

Empty Words
Ephesians 5: 3-7
Jason Henderson
Market Street Fellowship
081207

* [A Note About MSF Finances](#)

Most of you are aware that I have never said anything publicly about the financial situation of Market Street Fellowship. I have done that because it has always bothered me how Christian leaders so often attempt to extract money from believers to support personal visions or agendas...and usually that is done either by promises of spiritual blessings or warnings of dire consequences for not tithing. Let me say something plainly – tithing 10%, just like every single other Old Covenant institution, was a commandment that was put upon Israel by the law, and it was fulfilled and realized in Christ's work on the cross and in our relationship to Him as our High Priest in the New Covenant. **There is no such thing as a New Covenant tithe obligation.** In fact, the New Covenant, by nature, does not demand anything from your flesh, but rather works the very nature and righteousness of Christ into your soul by the Spirit of God. I'm not going to preach on that now. I'm just saddened by all of the monetary manipulation that goes on in the body of Christ. Tithing 10%, like the sacrifices, offerings, feasts, incense, etc. has come to its perfect realization in Christ.

However, with that said...supporting the body of Christ financially is obviously a necessity and a reality because we have bodies, and meet in buildings, and pay bills, and eat food, and have natural needs. Paul talks about this a few times in the New Testament. There is no religious mandate to give, but there are natural needs. And for that reason alone...I wanted to say something to both those present here and those who listen online about MSF's current financial situation. People that may want to help sometimes don't because they are unaware of need.

I said all of that because, as all of you sitting here today know...we've lost a bunch of folks over the years. We've gained a bunch too...but we've lost considerably more. The great majority of you were not here when I began seeing and preaching the cross in 2004. But despite people leaving, I'm encouraged about church, and I feel like we have a great group of folks who have a heart to know and share Christ in the truth of the cross. And you all know that.

However, with the most recent exodus of folks from our fellowship...it seems that we've come to a place where our income no longer fully covers our expenses. And when I say our expenses...I'm really just talking about bills, mortgage, payroll, and giving. We don't really spend money on anything else.

So, I guess I'm saying that if you appreciate the ministry that comes from Market Street Fellowship...whether you're part of the local congregation or part of our larger group of internet listeners...and would like to help support us, that would be great and it would help keep us afloat. We've added a "donate" button on our website where people can donate easily online through Paypal. All donations are, of course, tax deductible and you will receive a contribution receipt at the end of each year. Checks can be made out to Market Street Fellowship and sent to the church address.

Empty Words

I want to continue in the book of Ephesians this morning. We're going to move along in chapter five. If you'll recall, last week we talked about walking in love as Christ loved us. Today we're going to pick up in verse three where Paul continues with a list of adamic fruits that he expects to be passing away from their heart and their lives.

I know that we've said it multiple times, but I'm doing that on purpose – these lists of certain behaviors are best understood to be the fruit of one of two men. And that's not just my idea. That is what he says on many occasions, including verse 9 of this very chapter. If you'll read down just a few verses, you'll see that Paul makes sure to remind his readers that the good that they are putting on is the fruit of the Spirit Himself. So, on the one hand, love, joy, peace, patience...all of these are the fruits of Christ, or the fruits of the Spirit. On the other hand, fornication, covetousness, idolatry, these are the fruits of the adamic man.

So when you read these descriptive lists, it is not a correct view to think to yourself..."I need to do more of this and less of that. I need to discipline myself to act more like this, and discipline myself to act less like that." This isn't about an act. Discipline is fine for what it is...and it is fitting and appropriate when flesh is moving and motivating your heart. But Paul is talking about the transformation of the soul here, where one entire kind and nature and man is crowded out by the revelation and formation of another.

There are always two men in view. There is the man who is being put off together with his deeds and lusts. And there is the man who is being put on, together with the fruits of His Spirit. And both of these experiences occur by the renewing of the mind so that you come into accord with, agreement with, congruency with, the finished work of God in Christ. God has finished all things. Knowing the truth, through the revelation of Christ by the Spirit, brings you into the experience of what God has finished.

So let me read the next three verses, and I'm not really going to say much about them because of all that we've said about these lists already. Paul says,

Eph 5:3 But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; ***4*** neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. ***5*** For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

This last sentence can be a bit confusing, where he says that no fornicator, unclean person, covetous man, idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of God. There are a few interpretations of what Paul is saying here. What exactly does Paul mean by a

person "having no inheritance in the kingdom of God and Christ." What does it mean to be a fornicator or an idolater.

Sometimes Christians will read a verse like this without much of an understanding of the cross and use it to either condemn others or condemn themselves. I've heard people say, "well, I've done some of these things since I became a Christian...does that mean that I can't go to heaven?". Well, that's not even a right view of heaven to begin with. Nor is it, in my opinion, related to what Paul is saying here.

