

## Becoming: Your New Self

### *Ephesians 4:17-5:2*

During my first year in college, there was a young man (I'll call him Mike) who almost never changed his clothes, rarely showered or combed his hair or used deodorant. We could smell him coming from a long way off. We tried to help him out by throwing him in the shower and by shaming him in every way we knew how. We even put our money together and mailed him anonymously a care package of soap, shampoo and toiletries of all kinds. A few days later, he came into the lounge on our floor and said, "Hey, guys – I just got all this stuff in the mail. But, I don't need it" – so he gave it all back to us. Eventually, we just gave up on Mike.

A few months later, we were all in the student center watching a Chicago Bears football game when the elevator door opened and a young man who looked like Mike walked out. But, this young man had new clothes on – combed hair and even smelled of Armani cologne. Then, we saw the truth: This WAS Mike! A new Mike! We couldn't figure out what had changed him. But then, in a few moments, the elevator door opened again – and SHE walked out. Then, we knew what had happened...

Her name was Amy. Mike had met her and immediately been smitten. And, she seemed to like Mike too. But, she had told him in no uncertain terms that she would never go out with him until he cleaned up. I learned a powerful lesson that day, i.e., **What rules, shaming and manipulation cannot change, love can.**

I thought of that story as I read Eph 4:17-5:2 again this week. It is one of the most profound passages in the Bible about the transformation of our lives that only God can bring about. And, I will tell you now, that the transformation of our lives that God promises to bring about is a transformation brought about by love.

#1: The Need for Transformation (4:17-21) -- *You must no longer live as the Gentiles do...*

The strong words in these verses telling not to live like the Gentiles is the flip side of Paul's strong words we saw last week in 4:1 calling us to live worthy of our calling in Christ Jesus. But, there is something very striking about what Paul calls for here in 4:17, i.e., most of the Christians in the church in Ephesus were Gentiles. What can he mean when he says, "You Gentiles, don't live like Gentiles!"?

Let me say first that Paul was NOT saying nasty things about unbelievers out in the world in these verses. That's how I've heard many preachers preach about this text. They've said, "Those people out in the world live awful lives so stay away

from them!” But, that’s not what how Paul lived – and that’s not what he’s saying in these verses either. I know that our English translations make it seem like he’s lashing out against unbelievers. But, what he’s saying is that unbelievers in the world are not alive to God, so they have no hope of being able to live for him. Notice that he talks about how, if we don’t know Jesus, our thinking is futile in v. 17 and our understanding darkened to the light in v. 18. Paul used the word “ignorance” for unbelievers in v. 18 but that word was not pejorative. The word he used merely meant “they don’t know.”

So, basically, Paul is saying that people who have not come to know Jesus are not yet alive to God – and therefore not alive to the reality and power of the Holy Spirit. Apart from Christ we are only alive to the material world. Apart for faith in Jesus, we can only live as our senses direct us.

No, Paul isn’t berating unbelievers here. He’s saying that people like us in the church who have come to trust Jesus are alive to God. When we are, we shouldn’t live the way we used to before meeting Jesus. The Bible is speaking here about church people living life as if we’re still dead to God!

The point is that Jesus-followers need to spend less time saying how bad people in the world are and spend a lot more time showing people the new life that we have in Jesus. Paul said the same thing even more directly in 1 Cor 5:9-13: *I wrote to you in my last letter not to associate with sexually immoral people - not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler.*

Consistent with that, the Bible’s message today is directly meant for all of us who claim to be believers in Jesus but continue to feel the tug to live the way people live before coming alive to God.

When I was speaking to campus groups at Penn State University a few years ago, one young man gave his testimony about when he felt his real conversion began. He said, “It all kicked in one day when I woke up to myself and saw no difference between my life now and my life before Christ. Even more, I saw no difference between the way I was living my life and the way my friends were living theirs. I knew something was wrong.”

#2: The Decision that Leads to Transformation (4:22-24) – *Put off your old self... and put on the new self...*

The word picture that Paul uses here is that of putting off old dirty clothes and putting on new, clean ones. I think it's something we can all relate to. The point of it culminates with this remarkable phrase: We do this because we are "...created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (4:24)."

