

## OFF WITH THE OLD, ON WITH THE NEW!

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

August 13, 2006

Most of you know that I was part of the Mission Team that was in Costa Rica last week. It's come to my attention that last Sunday a rather INFAMOUS photo was shown of me preparing for our first day's work there. But what you may not realize is that I was dressed in that manner NOT to make a "fashion statement" – but out of NECESSITY. 27 team members went to Costa Rica – but only 26 suitcases arrived. ONE person's luggage got lost [MINE]. One of the airline employees at the local airport put the wrong sticker on my luggage; all we know is that a forest-fire fighter arrived in Salt Lake City with a big blue suitcase while I arrived in Costa Rica with a bagful of firefighting equipment!

Fortunately, I had a few extra items in my carry-on – and my teammates were very gracious about the situation – TO BEGIN WITH. But after a while I began to notice they weren't sitting DOWNWIND of me anymore – and by Tuesday night I couldn't stand to be around MYSELF!

But FINALLY – on Wednesday – I got a call that my suitcase would be arriving from Salt Lake City. When I picked it up and got back to the work site, the whole team celebrated – and what a wonderful moment when I was able to TAKE OFF those dirty old clothes I had been in for days and PUT ON something CLEAN and FRESH.

A FRESH START – a new beginning – TRANSFORMATION – that's what I experienced – and that's what the Scripture reading for this morning is all about. But first – **there's something we need to know about this text**. Most of us have been taught that the letter to the Ephesians was written by the Apostle Paul and is addressed to the Christians who live in Ephesus – one of the largest cities in the ancient world located in what is today western Turkey. Ephesus was a city famous for its many temples and shrines dedicated to the Greek and Roman gods.

But while TRADITION attributes Ephesians to Paul – **THIS letter is UNLIKE any other letter Paul ever wrote**. For one thing – it lacks the personal writing style [the greetings, the personal words of encouragement, the farewells] that characterize Paul's other writings. For another thing, it DOESN'T address specific situations and needs within the congregation at Ephesus the way Paul's other letters do. In fact, **Ephesians is SO different that many Biblical scholars QUESTION whether Paul wrote it at all**. According to them, it was written by a DISCIPLE of Paul and written under HIS name – a common thing in the ancient world [pseudepigraphy].

But while scholars may DEBATE whether Paul wrote Ephesians or not – there is almost UNIVERSAL agreement over WHO it was written FOR and WHY. Most scholars agree that **while it's addressed to the Christians at Ephesus – it is really INTENDED for Gentile Christians who are spread throughout all of Asia.**

And **THIS is the reason they feel this way:** as the gospel of Jesus Christ begins to spread beyond Palestine, non-Jews [Gentiles] are also attracted to the message. In fact, so many GENTILES begin to respond to the good news of Christ that they soon outnumber the JEWISH Christians.

But apparently – many of these Gentile believers are CONFUSED about what following Christ is all about. Among many of these “new” Christians” **there is apparently the notion that after experiencing Christ – they can continue to live their lives as they have always done.** For many of these Gentile believers, faith in Christ does not demand a change in one's BEHAVIOR, MORALITY, or ETHICAL STANDARDS.

Thus, the central question raised in the letter to the Ephesians is: **HOW DOES ONE LIVE AFTER RECEIVING NEW LIFE FROM CHRIST?** Is it “business as usual” [do we keep doing things the way we've always done?] – OR – Do we live DIFFERENTLY? Is our life “under new management”?

**The writer of Ephesians** – for the sake of simplicity today, let's say it IS the Apostle Paul - is **INSISTENT that life in Christ introduces an altogether NEW dynamic into our lives.** Through Christ, we DIE to sin and are RAISED to new life by the grace of God. **The very Spirit of God comes to abide within us.** That's why Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, *“If anyone is in Christ, they are a new person; the “old” passes away and the “new” begins.”*

But – Paul makes it clear that **there are TWO ELEMENTS to becoming a new person: PUTTING OFF THE OLD and PUTTING ON THE NEW.** The language Paul uses is EXACTLY that used to describe what one does when they take off an old, dirty set of clothes and put on a fresh, clean set. And to become a NEW person – to experience this new life in Christ – BOTH parts are absolutely NECESSARY. Let's take a quick look at both.

