

## Shaping Culture (Ephesians 4:25-5:2)

The NYT columnist Farhad Manjoo published a piece the other day titled, “What if Humans Just Can’t Get Along Anymore?” in which he wondered whether humanity as a whole has reached its capacity for cooperation. Manjoo cited historic examples of how humanity has practiced cooperation in the face of great challenge, although this was typically regional, or even tribal efforts at getting along to overcome a common threat. His point was that we’re at a place where the challenges facing us are global in scope and we seem incapable of collectively seeing the forest for the trees. While he ended on a note of cautious optimism, the readers’ responses were less so. Of the hundred or so responses I read, the majority of them reflected despondency, the sense of which were along the lines of “has humanity ever cooperated?” Only two of the responses referenced biblical thought—one supporting despondency cited Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, and the rest, the response said, is history. The other was more positive in tone as it referenced the teaching of Jesus as a means for finding the way to cooperation. Apart from these, the other references citing religion, did so in support of it being the problem rather than a solution. A basic idea that grounded most responses held that human nature is the problem, and that its propensity to conflict cannot be changed; hence, in their minds, the future was bleak.

This piece caught my attention as the passage for today’s message was lingering in my mind. My initial response was appreciation for the fact that people are aware of the problem—no-one disputed the premise. No one needed convincing that things aren’t the way that best serves humanity, but they were looking only to human capability for answers. This led to despair as human capability seems inadequate. My second response prompted the question, Why isn’t there an alternative course available to peoples’ thought in light of Christianity’s presence for 2000+ years in history? To be fair, Christian thought has prevailed at critical moments in history—and one could argue that much of what is good in the world—medical care, education, social support systems, civil rights legislation, the abolition of slavery in the Western world—had its start among Christian communities or were spear-headed by Christians who led and influenced popular thought. Since then, much of what began by Christianity’s influence has been absorbed by culture, and responsibility for their ongoing purposes are now carried out by systems or people not necessarily grounded in its roots. But what’s become of our ongoing influence as Christians in the world? Why are there such intractable issues in a world filled with Christians who actually believe that human nature is changeable? Given the scale of the problem, how do we even conceive an approach that can effect change?

So then, we come to our passage today in which Paul stresses the practical implications of what it means to follow Christ. And its fairly straight forward as Paul presents the contrast of life in the old self and that of the new. This is not news for anyone who has been a Christ follower for some time—it’s a primary theme of Christian teaching. I doubt anyone would question the merits of what Paul suggests here. In verses just prior to our passage, Paul used the terms, “putting off” the old self, and “putting on” the new which indicates a sense of personal effort—the new self doesn’t simply take over, it is something in which we participate, something we cultivate. But we don’t do this by ourselves. At the heart of this idea is the presence of Christ’s Spirit resident within, working with us, that is, leading our efforts in putting on the new self.

Yet there is a tendency for us to view this within a rules based model that simply prompts behavioral change—in other words, when your first thought is to do “this,” do “that” instead: “this” belonging to the old self and “that” belonging to the new. And while it sounds plausible, left unchecked, an approach like this can lead to constant struggle where energy is given to resisting the urge to act in one way in favor of another, when in fact, the point of the new self is based on the idea that what’s associated with it becomes natural and normal for the Christ follower. After all, the outcome of Christ’s work—and the bulk of his teaching—pertains to the vision of a new humanity, a different historical being in world who lives in union with God, who has the power of God available to live in a stream of agreement with God on how to live that will have an impact for good in the world as an alternative approach to life creating a

culture that has humanity's best interest at heart which is God's design for human well-being.

This, I would suggest, is what Paul is after in the passage before us. Rather than laying out a new set of rules to replace the old ones, rather than just speaking to how we treat one another within the bounds of our fellowship, Paul was speaking to the idea of how Christ followers live in the world in all of its contingencies, and in so doing create a new culture that offers a different approach to life demonstrating the sensibility of living in ways that agree with God's design for life and for which God gives grace to live it, to the end that this culture captures the attention of the world, by the benefit it gains, and people are compelled to seek the source of that way of life.

