

# THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> June 2026



## St Peter's Notting Hill

92 Kensington Park Rd, London W11 2PN

**Ephesians 4: 17-32**

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Sermon Sunday 21 June 2026  
St Peter's Notting Hill, 92 Kensington Park Road, London W11 2PN

Once upon a time there was a President of the United States who was the complete opposite of Donald Trump. This President, whose name was Calvin Coolidge, was quiet, modest, consistent, never boastful and famous for being so monosyllabic in his answers to questions that his nickname was 'Silent Cal'! Here's a story about Silent Cal which is a signpost for today's reading.

One Sunday in 1927, President Coolidge went to church as usual to St John's Episcopal Church in Washington. As it happens it used to be my favourite church when I was working as a political columnist in that city. It is in easy walking distance from the White House. It is often called the Church of The Presidents because every President from George Washington has worshipped there. On this particular Sunday, unusually, President Coolidge went on his own to St John's church because his wife was unwell. When he got back to the White House, Mrs Coolidge asked him:

"How was the service?"

"Good" he replied.

She asked: "How was the sermon?"

"Good" he replied.

"What was it about?"

"Sin!" he said.

"What did the preacher have to say about sin?" persisted Mrs Coolidge, eventually extracting a four-word answer from her husband.

"He was against it!" said President Coolidge.

The Coolidge view of sin could well be applied to our reading today for here we have St Paul teaching the Ephesians in the bluntest of terms why he was against the six sins they must not commit if they are going to live the Christian life and it's a tough, uncompromising list of sins.

Its toughness may have shocked the Ephesians, just as it may shock some of us today. And yet, it is not just a list of "Don'ts", describing the sins we should avoid because every negative prohibition is balanced by a corresponding positive command and the oratorical device Paul uses to make his point is to contrast "our old self" with "our new self." So this morning let's begin by looking at the vices of the old self who is self-centred with the virtues of the new self who is Christ centred and then let's place them into the context of Paul's theology and indeed in the context of the teaching and example of Jesus Christ.

\*\*\*

According to Paul our old self is self-centred and often influenced by all sorts of sinful forces like lying, anger, stealing, unwholesome talk, sexual lust and unkindness. By contrast our new self is Christ-centred displaying the virtues of love, keeping our anger under control, honesty, purity, gentle civility of speech, and kindness.

Now, let's face it – we are all sinners. St Paul reminds us of this in other passages of his writings most famously in Romans 3:23: *"For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."* Nevertheless, it is a good spiritual discipline to look closely at the six areas of sin that Paul highlighted in his letter to the Ephesians. The first – see Verse 25 – is *"Don't tell lies but rather tell the truth."*

Now I can speak from the heart about the power and the wisdom of this first exhortation because I am a convicted perjurer. As many of you know, 27 years ago I was standing in the dock of the Old Bailey where I pleaded guilty to telling a lie on oath, I was given an 18-month prison sentence and was escorted out of court in handcuffs for the police car to take me to HMP Belmarsh. Of course, I had plenty of time in my prison cell and for years afterwards to repent of this sin of lying.

But at the time when I told the lie which took me to prison, I have to admit that I thought it was no big deal: "It seemed to be 'just a little lie'"

Please beware of those four lethal words: Just-A-Little-Lie.

My lie was about a £900 hotel bill in the Ritz Hotel in Paris, which was paid for by a friend, contrary to the Ministerial rules. But when asked about it by an investigative reporter from *The Guardian*, I told a lie and said: "My wife paid the bill." Untrue. It was a lie. No big deal, I thought at the time. Alas, this small lie grew into an enormous deal. As many of you will know the old line of school poetry:

*"Oh, what a tangled web we weave,  
When first we practice to deceive."*

So you are looking at the living embodiment in today's preacher at how the old self habit of fibbing or lying can have disastrous consequences.

\*\*\*

Let's move on to Paul's second warning against sin in verse 26: "*In your anger do not sin*" - do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. Anger is usually a highly negative force in anyone's life, but it is a temptation that many of us give way to. It takes a strong, perhaps a saintly, person to never get angry as the Book of Proverbs 16:32 reminds us: "*He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty.*"

How do we become mighty enough to control our anger? By self-discipline? By taking a deep breath? Counting one to ten is a useful anger prevention device so is apologising, cooling off and asking for forgiveness. St Paul's words "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath" does not, of course, have to be taken literally. It does not mean that people live in Greenland or Norway have a licence to stay angry for 23 hours a day because daylight lasts so much longer in those countries. But Paul hits the nail on the head where he suggests that getting angry can give the devil a foothold. He is right. Those who stay angry are often in an anti-God state of mind. So avoid anger.

