

Getting changed in Jesus

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

Have you ever worn an outfit somewhere that made you stand out from everyone around you? How did people react?

Too many Christians are chameleons. They'll blend right in with whatever environment they're in. There will be nothing that makes them look distinct from the people or the culture that surrounds them. They think the same way, talk the same way, behave the same way.

A good many don't realise that's what they're doing, because they haven't given it much thought. Some are consciously doing it, because they're hiding. They're scared about the hits they might take if they stood out.

Richard Coekin comments that Christians can be like spiritual chameleons, and he says that you can usually tell this is happening when people outside church who have known you a long time are surprised to hear that you're a Christian.

The problem is, whether we realise we're doing it or not, many of us are imitating the world around us. Friends we want to be like and to be liked by. Famous people we treat as role models. Colleagues we want to get level with, or get past. But in Ephesians 4:17-5:2, Paul tells us to stop imitating the world and to start imitating God. If our life is in Jesus, it's time to get changed.

We're getting deeper into the second half of this letter to young churches of new Christians living around the city of Ephesus. A city filled with all the same get money, get laid, get drunk, get success, get ahead, get whatever you want excesses that we know about in our time and place.

And the message in this part of the letter is this: Christians, keep what you have been given. And become what you are. We looked two weeks ago at how the unity with God and with one another that was won for us at the cross is something to be treasured and looked after.

What we are as the Church is loved, adopted, treasured, united children of God, a new humanity being recreated in Christ Jesus. In the first part of chapter 4, we saw how 'becoming what we are' involves discovering the different roles we each have as a church, and growing in unity and fullness as we put those roles to use.

But in the second part of Ephesians 4 right through to chapter 6, 'becoming what you are' has much more to do with character than with calling. It's to do with how you live out a different way of life in Jesus.

v.17 kicks off teaching us to become what we are by reminding us what we are not. It's something that we *were*, but we are no longer. We're *not* Gentiles any more - so we're not to live like we are.

'Gentiles' is a word we've seen before - it means 'those who aren't Jewish,' but Paul has used it in chapter 2 to describe people who are apart from God, miles off from Him, insensitive to God, spiritually dead and in the dark, and without hope.

In vv.17-19, Paul uses similar language again. And he describes the way of thinking and behaving that comes with that life. 'Hardened hearts' that just have no openness to the love and lead of God. Lacking that sensitivity, this way of life pursues sensuality.

It's a life that seeks satisfaction in what the physical senses can get. Sex. Alcohol. Possessions. Power. Experiences. But v.19 explains the problem. There's a 'continual lust for more.' Because nothing ever satisfies.

One partner isn't enough (so we've got Inverness topping the league table for 'cities that cheat'). One drink isn't enough (so the chief superintendent of Highland Police tells me that it's alcohol that's ruining people here). One more new thing to buy isn't enough. One more promotion isn't enough. One more holiday isn't enough. It's like an endless road that never arrives.

There's an insatiable void in the old humanity that sensuality of every kind can't cut. We were that, once. But we're not Gentiles, or Jews, or anything else that the old humanity defines itself by that Jesus did away with at the cross.

We're Christians. People not just with a sensitivity to God in our lives, but people whose whole lives and destinies are bound up in Jesus. We're meant to live lives that look and sound and *are* very different to the world around us. Lives that show how life could be. That look like they might really just be infinitely fuller, more colourful, richer and whole than they used to be.

In vv.25-32 we're going to look at lots of practical ways that our behaviour is going to look increasingly different to the world's. But Paul wants us to know

that a change of behaviour doesn't happen by just trying harder to live a better, more godly life. vv.20-24 tell us that it starts with a change of mind, and a change of role model.

'...to be made new in the attitude of your minds,' v.23 says. There's a mindshift that needs to happen for a Christian. Paul put it like this in another letter, in Romans 12:2 - 'Do not *conform* any longer to the pattern of this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind.'

That word 'transformed' in the Greek is 'metamorphosis.' Like the caterpillar to the butterfly. A complete change from something ordinary into something radically different, and way more beautiful. Something like that needs to happen in our way of actually thinking as Christian human beings.

Back to Ephesians 4, and vv.20-22 tell us how that happens. It's about what information is shaping our minds. We came to know the truth that is in Jesus. We have been taught 'in Him.' Paul's probably pointing these early Christians back to the teaching that they've already heard - the teaching that came from Jesus Himself and got passed on to the churches.

If the information that's filling our heads is what Jesus teaches and what His Spirit teaches by His Word, that's going to 'make new the attitude of our minds.' Renew them, transform them, metamorphose them. If the information that's filling our heads is what culture says is normal and what the senses say feels good, that's going to keep our minds conformed to the pattern of the world that lives without God.

