

Ephesians 15-02-01a

This is Sunday, the 1st of February, 2015. We're going to undertake a special in connection with our study of Ephesians chapter 5. We have seen in this past chapter or chapter and a half an emphasis on two things. One is putting aside deceit, putting aside falsehood, putting aside lying.

Let us speak truth with one another. There's been a great emphasis on truth. And most recently in the chiastic structure in Ephesians chapter 5, we have seen the illustration of the exercise of authority and willingness to follow, submit, and obey under that authority illustrated particularly in the concept of marriage and the relationship between Jesus Christ and us, His body, is brought into juxtaposition with that.

Husbands are to love their wives. Wives are to be listening and subordinate and respect the authority given by God to the husband in the same way that the church is to listen to and respect the authority that has been given to Jesus Christ by that same God in heaven. Well, the concordance of these ideas of truth, of fidelity in the Lord, of respect for authority and submission to authority in the Lord has a very graphic illustration in the book of Acts.

And our study this morning is going to be in Acts chapter 5 with a bit of context from chapter 4. And it is the episode of Ananias and Sapphira. This is a couple and you can quickly see that there are several connections from this episode to Paul's words in his letter to Laodicea and Colossae that we call Ephesians. We have a husband and wife, we have an issue of truth, and we have relationship to the church which is the body of Christ.

So there is some lively pertinence here that we're going to explore this morning. Let's take a moment as we always do to pause and ensure that we've given ourselves the opportunity to go before the Lord in prayer, to recognize the essential ministry of God's Holy Spirit. We are incapable.

I am incapable of teaching. We are all incapable of learning without the active, divinely enabled presence and power that comes from God's Holy Spirit. Shall we pray? Father, we are grateful that in the onrush of circumstances and events and responsibilities and scheduled tasks that we can pause for refreshment at the oasis of divine truth, the living water that we have a right to claim because of the Lord Jesus Christ and because of his work on our behalf and because we have standing in him, because we are related to you through him, we enjoy the privilege of having your truth ministered to our souls through your Holy Spirit.

We are enabled not only to understand it but to live in its light. We thank you for these tremendous privileges. We thank you that we were born to live in this age and to experience these times.

We thank you for the opportunity and the potential for reflecting your glory as we strive to walk that narrow path and enter that narrow gate that leads to life that is the fulfillment of your purpose

for us that enables us not only to serve and to learn and to grow and to be made whole in Jesus Christ in this age but to give us a wonderful expectation and confident hope for the ages that are to come. We thank you for this portion of your word that we're going to look at this morning and we ask that God the Holy Spirit will enable each one of us to glean from it the truth that is pertinent, that is meaningful and helpful, that will strengthen us and encourage us and motivate us to see our lives in the context of your plan and purpose moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day so that we can walk in truth, so that we can walk in love, so that we can be reflections of your divine character and your divine purpose both now and as preparation for service in the kingdoms that lie ahead. We pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. After the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, there was a space of time, a time of waiting, a time of anticipation. It was a sort of silence during the period between the Feast of Firstfruits, the Feast of Unleavened Bread when Jesus rose on the first day of the week, that's Sunday after Passover.

He appeared to his disciples. We have some of those accounts detailed for us. The upper room when he appears and eats a piece of fish and some honeycomb.

Later on, he appears to Thomas who explores the scars on the resurrection body of the Lord to verify his identity. He appeared in Galilee. He appeared to upwards of 501 places.

And finally, on the Mount of Olives, he appears and he ascends into heaven. And in Acts chapter 1, you have the angelic exhortation, Ye men, why stand ye gazing into heaven? This same Jesus will come again in like manner as you have seen him go. Well, he had told them before he left, wait until you receive power from on high.

And you will be witnesses and so on. There is a period of 10 days between the Ascension and the Day of Pentecost. Just count the days off.

