acts of kindness. Let's turn down the hate, turn up the love, turn down the pride, turn up the humility, turn down the fear, turn up the faith. And I'll give you one more. Let's turn down the shouting and turn up the singing.

Three, you have to prophesy your praise. That's verse 19, *"speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."* Now, we're not entirely sure why Paul identifies three kinds of songs. Did you catch it, psalms, hymns and spiritual songs? But what I love about that is this; there is a song for every season.

I think about two moments this year kind of on opposite ends of the spectrum. That night that we recorded the Jesus Way, oh, man, I was throwing up my hands and throwing down the worship. I mean, it was almost like remember the song of Moses and the song of Miriam after they cross through the Red Sea. It's one of those moments where you can't not worship. I love worshipping God that way. But I also think of the Song of Lament that was sung when we corporately mourn the death of Ahmaud Arbery. That is giving God the sacrifice of praise. And I'll say this; I think the hardest praise is often the highest praise. Now, listen, those who hear not the music, think the dancer is mad. We are a people that Praise God. We sing when other people shout and I hope that provoked some questions for which the gospel is the answer.

There are two kinds of praise. Past tense, praise is thanking God after he does it, 'Great is Thy Faithfulness', right? Future tense praise is thanking God before he does it, 'Waymaker'. Two different kinds of praise both of them amazing, but one takes a little bit more faith. It's almost like the Israelites

circling Jericho. Do you remember this? It's not based on present tense circumstances it's based on future tense faith. It's reminding us of who we are and more importantly, who God is. It's declaring his goodness, his faithfulness, his healing, his peace, his power, and we need to do that right about now.

I'm going to invite our worship team to come. Would you prophesy your praise today?"