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**Proverbs 29:13, ESV**

<sup>13</sup> *The poor man and the oppressor meet together;  
the LORD gives light to the eyes of both.*

**Galatians 3:28, ESV**

<sup>28</sup> *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

**1<sup>st</sup> John 2:7–11, ESV**

<sup>7</sup> *Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. <sup>8</sup> At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. <sup>9</sup> Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. <sup>10</sup> Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. <sup>11</sup> But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.*

**Colossians 3:8, ESV**

<sup>8</sup> *But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.*

**Ephesians 4:29, ESV**

<sup>29</sup> *Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.*

## **A word you don't use.**

I'm going to tell a story about my mother, and it has to do with a word she used to use. I'll say the word only once in my sermon, since it is now considered to be a hateful, hurtful, cruel word. But this was back in the sixties and people my parents' age used this word without meaning any harm at all. I do want to say that my mother genuinely loved all people and was a true Christian. There is a funny story about this word my mother used. It is a sort of apocryphal story, one that you hear people telling and you wonder if it could really be true; but the honest truth is that with my mother and me, the story is very real. Here is the tale. When I was beginning second grade we moved from northern California to southern California, to the town that I would eventually grow up in, Oxnard, in Ventura County, north of L.A. The city that we had been living in in northern California was solidly middle class and most everyone was white. But Oxnard is very much a city with an ethnically mixed population. It was a fantastic place to grow up. I was one of those kids who got on his bike early Saturday morning and came home just before dark. My friends and I owned the town. We were safe, happy, and in a community that looked after its kids. The first day of second grade, that morning, my mother put me on a public bus to school. She told me that there was something she had to tell me. She said that unlike my school back

in northern California, the Catholic school in Oxnard would have *colored* kids in it. She said to remember that these kids were no different than any other kid. They looked different, but they were just like me. I said okay, I'll remember that. That first day, when I got home from school, she asked me how my first day went. I told her that it was fine, all the kids were nice, but there weren't any of those kids that she said would be there. Not a single one. Okay, you guessed it, given what my mother had said, I was expecting orange or green kids, maybe striped ones. I'm completely serious. I was disappointed when all the kids I met seemed like regular kids to me. I'll get back to this story. I have a bit more to add.

Let's look at our Bible quotes for today. The first three have a common theme, and the last two have a different, common theme. Consider our first quote. We've talked about the Proverbs. I love to use them. They were written by a special class of Israelite intellectuals called Sages. They are actually attributed to King Solomon, and it's not known if he actually wrote any of them. Perhaps he was the one who ordered them to be collected into the book we have today. Proverb 29:13 says: "*The poor man and the oppressor meet together; the LORD gives light to the eyes of both.*" It's pretty obvious what it means, and it shows that thousands of years ago our spiritual ancestors knew something that the world is still struggling to learn: all people are created equal in God's eyes,

and those who have wealth and power do not hold any higher position than the person considered the least significant by society.

Our second quote comes from Paul's letter to the Galatians, and it is believed that he did indeed write this letter himself, that it wasn't written by some pseudo-Paul who attributed it to the real Paul. It is an eloquent letter. It tells us that what matters is our faith in God, not that we obey specific religious laws. And once we have faith, we are all equal believers in the eyes of Christ. Here is our quote: *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* Again, the meaning is obvious. Remember that the Jews had a good reason to not like the Greeks and the Romans. Both peoples oppressed them, made political and economic slaves out of them. But Paul is saying that a Jew who believes in Christ and a Greek who believes in Christ are equal as faithful people. When he speaks of Greeks, he is talking about non-Jews in general, that is, gentiles. This quote comes from a chapter where Paul talks about the freedom of being a Christian. We are not held under the burden of a system of laws. We live under the New Covenant. All we need to do is accept Christ and live the way he lived – and to live that way requires that we see the grace of God in all people.

Our third quote is from 1<sup>st</sup> John. This is a very compelling, moving document. It is more of a sermon than a letter. The essential message is that we need to accept the teachings of Jesus if we want to live in a godly way. The book has been traditionally attributed to the Apostle John, but as early as 200 A.D., the Christian scholar Origen of Alexandria, Egypt thought that it was written by some other church leader named John. We really don't know who wrote it. In the part of the letter where our quote appears, John is telling us how to walk in the light of God. Here is what it says: *“Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. <sup>9</sup> Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. <sup>10</sup> Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. <sup>11</sup> But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”* This passage says that if you think you walk in the light, but you hate others who you perceive as not being like you, then guess what – you are walking in darkness.

