

## Living a New Life - Imitate God

### [Ephesians 4:17-5:2](#)

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Sunday, November 12, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

It is good that we are led in worship by people who have invested heavily in the arts of music. We've been graced with three choirs this morning. We are blessed to be led in worship by our Chancel Choir, by the Bethlehem Bible College Choir, and by our children with singing. We thank you all for leading us to God in music.

This week you will be receiving in the mail, if you are a member or participant on the mailing list of our church, a packet which contains our stewardship information for 2006. I encourage you to prayerfully consider your giving to the National Presbyterian Church. One of the pamphlets enclosed is a theology of generosity written by John Stott, and it will help you to reflect, as you think about what God is calling you to do in your personal life, your financial life, in regard to the kingdom of God. I encourage you to prayerfully think about your commitment and prepare for bringing your commitment card to church next Sunday.

We are in the midst of a series on the book of Ephesians. As we look to the Word of God, let us pray together. Almighty and gracious God, in Jesus Christ you have brought great opposing forces together. We know that you desire that none should be in terror or hurt of another. We know that you desire that the body of Christ be an example of the goodness of your reconciling and forgiving presence in this world. So speak to us now in the voice of your word, through the power of your holy spirit, in the pattern of Jesus Christ, as we pray in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We have seen that the book of Ephesians calls us to exhort people who are in opposition with each other, as part of the people of God, to come together in unity to follow Jesus. We have seen how Paul encourages Jewish followers and Gentile followers to come together, and to use their God-given abilities for common purpose in the mission of Christ. We have seen how there is a call to exorcise the demon—the evil of the body of Christ—and to exercise the Spirit of God in the growth and maturity of the body to do ministry together. To put an end to hostility and to begin a pattern of reconciliation and peace that ministers to the world.

This past week, we have witnessed a great battle between the forces of red and blue; a national struggle for power and control; a fight that was not settled until the very end. Both sides fought hard, sometimes falling into the temptations of playing dirty or showing some mean streaks. Both sides showed mistakes in strategy and missteps in execution. And we have to ask the question, and it has been asked: Was it God or the devil who intervened at the last moment? And I frankly think that the wrong team won: the Cowboys should have beaten the Redskins! I'll get some letters on that one, I'm sure.

One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside of people. He said, "My son, the battle is between the wolves, the two wolves inside of us. One is evil – it is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regrets, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, worry, resentment, and inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, ego. The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, humor, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith." The grandson thought about it for awhile, and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

This text talks about the one that you put on, and the one that you take off. The call to take off the patterns of hurting other people that cause divisions and pain, and to put on the patterns of God that are demonstrated in Jesus Christ. The metaphor for the entire passage is summarized in these words: imitate God. It is the image of an actor who is putting on clothes, makeup, the mask, and the look of another; adopting the body language, the style, the posture, the poses, the walk, the gestures, and the expressions of the one whom he or she imitates. It is about the call of that actor—those of us in the church—to imitate

God as our action plan.

Jesus, in Matthew 5, in the Sermon on the Mount, said these unusual words that are impossible to live into: "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Become all that your heavenly Father is. As the apostle Paul puts it, mimic God. Act out the role of God in the world. Look like, act like, talk like God. Grow up, in another part of the passage, to be fully esteemed in the stature of Jesus. Become mature, or perfect. Attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Be like God; act like Jesus; put on the royal clothes of the relationship between the Father and the Son—the royal clothes of the family. And those clothes are: humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, keeping unity, grace, using our gifts graciously with one another, being peaceful, speaking the truth in love, building up and being constructive, being kind, compassionate to one another, forgiving one another just as Christ, as God, has forgiven us.

It is true that in our life we will imitate the gods that we worship. The god of greed or control; the god of power, or malice, or capriciousness; the god of denial or avoidance. We imitate those whom we admire. We imitate those whom we fear. We imitate and react to powerful people: to parents; to bosses; to mentors; and to heroes. And sometimes we just simply imitate the wrong gods.

Not too far in the past, I spent some time with Korean pastors. And over-archingly, in the feedback they would give to me about their ministry in the context of Korean culture, is their struggle to let go of the gods of Confucianism. Confucianism still, in some ways, has more power than the power of Christ in their church. Confucianism calls for there to be a serious hierarchy of value systems. The young must always defer to the old. The junior must always defer to the elder. There must always be a sense of associates always treating the senior pastor as the king. Some of that is not so bad. And their concern was that, if Jesus Christ called us to lay down our lives and to love one another in the way that Christ has loved us, then we're going to have to let go of the Confucian pattern of life in order to live Jesus' pattern of life.

