

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH
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Series Love Matters More

SERMON: "Speaking the Truth in Love"

Introduction

Good morning Five Forks. Good to meet with you. We are in the 3rd and final week of our series: **Love Matters More**.

So a quick review.

In the first week we saw how important love is in any relationship with people. In fact Paul seems to say, **love is the most important thing**.

However we attempt to express our spirituality and love for God, if we don't have love, or act lovingly, towards other people, everything else we do is worthless – for us and for the other person.

Last week we considered where, "telling people the truth" fits in relationships. After all, isn't it my Christian duty to let people know where they are going astray? We may think, "It is unfortunate if they don't like the truth, or if the truth hurts, but I have to tell them the truth. Don't I?"

We learned that **"Truth is a tool to Love"**, it is not the final goal in our relationships.

We learned that when we talk about "truth" we don't always mean the same thing. Sometimes we mean facts. Other times we mean wisdom – or how to navigate life well. We saw that Jesus almost exclusively related to other people from the perspective of wisdom-truth.

It was not that facts and knowledge were not important to Jesus. They were very important to him. But he acted towards people in a way that sometimes seemed to ignore the facts, and focus on loving.

When we attempt to do the same thing we often find ourselves in an internal tug of war.

We feel like we have to choose between “speaking the truth,” that is, telling a person where they are wrong, or accepting them and just being nice to them, and not saying anything. Those are not the only two options. As I hope we discover this morning.

Often this tug of war in our spirits is out of a genuine concern for the other person’s welfare. But let’s be honest, at other times it is simply to make ourselves feel better about ourselves. When we point out the failure of others, it is often so we feel better about our own short comings.

At such times we will use phrases like, “I was just telling them the truth.” Or, “I was just telling them like it is.” And sometimes, to justify our condemnation of them or their behavior, we will quote [Ephesians 4:15](#) **“I was speaking the truth in love.”**

Let me lay a foundation for us so we can speak the truth in love, as Paul instructs us.

It is important that we talk about hard things with people rather than avoid the difficult topics – or pretend they are not there. My concern is that too often we do not speak the truth in love. Emphasis – “In Love.”

Instead, this is **How we often use “Speaking the Truth in Love.”**

We often use the phrase in a way that reveals **1. the assumption that God’s Word and my opinion are the same.** I believe our opinions are often informed by our interpretations of God’s Word, and they must be. In our statement of faith, we say, **“We believe the bible is the authority for our faith and conduct.”** We must use the bible to guide our opinions.

If we had perfect knowledge, the assumption that God’s Word and our opinion are the same, may be correct. But we said last week, we must admit to ourselves, **every time we read the bible we are interpreting it through a lens that is not perfect.** It is a lens that is distorted by our humanity.

Even the Apostle Paul admitted he did not have perfect knowledge, or understanding, and certainly not perfect wisdom about how to live life well, when he said:

“Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then, (referring to the consummation of all time) we will see everything with perfect clarity.”

Even Paul had the humility to admit, he did not know the complete truth about the world, about life, about God, or even about other people. **Can we admit to our own limitations of knowing the whole truth about anything?** Speaking the truth in love requires that we recognize **we could be wrong** in our interpretations and assumptions about people sometimes.

Another reason we may use the phrase, “I am speaking the truth in love,” while we proceed to point out another person’s failure is that **2. we may believe that people are most likely to change when we tell them they are sinning and living their life wrong.** However, observation tells us this is not an accurate view of how people are most likely to change.

There is something called **the “change paradox.”** Simply put, it goes like this. **The more we try to change another person or ourselves, the more we stay the same.** A person is most likely to change when they are first accepted as they are.

This is what we see happening with Jesus and the people he encounters. He seemed to accept people where they are, and then they changed. I think of the stories of **Zacchaeus – a dishonest tax collector**, the **woman at the well – who had trouble staying married**. The **woman caught in adultery – clearly a person living in sin.**

Jesus accepted them lovingly and then they were transformed. People standing around watching him, thought he was condoning their bad behavior. And they criticized him for that approach. But **Jesus made loving them and accepting them, the starting point.** Just like Jesus does with every one of us.

We tend to forget that, and try to change people first, so we can love them more easily.

