

A NEW TARGET

23rd in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"

Passage: Ephesians 4:30-32

A few years ago humorist Bruce Cameron wrote about a business trip he took. He said, "Recently, through no fault of my own, I found myself in a state of existence, which can only be described as 'Cleveland.'" Having flown in for a meeting, I now wanted to fly out, and selected the airport as being the logical place from which to commence my return journey. The airport in Cleveland is actually IN Cleveland, as opposed to my hometown Denver's airport, which is in Nebraska. When I dropped off my rental car they asked me if I'd had a "good time" in Cleveland, which I thought was pretty amusing." He said after everyone was settled on the plane it pushed back from the terminal and began rolling. It rolled, and rolled some more. After a long time, he said, "I checked my ticket to see if it said anything about actually flying, or if the airline could fulfill its commitment if they simply drove me to Denver." After a long time taxiing they finally stopped...back at the gate. Stop me if you've heard this one. They were informed the passengers that mechanics had been called to the plane. After hours of repeated attempts to depart all of which failed, the first officer said over the PA system, "I'm afraid we're not going to be flying to Denver tonight. If you check with the gate agent he'll help you get on another flight." Cameron wrote, "This turned out to be true. I was able to get another flight, just not one to Denver. 'We'll put you up in a hotel in St. Louis,' the gate agent beamed, acting as if I'd just won a free vacation. 'St. Louis is in Missouri,' I informed him geographically. He frowned at his paperwork, apparently distrusting this slanderous declaration. 'I live in Colorado,' I explained, so that he'd see the difference. 'Well there's a 6 AM flight to Colorado Springs from St. Louis,' he proclaimed, emphasizing the word Colorado so I'd be joyful. 'And then I'll be two hours from home,' I said."

He did go to St. Louis and Colorado Springs, and then they put him on a bus to Denver. It is distressing when an airline loses sight of where they're supposed to take you. Cameron said it was the worst trip to Cleveland since the Edmond Fitzgerald. For an airline a key question is "where are you going?" They seriously need to have that target in mind. Lose sight of that and nothing good is going to happen. Today I want you to think with me about what the right target is in life as we look at Ephesians 4:30-32. It is more important that we keep the target of life in view than the airlines need to remember their target. For both our lives and airlines we need to remember where we are going.

DO NOT GRIEVE THE SPIRIT

Paul starts off by telling us not to grieve the Holy Spirit. Ah, the Holy Spirit, who back in days of old was known as the Holy Ghost, an even spookier idea. Sometimes Christians view the Holy Spirit as a sort of mysterious entity. He's like the Force in Star Wars, sort of hard to define, but kind of ever present and working to shape events at all times. Instead of "Use the Force, Luke," the Christian version is "Walk by the Spirit, Christian." But walking by the Spirit is as ill-defined

for us as Luke reaching out with his feelings and using the Force instead of his targeting computer to fire the last, desperate shot that succeeded in blowing up the Death Star. Um, okay, reach out by faith and walk by the Spirit. Right. I'll get right on that. Soon as I get a clue how I'm supposed to do it.

We'll get some instruction on that in the next chapter in Ephesians. But part of that process requires that we pay attention to what Paul says we should *not* do here. Don't *grieve* the Holy Spirit. What does that tell you about the Holy Spirit? Well, start by asking what you can grieve. We've been staying at Carissa and Michael's house when Michael is away flying because the doctors don't want Carissa to be left alone during her high risk pregnancy. So we've been helping take care of their rabbit, Lily Belle. Lily Belle loves three things. She loves being given attention and petted, she loves being fed, and she loves treats, especially Craisins. When you walk into the room she will hop in your direction hoping you will provide one of those three, especially the last one, which is her favorite. Laurie is a sucker for her. Me, not so much. When I don't give her attention or a treat it disappoints her. But she is not grieved. She doesn't go into the corner of her cage and mourn. You can disappoint Lily Belle, but you can't grieve her.