It is true that we, too, in all of our cultures and families, have our patterns that are the worship of the wrong gods. We put on the wrong clothes for the God that we worship. In Peter Scazzero's book, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, he talks about how there's a temptation to live into the gods of the families that we grew up in. In emotionally healthy churches, he says, people understand how their past affects their present ability to love Christ and others. They realize the intricate and complex relationship that exists between the kind of person they are today, and who they have been in the past. And because they've been influenced by family—for better or for worse—that people are called to move from the family of origin into the family of God. In taking off the clothes of the family of origin and putting on the clothes of the family of God, there is hard work to be done.

Peter Scazzero talks about key questions that might need to be asked in our discipleship as we make that movement. For example: How was conflict handled in your family of origin? How did they deal with anger or tension? How well did your family talk about money; feelings; sex; mistakes; hopes and fears—the hard stuff? How did your family handle secrets? What kinds of addictions or addictive behaviors existed in your family? How did your parents use power? These kinds of patterns reflect the true identity of the gods that we serve from our families and patterns of origin.

This scripture calls for us to see our relationship with the God of Jesus Christ, the Father of Jesus Christ, as if his relationship with the Son is our relationship with the Father, as dearly loved children. The image of this is the child who is being treated as the one and only special child; the child who literally receives all of the love of the parents upon them; the wonder of the Father's love of the only begotten Son—the beloved Son, the one that receives this blessing in his baptism in chapter 3 of Matthew, God's statement: "This is my Son." My daughter. This is my special beloved child. This is the one in whom I am very well pleased. It is that deep sense of being immersed in the love of the Father, the presence of the family of Jesus—that we are the unique one and only child; that God loves us exclusively and extensively, and that we are given all the blessings that Jesus has.

We see such an effect upon such a blessed child whenever we see Tiger Woods playing golf. We hear the story over and over again of the belovedness of which he was treated by his mother and father. Their only child; the one in whom they invested everything; the one that they poured upon all of their love. But they

also show us, in their pattern of raising Tiger, the way that they gave him discipline and excellence in pursuit: blessed to be a good person, and to play golf as well. Both the strength of character under fire, and the strength of person. We stand in wonder of the impact such a great love can have on such a person.

Tim Russert raises the questions of relationships between fathers and children in his book, *Wisdom of Our Fathers*. In a section on the characters that fathers can be at times, one daughter wrote about her dad: "My father was an alcoholic and gambler. I remember standing with him at the age of three at the Santa Anita racetrack, yelling, 'Come on, my daddy's horse!' At the age of six, he walked me to a boxing match where the crowd was jumping and yelling and spilling beer, the women in fake furs and heavy makeup. And I was relieved when we walked home. But even when we walked home, my dad, holding me with one hand, would move his fingers and thumb together, and say, 'Feel that air—the air of money to be won.'"

She remembers many things about her growing up. But one of the most poignant moments that tells the story of her ongoing love for her father, was that he "woke me up one snowy night returning from a night shift at the Chicago Tribune, to dress me warmly and take me out for a ride on my sled." This is the image of the father dressing the child and surrounding her with warmth and love, even in the midst of hard times and less-than-best character. As the beloved child, like Jesus, Paul says: imitate the Father. Take off the old clothes and throw them away, for they are your old self. Receive the new clothes—the new clothes of the royal family: the new mind, the new attitude, the new lifestyle, the right living, and the living in holiness and justice.

Take off those old clothes and put on new clothes. Take off the lies and the deceitfulness and put on the truth. Take off the sustained anger and put on the new clothes of releasing anger. Take off the stealing patterns and put on the new patterns of using your hands for useful work. Take off the patterns of hurting other people with your talk and put on the patterns of building other people up with what you say. Take off the old clothes of bitterness, and rage, and slander, and malice, and put on the new clothes of kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and love. Do not continue as your old life, for you've lost sensitivity; for your thinking has been futile; for you're ignorant and you have a hardness-of-heart. Put on the clothes of Jesus.

My dad has always, since I have known him, worn OshKosh overalls and an engineer hat. It's such a famous outfit in our family that, when we have children and grandchildren, they are often dressed with little mini OshKosh overalls and engineer hats—as if to reflect that this is part of our roots in the Icenogle family. I also grew up in a family business, where my father would wear those OshKosh overalls and that engineer hat into the business. And the longer he wore that particular outfit, the more oily and greasy each day it became, in the shop—because of the grease pouring out of the gears and bearings of the turret lathes... the engine lathes... the drill presses and vertical mills... the horizontal mills... the grinders and the production saws... oil and grease on the tubes of steel that we carried around the shop... oil from the lubricants and the coolants of tool cutting on metal... soluble oil that turned white because oil and water came together to use for coolant while cutting. We would take all of that greasy, oily clothing and wear it home. And I'll never forget my mother's first words, walking in the door (and this is the point of communal accountability): "Take off those dirty clothes. Take off those oily shoes. Don't drag that stuff in my house."