For starters, I suspect that Paul has in mind the kingdom of Old Covenant Israel as the shadow of the New Covenant kingdom of God when he makes this remark. In the Old Covenant, anybody who was found to be an idolater or a fornicator or unclean was cut off from God's kingdom on earth. If you recall God's covenant with Israel, in one instance such people were stoned, in another instance they were put outside the boundaries of Israel, and in another instance they were made to camp outside until they became clean, and then they could return. But, in either case, the picture was that those things are not part of God's relatedness to a people. Those things separated them from God's fellowship and God's kingdom. Those things disqualified them, either temporarily or permanently, from their inheritance in the natural kingdom of God.

Well, I think that is the type and shadow that Paul is working with here. I don't think the point here is to make a list of who's going and not "going to heaven"...but rather who is experiencing and partaking of their inheritance in God's kingdom. **In other words, those who choose to hold on to the adamic man and his deeds...to that exact measure, they are also choosing to forfeit their inheritance in the kingdom of God.**

And I think that is true on every level. In other words, those who are unbelievers are obviously holding to the adamic man and therefore, to the fullest extent, they are forfeiting God's offer of the kingdom. They will know nothing of it. But I think its also true of those who are born of God. We are saved, for sure. But by holding onto that man with his lusts and deeds, we are, to whatever degree, forfeiting our experience and participation of God's kingdom as it was meant to be our inheritance. For Christians this is not unto eternal separation from God, but it certainly does amount to falling short of the high calling of God in Christ.

Remember the people of Israel in the time of the judges? Remember king Saul? What was God's problem with his people in those times? To put it very simply, they would not allow the kingdom of God to fully take that land. They held on to things. They held on to themselves in a number of ways and places and they forfeited their inheritance. Then think about King David. What was different about King David. Why was he called a "man after God's own heart"? Largely, I think, because he was a man who executed God's judgment on the land. Starting with the uncircumcised Goliath, David expanded the kingdom of Israel to its full glory so that Solomon could reign in wisdom and peace.

My point, however, is that Israel forfeited the fullness of their inheritance in the old covenant kingdom even when they were in the land. I think that many of us do the same. We don't allow Him to take this as far as it goes. We hold on to our selves. We hold on to the man that God has judged, and like King Saul, we will not allow him to be fully put away. And when we do this, we surrender something of our inheritance in God's kingdom.

So, to summarize: I think that this verse could be speaking of one who is totally cut off from God and His kingdom eternally by never accepting God's judgment of the adamic man. Or, I suppose this verse could be speaking of the way that we, as Christians, though we are born again, we forfeit the greatness of our inheritance by holding to that man in our hearts. We hold to our own versions of idolatry and uncleanness and covetousness. We hold tightly to a man who has no inheritance in the kingdom of God and of Christ.

Paul continues by warning the Ephesians not to be deceived by those who come to them speaking what he calls "empty words". Let me read verses 6 and 7.

***Eph 5:6** Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. **7** Therefore do not be partakers with them.*

Let no one deceive you with empty words. What are empty words? What makes a word empty or full? Its more than just whether they are true or false words. Words can be true and still be empty. It might be easier to explain an empty word by first explaining a full word. A word is full when that word is merely a container for something real and substantial that we experience in Christ. **A word is full of meaning when the reality, the substance, the experience, has defined the word. And a word is empty when the reality, substance, or experience of the word is left up to anybody's imagination.**

Let me try to explain. It is common for believers, while reading a familiar passage of Scripture, to suddenly see something altogether new and different. Sometimes when this happens we say things like, "it was like the words jumped off the page." Well, why does this happen? Why didn't it happen the last time we read the same words? The answer lies in the fact that, though we can read God's words all day long, we cannot truly hear them or know them until the substance of which they speak **is shown to us** by the Spirit of God. And then those words start to become full of reality. Then, for instance, the reality of grace or life or love shows you what the word has always meant.

Do you remember a while back when I said that words are like a package? Somebody can hand you a box that is completely filled or entirely empty. Either way the box is exactly the same. It is merely the transportation or communication of something else inside. Words function the same way. They are the carriers or vehicles of something real. The words of man convey from mouth to ear something of his plans, sentiments, or ideas. But to really know that man the soul must encounter what was behind the words. The words of God are packages that convey the world of spirit and truth as it is in Christ. But to genuinely know God, the soul must experience and abide in the Spirit who spoke the words. In either case, the words themselves have no inherent reality.

If you remember the analogy, I asked you to imagine that somebody handed you a box with the word "disgusting" written on top. Well, that wouldn't be too bad. It is just the word "disgusting" on a box. There is nothing terribly disgusting about the word "disgusting". There is nothing disgusting about the box. And considering that one man's trash is another man's treasure, you begin to wonder if it might actually be something interesting or valuable. As long as it is just a word on a box, your imagination defines the contents. It could be anything at all...until you see it.