Apparently constant exposure to influences we spend a lot of time in actually rewires the synapses of our brains. That's documented about people addicted to pornography, and more recently studies on our addiction to social media, where people are ranging between 4 and 9 hours *per day* on their phones when you add it all up. But Christians are called to have Scripture rewire our minds and our ways of thinking.

*Which is shaping your mind more - what the world says, or what Jesus says?
How do you know?*

It's not just new *information* - the teaching of Jesus - but new *imitation* that the Christian is called to. Paul says in v.17, we are to no longer live like the godless world. Instead, we are to be 'like God in true righteousness and holiness' v.24 says.

We're to be 'imitators of God' as we 'live a life of sacrificial love like Christ,' 5:1-2 say. In other words, stop copying the world around you. Start copying Jesus.

Doing that is like getting changed. vv.22-24 say, 'put off the old humanity,' and 'put on the new humanity.' The humanity that's being recreated in Jesus. Paul's not just telling us to throw off the old way of being *me* like the NIV's 'self' suggests.

He's telling us to stop wearing the old, godless way of being human - chasing more and more of what the senses want but can never have enough of. And to start wearing the new way of being human that Jesus perfectly demonstrated in His human life.

That's going to mean we stop blending in like chameleons at work, uni, school, at home, on social media and everywhere else we live. And we're going to start standing out as wearing something noticeably different. The old clothes might feel comfortable, but they're rags. The new clothes might feel strange at first, but you'll find over time they fit way better and last way longer - like, eternally.

When we're new at something - not least when we're learning to be a new kind of human! - it helps to have someone to copy, to see how it looks in practice. In Jesus, we've got a literally perfect example of how to live the new life He brings. And in vv.25-32, Paul starts spelling out in practice the ways of living and behaving that we are to imitate Jesus in. And it's all about swapping an old way of being human for a new way.

In v.25, we're taught to *take off falsehood, and put on truthful speaking*. So we get changed out of telling each other lies, and telling lies about each other. People do it for lots of reasons - to get an advantage over others. To hide. To cover up wrongdoing. To be polite and avoid offending. To cover up speaking ill of someone by speaking well to their face.

Falsehood isn't just what's said; it's what's hidden. What you're *not* telling anybody else at church about what's going on in your life. What you present in public being way off how you are in private. It's what's unsaid that's bottled up and threatening to blow, with collateral damage when it does.

We're called to get changed into speaking truthfully to one another, and Paul goes back to the point about us being one body. Lies and hiddenness damage the unity of the church family. We're called to no false lives, no

deceitful speech and body language. We're called to courageous, open, truthful living and speaking.

Changing out of the falsehood of hiddenness will probably mean being completely open and truthful with one or two trusted people in church. Changing out of the falsehood of lies will mean committing to speaking honestly with everyone in church and outside of it - just as Jesus showed us how.

In vv.26-27, we're called to *take off unchecked anger, and put on peace*. Look closely. The verses don't say, 'don't be angry.' We get angry. It's a pretty natural human emotion. Jesus had it, and He expressed it. But not untamed and unchecked. 'In your anger do not *sin*... do not give the devil a foothold...'

There's echoes of Genesis 4, where Cain gets angry, and God says: 'Why are you angry?... sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.' The idea is that when we're angry, we're very vulnerable to sin jumping in, springing to life and taking over.

The old way of being human is to vent our anger, express it all and have our say; or else to bottle it all up, nurture it as a grudge and let it breed in our hearts. Either way, anger stays unchecked and it's like an open goal for sin to shoot at. But the new way of being human to put on is to check our anger, and have very short accounts with it. Specifically, the deadline is bedtime.

Paul quotes Psalm 4:4 - 'In your anger, do not sin.' It goes on to say, 'when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.' There is to be no more raging, but peace, when we lie down. 'Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,' Paul says. Deal with it before bed.

That's a challenge to lots of us in day to day life. How many of us as married couples have struggled to sort it out and make up before bedtime? How many of us putting the kids to bed have let our last words to them be angry? How often have you left an evening meeting and a car park rant afterwards to go to bed still fuming?

God calls us to put on peace. Remember, peace with God and with one another was dearly bought for us at the cross, Ephesians 2 taught us. Checking our anger, resolving all we can, and letting it go before the lights go out is the new way to wear being human in Jesus. As a church, if we share a

commitment that we hold one another to - anger gets put away before bedtime - we can live this one out together, too.

In v.28, Paul teaches us to *take off stealing, and put on generosity*. Taking off stealing of course means no more nicking tenners. But there are people stealing that have told themselves they're not. It means no more lies on the tax return. No maximising profit by minimising pay at the lower end of the workforce. No fraudulent benefits. No making money from money with no useful purpose.

The verse goes on to say that stealing is to be replaced with doing useful work. It's in us to be productive, to contribute, to care and to share. For some of us, that'll be in paid employment, for others, it'll be in the home or voluntary or church work. Some genuinely can't work, and they are the ones in need that should be shared with.