In service of that idea, Paul depicted the approach to life followed by the world—those living in what he called the old self—as falsehood, anger, theft, corrupt speech, bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. A list like this isn't meant to say that everyone not in Christ exhibits every one of these characteristics in their most extreme form all the time. These traits aren't always overt—they are certainly nuanced in their expression, but at their heart, they are these traits in raw form. And they originate in the heart, which is the issue of human nature. The trouble is, people can appear congenial and likable in most situations, but when challenge or conflict arises, these default approaches also arise. In a manner of speaking, Paul identified the idea of might in the world—this is how the world runs. It is might in service of self. This is the general sense of worldly culture and it operates in small and large ways. Resorting to these ways is a learned habit we acquire as we make our way in the world. We may not like how it works, but we're resigned to the fact that this is the way it is. It is self-preservation and largely driven by fear, whether that's insecurity, an overt threat, or simply criticism. Writ large this is how institutions can behave, this is how geo-politics gets managed. It's not a pretty picture, but as many will say, this is the real world—this is hard reality.

On the other hand, Paul contrasts the way of the world—the old self—with the way of the kingdom of Christ—the new self, and this approach to life is depicted as truth, self-control, productive work, edifying speech, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and love. But note that these aren't limited to environments wherein these values are honored and practiced, they are meant to be expressed in a culture driven by the values of the old self. When the world bumps up against us with its values, our default response is to express the values of Christ's kingdom. Getting to that is a matter of effort, but it's not effort in the moment of confrontation, it's effort apart from it—before it occurs. This is the place for spiritual disciplines—whichever ones you need—to train your response in the moment of encounter. This is the effort—placing yourself in the presence of Christ's Spirit deliberately so that in the intimacy of that encounter, the pieces of your soul that are rough around the edges, are perhaps broken or wounded, that are deeply wired in your approach to life can be re-formed in ways that reflect kingdom values so that in the moment of your response to the values of a broken world and its ways, you will easily and naturally respond with the values of Christ's kingdom.

Now these have personal value to be sure, but kingdom values are not simply for private use. They begin here, but are to grow towards influence in the world. This is leadership, which is described as defining reality and casting a vision for thriving amid it. Friends, we are to capture the vision of a long arc bending towards God's design for humanity's well-being through promoting kingdom culture by living according to its values within our spheres of influence producing outcomes of well-being that compel the attention of the world. We are to demonstrate the sensibility of God's design, and we begin that in our families—living these values at home influencing our family members, spouses and children so that these ideas are modeled and passed along. We live these values in our neighborhoods with those who live near to us—we build relationships that influence. We carry these values in our community concerns—how do we promote well-being in our community? We live by these values in our recreational choices—how would edifying speech improve the atmosphere at our kid's sporting events? We live by these in business and industry—are you a team leader, a business owner, a manager, an executive—how do your actions and values line up with kingdom values at work? What about education, or media—social and otherwise—how can you incorporate kingdom

values in these arenas? Perhaps you need to run for the school board; if you're a mentor teacher, how can you instill kingdom values in those you train? In politics or government, how can you convey kingdom values by the way you serve in whatever capacity you are in? How might the professions benefit from Christ followers who carry out their profession in the grip of kingdom values? In all of these instances and more, the prayer of the Christ follower living in the culture of Christ's kingdom is for more influence—Lord allow me more opportunity to lead thought, shape practices, conceive of ideas, encourage and support others, so that your approach to life gains the confidence and trust of others who will join in this cause for the sensibility it demonstrates.

You see, we do these things because they are right and good, and we lead with that. We know their source, but we don't lead with that because there's much confusion and distortion about God in our world. We don't lead with "I'm right because I'm a Christian." We lead by example. We lead by saying, "What if we try it this way, what if we make this decision, what if we aim for this, this seems right for all concerned." When it prevails, and people want to know where that idea, or direction, or decision came from, then we can point to the teaching of Jesus. We lead by persuasion, not coercion, and in so doing the long arc of God's purpose bends closer to the world God loves. AMEN