He appears and makes these appearances, post-resurrection appearances for 40 days. Pentecost is 50 days after that crucifixion resurrection weekend. And it is on the Day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 that you have over 100 believers gathered in one place.

You have the descent of the Holy Spirit like a dove. People hear the preaching of the truth of God in their own language. And the church age is formally, fully, and visibly underway.

It is a new time. It is a new age. And as is so often the case, when God starts a new phase, he marks it with miracles.

He is doing a new thing. And any time God starts a new thing, a new phase, he will emphasize his presence. He will emphasize his truth.

He will emphasize his standards as archetypes in ways that are not likely to be repeated all the

way through that age. So, for example, when Israel left Egypt, you have the nine signs, flies, frogs, lice, darkness, hail, so on, followed by the tenth, which is the death of the firstborn males. And this marks the beginning of the age of Israel, the nation of Israel, the formal covenant people of God.

It will find its culmination at Mount Sinai. It's difficult to say that there is a point in time at which it began. One minute before, it wasn't the age of Israel.

One minute after, it was. It's a process. It begins with deliverance from Egypt.

It begins when they are still in bondage, and God works to free them and to display his power over all of the gods of Egypt, over the evil represented by Egypt, in delivering his people out of bondage and sending them in the direction of inheritance in the promised land. During that time, there is the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. There is manna.

There is miraculous intervention by God in a number of ways over that next 40 years. With decreasing frequency, you will notice, when Joshua goes into the land, some of the last miracles that God performs of a national character that are ubiquitous are the battle-winning storms that come in as Joshua and the troops conquer the southern part of the land. You have the great hailstorms and so on.

You have the walls of Jericho falling. You have large and prominent interventions by God. And then there is a cessation of those things for many, many years.

It is very exceptional and very infrequent that you see an intervention by God. And we've seen some of those later interventions in the days of the prophets. Well, as the Church Age begins, there is also miraculous sign intervention by God to ensure that people understand, in the same way that God marked out Moses as his designated leader as the one to whom people should listen.

When people started saying bad things about Moses, they developed leprosy. When they disobeyed His instructions from God, the earth opened and swallowed them up. Fire came out from the altar and consumed them.

It was a bad idea when God had identified Moses as His spokesman and His authority in Israel to try to contravene Him. God deals with Moses directly. And Moses gets his own discipline when he is disobedient.

It's one of the reasons he has to climb Mount Pisgah and he looks from afar at the land, but he doesn't go in. That was God's dealing with Moses privately, one-on-one. At any rate, there is a similar reflection.

There is another instance of that pattern at the beginning of the Church Age. A lot of miraculous designation of God's spokesmen, in this case the apostles, through miracles. It is the beginning of

a new thing.

This is where we find ourselves in the last part of Acts 4 and the beginning of Chapter 5. Between Acts 2 and 4, you have the preaching of truth at the temple, Solomon's portico. You have the man who comes up and Peter and John, he asks for alms. They say, we don't have money to give you, but we'll heal you.

This guy is over 40 years old and he has been ailing for all this time. As a result of this, Peter and John are arrested. You have the account of that after this lame man is healed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. Peter and John are arrested.

They address the Sanhedrin. They are told not to preach the name of Jesus. They say, well, time will tell whether it is a better thing for us to obey you or obey God.

We cannot help but testify to what we have seen and heard. They disobey what you could view as authority in Israel because they are under a higher set of instructions. The Lord Jesus Christ said, you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem.

Well, that trumps the Sanhedrin and the scribes and Pharisees saying, don't preach. If Jesus said preach, that's a pretty easy who outranks whom. But in verse 23 of Chapter 4, let's pick up there because we need a little bit of context for what we're going to look at this morning.

Being let go, Peter and John went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they, the group, heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said. Now, this is where we want to begin noticing some contextual clues that help us understand what happens in Acts Chapter 5. Peter and John are proclaiming the truth.

