

## Words to Live By

1 Kings 19: 4-8

Ephesians 4: 25-5: 2

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### *1 Kings 19: 4-8*

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

### *Ephesians 4: 25-5:2*

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

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John Lennon's life wisdom included the advice to, "Count your age by friends, not years. Count your life by smiles, not tears." Paul Brandt puts no limits on what he suggests we strive for as he said, "Don't tell me the sky's the limit when there's footprints on the moon." Mary Engelbreit offers wise words on what can and can't be changed, "If you don't like something, change it; if you can't change it, change the way you think about it." An In Cast conversation several months ago offered a grace and care beyond the Golden Rule. "Follow the Platinum Rule. Do unto others as they would want done to them."

All of these words to live by are bumper sticker wisdom, are tweet sized guidance, that can be guiding principles for a lifetime.

We all have a few key quotes or phrases that speak to us as a compass for our path. For years I had used Winston Churchill's wonderful words as my email signature line, "We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give," hoping to share that reminder with anyone receiving an email from me.

Many times there are words of Scripture that are the beacon for us. Jesus' guiding light shines through the words, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me."

Paul shares encouragement for life, “stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong,” while the Psalmist guides us by the words, “the Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?”

While raising my children I often reflected upon the Proverb, “Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.” When I was in seminary, serving two years as a student minister, working part time and raising two teenagers, I repeatedly lived by Paul’s words, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” when I was overwhelmed with papers and tasks and priorities.

Sometimes the wise words we live by have a double meaning—the straight on literal and then the more abstract metaphorical. “Look both ways before crossing the street,” is clear when standing on a curb at an intersection, yet it also offers tremendous insight when considering an important decision. Look carefully at both sides, look carefully at all sides, before stepping off the safe place and into the unknown.

When my sister was a new driver she was anxious about driving at night, worried that she might not always see what she should, especially if the road was not well lit. As the older sister my advice to her was to look for the solid line on the side of the road. Many years later, long after I had forgotten the conversation, she reminded me of it to tell me how helpful that was when driving on dark, unfamiliar roads, but also how the image of the solid line on the side of the road became an inner marker when she was juggling too much or about to make a poor decision and for all the wrong reasons. The solid line on the side of the road was a symbol of being led back to the safe place where she belonged.

The words we live by however are not always wise, encouraging, uplifting or of our own choosing. Whether from our families, our neighbors, the school bullies, cyberbullying, social media and certainly by society’s expectations of beauty, wealth and possessions, the words that shape and guide our lives can be sharp, painful, hurtful and shaming. Loop tapes of weakness, inadequacy, appearance, fear and failure can play over and over in our minds until we believe the words as truth and so diminish the gift of our own God-given life. What Paul was teaching to the first church in Ephesus he is still teaching to us today. Put away falsehood, do not let the sun go down on your anger, let no evil talk come out of your mouths. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love.

What a lifestyle to strive for, a lifelong process to hope for, as we read and hear the news every day and reality overshadows Paul’s vision, God’s vision, for humanity. The angry verbal political wars over masking and vaccines as responsibility is trampled by the perception of personal rights in words that inflame and attack. The crude vocal assaults on those of a different race, culture, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, political stance, age or ability are spewed by misguided falsehoods that tear down other children of God. Self-centered words to live by seek entitlement rather than labor and work to include something to share with the needy. Old grudges simmer in malice and bitterness and the olive branch of forgiveness is never extended. The words of animosity, cruelty, hate and division tear us apart and grieve the very Spirit of God.

Across his many letters Paul has a theme of not conforming to this world, and how we speak to one another, even in times of stress, anger, and disagreement is a time to not fall into the easy downward spiral of harsh words that cannot be taken back as they do conform to the world, but rather we are called as the body of Christ to speak from our better nature, our baptized nature. We are encouraged to let no evil talk come out of our mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that our words may give grace to those who hear.

This is what faith calls us to strive for as the body of Christ, as imitators of Christ who offer words to live by for ourselves and others that are uplifting, welcoming, grace-filled, wise, encouraging and forgiving.

As we strive, as we endeavor, to follow Paul's words to live by, we do and will fall short, just as we honestly offered in our prayer of confession:

We confess that it can be easier, quicker, to speak in falsehood rather than speak the truth to our neighbors. When we are angry we hold onto that pain and frustration long after the sun has gone down. We cut corners on working honestly as time constraints and busyness fills our days. The words we speak are not always useful and tenderhearted kindness for building up when bitterness and bickering get the better of us. We neglect to offer forgiveness as you have forgiven us.

Yet thanks be to God that when we do fall short, God's forgiveness is offered so that as God's beloved children we will imitate God's grace and love in our hearts.

As we learn from Paul's words, as we live out being imitators of God, we are fed by the same spiritual bread that guided the prophet Elijah. In Elijah's despair his self-loathing words to live by instead became words to die by. He was trapped in a wilderness of hopelessness until he was fed with divine words of strength, encouragement and new life. Words can hurt, words can heal.

The words we live by feed us—whether they are healthy or unhealthy—whether they are life giving or life destroying—whether they build us up or knock us down. As the body of Christ, as members of one another, we are called to a lifelong journey of imitating the selfless love of God in what we do, and in what we say.

As God's beloved children we will imitate God's grace and love in our hearts. Thanks be to God. Amen.