I've had a computer now for nine years and it really needed to be replaced. It has behaved badly at times, and I have let it know in no uncertain terms that I've had enough of its antics and I am going to replace it. These are harsh, hurtful words. That's a terrible threat. My computer is not grieved. It doesn't weep or mourn over the fact that I am upset with it to the point of planning to send it to the scrap heap. Here's the key that I want you to get. You can only grieve a person. Yes, yes, I know, some animals appear to grieve the loss of a mate, but would you be willing to stipulate that the Holy Spirit is not an animal? What's left then? He's a person.

The Holy Spirit is just what his name says. He is a Spirit who is the Holy One, the true Holy One, meaning God. Paul calls him the "Holy Spirit of God." He is God with us as a Spirit. Just as we know God the Father and God the Son are persons, so the Holy Spirit is a person, and as such he can be grieved.

When we hear the word "grieved" we have a tendency to hear annoyed, angered, frustrated, fed up. We think the Holy Spirit is irritated by us and maybe doesn't want anything to do with us. But that is not what Paul wrote. To be grieved is to be saddened. When our son Toby was a freshman in college he changed his major. That was hard to do at his school, and it resulted in him not being able to get a full load of classes for one quarter. He could have picked up a couple of classes at a nearby community college, but he didn't do that. His next quarter he still had some difficulty so he chose not to stress and took less than a full load. I was disappointed because we were helping pay for him to get through school and he wasn't doing his best to work hard at it. His sophomore year he decided that he wanted to play football, even though he was at a division 1 school. No one from his high school team was recruited to play at that level, and he wasn't a star on that team. He would have to walk on to that program and beat out a recruited athlete,

possibly a scholarship athlete, to earn a spot on that team. The idea seemed ridiculous to me, but he wanted to try. He did try, and to my amazement, he did it. He made that team. But a few weeks after he made the team he got some very bad news. He was declared ineligible by the NCAA. His grades were fine, but they determined he had not made sufficient progress toward a degree. He was *one* unit short of the required number to be eligible. His previous quarter he had thought about taking a one-unit class on surfboard shaping, but then chose not to do it. Had he taken one class at a community college, or had he taken that one-unit class, he would have been eligible. He was heartbroken. I was saddened for him, because I knew how badly he had wanted to play football and how hard he had worked for months to make that team. Losing that year of eligibility after he had started late essentially meant his college football career was ended. I grieved for him. I wasn't irritated at him. I wasn't annoyed by him. I wasn't thinking I should disown him and have him no longer be my son. I was sad, because I knew his unfortunate choices had cost him something he really wanted.

When we grieve the Spirit he is not angry with us. He's not annoyed at us, or disgusted by us, and he certainly is not thinking he's had enough of us and is considering kicking us out of the family. He is saddened, because he knows that our poor choices are costing us something he wants for us, something we really want for ourselves even if we don't always know it.

What is it that saddens the Spirit of God? Remember the context of these words. In 4:1 Paul said, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." He wants us to do something that is worthy of the incredible blessing and privilege we have in Christ. In verse 3 he identified what that is. "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit." We saw that what God thinks is worthy of the gift we've been given is being unified. This whole chapter is about what that requires. It is about having unity in our relationships. So this is about that same theme. What grieves the Spirit is fouling up that unity. It has to do with the way we relate to one another. We grieve the Spirit when we relate to others in ungodly ways and cause division, dissension, distance or damage in our relationships with others.

DO CHANGE YOUR ATTITUDE

Look at what Paul says we need to get rid of in verse 31. Bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, every form of malice. That is quite a lineup. The fact that the Ephesians needed to get rid of those means they had them. You don't need to get rid of something you don't have. It would be silly for you to tell me to get rid of my millions of dollars, because I don't have millions of dollars. Doesn't this make you wonder what was going on in that church? There was bitterness, rage, brawling and slander. They were having fights? That must have been a fun church to be a part of.

It was not as bad as it sounds at first. The term translated "brawling" would better be translated "shouting" or "yelling." That's better than having a fist fight in church, but if people were shouting at each other in anger that's probably not something anyone would be anxious to be part

of. Have you ever been in a place where people were yelling at each other? Typically, someone will try to step in and calm everyone down, and most everyone else will be looking for some way to exit quickly. It is unpleasant and uncomfortable for all who witness it. So that doesn't sound like a great church to be part of.