They are recounting their arrest and their trial and their encounter with the human authorities in Jerusalem, right? And with one accord, everyone in the group, and this is still a relatively small group, probably in the low 100s, I would think. This regularly meeting congregation, they're all able to hear, they can assemble in one place and listen. When they heard the account that Peter and John relate, the healing of the lame man, their arrest, what is said before the Sanhedrin and so on, they, the group, raised their voice to God with one accord.

You might just circle or underline that, with one accord. There is no dissension. There's no debate.

There's no argument. There's not part of the group that thinks one thing and, well, shouldn't we? Aren't these the authorities? With one accord, they lift their voice to God and say, Lord, you are God who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them. The first and foremost identification of God in heaven is He is the creator.

This is the ground and the basis, from a human point of view, of His authority. It is He that hath

made us and not we ourselves. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

This is God's authority. He is the creator. Who is going to tell the creator what to do with His creation? That is the highest authority there is.

By the mouth of your servant David you said, Why did the nations rage and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand. The authorities of the earth took their stand. You see the background here.

The rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Messiah. Against the Lord and against His duly appointed authority, who is the Mashiach, but the anointed King. Other rulers, other kings, have taken a stand against God and against His designated authority.

Make sense? See how this is laying out? They clearly understand that this issue is between what they have always considered to be the highest top authority in Jerusalem, in the land of Israel. These are the arbiters. These are the ones who are the keepers of the law and the ordinances and so on.

Versus the Lord Jesus Christ who has come and in these last few years has been identified as and established as God's Messiah, a higher authority. God's designated authority. Truly, verse 27, against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed, whom you commissioned, whom you authorized, right? Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and the people of Israel were gathered together to do whatever your hand and your purpose determined before to be done.

They were allowed. God in His authority granted them freedom. Think about this.

We serve God in heaven. He is all-powerful. We are His people.

We are the body of Christ on this earth. And yet, in the providences of God, in the plans and purposes of God, there are times when He gives space to illegitimate authorities, illegitimate powers to do a limited amount of damage to us. And it's damage.

All you have to do is think about the Old Testament example of Job. God grants Satan space and a limited amount of damage, and it is damage that he can do to Job. God foreordained that there would be a circumscribed area in which these false rulers could operate.

And you think about this. It's true in life. God has the power, and this is one of the arguments of the atheists.

Well, if there's a God in heaven, why is there so much bad, evil behavior in the world? Why doesn't He put a stop to it? Well, you think about the world if He did. Anytime somebody reached out to unjustly strike someone, their hand just mysteriously stopped. Anytime someone started to rob a store, they try to smash the window with a brick and the brick just bounces off.

They can't do it. Anytime they reach into the till, they just can't pull the money out. Anytime they try to cook the books, their pen just won't write.

Their computer won't register the changes. Anytime they try to tell a lie, their tongue mysteriously cleaves to the roof of their mouth. Anytime somebody tries to operate against the righteousness of God, they're just powerless.

They're just immobile. They're paralyzed and completely incapable. Well, what kind of a world is this? God has to grant space.

He has to allow free will to express itself. And when fallen free will and evil corrupt natures express themselves, it is going to do damage. And God allows it.

God knows. He knows our sufferings. The Lord Jesus was tested in all points like as we are.

He experienced suffering. He was damaged by what God the Father allowed unholy authority to do. Who put Jesus on the cross, really? The scribes, the Pharisees, and the elders of the people plotted, allowed false witnesses whom they knew to be false, whom they themselves had hired to give testimony.

They had a mock trial. It was a sham justice. And they convinced Pilate to crucify Jesus.

And people say, ooh, it's anti-Semitic to say that the Jews crucified Christ. Look, we're not talking about being unhappy with Jewish people that are around us today. It is a fact that it was the rulers and authorities at the behest of Satan himself, who is the god of this world, God gave all of those authorities, the principalities and powers, and the rulers of the darkness of this age are given space to act.