So, God's goal for your personal life and for our whole church family is that we will all grow to become more and more like Christ. And, according to last week's text, Eph 4:1-16, that happens as we do life together in a loving and unified local church like ours must be, a church that worships together, sticks with one another, and serves one another in love. Do you remember this promise from last week? ...we all will... become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (4:13).

So, this week we are told the same thing, but with different language, that we are created to be like God. This has always been God's plan for us. This is what Jesus died to bring about in us. This is what the Holy Spirit is given to bring it about in us. Our role is to take something off and put something on. That language refers to a specific, personal, intentional act of faith. This was something that those who professed to be Christians in Ephesus had already done. This is how your new life begins – when you confess your sins and turn from your old way of living and entrust your life to Jesus as your Savior and Lord.

The completely unique thing about what Paul wrote here is that what we are to put off and put on "a self". No one else had ever said anything like this before. Many had written about putting off old ways like anger or dishonesty. But, with these words, the Bible calls for a complete overhaul of our lives – not just a cover-up of our



flaws.



In these verses, Paul tells you to put off/put on a “self”. That word “self” speaks of everything you are!

- Where you go with your body and do with it as well as where you go with your mind and put in it;
- Who you are really living for – for yourself, to please others or to glorify God?
- What motivates you – getting ahead, winning the battle being respected or gratitude to God?

The New Testament speaks consistently of faith in Jesus being like putting on a whole new self:

Look at Rom 6:6,8,11 – “Our old self was crucified with Christ so that... we should no longer be slaves to sin. If we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him... Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

Boiling it down: When you place your faith in Jesus, you take off an old self-directed way of life that was dead to God and you put on a new way of life 1) now

alive to God, 2) with Jesus as Lord and 3) with the Holy Spirit as your guide and source of strength. When that is true, your life cannot be the same as before.

In my own walk with God, I know my relationship with him began with I made a decision to repent of my old self-directed way of life that was filled with sin and put on a new self as one who trusts and follows Jesus, one daily empowered by the Holy Spirit. It starts that way. I've found, however, that almost every day I need to wake up and consciously and intentionally put off my selfish self and pray, "I will not live for myself today but for Jesus who died and gave his life for me (cf, 2 Cor 5:14)." I encourage you to do the same.

All this was illustrated well in CS Lewis's *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. In it, a surly little boy named Eustace Clarence Scrubb woke up and realized he was a dragon. Well, he tried over and over again to change himself – to rip off that dragon skin with his own hands. It didn't work. Then he met a lion, the Christ-figure Aslan, who said, "You will have to let me undress you." The lion made a cut so deep into Eustace that it went right into his heart. Eustace said, "After that he went out and dressed me – in new clothes – the same ones I have on now as a matter of fact." Now, listen to this section:

*It would be nice, and fairly nearly true, to say that "from that time forth Eustace was a different boy." To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of those I shall not notice. The cure had begun.*

#3: Evidences of Transformation (4:25-32) *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another...*

In Eph 4:1-16, we learned that we grow spiritually when we are a part of a church in which each person is serving and loving one another. In our passage today, the main point Paul makes is that we will not grow together if we behave in the church in the ways those who don't know Christ behave – in the way we behaved before we came to Christ. Vv. 25-32 spell out some of the most important ways that Christ should change our lives together here at LAC. It speaks to us very practically about matters like how we are to speak with people in our church and how we should deal with people in the church that we're angry with them.

You may think God is too big to care about things like how we speak to one another in church or deal with our anger toward church people. God surely would want us to focus exclusively on the huge issues in our world like the massive migration of refugees in the Middle East and Central America, like the natural disasters that seem to be increasing around the world and like the slavery of children around the globe. And, the Bible surely does address those issues. But, in a passage like this one, **God's Word teaches us that Jesus-followers begin to learn**

how to address the “big issues of life” by forcing us to look into our own dealings with people at church.