First – **Paul says we must PUT OFF THE OLD ways of living** – and he specifically mentions several things that are inconsistent with the new life they have received in Christ. for instance, we are to PUT OFF:

- FALSEHOOD [lies, deceptions, slanders, misrepresentations of the truth in any form]
- RAGE [uncontrollable anger]

- STEALING [the avoidance of honest work for whatever is convenient or easy; sitting around waiting for Jesus to come, mooching off others]
- FOUL/ABUSIVE LANGUAGE [is what we say TRUE? GOOD? NECESSARY?]
- MALICIOUS BEHAVIOR [intentionally harming another]

This list is like the list of “spiritual gifts” found in other places – not meant to be exclusive, but indicative of what needs to be “put off”. The reason it’s SO important to “put off” these things is that **they GRIEVE [bring sorrow to] the Holy Spirit**, God dwelling within us. It’s the work of the Spirit to FORM us into the likeness of Jesus. But beyond grieving the Spirit – there’s a very PRACTICAL reason we need to rid our lives of these things. **These practices destroy UNITY, they destroy TRUST.** Much of the letter to the Ephesians is devoted to showing that **in Christ, people from different backgrounds [Jew/Gentile, male/female, free/slave] are made ONE in Christ.** But HOW can people be “ONE” if they LIE to each other, or speak ABUSIVELY to each other, or harm each other MALICIOUSLY? NONE of these things are part of what life is like for those who are in Christ. So – PUT THEM OFF!

But not only are we to PUT OFF THE OLD, we also are to **PUT ON THE NEW.** Specifically, Paul says PUT ON [let your life be characterized by]:

- TRUTH [good news]
- KINDNESS – not being “nice” but extending the gift of hospitality
- COMPASSION [mercy] – God has shown us mercy; let us show mercy to one another
- FORGIVENESS – God in Christ has forgiven us; let us forgive one another

And **above all, our lives are to reflect the most important element of God’s being: LOVE.** We are to live “a life filled with love following the example of Christ” [Ephesians 5:2]. **To experience Christ and to walk with him involves nothing LESS than *Following God’s example in everything you do [being IMITATORS of God].***

I wonder this morning – **who do you spend your time/energy IMITATING?** When I was young, the best stand-up comics of my day were impersonators – people who did “impressions” of other people. Comics like Jonathan Winters and Rich Little used to appear on all the variety shows. In particular, Rich Little did a number of GREAT impersonations – John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Howard Cosell, and Elvis. Even though today impersonators aren’t so common – someone will occasionally come along with a GREAT impression that STICKS with us [remember Dana Carvey on SNL doing his George Bush impersonation?].

What the best impersonators share in common is that **they carefully research those they want to impersonate**. They closely examine their mannerisms, the inflection and speech patterns in their voices, even their body language. And then they PRACTICE all of these different components until they “capture” the *persona* of the other person.

Paul says **ALL OF US IMITATE SOMEONE; but those who follow Jesus are to be IMITATORS OF GOD**. We are to learn God’s ways until they become part of who we are.

Brothers and Sisters – Paul says that **to follow/walk with Jesus involves the radical transformation of our lives**. It requires PUTTING OFF THE OLD and PUTTING ON THE NEW. It requires IMITATING GOD. It isn’t always EASY; and it isn’t always INSTANTANEOUS; but it IS absolutely necessary.

In the movie “Bruce Almighty”, Jim Carrey plays the role of a TV newsman who one day has an encounter with God. God grants to Carrey all of God’s power on a temporary basis – and at first, Carrey uses it PREDICTABLY – selfishly. He uses the divine power to “part” his bowl of soup [like Moses parted the Red Sea]; he uses divine power to get parking spaces, and to get the job of his dreams.

But one day Carrey comes to realize that not even divine power brings happiness if you use it for the wrong reasons. He undergoes a “conversion”, a “transformation” – and he begins to use the power entrusted to him to help OTHERS instead of himself.

What about US? Are we PUTTING OFF the old ways of living and PUTTING ON the new ways of God? Do our lives reflect the goodness, the hospitality, the mercy, and the love of God? Or do our lives resemble those in the world who don’t follow Christ?

WHOSE LIVES ARE WE IMITATING?

Let us pray....