Most often, perhaps, when we use the phrase, “speaking the truth in love” we tend to **3. make truth telling or correcting, the goal rather than a tool to love.** In doing so, we often put the other person in a position of being excluded or on the ‘outside.’ Where they feel

ostracized or marginalized until they come around to our way of thinking.

We may know someone has strongly different political views than ours. And we think some of those views are morally or ethically wrong. So, we don't invite them to our gatherings, or when they come to our gatherings, we make them feel like an outsider. Unless they come around to our way of thinking.

Some of you are wondering, "When do I get to tell someone the truth? They need to hear it sometime, don't they?"

Yes. It is very important that we speak "the truth." But it is only valid to do so when we do it "in love."

Imagine what it might look like if, when trying to settle a disagreement or voice our disapproval of someone's behavior, imagine what might it look like **to begin** with asking ourselves, "**How can I show love to this person and help them feel accepted and included?**"

Let that be our starting point. I believe this is what Paul means when he says:

Ephesians 4:15 "We will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.

This is what we are about at Five Forks – "Growing in every way more and more like Christ." It is what we mean we say, "Knowing, Loving, Following Jesus."

Let's unpack Ephesians 4 to get a better idea of what Paul means in vs 15.

(~~"Speaking the Truth in Love" and Other Traits~~)

Chapter 4 begins:

Ephesians 4 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the

calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Notice several things here. Paul is getting us ready to speak the truth in love. But there are some things that need to happen **before** we are ready to speak and **while** we speak.

Speaking the truth in love must be accompanied by several other traits.

Speaking the truth in love goes hand in hand with these other traits:

Being **humble**

Being **gentle**

Being **patient**

Bearing with one another in love,

The phrase “**bearing with one another in love.**” This is the same phrase, “in love,” that Paul uses when he says **speaking the truth ‘in love.’** And it applies to all the traits.

And:

Making every effort to keep unity through the bond of peace.

“Telling the truth” **cannot be separated** from these other traits. These must come **prior** to, and **then remain along with**, speaking the truth in love. We cannot get to the point where we say, “I have been **humble** long enough. I have been **gentle** long enough. I have been **patient** long enough.” Now it’s time to “just tell them like it is. And I’m sorry if they can’t handle the truth.”

That sort of an attitude cannot be farther from what Paul means when he says “speak the truth in love.” So let us look at each of them more closely.

Be completely humble.

What does it mean to be humble? Quite simply – “**Not thinking of yourself as better or more important than other people.**” This is how Paul described Jesus in

Philippians. He writes: “**Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself.**” And then he describes how Jesus had this attitude about himself, and he calls us to have the same attitude.

That verse always amazes me because Jesus **was** better than everybody else. But he didn't think of himself that way. Being humble may be one of the most difficult characteristics to master. It just doesn't come naturally to anyone.

Paul says before you can speak the truth in love you must be completely humble.

True humility is when someone has an accurate assessment of both his or her strengths and weaknesses. They recognize their abilities and ask how they can contribute. They also recognize their own flaws and ask how they can grow.

In the context of “speaking the truth” we focus on what some have called “**intellectual humility.**” That is: What do we think of our own **knowledge or facts**. What do we think of our understanding of what the facts mean? And what do we think of our wisdom – our ability to take that knowledge and navigate life well? How do we consider our intellect? Are we completely humble about our intellect? Do we consider that others are better than ourselves in knowledge and wisdom and thinking? Often we don't.

Fascinating studies have been done in this field. **Intellectually humble** people show a willingness to admit they aren't always right, and with new evidence they will change their views.

Intellectually arrogant people insist they are rarely wrong and they rarely change their minds. On a questionnaire, they insist that even their wrong responses are correct. They are more susceptible to false information – they are more likely to believe false information. In other words, **they don't know what they don't know**. I must confess, when I am trying to prove that I am right about something, I often don't know what I don't know.

Intellectually humble people have a constant desire to learn and improve. They like getting new information. They even enjoy finding out when they are wrong so they can correct

their thinking. And when in trouble, they are more willing to accept help.

The **intellectually arrogant** are convinced they have the right answers. They are certain they have heard it all before. They are even threatened by new information. Because they perceive new facts, not as facts, but that you think they are ignorant.

