

St. Peter Ev. Lutheran Church Modesto, California
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 24, 2003

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Ephesians 4:17-24

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. (NIV)

Off with the Old, On with the New!

Brothers and sisters of our Lord,

Since it's been a long, hot summer, I'd like us to imagine a cooler time of year. Specifically I'm thinking of January. January 1st, to be exact, New Year's Day. Everything seems so hopeful on New Year's Day, doesn't it? There are those new year's resolutions, the promises that we make to try harder and do better. And there's a sense of hope that we can do it.

But the hopefulness doesn't seem to last long. Many have noticed that health clubs are filled in the beginning of January with people who have resolved to exercise. But after a few weeks, the health clubs aren't as full anymore. We know that feeling as Christian people. We make resolutions of a kind, to serve God better, to live for him more completely. We know the feeling of hopefulness that we can do better. And we know the disappointment—even disgust—of failing.

Christians of every age have experienced the same thing. This morning we hear the Apostle Paul writing to the Christians in the city of Ephesus—and really he's writing to you and me, too. What he writes sounds like something we might hear around New Year's Day. Off with the old, on with the new, he says. He's not talking just about New Year's resolutions. He's talking about real people with real lives, relating to the real God.

Let's listen to what he says to us. We'll go through this section, for the most part, verse by verse, noting some things along the way. As we go, take special note of two key points. Paul tells us first to take off the old self with its deeds and desires, and second to put on the new self with its righteousness and holiness. Off with the old, on with the new!

Take off the old self with its deeds and desires.

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord... Do you get the sense that Paul is serious? It's as if he wants to tell us something, and he wants it to be solemn testimony, like that of a witness in a court of law. This Christianity is serious business.

...that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.

When Paul speaks of "Gentiles" here, we gather from the context that he's talking about people who are disconnected from God. They don't know or believe in who Jesus is. Such people, he says live in "futility". There's a classic scene in movies and TV shows (I saw it recently in a Winnie the Pooh movie the kids were watching, and I know I've seen it on TV shows), one I think you'll recognize. There's a bunch of people lost in the forest or the jungle. They set out walking, trying to find their way back to civilization. They turn this way, then that way. Finally, after hours of walking, they stop to rest. And they realize, to their horror, that they're in the same place they started from! They've been walking in a circle! That's futility. People without God aren't getting anywhere. They may be exerting a lot of effort, but really they're not making any progress. They're not getting any closer to real life. They are separated from the life of God—the spiritual life found only in Jesus Christ.

They are darkened in their understanding, says Paul. They don't know that they're going nowhere. In that classic movie scene, the people who are walking in circles finally realize the futility of what they've been doing. But for people living without God, that realization isn't there. There's no epiphany, no moment when they realize that the life they think they are building is really no life at all, but death. They think they're doing something good for themselves, maybe even getting closer to God, but in reality they're getting farther from him. They are separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

Paul goes on: 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. They've given themselves over to sensuality. What drives these people is what makes them feel good at the moment. Whatever gives pleasure, they'll indulge in it. And there's a continual lust for more. Is it Lay's potato chips that has the slogan "You can't eat just one"? That's what indulging in whatever feels good is like. It's addictive. You always want more.

Now, we should pause for a moment. At this point we might be thinking, "Man, those non-Christians are a rotten bunch! Wicked people. Evil. Self-indulgent. Hedonistic. Pleasure seekers." But before we break our arms trying to pat ourselves on the back, thinking we're better than all this, we should take note of something. Maybe you're realizing it already. Non-Christians are not the only ones who do things because they're pleasurable. We do too. Even when those things are not what God wants us to do. Even when he forbids and condemns them. And let's face it: sin is addictive for us, too. We could get personal, couldn't we? I could share with you some of the things I have done and want to do again; you could, too. Sin is addictive for Christians, too. It's because we have inside us—I'm getting ahead of myself a little—what Paul calls the "old self". This is like another person living in us, an evil one who loves to sin.

But wait. Shouldn't our consciences put on the brakes? And even non-Christians have consciences; they know basics of right and wrong. But Paul says about some that they have lost all sensitivity. It's as if they've developed calluses. You know how that

happens. In late fall, you go out and rake leaves. After working hard, your hands hurt. The skin is sore after rubbing against the rake. You rake again the next week. This time your hands don't hurt so much. The week after that, they don't hurt at all. Your skin has become thicker and less sensitive. God warns us that the same can happen to us when it comes to sin. We do something wrong and our conscience makes us feel bad about it. Then we sin again in the same way, and our conscience bothers us less. We do it more and more until our hearts are callused. They're no longer sensitive to that sin. We're in danger of the very things of which Paul speaks.

God, however, has done something powerful to us. You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. You Christians are different than those who have no connection to God. God has come to you and connected you to Christ. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. God opened your eyes to the fact that you were walking around in circles, getting nowhere spiritually. God brought you to Jesus and broke the cycle of futility. Jesus, instead of letting us indulge ourselves to death, told us, "Repent!" He turned us away from ourselves and our sins. The Holy Spirit brought us spiritual life. We know the truth, the truth that God is real, that he loves us, and that Jesus is the only way to him and the life he freely gives.

