

Ephesians 4:17-32

17 So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. 19 Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

20 You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. 21 Surely you heard of Him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

25 Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour, for we are all members of one body. 26 'In your anger do not sin': do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold. 28 Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

29 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. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

What words would you use to describe Britain in 2021? If we concentrate on the moral and spiritual life of Britain, again what words would you use? I'm struck by the first part of that reading this morning – this is Britain in 2021, people living in the spiritual darkness, not thinking about God, hearts hardened to faith, insensitive to the deeper things of life and the needs of other people. Abuse, murder, racism, misogyny, poverty, ill-divided, uncertain, shortage – these are just some words from the news headlines this week. People behave like this because they have thrown off moral and spiritual constraints and so any kind of behaviour is seen to be acceptable; nothing is right and nothing is wrong anymore! Faith is irrelevant!

How does the church family behave in a world like this? Paul is asking the question "what does the church family look like?" and this is part two of his answer. "What does the church family look like?" in a world like this? Last week's answer was all about unity and togetherness – "*be humble, gentle, patient and full of love*" towards one another in the church family. Today's answer is all about the kind of people we are more generally. Here are some words to help us understand what kind of people we should be; this is what the church family looks like; some ways to live and behave. Paul takes us to the wardrobe: he paints a picture all about clothes; the wardrobe as a visual aid to help us understand what the church family looks like; this is the kind of people that we are to be in our ordinary, day-to-day living.

In the wardrobe picture, there are clothes to put off and new clothes to put on; there are dirty clothes, tatty clothes to take off and put into the bin, and there are new, fresh clothes to put on in their place. "*...put off your old self... and put on the new self*" (verses 22,24) The old self is corrupt and deceitful; the new self is created to be like God, full of what is right and good. The old ways are to be put off and the new ways are to be put on in their place. It all starts with the ways in which we think, our attitudes. We live in a world where, for lots of people, their main priority is money: corrupt leaders

build up huge secret bank accounts by stealing from their people; some people are driven to work all the hours they can just to enhance their bank balance and have more. Love money – that’s an attitude! There are other ways of thinking that, when you listen to Jesus, He tells us to change. Love God, love other people – for Jesus this is a better way of thinking. Put off the old, put on the new. It all starts with having good attitudes.

Paul gives us 5 examples: here is a kind of behaviour to put off, and something to put on in its place. We have to presume that all of these were to be found in the church family in Ephesus and needed sorting out. There are ways to put off and there are new ways to put on.

Example no.1: Stop telling lies and speak the truth in love. “A little white lie never hurt anyone” but where does the boundary line fall between the “little white lie” that doesn’t hurt and the lie that changes lives and breaks relationships? Telling lies becomes a habit; it is much better to love the truth, to speak the truth in a spirit of love. Put off the old way and put on the new. Speak the truth in love.

Example no.2: be angry if you need to be, but don’t let it turn into resentment. At times, it is right to be angry. We are hurt, even a victim of abuse and that leaves us angry; being angry is the other side knowing what is right! But when you are angry with a friend, don’t let it fester; when anger is allowed to fester, it becomes deep and bitter resentment. *“Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry.”*

Example no.3: Don’t steal, but work hard, doing something useful and helpful. Some of the new Christians in Ephesus would have been people with a dodgy past. Some were criminals, thieves and robbers; they needed to deal with their past and get rid of their desire to steal and the habit of stealing. Instead, they are to work and to use their time, energy and skills to help other people. Here is a whole new way of thinking and being, away from being selfish and greedy, to spend time and energy caring for others.

Example no. 4: Don’t use bad language, but let your words be helpful to other people. The power of words is enormous. Words can carry abuse; they can be full of venom; they can be corrupt and deceitful; words can destroy someone completely. On the other hand, words can encourage someone who is feeling low; words can share love; words can tell someone how wonderful they are; words can build others up and care for them in their time of need. Which is better? Which is Jesus’ way?

Example no 5: brings together a whole set of bad behaviours towards other people that we should put off, to be replaced by a set of good behaviours that make us more and more like Jesus. This is all about the way we treat one another: *“bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, malice* – what was the church in Ephesus like? Were the new Christians carrying on as they did before their conversion? *“Be kind, compassionate, forgiving”* is a totally new way of thinking, of being, of relating to one another. Imagine the impact: the brawler is kind; the man who had been full of rage is full of compassion. What would people see?

This all sounds so easy: a new way to think and a new way to behave. But of course, it is never quite so easy in practice. We are a work in progress. Even those of us who have been working at this for 40 or 50 years as Christian disciples, we are still a work in progress. We have a situation to deal with; we deal with it well on Tuesday; we’re faced with the same situation on Thursday, but on Thursday we deal with it badly; one step forward, one step back! We pick ourselves up, repent of our mistake and next time try to deal with it better. We know we should forgive, but we find bitterness and resentment

in our hearts when someone crosses us; we determine that next time we will forgive! We're a work in progress, God helping us.

The whole aim of this putting-off and putting-on is for us to become more and more like Jesus. Jesus spoke the truth in love; He was angry at times but never resentful; He worked for others constantly; His words built people up rather than knocked them down; He was full of kindness, compassion and forgiveness. We should be more and more like Jesus in the kind of people we are. 10 or 15 years ago, there was a fad among young people for wearing bracelets with little slogans on them: WWJD was one of these. It stands for "What would Jesus do?" It was a way of helping people make choices. Faced with a dilemma, handling a difficult situation and I'm not sure what to do – "What would Jesus do?" Does that help me find a good answer, the right answer? It's a great aim for the Christian – to be more and more like Jesus; from the age of 6 to 96, what a good target that is to aim for, to be more and more like Jesus.

If you're looking for motivation, here's why we should do this. We forgive because God forgives us. God forgives; God treats us as if we have done nothing wrong; that's what forgiveness is. God treats us as if we have done nothing wrong because Jesus died on the cross. He died that we might be forgiven. We forgive others because God forgives us; we treat other people as if they have done nothing wrong because that is what God is like with us. We love others because God has loved us first. We know what love is by seeing what Jesus is like; our target is to be like Jesus; we are loved so we learn to love others.

So, what does the Church family look like? If the Church family behaves like this, puts off the old ways and puts on the new ways, what does the Church family look like? The best answer that we can give is that the church family looks like Jesus! Our aim has to become a people who think like Jesus, who speak like Jesus, who behave like Jesus; people see Jesus in us! We're not perfect; we know that we're a work in progress... When a baby is born, people ask who he or she is like; even babies one, two, three days old have a family-likeness; "he's got his dad's nose", "she's got her mother's eyes!" The work-in-progress, never-quite-perfect church family should have a family-likeness to Jesus; do people see Jesus in us? Do people see Jesus in the attitudes that we hold? Do people see Jesus in the things that we say and the way that we say them? Do people see Jesus in the way that we behave, that we love and forgive, that we care and work for others?

When you go to your wardrobe to pull out a clean shirt to wear, or pair of trousers, or a skirt, or a blouse, ask yourself "how can I be more like Jesus today?"