And any time they act, there is going to be damage. Our faith rests on knowing that God has circumscribed and limited how much of this can go on and how far it can go. Again, you look at Job.

God says, this far and no farther. It's pictured in the Psalms when he appoints the limits for the raging sea. And he says, this far and no farther.

But it is a part of the plan and purpose of God. And this is what these people understand. It's all about authority.

Against your holy servant Jesus, verse 27, whom you anointed, you authorized, Herod, Pontius Pilate, Gentiles and people of Israel were gathered together to do whatever your hand and your purpose determined before could be done. God knew this was coming. He allowed so much and no more.

And in the Lord Jesus' case, it was even the death of the cross. Now, Lord, verse 29, look on

their threats. They are currently trying to exercise this unlawful authority against us.

They are trying to prevent us from fulfilling the command of the Lord Jesus Christ to be witnesses, to make disciples. Grant to your servants, verse 29, that with all boldness they may speak your word by stretching out your hand to heal and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus. Demonstrate who has divinely authorized authority.

That's what he did for the Lord Jesus. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit marks out who is the authorized authority. Is it the scribes and Pharisees and rulers, elders of the people, or is it these apostles who have no academic degree, have no qualification, other than that they were with the Lord.

They were commissioned by the Lord. He was God's anointed. He has anointed and commissioned them.

I send you forth. Power from on high will anoint you. And it is the presence of the Holy Spirit that represents the anointing, the authorization to speak in the name of God, to speak witness of the Lord Jesus, and to authenticate that authority by signs and miracles.

In his name, in the Lord. Verse 31, when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. We talked about the connections between this passage and Ephesians chapter 4 and 5. There's another one.

Be not drunk with wine wherein is excess, but what? Be filled with the Spirit. They spoke the word of God with boldness. They contravened, they disregarded, they disobeyed what the rulers of the people told them to do.

Now, the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul. Second thing to circle here. We already saw they were with one accord when Peter and John came back, right? Here, they are of one heart and one soul.

Neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all. There's two greats in this verse.

Great power, great grace. Where does the power come from? On high. Where does the great grace come from? On high.

Great power and great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked. Now, this is an interesting and necessary situation for us to understand if we're going to make sense out of and truly grasp what's going on with the Ananias and Sapphira episode coming up.

We're told in verse 32 that everyone is of one heart and one soul, all of those who believed, and these are the ones who are assembling. And neither did anyone say that any of the things he

possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. Dr. Griswold preached a sermon on this and called it Christian Communism.

Very memorable title, Christian Communism. They had all things in common. Now, does this truly mean that everybody just sort of pooled their stuff and everybody had use of everything that had formerly belonged to anyone? Nobody said, that's mine.

You know, you want my car, drive it. You want my pitcher of cold water, drink it. You want my bowl of meal.

You want my bowl of gruel, it's yours. You want my sirloin steak, I've got a field full of cattle, take one. This actually is not what it says, and it's going to be amplified below.

Beginning in verse 34, Nor was there any among them who lacked, for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold. What we learn here, especially in the Greek tenses that are used, is that the selling and the provision is, these are in the aorist tense, meaning as the occasion arose. This doesn't mean that there wasn't anyone needy because everybody was sharing everybody's stuff.

It means that when there was an occasion of need, somebody who had excess would sell what they had in excess and donate the proceeds on that occasion. It wasn't a big pool, everybody just dip your own dipper into it. The apostles oversaw this process.

They would make a need known. Here's Bethuel over here, and he's just suffered a loss. Maybe his stuff has been confiscated because the elders found out that he is a follower of Christ, and they have trumped up some false tax charge and taken all of his stuff, and he doesn't have a place to live now.

One of the wealthy individuals in the church would say, Look, I've got a piece of property out on the outskirts. Let me sell that. I'll give you the money.

You give it to Bethuel so that he can take care of his needs. It was episodic. It was as the need arose, somebody would recognize the need, take steps to give provision to the apostles, who then dispensed it to the person in need.

You see the difference. They weren't just, Hey, I like that goat. I'm taking it home and cooking it.

This is an occasional situation. It is recognized. Somebody for that specific need will do a thing, bring the proceeds to the apostles and say, Look, here's something you can use for that need.

As a need arose, somebody met it. Arist. So they would lay the proceeds of the things that were sold at the apostles' feet, and they, the apostles, distributed to each as anyone had need.

That need was determined by the apostles. Here's a real need. Now, these people had been

living for years before they joined the church, right? So why would there suddenly be a need? If they had a job before, they have a job now.

If they had a house before, they have a house now. If they were very poor before and they've come to faith in Christ, well, they're very poor now. And how did they make their living before they came to Christ? Maybe they were a beggar.

Maybe they did alms or whatever. Somebody says, You know, you don't have to live like a beggar anymore. We'll sell this field.

We'll give this guy some proceeds. We'll let him set himself up in a business and get out of this indigent mode. He is of one mind.

He is of one accord with us. He who does not work does not eat. Let's give him an opportunity to work.

Let's make an expenditure or an investment and get this person set up. So it's not just, Oh, boy, we're just all sharing everything and we're all hippies in a commune in Arizona someplace. This is a very carefully administered program to ensure that these people who are like-minded, who are glorifying God and recognizing God's authority and how critical it is, are not uncared for.

This is an expression of love. It is sensitivity. It is under the authority of the apostles.

Nobody sells a piece of land and lays the proceeds at the needy person's feet, do they? It's at the apostles' feet. Why? Authority. There is authority here.

Who is God's designated authority? The apostles. How do you know? Signs and wonders. Peter and John, right? That's how it works.

Well, this is the background. This is the situation in the Jerusalem church, numbering something in the hundreds at this point. Now, there's a time when there's like 5,000 people who believe, but not all 5,000 of those people try to join the church.

This is the like-minded, dedicated, narrow road, straight gate group that are gathered around the apostles, meeting on a regular basis. It is limited. It is dedicated.

It is completely of one mind and of one accord. These people all understand exactly what's going on. That's our background.

Well, if we had to pause here and didn't have a second session, what would we take away from this to operate on for the week ahead? It is essential when we are trying to be obedient, when we're trying to follow the laws, when we are trying to fear God and honor the king, when we pray for those who have the rule over us, that we have a clear understanding of what is duly constituted authority, blessed by God, ordained by God. The heart of the king is in the hand of the

Lord. Nobody rules without God's allowance.

And to understand that under that there can be a certain amount of suffering. There can be oppression. God has to give space to evil.

He can't say, well, I'll only let evil people do evil things to other evil people. If you're a believer, you're just golden and you can't be touched. These things are foreordained.

It is allowed. Remember James, John's brother, is going to be killed right at the beginning. Jesus trains him for over three years.

He is in the upper room with the little girl who's raised from the dead. He's on the Mount of Transfiguration. He's in the Garden of Gethsemane.

James gets all the same training as Peter and John, but you notice it's just Peter and John here. James gets killed almost immediately by Herod. God allows.

God reminds the early church, I am going to give space to the principalities and powers and the rulers representing the darkness of this age. And you've got to be prepared. And know that it is God who sets the limits, who says this far and no farther.

Do not think it unusual when you face fiery trials. Remember that no testing has befallen you, but such as is common to man. And with every trial, God is aware.

He has limited it. He has scaled it. It is this far and no farther.

You will never be tested above what you are able to bear. There is always a means of coping. There is always a means of escaping failure in that test.

Jesus understands. He went through this himself, and he is our advocate at the Father's right hand. So when bad things happen to good people, this is what we remember.

This is a part of God's ordained plan. He has set the boundaries. It is our job to figure out how to be faithful, how to focus, how to lay hold of righteousness by faith, and be on the loving kindness side of God's decision making.