The intellectually humble are more tolerant of different opinions and positions. They know they need others. They are more sensitive to, and accepting of differences. And in one study the humble were consistently more fair and more generous.

Paul's advice to the Ephesians is **Be Completely Humble**.

Now consider if someone is **coming to you** to "tell you the truth about your failures or where you are wrong." Are you more likely to listen to them if they display humility, rather than arrogance? So, if you want someone to heed the truth you are trying to convey to them, they are more likely to listen and even change if you display genuine humility.

Speaking the truth in Love must begin with genuine humility. Until you have genuine humility your truth speaking is not valid.

Be Gentle

What does it mean to be gentle? By definition it is: **not displaying a bad temper or being belligerent, not being harsh or insulting. – instead it is being kindly.**

Gentleness or the lack of it can be communicated with:

Our voice, and

Our facial expression or demeanor.

Gentleness is expressed on our **tone of voice**. I remember **my father** as a man who almost always had a gentle tone of voice. Except for when I was learning to drive and was about to back into a tree. Then his voice became less gentle that time. But otherwise I would describe his voice as firm, yet reassuring, welcoming and kindly. You knew he was listening to you. He was that way with everyone, even when he was disagreeing with them.

Seldom will a **loud** voice be described as gentle. I remember getting into an argument with one of my brothers in a restaurant. We thought we were just speaking the truth to each other. At first, no one else noticed. But as the disagreement grew hotter, and we each tried harder to convince the other one that we were right, our voices got louder, without us even noticing it. Until my other, older and wiser brother said, “Hey guys, everyone is looking at you.” We were not speaking the truth to each other in love.

So **pay attention to the voice you use**, or plan to use, when you speak the truth in love to someone.

Gentleness is also communicated in your **facial expressions**. We read each other’s faces all the time. Look in the mirror and practice what you want to say to someone. Does your face communicate gentleness and acceptance?

In certain situations, gentleness is communicated with **touch**. When my father needed to tell me something difficult, he would often put his hand gently on my shoulder. Jesus was in the habit of touching people who were considered unclean, or sinners.

So, as we prepare to speak the truth in love, we are only ready when we can maintain a gentle spirit throughout the interaction.

Paul also says:

Be Patient

I love this definition of patience:

“It is the long waiting time during which a person refuses to give in to their anger or frustration.”

Patience is hard. Think how long you have to wait these days to be served at a restaurant. Terrible, isn’t it. Think how long the Israelites had to wait for freedom from Egyptian slavery. Or how long they had to wait for their Messiah. Patience takes much longer than we want it to. But Love is patient.

To be patient is to wait gently with the hope that another person may come to recognize

the truth revealed to them by the Holy Spirit.

Patience is giving time for the power of love to do its work of transformation in an individual's heart. If we stop being patient. We have stopped too soon.

When you are contemplating "speaking the truth in love," how long are you willing to be patient with the other person? That is one of the questions you have to wrestle with before you begin to speak the truth in love.

Paul says:

Bear with one another in Love

This is the same idea Paul uses in I Corinthians 13 when he says "**Love always protects.**" Some translations say it this way,

"Make allowance for each other's faults, because of your love" (NLT)

The word 'to bear' has several meanings – to cover, to keep confidential, to pass over in silence, to throw a cloak of silence over what is displeasing in another person.

In Proverbs we read:

17:9 He who covers over an offence promotes love but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.

I grew up in a culture where being on time was less important than stopping to talk to someone – just to talk – even if it made you late for an appointment. So, I did not have a habit of being on time.

I began working with a man for whom, if you were five minutes early, you were already 10 minutes late. Promptness and the discipline of being on time for appointments was one of his virtues. My habit of being late was certainly a fault in his eyes.

But you know what, he chose to cover over my fault with a cloak of silence. The relationship between us was more important to him than correcting my fault. Maybe he tried to

get me to change and just gave up after while? This is an example of bearing with one another in love, or making allowance for each other's faults.

Now put this in the context of "speaking the truth in love." We speak the truth in love to correct other people. My speaking the truth in love is only valid if I am willing to "bear with the other person" – that is, keep it confidential, and make allowance for their fault.