But there is one qualification here. There is such a thing as righteous indignation - when you get angry for Godly reasons. Jesus himself got angry with the hypocrites and humbugs among the Pharisees. He got angry with the money changers and traders in the Temple but there is a fine line between anger that is righteous and anger that is wrong. And as Paul warned, the Devil lurks around angry people hoping to provoke them into hatred or violence or hostility in family relationships. "Never go to bed angry" is a good rule especially for married couples.

\*\*\*

Let's move from anger to stealing which is No 4 on Paul's sin list. I don't suppose Paul was referring here to shoplifting. There weren't any supermarkets around in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. He was probably condemning all forms of dishonesty including those which are all too prevalent in our 21<sup>st</sup> century such as the exaggerating or fictionalising of company expenses by business people or journalists or enlarging of hours worked by lawyers or charging restaurant meals to the companies. The corporate bean counters and accountants may not spot these deviations into dishonesty but an all seeing and all-knowing God will be well aware of them just as he will know about false or phoney benefit claims against the state, which seem to be hitting record levels.

Unfortunately, the opportunities for stealing by another name are greater than ever in the age of low morals and high technology. Too often weak systems of compliance have replaced strong individual consciences as the arbiters of dishonesty.

\*\*\*

Here is a question who put conscience into each and every one of us?

It is surely a gift from God that we have to use his gift with our hearts instead of relying on computers for AI or algorithms as escape routes for not getting caught.

\*\*\*

Sin number 5 is unwholesome talk: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths" says Paul in verse 29. The original Greek word translated here as 'unwholesome' is *sapros* which is used elsewhere in the New Testament for rotten trees and rotten fruit when applied to rotten talk which is dishonest and unkind and we can be sure that this is a misuse of the wonderful gift of human speech. And a misuse designed to offend or hurt the hearers. Speech should be used, Paul tells us, to be helpful "for building others up according to their needs that it may benefit those who listen." Swear words, crude words and obscene words have no such helpful purposes

On the subject of swear words which some of us slip into too easily in moments of stress, I'll mention another President of the United States: Richard Nixon.

Having written his biography 35 years ago I know a fair bit about this talented yet flawed American leader who became notorious for "unwholesome talk" because of what was called "the expletives deleted" in the White House tapes in the 1970s. Without going into graphic detail at the height of the Watergate Crisis the Supreme Court in 1972 ordered the President to publish the full text of his conversations in the Oval Office. But when they were published the transcripts were littered with redactions labelled: expletives deleted! There were so many of them that it looked as though Silent Cal had been replaced by Salacious Nixon.

The American public was shocked because everyone assumed that the *expletives deleted* were dirty six- and four-letter words from the vocabulary of anatomical swearing. But far from it. Nixon was no saint, but he was prudish and cautious in his bad language. Brought up as a Quaker by a strict mother who was known throughout California as a Quaker saint, he listened to the White House tapes himself and personally deleted many

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Sermon Sunday 21 June 2026  
St Peter's Notting Hill, 92 Kensington Park Road, London W11 2PN

expletives, but they were all Sunday School swear words like 'goddam'; For god's sake or for Chrissakes!

Nixon said, at the time he deleted them, because his mother would turn in her grave if she knew that her son had used such ungodly swear words. Well of course President Nixon and his mother Hannah Nixon were right.

*Do not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain* is the fifth of the Ten Commandments.

Mocking God in an unwholesome language which is undoubtedly a sin, but I have always been slightly sympathetic to Nixon for his Sunday School swearing because in the culture of the time his *deleted expletives* were not all that bad. There are, perhaps, grades of sin. Catholics divide sins into mortal and venial categories but let's not go there today.

\*\*\*

Finally, let's move to lust for which Paul rather unfairly blames the Gentiles at the beginning of our reading: "They have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity" asserts the great Apostle in verse 19. Now a word of caution here: There is a difference in tone, if not in direction between Paul's fierce denunciation of sexual sins and the gentler attitude of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels.