Is it going to be grace or is it going to be judgment? Well, we look for the righteousness. How can I do the right thing? How can I do what pleases God? I need boldness. I need courage.

I need endurance. I need patience so that after I have suffered a while, I receive the promises. I inherit.

Think how long Caleb had to wait before he got his inheritance in the land. But God recognized him at the beginning. He said, Caleb, you're going to have to wait 40 years, but you will inherit.

You're going to have to put up with a lot, but you will inherit. And when he gets there, what does he do? Give me the uphill climb with giants on top, because that's how strong he is after enduring for 40 years. He's the oldest guy in Israel, and he's going to climb the mountain and slay the giants, because that's what persevering in trial and in the limited scenario.

It always reminds me when they were teaching us self-defense at Navy, and they said, this is how you handle yourself when somebody attacks you with a knife. Well, how do you learn how to survive in a knife fight the first several times when you don't have any skills? If the person is actually attacking you with a knife in training, you're going to get hurt. So for knives, they gave us the center of a paper towel roll.

It's a cardboard tube. This is the knife. It's limited.

They're attacking. I mean, you could get poked in the eye, or something could happen with these little tubes, but it's nothing like the real knife. It's limited.

In boxing, you've got pads. You've got a head protector. You've got boxing gloves.

They don't say, well, in a bare knuckle situation, you need to know how to handle yourself. Everybody take off all the pads and gloves, and let's go at it and see who gets the black eye. It's limited.

It is scaled. It is necessary, and it hurts. You know, a lot of people came away from boxing class with bloody noses and split lips, despite all the padding.

You can get injured in training, but it's limited, and it's necessary. This is what God is doing for us. So we need to understand the presence of evil, the presence of testing, bad things happening in our lives, and don't be shocked.

Don't be dismayed. Don't start questioning faith or questioning the grace of God. If we're doing what we're supposed to do, and everybody knows whether you're doing what you're supposed to do or not, are you asking? Are you seeking? Are you knocking? Are you praying? Are you reflecting on the word of God that you get in Bible class? Are you striving to enter by the narrow gate or not? And if you know you are, then when bad things happen, you don't have to raise a lot of questions.

You say, it is Acts chapter 4. This is God's preordained, foreknown battleground for me. This is my training class, and it looks like the guy's got a real knife, but greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world. God will never suffer the righteous to be moved.

And this is where we express faith. There would be no occasion for faith if God didn't let evil through the gate from time to time, if he didn't take down the wall and say, all right, you anemic forces of evil come in, and my people are going to deal with you. It's what he has to do.

So we need to remember who we are and why we're here. We are here to learn and to grow. We want to be Caleb at the end of our lives, be stronger and more fearsome than we were at the beginning, be able to take on bigger challenges than we ever faced in the earlier days.

And you only get that by persevering in trial. It doesn't sound like fun, but you look at people who have persevered through training. I look at people who play the violin.

I've been sawn away in my violin, and it's so frustrating. It just sounds so bad. But I look at people.

We see the videos from First Baptist Church. They've got an orchestra there. All of these people, they're just effortless.

It's no strain. You know how long it takes and how much agony and practice it takes to be able to just effortlessly saw away on a violin, and it just sounds beautiful. They play these violin solos, and it's to die for.

Well, they didn't get there because they wanted to be a good violinist. They got there because they sawed their way through hours and hours and hours of practice and of torturing themselves with what they heard coming out of the instrument like I'm doing. And at the end of that, you break free.

And would they ever go back and say, you know, I wish I hadn't spent all that time practicing? To be able to play that way, they say, look, it was worth it because look at what I can do now. And this is where we will arrive when the Lord Jesus returns and takes us to himself. There's an old song.

It will be worth it all when we see Jesus. Life's trials will seem so small when we see him. One look at his dear face, all sorrow will erase.

When we have run our race, when we see Christ. That's the essential. And that's the background of the Ananias and Sapphira story that we're going to resume and take up when we come back from the break.