But notice Paul says make allowance for **each other's** faults. The assumption is that all of us have faults. Do you have the humility to admit your own faults? Are you working just as hard to correct your own faults, as you want to work, to correct someone else's faults?

Jesus talked about, in the context of pointing out other people's faults, "removing the log in our own eye, before we try to remove the splinter in someone else's eye." Jesus says, work on your own faults first. Then you can legitimately speak to another person about the things that need to change in their life.

Isn't it interesting that when the **teachers of the law** – those who knew the facts of the law and wanted to use the law to trap Jesus. When they brought a **woman, caught in adultery**, to Jesus. Jesus **waited**. Jesus started writing on the ground.

Then Jesus stands up and says. "Alright, you have quoted the truth of the law correctly. However, any of you without sin should throw the first stone."

And the accusers all left, one by one.

Could it be that because they had not spoken the truth in love; they did not bear with the woman in love. They did clear the log out of their own eye first. Could it be that Jesus considered their utterance of the truth as not valid?

That is a different understanding of that story for me.

The last trait Paul mentions that must accompany "speaking the truth in love," is:

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

As Jesus prayed for his disciples and for us, in John 17:21, He said this:

John 17:21 May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.

Unity between believers is **evidence for the whole world to see**, and come to know that **Jesus is the Son of God**. Paul is concerned with unity between believers in all of his writings. It seems divisions, quarreling, and conflict have been a part of the church from its beginning. And yet unity is intended to be the greatest evidence of the truth of the gospel.

So often believers have used “speaking the truth in love” as a weapon on each other to divide and alienate, rather than unite and connect. We use “the truth,” or more accurately we should say, we use our “interpretation of the truth” as a tool **to decide if someone is in our group or not**. We use it to exclude those who disagree with us. We hold people at arms-length if they do not agree with us completely. Paul is saying this should not be.

It is okay, even a good thing very often, to maintain close relationships with people with whom we disagree. Even if the disagreement is a theological or even ethical one. It is even good to talk about those areas of disagreement at times. Most times we are clinging to an opinion of the truth.

But talking about what we disagree on is how we learn and grow in our faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ. We don't have to exclude people who disagree with us. Believe it or not, we can learn to embrace the differences

It is even good to have friends who hold differing political views from yours. With humility and a desire to grow and improve. Those differences prove valuable for all of use to learn to navigate life well.

As you consider if it is time to “speak the truth in love,” are you doing it in a way that makes the other person feel more a part of your group, or are you doing it in a way that makes

the person feel like they are excluded from your fellowship.

Speaking the truth in love leads to more inclusion not less.

As you can see there is a lot of work to be done in loving another person before it is valid for you and I to “speak the truth in love” to them. When we make loving the other person the goal, rather than making correcting them the goal, the whole dynamic of the interaction changes.

Our efforts to be right, keep us from loving others the way Jesus has loved us.

And so, before we start speaking the truth in love we need to know our own heart.

So get to **Know Your Heart Before you Start.**

If we go into the conversation with a feeling that we are **more righteous** than the other person, our heart is not yet in the right place.

If we approach the interaction thinking that we can **fix the other person**, our heart is not yet in the right place.

If we approach the interaction convinced that we need to **convince the other person we are right**, our heart is not yet in the right place.

On the otherhand, I can know my heart is in the right place if:

I want what is best for the other person.

I want that someone to be heard.

I value my relationship with that someone over getting them to agree with my opinion.

I am willing to continue to be in a relationship with them, even if they reject my opinion.

I respect their choices as theirs to make.

It is a long list but I believe this is all work that needs to be done in order to love well. We cannot shortchange any of these. We cannot pick and choose which ones we want to do

well. Loving well means doing all these well.

Let me stress, I believe it is important for us to speak the truth to one another. It is important for us to speak with each other about hard things. It is important for us, as followers of Jesus, to help each other know and follow the truth we find in God's Word. But before we speak, and while we are speaking, may we make loving each other, that looks like the love Jesus has shown us; may we make that the highest priority, because:

Love Matters More.

PRAY

Benediction – May the God of Love, and the Prince of Peace, and the Spirit of unity, guide you and keep you as you endeavor to “speak the truth in love” till we are all conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ.