



# Central Peninsula Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

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Ephesians 4:22–5:4  
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## Off With The Old, On With The New

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Whenever we come to the end of the year and look towards the beginning of a new one, most of us pause and reflect on seasons past. It's a time to sit and ponder, prop our feet beside a warm fire and evaluate our hearts. Within this inner dialogue our attention must first be drawn to our relationship with God. Everything starts here. How has God blessed us? In what ways is He challenging us to grow? Are we still yielding our wills to Him or clinging to our own rights and agendas? These are questions we want to consider. But it's equally important to assess our personal relationships with others. What character strengths are we demonstrating? What weaknesses? Have we been honest and considerate or dishonest and self-seeking? But regardless of where we may find ourselves at this time of year, we all long to build on our strengths and minimize our weaknesses. And yet, as we look back, most of us have to admit that although we may have started out the year with the best of intentions, somehow things have not gone as well as expected. So as the New Year approaches, we ask ourselves, "How can we get over the proverbial hump? Where can we get the help we need to shore up our relational patterns?"

Thankfully the Scripture has much to say about relational change. In Paul's great letter to the Ephesians he begins by painting a striking before and after portrait. He tells us that before Christ came into our lives we "were dead" in our trespasses, enslaved to Satan's ways and condemned to eternal separation. But God didn't just leave us in the muck and mire, without hope or promise. He never commanded that we "pull ourselves up by the bootstraps," without His resources or power to change. Ephesians 2:4-6 tells us, "**But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.**" What this tells us is that God Himself initiated the first movement towards healthy change. We call this the "new birth." And within this transaction He plucked us from the futility of our ways and freed us from the shackles of sin through Christ's death and resurrection (Eph.1:6-7a).

But that's not all! He also blessed us with every spiritual blessing (Eph.1:3), adopted us as His children (Eph.1:5), forgave us as far as the east is from the west (Eph.1:7b). God lavished His grace upon us to such an extent (Eph.1:7c-8a) that all the riches available in Christ await us in eternity (Eph.1:10b-12). That's an

amazing thought! Think about it this way—if all the treasures of the sea, if all the gold, silver and diamonds of the earth were heaped into one towering pile, they would amount to a speck of dust compared to the immense riches of God's grace towards us. Every one of us ought to immerse ourselves in these great truths and savor them like vintage wine. Because of who God is and how He has blessed us in Christ, the ties that once bound us to our old life have been severed forever and we now live as children of God.

So what does this have to do with the New Year and changing relational patterns? Everything! All good relationships are built upon the foundational stones of our identity in Christ. For me to be rightly related to you I must first be rightly related to God. Paul Tripp, in his book *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*, writes, "When I live out of a biblical sense of who I am and rest in who God is I will be able to build a healthy relationship with you. These are not abstract theological concepts. We're talking about the content and character of our hearts. What you believe and do about these things will give shape to the way you live with the people God has placed in your life. For this reason we can say that we all live theologically; that is, the things we believe about God and ourselves are the foundation for the decisions we make, the actions we take, and all the words we speak."

When we forget our true identity, which we often do, we may then fall prone to certain distortions that will negatively affect our relationships. For example, if I believe that my intrinsic worth before God depends upon my performance rather than His grace, I will then, most likely, project that same standard on you. One can easily see how stifling it would be to try and measure our self worth by these performance-oriented expectations from another. Where we may be prone to say, "I will love you if," God says, "I will love you regardless." Then again, if I believe that God is repulsed by my "neediness" then my ability to show compassion for your needs will be impaired. Whatever capacity I may have to minister compassion to you begins with knowing that God accepts me in the midst of, and not to the exclusion of, my own brokenness. Do you see how that works! As Proverbs states so clearly, "**as a man thinketh within himself so he is.**" Our behaviors reflect our beliefs about who we are. Sadly many Christians don't stand in the reality of their "new birth." So they live their lives being someone God never created them to be. They lose themselves in a myriad of worldly counterfeits instead of finding their true identity in Christ. Our circumstances, our successes or failures,

spouses, friends or children can't possibly be the source of our identity. When we seek to define who we are through these means, we are then asking something that's broken to be our personal messiah, to give us the inward sense of worth only God can give. But when we relate to others knowing we are God's children and recipients of His grace, we are then able to serve and love them in the same way. Real love and esteem is always rooted in who we are in relation to the God we serve.