Our fourth quote comes from Colossians. The letter to the Colossians was written to the Christians in a city called Colossae, in what is now Turkey; in biblical times it was a prosperous city, with a textile and wool-dyeing industry. The church there was probably founded by a follower of Paul. Although Paul is the

stated author of the letter, many scholars question this, as it contains a vocabulary not found in his other letters, and the letter doesn't focus on Paul's favorite topics of righteousness and justification by faith. So, it's likely that the letter was simply attributed to Paul, perhaps as a way of honoring him, perhaps to give the letter more weight. One purpose of the letter is to argue the divinity and saving powers of Jesus Christ. Another is to teach us how to live in this world as faithful people, and in a way that honors God. In Chapter three of the Book, where our quote comes from, we are told how to put away the old way of living, before we gained true faith, and how to become a new person in Christ. In particular, we must: "*put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.*" This is a bit of a different focus than our first three quotes. It tells us to watch what we say - that words can do harm. It says that using obscene or hurtful language can cause great damage to humanity.

Our fifth and last quote has a similar theme. It's from the letter to the Ephesians, and scholars do not believe Paul wrote it personally. The best guess is that the letter was written after Paul's death by a student or follower of his. The main focus of Ephesians is to battle alternative forms of Christianity, like Gnosticism. The pseudo-Paul is trying to build up the Christian church as a whole, rather than correct or redirect specific people. And it was particularly meant for

Gentiles to read, not Jews who were following the beliefs of Jesus. Our quote comes from Chapter 4, where the author is telling us how our faith serves to transform us into people who are truly living lives that emulate the life of Christ. Our quote says: *“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”* In other words, an important aspect of living like Jesus is to do what Jesus did, and that is to work to build people up, not cut them down. We are filled with God’s grace, and to pass that grace on to others, we need to be careful what we say. You don’t hand grace off with hateful language.

In sum, there is nothing in any of these quotes that we would not expect from a truly kind and empathetic teacher who might be alive today. But we see that in ancient times some people knew that we are all the same. Jesus was ahead of his time in calling for society to stop being bigoted against the poor, against people who are considered outsiders, against anyone who is somehow different. So much of the content of the Bible, both Old Testament and New, is completely relevant today. When it comes to human rights, Jesus knew it all. Society faces the same challenges that it faced at the beginning of recorded time. One of them was to always use words in an uplifting, affirming, empathetic fashion. We know this. My mother knew it. Jesus knew it.

Back to the story of my mother and those purple and spotted kids that my mother warned me would be at school. She was only trying to make sure that I knew that these other kids were no different than me. She was using an old, dying term, one that we do not use today because it is considered racist. But when I told her that there were no such kids in school, that I hadn't seen a single one, she was surprised. Then I asked her just what colors they were. I then saw a light go on in her eyes. She smiled and shook her head. She told me in her elegant, very French way that I should forget all about it. Kids can look a little different from each other, that was all she was trying to tell me, she said. You get the idea, Buzzy, I am sure. I don't remember what I said to that, but I probably shrugged and asked for my after-school snack.

We tend to focus today on racial bias. But perhaps a bigger problem in the U.S. is economic bias. People with little assets are often left to dangle in the wind when there's a crisis. The government offers token help, not real help. And in fact, a huge global underclass works at below survival wages to make luxury goods for people in America with money. I am very aware that people overseas who earn almost nothing slave away so that I can have my electronic devices. They are often spoken of in our society simply as cheap overseas labor, folks who are welcome to enrich our lives with cheap goods. Please pray with me.

*God, you did something very deliberate when you sent your son here as a simple man, an uneducated man, from an oppressed class of people. You made sure that we saw in the lowest of society the highest in your eyes. You were crafty. You sent Jesus here as the son of a small village builder, the friend of uneducated fishermen, the outcast of his society. Then you had him go out of his way, over and over, to treat as equals children, who were considered lowly in his society, as well as the hated Samaritans, those who had gotten into legal trouble, and even those with the leprosy, the disease that marked a person as untouchable. All people who were looked down upon were his equals. May we find joy in accepting all humans as being made in your image. And just as importantly, may we learn to be humble as Jesus was humble. May we return arrogance with empathy, cruelty with love. May we serve as an example to all other people, just as Jesus has served as an example to us. Let us live like Jesus and always use kind, supportive, and generous words with other children of God. Let us remember that above all else – that our words are powerful, that they must be chosen not simply to not offend – but to lift others up. Amen.*