Remember that God’s eternal plan has been to plant local families of his people into communities all over the world and then using us together to give witness to him and to go out and enter into the brokenness in this world to show God’s love. And in Eph 4:25-32, the Bible is saying that, for a church like ours actually to make a difference in our world, we must be transformed from living for ourselves into people who love as Jesus loves. And, this love must begin in the church. The Bible says that if we can’t truly love others who have received Jesus as Savior and Lord, we will never authentically love the people of our world. What we do in the church family will shape the way we deal with those outside the family of God.

Paul spoke of several things in these verses that have to be different about us if we’ll glorify God. Two of the main things have to do with our speech and with our anger. He wrote that we are to:

1. **Put off falsehood and put on truth speaking, truth with love (4:15,25)** – Notice that Paul specifically says we should do this in church because we are “members of one another” – and we will be forever. Truth sets free. Also, it means that we have to have an atmosphere that allows the very different people in the church family to speak about how they experience the world. When we bring together our very different viewpoints, we easily get angry with those we disagree with. This is evident in the world at large, isn’t it? How do we deal with that kind of anger when we have disagreements? **See v. 26.**

2. **Put off anger that tears down people and put on anger that tears down evil.** The Bible teaches that there is a rightful place for anger. God himself is angry about the sin that destroys lives. But, ungodly anger is always something that must be directed against evil. Ungodly anger does not seek to forgive and restore. Ungodly anger stays deep in our inner being and becomes a grudge. So, the Bible commands, “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger.” Don’t sin by hurting the other person when you are angry.

Paul’s words in **4:29** are concise and convicting: ***Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.***

Paul lays it on the line in **4:30-31**, “*Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you all were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander and every kind of malice!*”

This could not have been easy back in the 1st C in the 1st Church of Ephesus. A family as broad in make-up as that one was surely brought an incredible range of perspectives into this new household of faith. Can you imagine a church like that, one which apparently had both a slave and his master being church members? When I think about that, I realize that no matter what differences we face in a church like LAC, our challenges to being one loving, unified family in Christ are no more difficult than theirs were. And the Spirit of God was powerful enough to bring them through those challenges – together! And, he will do the same with us!

Here's the bottom line: If we will grow to become like Christ, we will do it through life in a family like this one we call Lake Avenue Church. But, for this to work as God says it must, we must hear again and again the message that Paul spoke in 4:29: *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

Something to Take Home – *Learn Christ* (4:20-21). *Be imitators of God* (5:1).

Whenever I preach a sermon like this, I always get a question like this: “I see what God’s Word asks us to do, but how do we do it?” We human beings usually like a checklist of things we should follow in order to become all God would have us become. But, spiritual growth doesn’t work that way. It starts with who we are and then flows into what we do. In the Bible, being always goes before doing.

So, our being a “new self” starts with being born again, i.e., putting off our old self and putting on a new one through faith in Jesus. When we do, God places us in a local church family and tells us to stick with it, to love the people there and to grow together – not living the way we would live if we were not alive to God.

But, let me give you one directive God’s Word speaks of here that facilitates growth, i.e., keep your eyes on Jesus. Eph 4:20 literally says, “*Learn Christ.*” Then, in 5:1, it says, “*Be imitators of God.*” You may know that the way we know how to imitate God is to learn Christ. In 5:1-2, we see this, “*Imitate God, i.e., “live a life of love just as Jesus loved us and gave himself up for us.”*

The point is that we become like those we keep our eyes fixed on. I’ve begun to see how true that is as I watch my grandson Brooks, now 6 years old, imitating



his Dad. Look at a couple of pictures showing that.





So, let me suggest to you something that my first college Resident Assistant (RA) suggested me to do as he mentored me. He asked me to read through the Gospel of Luke and stop each time there is a story of Jesus encountering a person. Then, he gave me three questions to ask and write about in my journal: How did Jesus see and treat that person?

What was different about the way Jesus treated that person from the way most people in the world do it?

What difference will it make in your relationships if you imitate what Jesus did?

I suggest you begin doing that this week. I think it is consistent with what the Apostle Paul is asking us to do in Eph 4:17-5:2 when he says, “*Learn Christ. Put on new clothes, a new self, made to be like Christ.*” Let us here at LAC learn to “*live lives of love*” right here in our church family – *just as Jesus loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

When we do, Lake Avenue Church will be that – “fragrant!” And, it all will be to the glory of God.