Some New Testament scholars offer the view that Paul, the first great Christian intellectual of the early church, was too harsh, perhaps even something of a misogynist when he writes about women and sexual temptations. "It is better to marry than to burn" he says rather begrudgingly. And in his letter, he imposes all sorts of restrictive rules about the behaviour of women on matters such as the length of their hair. By contrast Jesus, who had many women followers, was gentle and tolerant with female sinners.

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Sermon Sunday 21 June 2026  
St Peter's Notting Hill, 92 Kensington Park Road, London W11 2PN

Mary Magdalene, the first of Jesus's followers, to greet him after he rose from his tomb was said to have been a great 'sinner in the city' which may even have meant she was a prostitute. Yet, she was loved and was forgiven by Jesus or if you look at the story of the woman caught in the act of adultery and dragged in front of some sort of kangaroo court in the Temple she was treated with great compassion by Jesus who said to her: *Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.*

And he showed the same sort of attitude to the woman at the well at Sychar who had been married five times and was living with her latest boyfriend when she encountered Jesus. Jesus did not compromise his teachings, but he understood the sexual desires of both men and women which of course are with us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century just as they were in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

\*\*\*

I expect some of you know *Oklahoma* the wonderful musical by Rogers and Hammerstein. It is full of great songs.

One of its biggest hits is "*I Cain't Say No*".

The chorus goes:

'm jist a girl who cain't say no,

I'm in a turrible fix.

I always say, "Come on, le's go!"

Jist when I orta say nix!

Well the *Oklahoma Girl* is a long way removed from St Paul's stern teachings on sex but not so far from Augustine who is credited as saying: "*Love ..and then do what you like.*"

\*\*\*

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Sermon Sunday 21 June 2026  
St Peter's Notting Hill, 92 Kensington Park Road, London W11 2PN

Augustine, of course, did not mean that we should live as if we were on a South Sea Island of hedonism. "*Amor vincit omnia*" he said. "Love conquers everything" which brings us finally to God's love, so well explained by Pat in his talk last Sunday when he highlighted Grace: "God's riches at Christ's expense" he told us. He also reminded us that Jesus had sacrificed himself on the Cross so we could be forgiven for our sins. And so let's end today's talk, as Pat did, on a positive note.

As indeed Paul himself did, right at the end of his diatribe against his selection of six deadly sins I am relieved to be ending this talk on a positive note. For I am somewhat exhausted after preaching to you for over 20 minutes about sin. Like the preacher in the story about President Coolidge: *I am against it!* And so should say all of us! But there are two important lines in our reading which give us hope, rather than fear, of sin.

The first comes in Verse 25:

*"Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God."*

Now, several eminent commentators on Ephesians, starting with the great John Stott, have expressed perplexity about why Paul suddenly introduces the Holy Spirit here. It doesn't quite seem to fit as a concept at the conclusion of a rather punchy list of six sins. But the Holy Spirit is not conceptual. He is personal. The word used here – "do not grieve the Holy Spirit" is a poor translation of the original Greek word *hypeo* which means causing someone pain or distress. Now, only a person can feel such things.

Here at St Peter's, worshipping as we do in a spirit filled church, we surely do not want to hurt or cause pain or distress to the third person of God. The Holy Spirit is a sensitive spirit. Every spirit led believer should feel that it is our duty and our joy to bring pleasure to the Holy Spirit by our faithfulness, kindness, compassion and forgiveness which takes us to the final verse of our reading – Verse 32: *"Be kind and compassionate to another, forgiving each other, just as Christ forgave you."*

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Sermon Sunday 21 June 2026  
St Peter's Notting Hill, 92 Kensington Park Road, London W11 2PN

Forgiveness is at the heart and soul of our Christian faith. It's at the heart of the prayer Jesus taught us. *"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."*

Let's also remember perhaps the most amazing example Jesus set us about forgiveness. Just before His Crucifixion, when the nails were being brutally hammered into his hands and feet, he said in the hearing of his torturers *"Father forgive them for they know not what they do"*.

Of course we must follow His example and forgive, forgive, forgive. We may hate the sins, but we should be ready to love the sinners, especially those who turn to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in sincere repentance. Harken to these great words from the First Epistle of John, Chapter 1, Verse 8: *"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

This is the message of Jesus, the message of John, and the message of the final sentence of our reading this morning – from Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. I repeat it again.

*"Be kind and compassionate to one another,*

*Forgiving each other,*

*Just as Christ God forgave us." **AMEN***