Today I would like to look at our lesson from Ephesians. And at first glance it simply seems like a set of character traits that a person would try to follow. And they seem a bit like any kind of instructions that a child or school aged person would receive when they come into a classroom. Don’t lie. Tell the truth. No outbursts. Be nice to one another. No fighting. Be nice to your brother. You can just sort of hear the teachers and parents and anyone who is dealing a group of children sort speaking in this manner. They wouldn’t say be imitators of God of course, but this is sort of the kind of thing that most people associate with being a Christian I think. Be forgiving. And these kinds of things are taught as behaviors or attitudes or character traits that are expected to be followed by good people.

At the same time, I think we would all realize that these expectations usually need to be constantly given and reinforced with punishment right? Stop hitting, put the erasure down, calm down, cool off. Because really, that’s not how people rea;;u are. Right? That’s often not our real character. The put downs are just non stop. The bitterness is everywhere. Misinformation is everywhere. Malicious intent to ruin someone reputation, mockery, and ridicule and scoffing. And that’s the just the adults, and when dealing with kids it’s like you fight it all the time. It’s just relentless. Why the put downs all the time?

And so these verses very easily can become a kind of way to keep people from seeing who they really are. Instead its, well I’ll try to be nice, and I really should forgive and try to not to be so angry. And when we get together we should all try to get along. It’s who we should be maybe, at best. It’s nice isn’t it these verses. And we all want to hear them. We all expect to hear this kind of thing in church. We should do this because the Bible says and Jesus wants us to. But quite often it’s not who we really are at all. It doesn’t get past the surface down to where we really live. And this is really important because it’s why the church at times doesn’t seem to be very real.

Now as good Lutherans you might understand this as the consequence of living under the Law. What’s the law? Do this or you’ll get in trouble. Stop fighting, stop the wrangling. And it stops for a while but then it starts up again and you have to do it all over. No one gets anywhere. This is what it’s like to live under the law. It’s this constant stop it , quit it, but it never stops. Luther put perfectly. The law says “do this” and it is never done. Stop the put downs. You know its wrong. Quit it. And everyone sort gets silent for a while and looks down. And then after a few minutes, it starts all over again. Why? Because you not getting to the real person. It’s just the behavior. The deed. The preacher is not getting through to reality.

So it’s really important when we read something out of the Bible like this, this big long list of character traits that we don’t’ turn them into the Law. Things we are supposed to do. Or even worse we should try to do. That’s just living under the Law. See, this list we have in our lesson today, is an end result of something else. These are consequences of something else, that Paul has been talking about for 3 Chapters. If you just try to do these things, you will fail and fail miserably. What could be more obvious? But these character traits are the results or the by product of something else that you are focusing on. Look at the how the text starts. So then. In other words since this has happened, here are the results or the consequence.

I’ve been watching the Olympics this week. And it’s just amazing some of the things I’ve seen. It’s just remarkable to see what these people are capable of. But everything you saw was the consequence of something else right? Yeah, hours in the gym, tons of training. Lots of encouragement and support. You can’t just decide one day that you want to dead lift 250 pounds. You will fail. And maybe you think you should lift 250 pounds. That won’t help either. Deadliftng 250 pounds is the consequence of something else. And unless we understand that about this text, it just becomes what it often becomes. Some ideals. Pretty words that don’t seem really real. Nice thoughts. But it doesn’t really go anywhere.

So our lesson today from Ephesians is the outcome of focusing your attention on something else. This is critical. Something else that goes deeper. We have a lot of angry and partisan Christians out there who are easily upset by people of other points of view, or who disagree with them. We live in a culture today where there is nothing easier to do than to make people mad. Just say Black Lives Matter or Critical Race Theory or the election is rigged and a lot of Christians start to get malicious. At best. Lots of people who harbor grudges and resentments. Want to be different? Wouldn’t it be nice to be not so easily controlled? Do you want to be an imitator of God, like our lesson implies? You can be, our lesson today is not pretty words, it’s a reality you can live. But you won’t make by it trying. Or then trying harder. Focus your attention on something completely different and perhaps this will begin to be the outcome. It’s a by product of something else. So let’s look at what that might be.

