

## ***Guarding the Door* – Ephesians 4:25-5:2**

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Ponder with me for a moment this question: What inside us causes us to make right choices? When it comes to how we treat people, how we act in the world, and how we behave in relationship to God, what gets us to the point where we make the right call?

Well, first, we have all kinds of behavior modeled for us every day that either does or doesn't help us make the right choice. And we're very good at imitating the behavior of others, especially if we think it's sanctioned behavior.

In this political season when races are heating up in advance of November's election, there's all kinds of behavior modeled to us by candidates that just seems so overdone or exaggerated. We blow it off as just politics, but the more we watch it the more we are likely to demonstrate it to some degree to those who think differently than we do.

They say imitation is the highest form of flattery. Well, that may be so, but clearly there's behavior we shouldn't imitate.

Let's do a little exercise. I'm going to name a behavior, and I want you all to respond with the words "good behavior" or "bad behavior."

Talk less and listen more – good behavior.

Talk always and listen never – bad behavior.

Setting out the trash on trash day - good behavior.

Setting out the trash the day after trash day – bad behavior.

Giving compliments to the people in your life whom you love – good behavior.

Shouting “You’re the worst teacher ever” to that teacher on the first day of class – bad behavior.

Cheering loudly and proudly for your favorite team – good behavior.

Cheering loudly for the Chicago Bears to beat the Green Bay Packers – bad behavior.

Look at you! You’re on top of this! We know right from wrong. It’s just that when we see behavior modeled by influential people in our lives, we tend to not always exemplify what we know is right or wrong with our actions.

In this letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul exhorts his readers to be imitators of God and therefore walk in love.

Walking in love means not stealing, he says, but doing good with your own hands so that you have something to share with the needy. It means not letting evil talk come from our mouths but instead only words of grace. It means not having bitterness, wrath, anger and slander. It instead means being kind, gentle, and forgiving.

This sounds so simple, but it’s so hard at times. And there are constant threats to our right behavior. Those threats include bad imitators or models. And at the root of bad behavior is the presence of something we don’t often want to acknowledge. Paul talks about it here. And that’s the presence of the devil.

One reason the devil doesn’t get much play is because *we really don’t want to admit we believe in the devil*. Many believe that while the concept of the devil has played a pivotal role in shaping religious, cultural and literary narratives, belief in the demonic is too much to ask of a postmodern, rational mind. These critics argue that there are other infinitely more plausible explanations for bad and boorish behavior than claiming that “the devil made

me do it.” By exploring alternative explanations for bad behavior, they claim we can foster a more nuanced and coherent understanding of evil moral transgressions.

But it is not unreasonable or irrational to believe in the devil. Across diverse cultures and civilizations, the archetype of the devil appears in various forms. The other most popular term for it is Satan. And ever since the snake hissed at Eve in the garden of Eden, Satan has taunted the human psyche.

Here, in this passage from Ephesians, Paul cautions us about this force that would otherwise have us engage in the behavior that only leads to destruction.

The apostle warns us not to make room for the devil. Our house should not be the devil’s house. We should not give the devil a mailing address.

The NIV translations reads, “Don’t give the devil a foothold.” In other words, don’t let the devil get a foot in the door. And doing so requires that we guard the door. That we not let the devil into our lives.

One day this past week, I went to see a member who is in memory care at a local facility. I went into the facility and was greeted by a very friendly receptionist. I asked for directions to see this person and she pointed me in the right direction.

She told me it was a locked unit I was going into. So, there was no problem getting in, but to leave I had to have the correct code for the keypad that would unlock the door and let me out.

Then, almost as if somebody was right behind me, she said in a hushed voice, “When you leave, you should make sure nobody is around you. Because we have one of our residents who’s so quick, that she’s gotten out that door before when the person leaving isn’t paying attention.”

I thanked her for that and said, “Ok, I’ll make sure Usain Bolt isn’t around when I’m punching in the code on the keypad.”

Her message was clear to me: guard the door. In that case, guard the door so that nobody will escape.

When it comes to our spiritual lives, Paul says to guard the door so that the devil doesn’t get in. Usually, we intuitively know where the devil is lurking. And when the devil is at the door pushing the doorbell, we should not answer. We should not open the door.

Here’s something else we have to guard against: rationalization. We’re open to letting the devil in when we can rationalize doing so.

The New English Bible has yet another translation of the Greek: “Leave no *loophole* for the devil” (emphasis added). A loophole suggests a gap, a potential vulnerability that might allow negative or harmful forces to enter one’s life. A loophole is an opening in a system of defense that can be exploited to our advantage, even when we know in our hearts that our behavior is violating the spirit of the law we’re trying to get around.

Paul cautions us not to look for loopholes or work-arounds when it comes to moral, ethical or spiritual behavior. And loopholes are always there. Such as:

- All of this shopping is good for the economy, which is true. But we should primarily be concerned about our own personal economy.
- This doesn’t really count as sex.
- I’m earning frequent-flyer miles.
- Video games are good for my kid’s motor skills.
- Everybody does it.

“All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial,” Paul writes elsewhere (1 Corinthians 10:23). In such instances, the onus is on us to exercise personal responsibility, moral discernment and a commitment to values that extend beyond mere compliance with the law.

The late comedian George Carlin was one of those comedians whose material one could say was not appropriate for church. But there were times in his routines when remarkable wisdom would break through the smokescreen of nonsense. Case in point: “I’m not concerned about all hell breaking loose, but that a part of hell will break loose. It’ll be much harder to detect.”

That’s what the devil, or Satan, does. He disguises, squeezes in, tempts, and sweet talks his way into our lives so that he’s hard to detect. All the more reason to be attentive to guarding the door.

This all seems pretty negative. There’s a lot of don’ts that we’ve been talking about. And the reason for being on guard for the don’ts is because the things we shouldn’t do keep us from doing the things that give us life and meaning.

And here’s what we have going for us that helps us guard the door, helps prevent the bad behaviors from ruining the life we desire: it’s our close association with Christ and his victory over the powers of sin and death.

To be clear, our battle isn’t won because the pressure lifts from our lives or because our circumstances change. We still walk our journey with the presence of the devil wanting to get into our house.

No. Instead, the battle is won because of who walks with us through the dark valleys of despair and temptation and who sits at the table with us when we're surrounded by troubles.

In Christ, we are a new creation, Paul says. The old life has gone; a new life has begun. We have victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

"When temptations threaten us, we first become free by changing our perspectives. Instead of floundering in the quicksand of sin and temptation for the rest of our lives, we change how we think. We take responsibility for what happens in our minds and say, 'I am in Christ, and Christ is in me. I am a brand-new creation. Christ is the victor, and I can adopt a mindset that sees me walking in all the victory Jesus has won for me.'" (*Don't Give the Enemy A Seat at Your Table*, pg. 96-97, Louie Giglio)

How do we guard the door and keep the enemy out? We remind ourselves that Jesus has already won our struggle. And because we are joined with him, something powerful has already happened. Whatever he has won, we have won. We are in Christ, and he is in us.

We're not fighting the enemy by ourselves. We're tapping into the power of God that allows us to imitate God. And when we're imitating God, better things happen.

Bad choices are inevitable due to our sinfulness. Bad behavior will occasionally overcome us. Yet, in Christ, we can choose a better way. We can do a better job of watching the door and assuring that we keep the wrong influences out of our lives.

As we guard, Christ is by our sides.