Since God has done something to us, Paul says "Off with the old!" Yes, we still have our old, sinful selves present with us. They'll be with us till we go to heaven. But Paul tells us to take off those old selves every day. How? First of all, recognizing that our old selves have sinned. Instead of ignoring our sins, tuning out our consciences, hardening our hearts to them, God tells us to confess them. He tells us to compare what our lives are really like to what he tells us they must be. He tells us to feel bad that we've sinned against God, who loves us. And he tells us to confess and admit to those sins instead of rationalizing them or offering excuses. Turn away from those sins, God says. And most important of all—don't miss this!—believe the truth that God in his pure love for you, has forgiven you all your sins.

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... See, God knows we have these old selves with us every day. So he tells us—he insists on it—that we take off the old self. Instead of indulging the sinful desires and deeds of the old self, take them off and throw them in the garbage. Off with the old!

Put on the new self with its righteousness and holiness

And on with the new. Paul writes, [You were taught] to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

"Be made new in the attitude of your minds." Instead of thinking, "I'll do what feels good," we now think, "I'll do what God wants me to do." God has erased all our sins from his memory; he has forgiven us. That forgiveness gives us a new attitude about sin. We now don't want to do it. But how did we get this new attitude?

What God has done for us has created this new attitude. He has given us, as Paul says, a new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Without God, we'd be all "old self." We would sin and sin more, piling up guilt on ourselves, not seeing that all we were doing was making God madder. But God broke through the darkness, woke us up to the fact that we were sinners, and then forgave all our sins,

pardoning us completely. “Righteousness and holiness”—without God we certainly are neither of those things. We’re unrighteous and unholy. But get this: God comes to us, wipes away all our sins and declares us to be righteous and holy in his sight. God gives us a new identity, a “new self.” He considers us righteous and holy people.

God’s declaration that we are righteous and holy in his sight—that declaration leads us to act differently. It makes us want to and actually right things. Instead of saying, “What feels good?” we ask, “What’s the right thing to do? What does God want?” God’s loving and forgiving us leads us to say No to unrighteousness. God considers us to be righteous and holy, and he makes our lives match that status more and more. His love makes us pure and holy in his sight, and his love leads us to live for him.

Think of it this way. There’s a man in prison, convicted of armed robbery. He did it. But the governor, purely out of love for the man, pardons him and sets him free. The man is moved by the governor’s mercy. So, instead of going back to his old ways, the man strives to live a new, law-abiding life.

We’ve been pardoned by God. That pardon gives us a new life, a life to lead thanking the one who loved us and set us free.

I’ve been doing some study lately for a presentation I’m making at a pastors conference. Part of what I’ve been studying is confession and absolution. That’s the part that we usually have at the beginning of a church service. We confess our sins to God. We admit that we deserve his punishment. Going back a few centuries, when the Lutheran church was young, our forefathers had this practice, too, of confessing their sins. In Martin Luther’s day, it wasn’t part of the Sunday service. Confession took place privately with the pastor. It’s interesting to see that Luther and those with him strongly said that the practice of confessing sins should continue. Why? Because they thought everybody should always feel guilty about their sins? Not at all! Luther liked confession because of what followed it: absolution. He loved that one Christian could tell another, with Christ’s authorization, that his or her sins were forgiven. What a powerful message! “I forgive you all your sins.”

See, this is key to taking off the old self and putting on the new. Instead of ignoring our sins and the futility of life without God, we confess the sins we have done. We own up to them. And then God says, “I forgive you. I love you. I sent my Son to take all your sins away by dying for them and then rising from death. You have sinned. But I forgive you.” What kind of God is this, who says, “Your clothes are filthy. You’re full of impurity. Take off your old, dirty clothes. And let me put on you spotless robes. Let me give you a new life, the life of my perfect Son.” Off with the old, on with the new.

Christian author Max Lucado tells a story in his book *Just Like Jesus*. One day he was playing at the park with his little daughter, who was about three at the time. She was playing in the sand and having a good time. He heard the sound of the ice cream truck pulling up behind him and thought, “Why not?” Just for a few seconds, he said, he turned around to buy the ice cream. When he turned back to his daughter, he was horrified. She had filled her mouth with sand. Completely. What did he do? He did what any loving parent would do. He gently wiped all the sand out of his child’s mouth. Then he gave her the ice cream.

Our heavenly Father does the same for us. In the idiocy of our old selves, we do what seems best. We fill our lives with sin. But our Father gets the sin out of us. Out

with the old. Then he gives us something better. Righteousness. Holiness. He doesn't leave us in the grip of our old, sinful self. He gives us new life. As Max Lucado put it at the end of his story, God loves us just the way we are, but he refuses to leave us that way.

So I tell you, and insist on it in the Lord: off with the old, on with the new.
In the name of Jesus, our life. Amen.