At last, curiosity gets the best of you. You cut open the box only to find a bucket of something absolutely revolting beyond description. It turns your stomach and you quickly throw the box as far as you can and run away. Now the contents have defined the word for you. Seeing the substance has cast down any imagination and replaced it with the truth. And the next time you encounter a similar box, the word "disgusting" will be far more than a word to you. That word has been defined and filled with meaning through your experience of the substance. That word is no longer an *empty* word.

All words are like that, and Scripture even more so. The Bible is a collection of packages that cannot be known until you are confronted with their contents. Suppose now that somebody hands you a package with the word "glory" written on it. Now that's an exciting word! Or maybe it's a scary word. Or maybe it's a boring word. Or perhaps you're sure you already know what's inside. As long as it is a word on a box it remains whatever you happen to think. It's an empty word. All words and spiritual concepts are exactly this way until you are confronted with their definition in the appearing of Jesus Christ.

Our relationship is not with words but with the Lord who is described by them. Maybe you've never thought of it this way, and maybe we'd not like to admit it, but people naturally prefer relating to God in the security of words and concepts. Remember the Israelites? They probably would have all told you they wanted to be like Moses and speak to God face to face. But when God appeared in His glory in the presence of all of them, they were terrified and told Moses to go up the mountain alone to get his words. "Just tell us his words, don't make us face the substance."

Why are we like that? Because words can be learned with the mind, categorized, and controlled...so that learning Christ, just like learning math, feels systematic, predictable, and therefore safe. In this way we get to decide what it is that we believe, what it means, and how it applies, or doesn't apply, to our lives. We actually prefer empty words because then we get to fill them. We get to decide which Christian books are of interest, which denomination best fits our personality, which theological camp best corresponds to our views. As long as Scripture is largely an unopened package, we will interpret and manipulate the words to align with our invested interests, our felt needs, and our man-centered presuppositions. In this way we can be always learning God's words without ever coming to a knowledge of the Truth.

Paul is warning the believers here in Ephesians about the danger of empty words. The danger with words is that we can amass an enormous collection of packages and unknowingly forbid the Lord to open a single one. For Christians, the question is not whether we believe in the inspiration and authority of the written words of God. Nearly all hold the Scripture in very high regard. The question is always and forever the willingness of the heart to see the One of whom they speak.

Will you and I allow the Lord to open up his words? Believers are quick to insist that that we will, but curiosity is not the same as a willingness to know. Curiosity will never open a box. And asking questions is not the same as seeking truth. Truth comes at a cost. To learn Christ is to confront the cross and part with something of ourselves. Every box will be opened at the expense of something that YOU thought, something YOU wanted, something you mistakenly called truth. The hungry heart eventually learns that to truly "gain the excellency of the knowledge of Christ" (Phi

3:8) one must come to want Him more than our own words, more than our own definitions and understanding, more than our own life.

And that is why, without question, the most significant and helpful counsel I know to give a Christian is always the admonition that we do not know what we think we know. Regardless of whatever we've read or memorized or taught or thought we saw, we do not know anything that we are not currently seeing through the Spirit-given revealing of Christ. And this perpetual realization and foundation is the only way to guard ourselves against a lifetime of busy Christianity that amounts to nothing but vain imaginations built upon empty words.

God would like to take all of your spiritual words and concepts and ideas and fill them with the appearing of Himself. God wants to confront you with His substance, and cause the soul's encounter with Christ to become the reality and fullness of every spiritual word.

And that sounds great as an idea, but you see...its not that easy. I was having lunch with somebody this week and they said "now I understand why most people walk away from this gospel". He was realizing what I'm now trying to describe. He was realizing that one by one God confronts the packages and empty words that we have filled with our own ideas, our own understanding, our own lives....he confronts them one by one with the Truth, and that demands that He becomes the reality of every word and concept that we've ever read in the Bible. That demands that, in every arena, we lose ideas in exchange for Him.

I remember the Lord dealing with me on this very thing a few years ago. Back several years ago, I remember thinking that sooner or later I would come to the end of where I had been wrong, and finally be left with those things where I had been right. But I was very mistaken. I even preached that a few times. Some of you who were here back in the beginning may remember an analogy I used. It was a bad analogy. I was realizing that my entire foundational understanding of the gospel was wrong. I was realizing that everything that I had done and learned as a Christian was built on a foundation of man. Now that much was correct. But then I imagined that God could jack up the house that I built, wipe out the foundation, rebuild it, and then set my house down on a new foundation. Does anyone remember when I used to say that? I hope not.

