

Sermon Draft

Text: Ephesians 4:17–5:2

Sermon: Getting Along

A lot of people grumble this time of year, they say it's too hot, but this is every kid's favorite time of the year, it's Summer! When you can sleep late, hang out with your friends, do as you please. Freedom! From all the rules of school and the schedules everybody else makes for you. But not many days left before it's back to school.

Of course, I like this time of year too because I like the warm weather and because it's such a great time for children. I miss seeing them here at church during VBS and other summertime activities.

It is interesting to watch children interact. Sometimes they cooperate with one another so well, sometimes not so well; they're sinful like everybody else. What makes children get along with one another? We'd like to find the formula and maybe we could come up with an adult version.

As with most things, when it comes to raising children to get along and cooperate in wholesome ways, there are the two extreme views. There's the permissive approach and there's the strict, authoritarian approach. Wise parents, though, are looking for something in between.

Our heavenly Father is the wisest parent, and in our text this morning, our loving heavenly Father teaches us his children to get along. He knows the best of all teaching methodologies, and that means neither extreme, but the strengths of both approaches. Human parents can draw some very good advice from this Word of God, but God isn't really speaking to us as parents. He's speaking to all of us as children, his children.

That's foundational for everything God says to us in our text today from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. Our Father teaches us as his children. Paul assures, "*You were sealed for the day of redemption*" (4:30b) "*as beloved children*" (5:1b). We are children of God! All of us, at every age. In fact, we are sealed as his children. God did that—sealed us as his children—in our Baptisms. Baptism is the visible act by which God puts his seal on us.

Baptism marks each one of us—both on the forehead and on the heart—as his child. By that act, God also takes responsibility for raising us, for teaching us those things a parent teaches a child. Like how to get along with one another. Throughout the last three chapters of Ephesians, his emphasis is teaching us how to live with our fellow Christians, the rest of God’s children.

Just like kids, we sometimes get along well, sometimes not so well. We have our squabbles on the ball field. We fight over who gets which seat in the car for the first leg of the trip. We hit each other with water balloons. Except that the older we get, the more our squabbles become these: Destroying someone’s reputation through gossip, rather than shouting over who gets to bat first. Fighting for a job the other person wants, rather than for the seat with the best view. Soaking each other with verbal abuse, rather than mere water which would actually feel pretty good on a hot day. That kind of behavior is no more acceptable among adult Christians than it is among kids on summer vacation (4:17–19).

God intends in our text to lead us to a better kind of interaction: (4:30–32a). Children both young and old who are kind and forgiving of one another rather than bitter and angry. How does God make it happen in us?

Our Father has his don'ts and dos for getting along. Remember that extreme permissive approach? The parent gives full responsibility for development to the child. The parent lets the child learn on his or her own how to get along; every day is summer free for all.

The idea is that independence lets the child develop his or her creativity to the fullest. Unfortunately, children in such totally permissive homes often develop an egocentric, “me first” view that leads beyond water balloons. What's more, children in such environments often develop resentment for parents who don't seem to care enough to provide guidance.

God certainly does not take this kind of *laissez-faire*, “anything goes” attitude with his children. He cares. In fact, when his children sin, he grieves (4:30a). The Holy Spirit is described as being like a parent. He is the one who teaches us God's will.

And the Holy Spirit grieves when we ignore it. The Holy Spirit is the one who shows us God's love. And he grieves when our lives don't reflect that love. Imagine the grief a parent feels: When a son or daughter hurts someone else's child, maybe commits violent crime. When a child rejects everything a parent has done for him, storming out of the house at age 18, vowing never to come back. When a parent sees a child go the wrong way in life, perhaps destroying herself with drugs or alcohol or unchristian relationships.

The Holy Spirit is grieved: When God's children hurt one another. When we reject everything God has done in creating, redeeming, and caring for us. Whenever we hurt ourselves by falling into sin. God cares about us too much to sit back and see whether we'll learn how to get along. He doesn't take a "boys will be boys" or "children will be children" attitude when Christians hurt one another. No, he commands (4:31–32a).

God definitely has his don'ts and dos for getting along. It is completely inconsistent with Christian faith: For believers to fight, carry grudges, talk evil about other believers.

For Christian families to raise voices in anger against their own. God does not permit it! God commands his children to be kind and compassionate and forgiving. To care about the hurt others are feeling at the death of a loved one. To support others who are feeling weak when life seems to be going wrong. To bear with others' sins and failures.

God is no permissive, "sit back and watch" parent. We could never resent him as a Father who doesn't care. He longs, he aches, for us to be kind and compassionate to one another. By his commands, he actively teaches us to get along. Still, you can't compare him to a parent of the other extreme approach, a strict authoritarian.

Our Father uses a lot of love in getting us to get along (4:32–5:2). You know the authoritarian model. Lots of rules. "Do it because I said so." "If you don't, you're going to get it." The assumption is always "no" unless the parent surprises you by saying "yes." This approach gets outward compliance but inner resistance, even more resentment than the permissive model. So as soon as the threat is gone, even the outward compliance stops.

God doesn't want grudging outward action. He wants hearts. So, he brings about loving outward action by working inwardly, working in our hearts.

He showers us with huge doses of love (5:1). He calls us his kids, his dearly beloved. And he proved that that's exactly what we are to him when Christ sacrificed himself for us (5:2).

That's the greatest demonstration of love, giving up one's own life. Jesus died on the cross because God loves us. God wanted us to be his, to be his friends, friends who would serve him and one another willingly. That could only be possible if he removed the sin that separated us from him. That's what Jesus did by dying and rising again.

Paul says Jesus gave himself up as "a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." That recalls the Old Testament sacrifices—the smoke of the burnt offerings being sent up to God as a pleasing aroma. Let your nostrils imagine the pleasure of breathing fine incense. Nothing the Old Testament people or we ourselves could present could please God like that, but Jesus pleased God for us.

Jesus was God demonstrating his love for us. Christ's pleasing God for us is why we could be "sealed for the day of redemption." Once Christ had paid for the sins of the world, the Holy Spirit could come to us in Baptism and give us the forgiveness Jesus earned.

The seal means we can be certain of eternal life when our last day comes. Baptism, eternal life—that's God demonstrating his love for us. That love then teaches us to love; we imitate God's love (5:1).

The Greek word for "imitator" gives us our word "mimic." That's the way children learn, isn't it? Children mimic their parents. Children who live in a loving home see how it's done. Dad saying sweet things to Mom, spouses helping each other around the house—it rubs off.

God uses that technique on us, teaches us by example how to get along. He wants us to love, so he first loved us richly. He wants us to forgive, so he shows us how by first forgiving us. Even more important, God's love and forgiveness motivates us to love and forgive and get along.

A child who lives in a house of ill will not only won't know how to love, but he also won't want to. The anger he's received will be anger that has to come out. But a child who grows up in a loving family wants to be nice to other kids, wants to love other people.

We Christians are all growing up in the most loving family. In spite of all our sins, we're loved. In spite of our unworthiness, we're blessed every day. In spite of our "bitterness and wrath," "anger," "clamor," "slander," and "malice," all who believe have eternal life. That kind of love moves us to get along nicely, even if we've long outgrown summers off and the backseat of the family car.

Amen