I don't think Paul intended to say that these negative things were all a part of the fellowship in Ephesus. I think he meant that these kinds of things are a common part of human relationships. They are part of the old life that we put off when we came to Christ. He is saying they have no part among brothers and sisters in Christ, for they all absolutely annihilate the unity of the Spirit. When you yell at someone, you obliterate unity.

I would sum up that list with the term "hostility." We should not be hostile, critical, envious, jealous and quarreling with one another. In his book, *Darkness And Light*, the late Martyn Lloyd Jones wrote, "We are all bitter by nature in the unregenerate state." He went on to say in every human group there typically is a façade of polite society, but there is something else underneath. He said we give "a wonderful expression of affability, while the fact is behind the paint and the powder there is nothing but bitterness, the result of brooding upon wrongs, either real or imaginary." Under the surface, Jones claimed, there is a lot of fault finding, jealousy, criticism, resentment and ill will, and that undercurrent is there pretty much all the time. Galatians 5:20-21 lists some of the things that are characteristic of the flesh, which was Paul's term for normal, fallen human nature. "Idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy."

Terry Bradshaw was the quarterback for the Pittsburgh Steelers teams that won four Super Bowls back in the 1970's, and he is still on TV today as a commentator on NFL football. He wrote a book titled *Keep It Simple*. At one point in the book he wrote about one of his receivers, Lynn Swann, one of the all-time greats. Swann was voted into the NFL Hall of Fame, and in his acceptance speech he took a swipe at Bradshaw, claiming that he believed that at times the quarterback didn't want to throw him the ball, and that he couldn't read defenses very well. Bradshaw wrote, "How sad... that he chose what should have been one of the greatest days of his life to create this controversy. Why let the past spoil such a wonderful day? Instead of using that opportunity to release some anger he should have enjoyed all the honors due him. He should have been thrilled." On a team that had a run of success that was unprecedented at that point, the stars were divided, critical, suspicious of each other. They were bitter. According to Martyn Lloyd Jones, that is the natural state for human beings.

We are so easily rubbed the wrong way. We find fault with everything other people do, and assign impure motives to them when we really have no idea what's in their hearts. In Job 1:8 God said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." Surely Job must have been an incredible person for God to describe him in such glowing terms. Of course we know that Job's

life soon turned into a nightmare as he suffered losses that would have totally unraveled a lesser man. Job 2:11-13 says, “When Job’s three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Namathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.” These were real friends. They left their homes to comfort and support Job, they wept with him, they were grieved by his losses, they stayed with him a week, saying nothing, just being there for him. They did all you could want a friend to do.

Unfortunately, they eventually decided they should say something to try to adjust Job’s perspective on what had happened, and it turned into a train wreck. They got tired of Job protesting his innocence. Listen to what Eliphaz said to him in Job 22:5-10: “Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? You demanded security from your relatives for no reason; you stripped people of their clothing, leaving them naked. You gave no water to the weary and you withheld food from the hungry, though you were a powerful man, owning land, an honored man, living on it. And you sent widows away empty handed and broke the strength of the fatherless. That is why snares are all around you, why sudden peril terrifies you.”

Wow. Eliphaz claimed Job was greedy, took people’s clothes and left them naked, refused food to hungry people even though he had plenty, refused to help widows and orphans. He said Job’s sins were endless. All those awful things happened to him because he deserved it. He may have looked good, but the truth was he hid terrible sins by the trainload. Uh, does that sound to you like someone *God* would describe as blameless and upright? Job’s sins weren’t endless. Eliphaz’ criticisms and accusations were endless, even though he had never once seen Job do any of the things he accused him of. What happened here? Where was Eliphaz getting this stuff? I submit to you that Eliphaz really was a friend of Job, and that he did like him. But as is common among us human beings, he probably was also a bit jealous of him. He likely had a tiny bit of envy of Job’s position and his reputation as the most upright man on the planet. And he probably looked for some crack, some evidence that he wasn’t all that much better than his friends, he wasn’t any more deserving than they. I think he found a little glee in Job’s downfall. I don’t think Eliphaz was evil. I think he was human, and he jumped at the chance to prove that maybe he was the one who was worthy of praise and Job was getting his just desserts. That’s human nature in all of its sordid splendor.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t take much for us to find a cause to be annoyed with another person. Laurie and I went on a walk recently and after about 10 minutes I could feel something in my shoe that wasn’t supposed to be there. At first I just ignored that, but it wasn’t long before I told Laurie I needed to stop for a moment. I had to reach into that shoe and find what turned out to be an exceedingly small pebble. It wasn’t microscopic, but it wasn’t much short of being that small.

That little stone was an irritant. At first I could just pay it no attention, but as time went on it began to become an unavoidable annoyance. It diverted much of my attention to it, until I finally had to do something about it. The Greek word translated “bitterness” in verse 31 is *pikria*. It sounds like “picky,” which would be appropriate, but that’s not what it means. It literally means “irritation.” The problem is in our marriages, families, circle of friends, neighborhoods, teams, classes, clubs, and churches we will at times rub each other a bit wrong. We’ll be that tiny rock in the shoe. We get annoyed by the irritations, and after a while the irritation grows large, maybe even feeling unbearable.

Here’s one in our family that has happened several times. Toby and I used to love to talk about sports together. Football is the favorite, but we can go on at considerable length about baseball and hockey as well. But I don’t get the opportunity to spend time with him like that very often now because he is so crazy busy. But on occasion we will have extended conversations by text. That’s fine, but timing can be an issue. Several times we have gotten into a conversation near bed time. On at least two of those occasions Laurie has been very tired and wanting to go to sleep. But my receiving texts makes just enough noise to keep her awake, or even wake her up when she’s drifting off to sleep. She will start making comments like, “Are you going to be texting a lot longer?” Her tone of voice displays increasing annoyance. Uh oh. That’s a little pebble. I really want to communicate with Toby, but I can sense as time goes on that I am getting deeper into the red zone. And by that I don’t mean inside the 20-yard line. I mean the zone where Laurie is going to become seriously upset with me. That’s how those pebbles become problems.

We build up that hostility, that annoyance inside. Paul says this needs to go away. New Testament scholar Klyne Snodgrass said in his commentary on Ephesians that “hostile Christian is an oxymoron.” We must put away this hostility and irritation at others. The attitude toward others we are supposed to have is as far from that hostility as it could be. We are to be compassionate. The Greek word Paul used there is *eusplangnos*. The root, *splangnos*, meant “inward parts” or “internal organs.” It was a bit like our word “guts.” We use the word “guts” to mean courage and determination because it comes into play in situations that are so fearful or stressful you can feel it in your digestive tract. When you feel sick inside with fear and stress is when you need courage and strength. That’s when you need guts. But in Paul’s culture they meant something else by it. You can also feel something down deep inside when you have empathy for people, when you care so deeply for them you feel it down in the pit of your stomach. That’s what Paul meant by have guts. In this case he strengthened that by tacking on the preposition *eu* to the front of the word. That meant “good.” So he calls on us to have good guts, good compassion for other people.

The word compassion is a powerful one. The root meaning of passion is to suffer. The prefix “com” means “with.” So having compassion means to suffer with a person. It is to identify with them in their pain. It is the definition of the life of Jesus Christ. He came to share in our suffering. His whole life was about compassion. It was the reason why he lived on this earth, and it was why

he died here. If Jesus' whole life was driven by compassion, what do you suppose people who are living in his Spirit will be like? They will also be defined by compassion.

A few years ago Laurie had to have surgery to remove some of her original equipment. It had served a life giving function for her, but now it had gone over to the dark side and was definitely working against her. So she went through the surgery, and then had to spend a night in the hospital. The surgery went well, and she was doing well. They gave her that button she could push that would deliver a jolt of pain meds when she started hurting, and that button was threatening to push me out of my position as her best friend. But she was doing well. I stayed with her late into the night, but she wasn't in a private room and there was no place for me to sleep, so eventually I had to leave to go home and sleep. She was doing well, but it was terribly hard for me to leave. I didn't sleep all that well that night, and the first thing I wanted to do in the morning was talk to Laurie and see if she was all right. I was suffering with her, feeling compassion for her.