I used to think that much, or at least some, of what I learned as a Christian, did as a Christian, taught, prayed, thought as a Christian could be salvaged if it were only on the right foundation. But that is a deadly imagination, and I'm thankful to the Lord for casting it down from my heart. This house is nothing except the increase of the foundation. And nothing of spiritual value is known or done or learned unless Christ Himself is the life and source and substance of it. You don't have a house of your own that He can use. You don't have something of value that He is trying to support or correct or steer.

And I'm saying that because you will never get to the bottom of the words and ideas and concepts that He must redefine through an encounter with the Light. You will never find your last empty word. You will never find a package that doesn't need to be defined by the contents. All of your words are empty words. You don't know a full word until He appears as the fullness of it. And friends, that will never end.

I may be losing some of you in saying this. Sorry about that. But then again, maybe I'm not. Here's what I'm saying. Sooner or later the substance will demand all of your words. The substance will demand everything. And you will continually and forever have to make a choice. You will have to choose between holding onto your familiar package that you get to define and control...or giving it back to Him to define in His appearing. **And don't tell me that you've already made up your mind. That's a foolish thing to say because you can't do that. You can't make up your mind before your heart confronts the next choice. And then there is always the next one. It's a continual ongoing death to yourself through the revealing of Life. Its not a simple yes or no.**

Words are great things because they can hand you a package. They can give you a package that Christ can open in His appearing. For that reason I love words. For that reason I believe Paul prayed that God would give him utterance, that he might be able to speak the mystery of the gospel as he should. But words have an inherent danger. **The danger of words is that they are just words. And many have been deceived into believing that they have come to know very much, when all that they have done is amassed a collection of empty packages.** Paul warns the church about the deceptiveness of empty packages.

And, specifically, I believe he was talking about the Judaizers...the Jews who professed to believe in Christ, but were teaching the church to continue to be circumcised, continue to keep the law, the feasts, the sacrifices, sabbaths. They were the ones who were attempting to bring elements of the shadow into the substance. These are the proponents of Christian religion in that day...and they are, in many ways, exactly like the proponents of Christian religion in our day.

They were preaching empty words. They were preaching words that had not been filled up with Christ as their substance. Specifically, these people were preaching some of the Old Covenant words like Sabbath and circumcision that Christ had fulfilled in Himself. Do you see what I mean? Sabbath was just a word. It was a natural day with natural rest from six days of natural work. But Christ appeared as the substance of that Sabbath and they didn't see it. Christ appeared as the true rest of God, the true day where man's works ceased, the true end of a six day creation. Christ was the substance, but the Judaizers were preaching empty words. They were still preaching the Sabbath as a concept that people had to observe in the flesh, and not a reality that Christ had accomplished in spirit.

It's the same with circumcision. Circumcision was a spiritual word that they were familiar with. It had to do with a natural cutting off of flesh from a natural man. It had to do with that natural man coming into a covenant that dealt with natural things like sacrifices and offerings and laws. But Christ appeared as the substance of that word. Christ came and defined circumcision in Himself. He became the true cutting off of flesh from a spiritual man. He became the blood of that circumcision that brought a people into an everlasting covenant. But many of the Jewish Christians were still teaching circumcision as a word, a doctrine, to be obeyed in the natural realm.

So, in this specific case, Paul was dealing with Judaizers preaching empty words and deceiving the church. And that is why he calls them the "sons of disobedience". These are the natural sons of Abraham, the natural sons of Israel, the natural sons of God. These are the sons who Jesus talked about in so many of his parables. The sons that refused to do the Fathers bidding. The ones that refused to come to the wedding

feast though they were invited. The ones that wouldn't give the fruit of the vineyard to their owner. The ones that grew up for a time next to the sons of obedience but were eventually separated and destroyed.

I believe that the wrath that he is specifically talking about here is the wrath that Jesus spoke of that came on Israel and Jerusalem at the end of that generation. I'm sure you all remember Jesus' warnings to that generation. He said that they would be destroyed because they did not realize the time of His visitation. They said that an army would surround them. He said that not their house would be left desolate, and not a stone of the temple would be left standing upon another. All of this, he said, was because the sons of the flesh refused to become the sons of the Spirit. The sons of the Old Covenant would not, in general, become the sons of the new. And therefore their house WAS left to them desolate. Their cities and temple...their entire nation was destroyed by the Romans in 70AD.

But for a time, there were two groups claiming to be sons of God. Two groups in one household. Paul talks about this in Galatians chapter 4. There was the Isaacs and the Ishmaels in the house of Father Abraham both claiming to be the true sons of God. And for a time the sons of the flesh persecuted the sons of the spirit, but eventually God brought wrath upon the sons of disobedience and manifested the true sons of God.

Well, that is a long story...but I mention it because it is precisely these natural sons of Abraham that were troubling the church with empty words. And Paul is admonishing the true sons of Abraham by faith to separate from them. Have nothing to do with them, don't be partakers with them, for their end is destruction. They have been appointed to wrath because they have refused the day of the Lord. Amen.