



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 12

August 11, 2024

God Loves You Best!

Ephesians 4:17—5:2

¹⁷ Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Apart from the death of a child, I can't think of anything more distressing to a parent than seeing their children fighting amongst themselves. If you have more than one child, you know what I'm talking about. Now imagine what it would be like to lose your spouse and, in the midst of grieving, you have to witness your children arguing over funeral arrangements and the disposition of your lost loved one's personal effects. My heart goes out to those who've experienced this.

This sibling rivalry, this familial fighting, is what Paul has in mind when he writes to the church in Ephesus, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."

What does Luther say about the Holy Spirit in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed?



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“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

“In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

“In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.

“On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.”

The Holy Spirit has called you by the gospel. Through God's means of grace – His precious Word and Sacraments – He has made you a member of His family. That calling came at great cost. "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

That price of course, was the suffering and death of God's one and only Son, Jesus Christ. And in that death, the Father turned His back on His Son, who then cried out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mat. 27:46).

Talk about anguish! That's what it took to make us children of God – to forgive you and bring you into His family.

God went through that anguish so that He might also call *us* sons. Jesus suffered the wrath of His Father so that He might call us brothers: "In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers" (Heb. 2:10-11).

So, imagine the grief of the Holy Spirit, the grief of God, "who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3-4) when He sees His children, bought and paid for by the blood and condemnation of His only begotten Son, fighting amongst themselves. For not only is there the pain of seeing them argue and fight, but the pain of seeing others turned away from His means of grace by that fighting. For it is through His church, through *you*, brothers and sisters in Christ, that He calls, gathers, and enlightens others with His gospel. It's through the church that you were called.

And, in turn, God uses you to bring His grace, to bring His love, to others. In love for God and for the sake of those who must yet hear of His love through you, His church, Paul writes:

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.”



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These things are born of selfishness, a desire, a perceived need, to elevate ourselves. There's no need to illustrate this, it is there. We all know what it looks like. And it's not pretty.

And there's no church on earth free of this problem, for the Church is made up of sinners. Though we have been redeemed from our sin by the blood of Christ, sin still clings to our mortal bodies like barnacles on a sea-going vessel. And we fall back into our old ways and need to hear repeatedly of the forgiveness of God, and to remember our baptism in the name of the Father and of + the Son and of the Holy Spirit, by which the seal of God was emblazoned on our hearts, and we were made the people of Christ – brothers and sisters *in* Christ, brothers and sisters *of* Christ.

The fighting, the desire to be recognized, the selfishness, comes at the expense of others. For we all want recognition, do we not? But recognition alone is insufficient; our being lifted up is often not enough, we want see others put down. Never mind how the name of God is obscured in the process.

Therefore, Paul calls us to “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” He calls us to “Be imitators of God, therefore, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Brothers and sisters, please understand that there is no need for you to elevate yourself by bringing others down. For, "God raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:6-9).

Knowing, then, that you have been given the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; knowing that you have been baptized into Christ's death; knowing that you are privileged to receive the very body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of your sins – you know that God loves you best!

God loves you best! And you! And you! And you! And you! There's no need for rivalry, beloved. Each of you bears the seal of salvation. That's what makes you brothers and sisters *in* Christ. It's what makes you brothers and sisters *of* Christ. For you've been given the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen