

8 August 2021 – Ephesians 4:17-5:15

BIBLE READING

[Ephesians 4:17–5:15](#) (NIV)

MESSAGE Putting on the character of God

The Olympic Games finish this evening, having provided a welcome distraction from other problems affecting the world right now. I hope that you've enjoyed watching them.

There have been some interesting athlete clothing choices this week ...

... like the super cool gold medal winner in the men's high jump from Qatar named Mutaz Barshim who wore sun glasses and a floppy singlet for every jump ... I would've been worried about these clothing items knocking off the bar.



Or the German gymnastics team who refused to wear high-cut leotards, but who rather wore whole body covering unitards. The reason – to make a statement about the consistent sexualisation of women's sport.

It's similar to the hi-tech running suit worn by Cathy Freeman at the Sydney Olympics ...



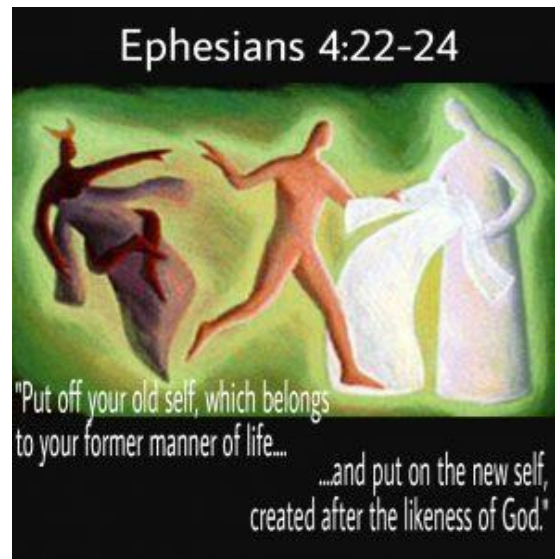
There's something about the clothes we wear that makes a statement about us and about our values. It also impacts our mood and our behaviour.

So we might opt for comfortable clothing at home ... perhaps a favourite pair of slippers to go with tracksuit pants or leggings and a puffer jacket.

Yet if we were going out to a formal event like a wedding or to church we would

probably choose a rather different set of clothes.

In this next section of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church, he urges them to **change their clothing** ... not literally but rather figuratively. The community that Paul is writing to consists mostly of new Christians who come from a non-Jewish background. Paul's advice to them is to **take off** their old way of life – the values, priorities and practices based on overt sensuality, impurity and greed.



Paul could well have been writing to us. So much of our culture and our advertising promotes sensuality and greed and it's really hard to find a movie or TV show to watch that is not based on violence, lust or corruption. We're bombarded with images and stories like this every day so we accept them as normal.



Instead, Paul says, put on **new clothes**, a new self created to be like God, a new self that is shaped by the presence of God's Spirit dwelling within us, transforming our **minds** so that our character reflects more and more of the **character of God**.

Paul summarises this Godly character as **righteousness** and **holiness**, two fairly old fashioned terms that many people today would struggle to understand.

Put simply, **righteousness** implies doing what is 'right' in any given situation, based on God's perspective. In the OT, righteousness is often linked to **justice** and is the opposite behaviour to greed and selfishness. It means looking after the needy in your midst and seeking to ensure that **everyone** is treated fairly and has enough. For Paul, righteous living means taking the focus off ourselves and thinking instead of the health of the wider community.

Holiness is an intrinsic part of God's nature that suggests purity and separation from everything that corrupts or pollutes. Paul names the followers of Jesus as **holy ones** –

normally translated as **saints** – people set apart or dedicated to following the ways of God. How do we develop such a holy character? Only through God’s Spirit working in our midst, changing us from the inside out.

What does a holy and righteous life look like?

Paul provides several examples to illustrate what he means. Each one involves a right attitude that leads onto a right behaviour ... each one may seem obvious but their cumulative effect is significant. So we have:

Don't speak falsely but rather speak truthfully to your neighbour

Don't let anger rule your life but rather deal with it and make peace

Don't steal but rather work hard so you can support those in need

Do not talk others down but rather speak in a way that build others up and is life-giving

Don't engage in behaviours that grieve the Holy Spirit – bitterness, rage, slander, malice – but rather be kind, compassionate and forgiving to others

Wouldn't politics be transformed if our political leaders spoke **truthfully** instead of always using spin and trying to score points over their opponents?

How many of our prison population would not be behind bars if someone had helped them deal with their **anger** or **greed**?

And how many lives could be transformed if we spoke **life-giving** and **life-affirming** and **kind** words rather than critical words?

For Paul, this is Jewish ethics 101. If we've grown up in the church, it doesn't seem like a very astounding list. But so many of these basic moral rules are consistently ignored or flouted in our culture – whether by politicians or by people who only care about themselves and what they want.

Look again at the list. What does it look like to you?

Where have you seen it before?

The **Ten Commandments!** ... and Jesus' **Sermon on the Mount!**

In fact, Paul suggests, it's all fairly simple ...

live a life of love and **imitate the example of God**.

What does this look like?

Loving and serving others as Jesus did, giving your life for them.

Sound easy? Sounds risky and very demanding!

I wonder what examples Paul might have given us if he were writing in our contemporary Australian context ...? Perhaps Paul would write ...

*Don't condone **racism** or **sexism** or **ageism** but rather actively seek to include every person whatever their background, language or gender*

*Don't give in to the **consumer culture** and the fantasy of advertising but rather only buy what you need and seek out sustainable options*

*Don't just entertain your **friends** and **family** but rather care also for the homeless, the lonely, the refugee and those living in poverty around you*

As we make more space for God to transform our thinking, we will grow towards maturity, which is the long-term goal. Eugene Peterson, the person who wrote *The Message* translation of the Bible writes that ...

Christian maturity is not a matter of doing more for God; it is God doing more in and through us.

We might be tempted at this point to think that Paul is a rather strict taskmaster who wants to take the fun out of life, especially as he repeats the whole argument again in terms of behaviours that will earn God's wrath, contrasting the deeds of **darkness** with deeds done in the **light**.

But we need to remember that Paul is not writing a letter to individuals but to a whole church community. He wants them to be a **living parable** to the world, a **signpost** of light and hope that will show their neighbours an attractive alternative way of living.

So why do we run a meals program at Croydon North on a Tuesday
or persist with Helping Hand at Croydon?
Do we run these ministries out of a sense of **duty**?

I've never got that impression.

Rather, it seems to me, that ... in words that Paul writes elsewhere ...
we have received the love and blessing of God
and the grace of Jesus
and enjoyed the fellowship that comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit, and so
our lives have been transformed.

These ministries then – and many others – are some of the ways that we **embody** the
loving character of God and so shine our **light** into the world.

They are the **clothes** that we have chosen to wear ...
that in some ways symbolize our vision for how to live ...
imitating the ways and love of God in life-giving communities ...
following the ways of God's wisdom ...

