

HC 14/10/18 Sermon Series – be mature Ephesians 4:25-32 Be Mature – in your behaviour

**“To live above, With the saints I love, O, wouldn’t that be glory.
But to live below, With the saints I know, well that’s another story.”**

So says the famous rhyme about life in church- the real church, not the ideal fairy tale church that we sometimes dream of. It’s a bit like marriage isn’t it? We all know the theory, they all live happily ever after, except it does not always work out that way. For sure there is happiness and fulfilment, but this comes often after trials and difficulties, especially if the couple have children who do not always turn out to be the ideal family like the Waltons For some there is the pain of childlessness, for others there is a single life, or a marriage that goes wrong in separation or divorce. We often turn out more like The Simpsons instead! I have conducted many marriages, and the most popular reading is 1 Corinthians 13, the subject of our sermon series in February. We love to hear the words read don’t we?

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

But as I remind our wedding couples, this reading comes from St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, a group of people whose leaders were using their power to obtain the best seats in church, and when they ate together they kept the best food for themselves. Word of these problems reached Paul and he wrote two very strongly worded letters to them – But in the middle of this strong teaching is this passage, which is a favourite of many people, especially at weddings. It is called the Hymn to love. Paul is basically saying that the problem in the church is due to a lack of love. You are thinking of yourselves and not others. This love is not the sort of heady emotion that we feel when we fall in love, but the more practical fellow -feeling we have for one another, wanting the best for them, caring kindness. This is the love that Paul speaks about, and then he says this **“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”** Paul is really saying to these Corinthians, stop being so childish- grow up, become mature, and learn to love, not thinking about yourselves but others, and learn to put God first in your lives.

Karen and I have two children Matthew 20 and Hannah 15. We are not yet out of the time when the children have left home, started out on life and relationships and are basically beyond our influence, although that time is fast approaching. Our hope is that Matthew and Hannah grow and mature to be the confident young people and become all that they are meant to be. We want them to mature and so in the time that is left to us, we want to encourage them as much as possible, but knowing that all we can really do is to be there and advise when they come to us. We know from our own experience, that things go well

when we as parents act maturely, and they go wrong when we have act childishly and selfishly or self-centredly as the Corinthians did.

You see that even though the Corinthians had been taught by Paul, knew Christ and the teaching and were adults, they regressed into their old ways of selfishness and self-centredness. These two things – **selfishness** and **self-centredness** are not exactly the same. **Selfishness** is what the Corinthians were doing, in wanting the best food and seats for themselves. We know it when we see it don't we? But **Self-centredness** is much more difficult to spot. It occurs when someone wants their own way over others, having power and using it wrongly to bully or manipulate. Sometimes what the self-centred person wants is something that appears to be 'Christian' but something, as the phrase says, '**leaves a nasty taste in the mouth.**' The **self-centred person** does not really want your opinion- they may ask for it, but really want you to just accept their view as right, because they are, better educated, stronger in personality, and imply that it would be 'unchristian' to oppose them. They often try to justify their bullying by Christian words, like "The Lord told me to tell you," or imply that they will get very angry and shame you if you dare to oppose them. However the **good person** will genuinely seek your opinion, and not try to 'steamroller' you into submission, and even if you end up disagreeing, you feel that you have been listened to, and you are much more likely to go along with their view if the majority of the rest agree with them.

We all know that young children can be really selfish, and just want things for themselves. But as children grow older and into youth and teenagers they become more sophisticated in trying to get their own way, using the force of their personality or words that try to argue you into accepting their way. In short as children grow older they become less outwardly **selfish**- they realise that this does not often work- but they become more **self-centred**. The journey from teenagers to adulthood is in my view, often the journey from self-centredness to maturity of self-giving agape love, as described in 1 Corinthians 13.

When we commit ourselves to Christ, either as children or as adults, we experience a new birth- we are as John 3 says 'born again'. And just like a physical birth, there is a process of maturity from spiritual infants, to mature as children, quite selfish in our prayers and demands, to then be like spiritual teenagers, looking down on those who we consider weak and childlike, and thinking we are somehow superior to others because of our spirituality, or intellectual understanding or position in the church- in short being spiritually self-centred. It is a normal way of developing as a Christian and we need to be continually confronted by the need to be sensitive to the needs of others and not be seen as aloof and superior. The process of growing up from teenage self-centredness to emotional maturity takes time, effort and discipline, and a willingness to be confronted and to be taught, and some people never make that step and stay as emotional teenagers, either trying to bully others, or following those who appear stronger. We all know people who are emotionally insecure as

adults, and they are very difficult to work with. It is the same with spiritual maturity – we can be like spiritual teenagers, either trying to manipulate people into following us because of our supposed better knowledge or spirituality, or we can just refuse to use our brains and follow others blindly. But what God wants is for us to become spiritually mature, which involves a continual seeking after God, willingness to be taught, willingness to repent, seeking consensus and reconciliation rather than trying to be in the right all the time and a humble heart, having our own opinions but knowing that we are not in possession of all the facts and so we can never have ‘the last word’ on any subject – that is God’s prerogative. If you want an example of this, look at the parable of the prodigal son. The younger son is selfish, but the older son is self-centred in his arrogance and bitterness. What God wants is that we make the journey from selfishness, and self-centredness to be like the father, full of forgiveness and grace.

