

Sermon for Sunday, September 10, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"WHEN YOU NEED TO STOP THE SUNSET"

Text: "Be angry but do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" Ephesian 4:26,27

The Bible says that we are not to let the sun go down on our anger. Do you ever need to stop the sunset? Well, I know I do. I suspect most of us have those bad emotions sweep across our hearts from time to time and we become the victims of our own bad feelings.

Let me talk about my wife for a moment. She is just fantastic. She is one of the neatest and most orderly persons I have ever known. That is really fortunate for us because I tend to be somewhat untidy. Just before we got married, she came over and began to fix up the house in preparation to moving in. She did a lot of wonderful things to the house to make it look better, but she did one thing that seemed terrible at the time. She began to clean out the basement. Well, I had treasures of all kind stored up in that basement. There was pieces of broken furniture I meant to fix someday; there were old suits I couldn't bear to part with; there were old books and magazines; odd pieces of wood I might need some day; and all sorts of wonderful things. But--out they went! I couldn't believe how much I carried out to the street to be picked up by the trash truck. At first I felt a great sense of loss because I knew there were many things going out in the trash that someday I would need. "Listen", she said to me, "if we keep everything you've got accumulated over the years we will be wading through clutter and debris forever. We just can't live with this accumulation of junk." Well, of course she was right. If I have ever needed anything she threw away, I can't think what it might be. You see, it is just necessary sometimes to get rid of our clutter and debris and junk that accumulates and piles up.

But that is not true only for material things, but it is especially true emotionally. A lot of us are going through life with a lot of psychological clutter and debris. There are old wounds, old memories, old hurts and even failures that clutter up our lives. They are things we should have left behind a long time ago because they hold us back and trip us up and keep us from growing and maturing and moving on in life.

Is that true in your life? Are there things that happen to you that you can't get rid of? Are there things that happened that you want to get even for or over which you grieve because you didn't do then what you can think of to do or say now? Well, most of us do that. And life gets cluttered up with emotional debris that keeps us from growing.

But the Bible says not to let the sun go down on those sort of emotions. And I don't know about you, but there are so many times when I need to stop the sundown. Wasn't this the case with Lot and his wife when God told them to leave Sodom behind? God told them to leave that wicked city behind. He told them to forget the past and to focus their eyes on the future. But, you know, it isn't easy to leave things behind. The Bible tells us that when the angels of the Lord told Lot to leave Sodom or be consumed it was hard for him to do. The Bible says of Lot, "But he lingered..." (Genesis 19:16) Do you do that about the past? Are you guilty of "lingering" emotionally over things that you need to put behind you and forget? And but worse still, the Bible tells us that Lot's wife looked back. And looking back destroyed her. I've known people like that. They are people who live in the past, who keep looking back on what has already happened, and because looking back keeps you from living in today and living for tomorrow, it destroys you.

Sometimes couples come in to counsel when their marriages are on the rocks. And do you know what is the most difficult thing in helping a couple put their marriage back together? It is the past. It is the clutter and debris of old arguments, old hurts, old wounds that neither can forgive or forget. They have let the sun go down on their anger.

There are times when the clutter and debris of the past keep us from following Jesus. Do you remember the story of the man who came to Jesus and said he wanted to follow him? Well, Jesus welcomed that man gladly, but when he and his followers started on to the next town the man said that he could not come right then. He said he had to go home and tell everyone goodbye. He still had some ties to the past that he had not cut. There were things in his past that held him back. A lot of us are like that. We see Jesus and we are deeply attracted to him. We say that we would like to be his disciple and follow him. But when it comes to reality, when it comes to actually following him, we discover there are some things we don't want to give up. Jesus said to the man who wanted to go back home first, "no man having put his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Is that our problem, too? Do you remember how St. Paul put it? He said, "forgetting those things that lie behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal..." (Phil. 3:13) Are you doing that? Are you cutting the ties to whatever binds you in order to follow Jesus, not looking back, but pressing on? You see, God is not nearly so interested in your past as he is in your present and in your future.

Now, let me point out several things to you about our scripture for this morning. First, it says that there are a lot of things that break our relationships to one another. It says falsehood breaks fellowship. It says stealing causes a breakdown--and you can steal things from someone other than material possessions. You can steal his self-esteem. Just the other day a couple I was counseling with were sharing their problems. She began to berate him for his failure in their sex relationship and in the process she stole his self-esteem as a man. I watched with deep sorrow as a man literally withered before my eyes. Yes, there are many ways we can steal laughter at the expense of our mate. Do you ever do that? Do you ever get in public before a group of friends, and make everyone laugh at the expense of your spouse? When you do that you steal from your mate and you steal from your marriage. The Bible has something to say about that sort of thing. It says in our scripture for this morning, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear."

So that's the first thing we can learn from our scripture for today. There are a lot of things that break our relationship to one another. St. Paul says to put that away. He writes, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you with all malice..." When you stop to think about it, are not these the sort of attitudes that have caused problems between you and some other person? St. Paul says to stop the sundown. He says not to let the sun go down on your anger.

Now, the second thing we can learn from this is how to deal with these emotions. St. Paul says, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." What does that mean? Doesn't it mean that God's spirit is in each Christian, helping him to be and do what God desires? Well, God isn't going to handcuff you and hog-tie you and make you do what you should.

No, God doesn't work that way. But God does put his Spirit in our hearts to urge us, to empower us, to lead us to be and to do what we should. And when we don't do that, it grieves the Holy Spirit in us.

Are you grieving the Holy Spirit this morning? Who is controlling your life? Is it you by your own will or are you letting God's Spirit control you? You see, to relate to others badly not only damages our relationship to them, but at the same time it disrupts our fellowship with God. It interrupts the flow, it breaks the communication between us and God. I'll tell you this:: you cannot have good relationships and good communications with God if you have poor and broken fellowship with others. Is something wrong in your relationship to God this morning? It may very well be due to a poor relationship to some other person and you can never get it right with God until you get it right with that other person. You can never have a right relationship with God as long as you are grieving the Holy Spirit by a wrong relationship to others. You may need to ask the forgiveness of some people this morning and you may need to ask God's Spirit to fill you and take control of your life before you can get your relationship to God straightened out again.

Then the third thing we can learn from our scripture this morning is what kind of persons we will be when we let God's Spirit control our lives. St. Paul writes, "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." Look at those three words: kind, tenderhearted, forgiving. Being kind has to do with how you treat another person. Are you kind to your husband-- or your wife? Are you kind to your children--to your friends, to the people you work with? Kindness is a work of God's Spirit in your heart. How about tenderheartedness? That has to do with understanding how another person feels. Do you stop to think about how someone else may feel or think or react to you? Being tenderhearted means to be sensitive to others. If you yell at your kids, do you stop to be tenderhearted, to think how they will feel? And how about forgiveness? Can you forgive? Sometimes we can if the person who hurt us is truly repentant and begs us to forgive. But the Bible says to forgive as God in Christ forgave us. That means we forgive even when others aren't even sorry! That means to forgive when they don't deserve it or haven't earned it. Do you remember when the disciples asked Jesus about forgiveness? They said, "if a man sins against me, how often shall I forgive him, seven times?" And Jesus said, "No, forgive 7 time 70"-- that is, just keep on forgiving.

Well, that's how it is. Don't let the sun go down on your wrath. That means either you can let God's Spirit control your life and your heart, or you can try to stop the sundown. I don't recommend trying to stop the sundown. It has never worked for me and I doubt if it will for you.