That's the kind of attitude that we are to have for those around us. We are to suffer with them. We are to know that every single one of them has suffered losses, has had cherished dreams die, has been wounded, scarred, beaten up by life. They've suffered through painful circumstances of all kinds, been battered by fears and hurt by other people. They are fighting to survive, to somehow cope, to try to protect themselves. This is true of every single one of them. They may put up a bold and brave front, but even that is actually a sign of the slings and arrows that have stung them and of their desire to avoid more hurt. They need our compassion. Every human being is desperate to be treated and regarded with compassion, and we are to have that attitude toward them just as the Lord Jesus did.

DO CHANGE YOUR ACTIONS

Not only are we to have a compassionate attitude, but we are to act in ways that are kind. Especially we are to forgive. Literally the passage says we are to "grace" one another. We don't have a verb that means to grace. We would say we need to give grace. But we all understand what it means. It means we are to give the kind of grace to other people that God gives to us. It means that when we see the imperfections of others, when they annoy us or wound us, when they hurt us with their insensitivity, their stupidity or their selfishness, we give them grace. We extend grace to them when they treat us unfairly, take us for granted, fail to help us, let us down or do something truly irritating.

A number of years ago a woman who lived in New York state, named Victoria Ruvolo, 45 at the time, was driving along a road when a car carrying 6 teenagers approached from the other direction. In the car was 19-year-old Ryan Cushing. He had just gone on a spending spree using a stolen credit card. Among his purchases was a frozen turkey. He and his friends decided it would be amusing to toss that turkey into oncoming traffic. He tossed it out the window and the 20 pound frozen bird smashed through the windshield of Ruvolo's car hitting her right in the face.

She was fortunate just to survive, but she had to go through 10 hours of surgery to repair the damage. When she was later released from the hospital she had to go home with a trachea tube that enabled her to breathe. Cushing was arrested, tried and convicted for his crime. The prosecutor said that victims in cases like Ruvolo's usually feel that no punishment is harsh enough for the perpetrator. Ruvolo attended Cushing's sentencing hearing, but her attitude was starkly different. She asked that he be given a plea deal. She said she wasn't interested in revenge, but in salvaging Cushing's life. She said, "Despite all the fear and pain I have had from this horrific experience, I have much to be thankful for. Each day when I wake up I thank God simply because I'm alive. I sincerely hope that you have learned from this awful experience Ryan. There is no room for vengeance in my life and I do not believe a long hard prison sentence would do you, me or society any good. I truly hope that by demonstrating compassion and leniency I have encouraged you to live an honorable life." Ryan approached her tentatively and while crying whispered, "I am so sorry for what I did to you." She responded, "It's okay, I just want you to make your life the best it can be." The reports said even the most hardened people in the courtroom were crying. Ryan could have been sentenced to a 25-year sentence. Because of Victoria's plea on his behalf he was given a six-month sentence with a year of probation.

We marvel at such a profound act of grace. We admire it, and we wish that we ourselves could have such large and grace filled hearts. But then we fail to notice our lack of grace toward the people that we encounter every day, our spouses, children, parents, co-workers, friends, extended family, neighbors and brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the action we are to take. In the compassion of Christ, we are to pass on the forgiveness of Christ.

APPLICATION

This sounds good, but it is not easy, is it. Dr. David Hilfiker has for years led a medical ministry in the inner city of Washington DC. He said, "There are so many battered people all over the place. I sometimes wonder what the Good Samaritan would have done if the road to Jericho had been littered with hundreds of men beaten by robbers." It is all too easy for our compassion to get overwhelmed.

Watching my son deal with the challenges of being a doctor in emergency medicine has been somewhat eye-opening to me. He has had to deal with some horrific things. Recently he had a day where there was one terrible trauma case right after another. One man was in an accident that resulted in breaking every bone in his face. His situation was so dire it was near impossible to get a breathing tube into him, though they finally managed it. Then there was a man who "coded" in the ER, they ended up having to crack his chest open and Toby had to reach inside the man's chest and use his own hand to pump the man's heart to keep him alive. He deals with life and death issues on a regular basis, and he has to deal with the aftermath when it doesn't end happily. I asked him, "How do you handle that? How does that not eat you alive?" He said he has

to compartmentalize, to just focus on doing his job and not get too emotionally involved with the patients. I thought that life can be so demanding for us at times we feel the same way. We cut ourselves off to keep from being overwhelmed. But God has an infinite reservoir of grace that he wants to flow through us. So what can we do to make sure we are compassionate, not hostile, and we are kind, full of grace for others?

ADMIT IRRITATION

I recently shared about some frustration I had over trying to make a printer work at home. As I look back at that incident I see now that I was upset at two targets. One was the company that made the printer because their instructions were maddeningly bad. But the other was at myself, because I seemed to be too dense to do a simple thing that many others do with no difficulty whatsoever. As it turned out my frustration was mostly misdirected. I still think the instructions left much to be desired. But it turned out that neither their instructions nor my intelligence were the source of the problem. After spending hours trying to figure the thing out, with an important suggestion from my son I began to suspect the problem actually was with the router in our Wi-Fi network. In a last ditch effort to conquer this problem I bought a new router and installed it. Somewhat to my wonder as well as my great relief, that solved the problem.

I tell you this because all along the router had been the problem. No matter what I tried it was never going to get better until I recognized and addressed that problem. Over many years I have had encounters with people who had some damaged relationships who insisted the problems were caused by other people. They couldn't see their own irritation and hostility toward others. It was obvious that things would never get better until they saw that the problem was with themselves. We all tend to make that mistake. We're never going to change until we admit our own weakness and failing. So we need to start with confessing to God, admitting that we are annoyed by other people primarily because they don't serve our purposes as we would like.

AIM FOR COMPASSION

We are going to have to want to be what Paul calls us to be in this passage. We need a new paradigm for what kind of people we are. We are going to have to desire and choose to be people who are kind, forgiving, patient and full of grace for other people.

It won't happen automatically. People are difficult. I was recently talking to a friend who manages a business and he was telling me about some of the difficulties he has dealing with both employees and customers. He gets hit from both sides with people who are often unreasonable, even to the point of being irrational. This is not an exception; he deals with this on a continual basis. They are not going to get better. That's how people are going to be much of the time for all of us. If you just go with the flow of your natural instincts and feelings, you will have lots of reason to be irritated, critical of others and hostile toward them. You have to aim at a different target.

I was recently reading about how the game of baseball has changed. I personally think many of the changes are unfortunate and I hope that the pendulum will swing the game back in a different direction. But one of the changes has to do with what players care about and focus on. As long as I have been alive one of the defining measures of success for players has been their batting average. In this article the thesis was that players mostly don't care about batting average anymore. The big thing hitters think about now is their OPS, which stands for "on base plus slugging." It is a measure of how often they get on base in any fashion along with how much power they have. That's what they aim at. Having a different target actually changes how they approach hitting and what they seek to accomplish.

As I was studying this passage it occurred to me that we need a paradigm shift analogous to that. What is it we are aiming at in life? Is it personal success? Is it to feel good? Is it to win applause? This passage calls on us to aim at something entirely different. The measure of how well we are doing is a whole new thing. I would call it our CGQ. That's our compassion plus grace quotient. The higher it is, the more we are hitting the goal. When we are trying to raise our CGQ it will impact how we relate to people in a powerful way.

ASK GOD FOR A GRACEFUL HEART

If we could change ourselves into people who are full of grace, simply by our own efforts there would have been no need for Jesus to sacrifice himself on our behalf. We are going to need something much greater than our own determination and effort. We are going to need God's compassion and grace to fill us and flow through us. We are going to need God to transform us. That is not something we can manufacture. But it is something God wills. He commands it because he wants it. So we can ask him to make us more like Jesus, to give us compassionate hearts that love the broken people around us and give them the grace that God has shown us. We can be confident he will hear that prayer and answer it.