I have gone into this in some detail because it is my opinion that the majority of problems in any Christian church are caused not be people being spiritually selfish, but by them being spiritually self-centred, behaving like spiritual teenagers not spiritual adults and that the road to maturity is, as St Paul says, by continually ‘putting childish ways’ behind us. The main disputes in the Christian church are not caused by differences of basic doctrine, but of factions of people trying to declare that their group is in possession of ‘the real truth’, and should therefore be in control of the running of the church affairs. The church has rules, each denomination, and these rules are there to facilitate mature growth and co-operation- **‘submit to one another out of reverence for Christ’** but again and again we find that disputes are caused by one person or group wanting their interpretation to be seen as the ‘right’ one. It is then a question of ‘authority’; who has the right to be seen as the leader, or the one to set the direction of the church. My old vicar used to say, **‘the proof of the maturity of a congregation is not when things go well, but when a church has problems and disagreements’** – how are they going to resolve those differences – in a mature adult Christian way after the pattern of Jesus and the gospels and epistles, or according to who has the greater power Unless we realise what is really at stake here, we will never grow up and become the spiritually adult church God wants us to be. Let us look in detail at our final reading from Ephesians 4- titled be mature in your behaviour

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another.

Speak the truth, plainly and gently, not bending the truth for our own purposes, treat others as you would like to be treated for we are family- members of one body, connected to each other, and if we hurt our own body, we too will suffer.

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.

It does not say “do not be angry”- that is impossible. Anger is a sign that we believe our rights have been violated and it is a healthy reaction, but what matters is what we do about it. We must not let it fester, otherwise resentment gets in and the devil confuses and misleads us into self-righteousness. We must speak to the person concerned, (Matthew 18 tells us how) but in love, not assuming that we are completely in the right and they are completely in the wrong. Some things are black and white, but most issues in churches and not quite so simple, and we need to express how we feel without blaming the other, taking responsibility for our own feelings and not projecting them on to others making them ‘the enemy.’

Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

Some things are not black and white, but some things are. If you are knowingly sinning, then you must stop, repent, turn away from sin, and start doing good, as Jesus has taught you.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

I have often said that our mouths are an emissions test for our hearts. In anger, it is very easy for bad words, resentful bitter accusing words which think the worst of others, words we would be ashamed of Jesus hearing, come out of our mouths, attacking another’s character and motives and refusing to see any good in them. This happens when we are angry; we need to cool down take 10, before we start speaking. Engage brain before opening mouth as the saying goes, or ‘least said, soonest mended’. God is not primarily interested in refereeing who is right or wrong, he is far more interested in whether we are mature enough to seek reconciliation and peace and to put aside teenage arrogance of ‘having to be right’.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

We were saved, not because we were in the right, but because we were in the wrong, and Jesus saved us by grace, so how can we continue to be arrogant and blame others for being ‘in the wrong’. The Holy Spirit comes to those who are holy and seek God in humble repentance; He is not given to those who are unable to admit their own faults.

Ps 24:3 ¶ Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?

4 Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.

5 They will receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation.

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice...

If these things are in your heart, then ask God to forgive you and to cleanse your heart and replace these things with , love joy and peace. If you are angry about someone, ask God to

give you His love for them, for He loves them in their sins, just as He loves you. It does not mean that the other is right, it does not condone their sin. But if we are hurt, there is a great danger of resentment getting in, and as one writer puts it, **'the devil of resentment is that it is often justified.'** The danger is not that we are in the right, but that there is often 'a wrong way of being right' and that we are more in danger being in the right than in the wrong, because we are much more open to the 'teenage' immaturity of self-centredness, even if the one wronging us is behaving with 'childish' selfishness. How do we know if there is malice and bitterness – check it out by the mouth test – if we cannot stop talking with anger, then we are bitter and need to repent of it, even if the other person was wrong in their behaviour to us in the first place – resentment is a killer of fellowship, unity, love and especially, grace.

be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Be mature, by being kind, not returning evil for evil, but overcoming evil with good. Bless those who persecute you. Find it in your hearts to try to understand the other person. It does not condone their sin, but helps you to love them and pray for them and forgive them, Forgiveness is one of the hardest things in the world to do, but we can only do it by asking God in Christ to do the work for us and say 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do,' It is a work of grace to move from resentment to forgiveness and we only have to be willing to let God do His work and He will do it. It may take time and lots of tears and frustrations, but the benefit of peace instead of being locked in unforgiveness and resentment is worth it. We forgive because Christ has forgiven us by grace. Not because we were in the right, but because we were in the wrong and admitted it and asked forgiveness. We are saved through grace and not through works.

The way is very simple, but very difficult – it is the way of grace, becoming mature, denying self, taking up the cross and following Jesus, crucifying the flesh – the selfish and self-centredness that we all possess, and giving oneself in the service of God and His church and our neighbours, and to go down that road means letting go of the teenage attitude of wanting to be in the right and letting go of resentment, bitterness, evil talk and slander, and replacing it with the adult mature behaviour of forgiveness, humility, service, blessing, thankfulness and love.

To be mature is to put an end to childish ways – not only the childish way of selfishness, but also the teenage self-centredness of wanting to be in the right and to show that others are in the wrong, which causes havoc in churches. **Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,**

That is the negative, but we must put off the negative and put on the positive, and become mature and full of grace and love, to become the mature people of God, full of grace and

love and forgiveness, after the pattern of Jesus - **and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.**

If like me you are not quite there yet but want to go on the journey from self-centredness to maturity, then perhaps we can join together in the words of song no. 382 as our prayer.

**Jesus take me as I am,
I can come no other way.
Take me deeper into You,
Make my flesh life melt away.
Make me like a precious stone,
Crystal clear and finely honed,
Life of Jesus shining through,
Giving glory back to You.**