And so it is that we need communal accountability. We need people around us to say, "You're wearing dirty, oily clothes, and you need to take them off when you're in the house and the presence of God. You are in the family of God now. Those aren't the clothes to wear." Sometimes you hold on to those patterns—those patterns that divide us—between good and evil; between heaven and hell.

Bob Dole tells the story in his book, *Great Political Wit*, about the campaign trail of Abraham Lincoln and his first race for Congress. His opponent was a Methodist minister by the name of Peter Cartwright. Now Peter Cartwright was evidently not averse to using some negative campaign tactics, particularly regarding criticism for Lincoln's absence from church. And since he was a preaching pastor, he could use the pulpit to do a little bullying. Lincoln attended a gathering one night when Cartwright was preaching. He was preaching a hellfire and brimstone sermon of heaven or hell: choose it. Included was an invitation for all those who wanted to go to heaven to stand, and many people in the congregation did. Next, Cartwright

shouted, "All those who do not wish to go to hell, stand!" and all arose except one. Cartwright saw his opportunity. "I observe that many of you accepted my invitation to give their hearts to God and to go to heaven. I further observe that all but one of you indicated an overwhelming desire not to go to hell. The sole exception is Mr. Lincoln, who failed to respond to either. May I inquire, Mr. Lincoln, where are you going?" To which Lincoln responded, "I tell you, Mr. Cartwright, I am going to Congress." You can decide whether that's heaven or hell.

We're called to take off the hellish pattern of life and to put on the heavenly pattern of life; to take off behaviors that reflect evil and to put on behaviors that reflect God. Not only are those actions individual actions, but they are also corporate actions. It is good for each one of us to be aware of those things that would cause us to lead lives that are not living up to God's hopes and expectations. But there's also a communal responsibility where we need to help one another see the clothes that we may not see ourselves. You know the old story about how the king has no clothes. He doesn't know it because no one has the guts to tell him. I'm sure I'll hear about that one, too.

The keys to changing clothes, I think, are summarized in two great disciplines in church history. That is: the art of self-examination and self-awareness, as well as the art of communal feedback and communal awareness. The decision to change is a part of our own desire to do so, and the accountability of the community of Jesus to help us to make those changes. Some of us cannot get undressed and redressed ourselves. We need the help of the people around us. Ignatius of Loyola talked about a discipline called self-examination that he believed was absolutely crucial to a growing Christian: that we should take time every day to reflect upon the things that needed to be let go, and the things that we need to understand about Jesus Christ that we need to take on. That self-examination spiritual exercise was crucial, according to Ignatius, for life and spirit with God.

John Wesley came along later and gave another important exercise that became an important communal part of this process of taking off and putting on. He had communal accountability questions, particularly in his most intimate groups, called bands. Questions like: "Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?" one would ask another in this little group. "Has no sin, inward or outward, have dominion over you? Do you desire to be told of your faults? Do you desire to be told of your faults plainly and directly, right here and now? Do you desire that every one of us should tell you, from time to time, whatsoever is in our heart concerning you?" Talk about accountability. It is the responsibility of the community to help us see the dirty clothes and to take them off, and to put on the righteous clothes.

This text calls us to be imitators of God as God's beloved children; to live a life of love, just as Christ has loved us. For he gave himself up for us, as a fragrant offering—a perfume-scented, 'cologne-d' offering, a special sacrifice to God—as if the clothes are topped off with the right kind of perfume or scent. The finished work of dressing is cleaning off the dirt, taking off the dirty clothes, putting on the new royal clothes, and splashing on some elegant scent; and the most elegant scent is self-sacrifice. It is the finishing touch of a life of giving; it is the grace of generosity, an abundant grace of sacrificial generosity, where I am able and free to give everything that I have, and all that I have. Splash on the extravagant scent of sacrificial giving. Generosity is part of the new clothing—the new wardrobe.

One of the great examples of people who have put on the new wardrobe in history as an organization, I believe, is World Vision. A recent article in their magazine was about Ted Engstrom, who died in July at the age of 90. I believe him to be one of the most influential Christian leaders of our day. He I count as a friend and mentor for myself and for my wife. This particular magazine article has a picture of him kneeling before an African-American child about the age of five or six. He is actually, in the picture, shorter than the child. He is facing the child eye-to-eye, with the biggest grin on his face, with his hand on the child's chest, as if to touch his heart. The child is dressed in new clothes, with Ted Engstrom there to bless him—as a model of the kind of clothing, and attitude, and disposition that would not only clothe a child for character for the future, but with clothes for the present.

Put on the full wardrobe of Jesus Christ. Put on the whole pattern of God. Imitate God. Become sacrificially generous. This is the call of the church. This is the call of The National Presbyterian Church.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, we bask in the love of your Father. As you have received belovedness, and

an immeasurable inheritance of grace, and abundance of power poured upon you to live the life that you imitate in the Father—help us to do likewise. May we become people who take off the old and put on the new. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.