There's a point to working usefully, and for the new Christian kind of human, it's about the work itself, but it goes beyond that, to what that work can enable. Paul wants us to put on an attitude of generosity - 'what can I possibly give?' - that replaces one of theft - 'what can I possibly get?'

You're sitting with a group in the staff room/board room/standing at the school gates/uni foyer...

The chat turns to a complaint about someone the group struggles with - how do you participate in that conversation?

In v.29, we're called to *take off gossip, and put on encouragement*. It's easy to be a chameleon on this one. To be sucked in to the toxic conversations of doing people down behind their backs, and sometimes to their faces. There's a really corrosive quality to that way of speaking that's so common in our schools, workplaces and most places where there are communities of people.

But we're called to exchange that way of talking for speaking only what will build up, encourage, and benefit those who hear what we're saying. Our church must be a place where we speak well of one another, and to one another. It doesn't mean we can't disagree or challenge, but it does mean we'll do those things honestly, and with genuine warmth and love.

And outside of church, we'll stand out in new clothing. We'll be the ones - sometimes the only ones - who bring something positive and encouraging to say in the middle of the toxic backbiting. A fresh angle, a hopeful attitude, a perspective of positivity where that's lacking. Our words are not to be useless

or damaging. They are to be fruitful for helping people to grow; and they are to do good for the minds of those who hear what you're saying.

In vv.31-32, Paul tells us to *take off revenge, and put on forgiveness*. Actually, he lists lots of things to 'get rid of.' *All* bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander and any kind of malice. Don't just take that stuff off, throw it away and burn it. These ways of thinking and acting are old humanity ways, and they are to be thoroughly rejected and abandoned.

Look at that list Paul reels off. It's about all of the against-others feelings and actions, inside and out. Every way that you want to get back at others, and every way that you actually try to. That's all got to go. The grudges let go. The faces softening from being screwed up. The tongues silenced from vindictiveness. All the things in your heart and on your lips that eat you up and beat others up - they're out.

But you don't leave it there, like you can exist in relationships with other people in a vacuum. You replace those old, rough clothes with some new and beautiful ones - hard to wear at first, but way more freeing to walk in quite quickly...

'Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.' This is a deliberate choice you make. *Choosing* to be kind to people means deliberate practical actions of kindness and compassion towards them.

And that means all the more when they are people who have hurt you, let you down or clashed with you. It's the expected currency of our relationships with one another in the church. And it's how we stand out in relationships with people outside the church.

The deliberate choice to be kind very often involved first of all the deliberate choice to forgive - to let go and wipe the slate clean. And to be able to do that involves the deliberate choice to remember your own forgiveness. The forgiveness that God has shown you in Christ dying for your sin on the cross. If you start there, that enables you to forgive, and that in turn enables you to live a life of practical, deliberate kindness and compassion.

In all of this, we're called to look like Jesus, more and more as we grow up together in Him as a church. 5:1 - 'Be imitators of God...' Which is a reminder about the kind of God we have. Tom Wright says, '...kindness is one of the purest forms of the imitation of God. How would it be if God were

the kind of god who was always making snide or bitter remarks at us? What would worship and prayer be like if we thought God had been talking about us behind our backs, putting us down to others?

‘How would we feel if we thought we couldn’t trust God to tell us the truth, if He was always losing His temper with us? Well: how do people feel about us if that’s what we’re like? Wouldn’t it be better in every way to be like God?’

God adopted us to be part of His family, and to grow in the family likeness. 4:30 says, ‘Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.’ He’s pointing us right back to chapter 1, where he sang out this song of praise to God for His rich, deep, eternal love for us. Where in 1:13-14, He talked about the Holy Spirit being a seal marking us as God’s; a deposit that God has put down on us to claim us for the day we’ll be fully redeemed.

We’re the treasured inheritance of God. Valuable and beautiful to Him. Chapter 4 calls us to become increasingly beautiful in our living. And v.30 says, ‘don’t spoil the goods!’ Take more care of how you live as a Christian, not because you’re worried that God will be cross with you otherwise, but because you love Him and you genuinely don’t want to spoil what He treats as treasure - *you*.

If you’re hearing this and thinking, ‘I can’t do all that, it’s too hard to live like that,’ you’re right. It is. None of this starts with you and what you do. It’s all a response to God and what He has done in and for you. That’s why everything in chapters 1-3 comes first.

If you’ve missed that - or if you find yourself struggling any time to live out the kind of life Jesus did and calls us to - then go back to the start. The amazing news of God’s grace and peace, the new identity He’s given us as He’s adopted us through our faith in Jesus. Go back to Ephesians 1-3, and that’ll help you live out Ephesians 4-6.

That’ll remind you who you are; *then* you can become what you are. That’ll help you not to live the old life that’s corrupted and corroding and spoiling God’s treasure. You can take that off. Time to get changed into the new life in Jesus.