I can’t do everything, but I’ll focus on the one thing I think is core. In otherwords if you want less wrangling and bitterness and anger and malice in you, focus on this. I’ll put it up on the screen, this is from Ephesians Chapter 2, verse 3. Focus on this. “All of us once lived (among them) in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of the flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else”. What’s the focus? Paul is focusing his congregation on the way they used to be driven by desire. When Scripture talks about this world in a negative way, “be not of this world”, it doesn’t mean the earth, or creation. It doesn’t mean the dirt we stand on. It’s the world that humans being create that is driven by desire. You want to get your anger down, your wrath, the wrangling, the malice. We need to learn how to not let our lives be driven by what we desire.

Now desire is good. And wanting things is good. You want strong and healthy desires. Desire leads people who long for freedom, for a runner to pursue a gold medal. Nothing wrong with desire. Watch those athletes and their desire brings tears to you eyes. What’s life without desire?

But the problem comes when you are driven by desire, and that is what Paul is focusing on here. Your country has to be this way, with this leader or you’re a mess. Your church has to be like this. My kids need to be like this. Stuff and land the need to be liked. The need to be right. The need to win. The need to be somebody. I want and want and want. Diane has been coming over to my house once in a while and she brings these chips. These wonderful chips. I don’t know where she gets them and I don’t want to know. Can’t say no to them, uh it drives me crazy. To be driven by desire is to be driven by a very harsh taskmaster. Ah, just one more. If I just get this, I’ll be happy. Nope. Doesn’t work.

How much of your life is driven by desire? By what you want? And the need to have your way? Just focus on that. Because isn’t that where the wrath comes from? You bet it is. The anger, the malice, the wrangling. The bitterness? Yup, that’s what it’s all about. My will is being blocked. I’m not getting my way. If your driving your car down the highway and you hit roadblock full speed, it’s a mess. And that’s what the anger, and bitterness, and malice are all about.

What if there was a power that helped me say no to being driven by desire, by the need to have my way? What if I could let go of that? For Paul of course this is the Good News. And so in Ephesians Chapter 2, verse 4 we read this, “But God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our through our trespasses made us alive together with Christ…..by Grace you have been saved. And his congregation of course would know the story of Jesus. Who came to his people with a great desire to be their God. And who wanted things to go his way I’m sure But it didn’t go so well did it? His desires were blocked. He didn’t get his way. And Jesus of course knew it wouldn’t go his way. But you know what? Turned out to be the way. It’s something to think about. When you don’t have to driven by desire and get your way, you’re starting to learn something about the way. How to find something like joy in a world where it can be so hard to find. You have to think about that a bit. It’s going a little deeper, to where I really live. When I can learn by the Grace of God to not have to driven by desire and the need to have my way, I’m learning about the Way.

At the Olympics you know a lot of people had great desire for things to go a certain way. But you know what? For most of them, it probably it didn’t go way they would have wanted or desired. A few reached their dreams. Most of them you know, didn’t. My guess is that most of them however, didn’t end up bitter or resentful or angry, or full of malice because of it. Their way was blocked, but like Jesus they discovered that it wasn’t the end. Maybe the roadblocks to our way, aren’t all bad. Maybe they open up a gift that God has for us. Maybe something like a little Peace. A little less anger, bitterness, malice. Maybe that would help us be a little more tenderhearted, forgiving one another as you have been forgiven. Maybe something like love and connection. Full of desire, but not driven by it. Giving it a shot but without having to win. And if you lose, discovering something maybe better. A grace that lifts you up.

And then you know our lesson today maybe makes a lot more sense. You don’t have to try. It’s not a list of instructions. Something is changing in you. A little more tenderhearted, a little less angry, a little less full of malice. An outcome, a by product of learning, by the Grace of God, that we don’t have to get our way, to be on the way. Imitators of the God revealed in Jesus. Amen.