The rest of Ephesians, chapters 4-6, instructs us on how to practically apply this principle. As Paul transitions to the first verse of chapter 4 he writes, **"Therefore walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called."** The idea here seems to be that since we, as Christians, have divine life indwelling us we are to conduct ourselves in line with that life. Paul then offers the prescription for ongoing change in verses 22,24, **"that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth."**

Paul is using figurative language here. He's saying that in order to live out our Christian lives we must change our wardrobes. But before we can put on new clothes, we must first take off our old ones. Can you remember the tattered and soiled relational patterns you once wore before God intervened in your life? For most of us, those memories haven't faded as quickly as we'd like. Some of us may even keep a set of old clothes stashed in the closet so we can slip back into familiar patterns every now and then, thinking no one will notice. That's why Paul tells us to make a clean break from the past, to throw all our rags out for good. What's to be "put off" is described as the "old self." We're talking about old ways of thinking and relating, our old self-centered attitudes and behaviors; in short, anything that had mastered us in the past and still tries to influence us in the present. As we are called to put off our old nature as a filthy garment, so we are being asked to put on our new nature as a garment of light. Wouldn't it seem a bit odd for a released prisoner to wear a state issue orange jumpsuit to a dinner party thrown in his honor? One would expect he would exchange the old ties of slavery to something more in line with the freedom he now enjoys. Paul tells us the old was corrupt and in process of decaying. The new is freshly created in the likeness of God. The old was ruled by lust and uncontrolled passions. The new is created in righteousness and holiness. The lusts of the old were deceitful. The righteousness of the new is true. So corruption and creation, passion and holiness, deceit and truth are set in opposition to one another, indicating the total incompatibility of the old and the new.

Now, in between these portraits of the kind of person we "put off" and "put on," comes verse 23, where Paul says, **"And be renewed in the spirit of your mind."** If our former lives were governed by the futility of our minds, then our new life depends on the renewing of our

minds. Something has to happen to our thinking. We can't go on thinking the way we used to and not give in to what we used to do. And there is only one thing that renews our mind—the Word of God. It's God's Word that cuts through the fog of our distorted thinking, bringing us face to face with the truth. It's God's Word that speaks of God's great tenderness and care when we are feeling unlovable. It's God's Word that teaches us of His sovereignty, of our sin and subsequent need of forgiveness. It's God's Word that prompts us to reconsider our priorities and our attitudes. You see, we can't be exposed to God's Word and not be affected. And, the reason this is true is because God's Word is a revelation of His mind. Because we live in a fallen world, the only way we can function by way of God's thinking is to feed on His truth on a daily basis. That's the only way!

Have you recognized that our behaviors most often follow our natural inclinations, that when left to our own devices, we will see life from a self-serving perspective? We will measure things by how we are being treated, by whether or not others are approving of us or whether we are getting what we think we deserve. But, the Word of God has the power to enlighten the eyes of our mind. Then we see that what's important is not how much we're receiving but to what extent we're giving. We begin to focus on encouraging those who are hurting rather than getting what we think we deserve. We become humble in our estimation of ourselves, long for purity and begin reflecting God's compassion and mercy, even to those who don't deserve it. In the Scriptures this kind of mind is called "the mind of Christ." It's to look at life as Jesus does, seeing life as He sees it and responding to it as He would respond. But we can't have this kind of mind unless we are allowing God's word to renew us on a daily basis.

In *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* C.S. Lewis tells the story of a little boy named Eustace who becomes lost and separated from his friends. He finally stumbles upon a dragon's lair. Once inside, Eustace discovers great wealth there and his mind becomes enticed by the possibilities. So he steals a gold armband, puts it on, only to find that his greed has turned him into a dragon. Well, Aslan the Lion finds him—covered with scales and in great despair—and leads him along a high mountain trek. Upon arriving at a healing pool centered in the midst of a great garden, Aslan asks Eustace to strip himself naked before entering the well. Three times Eustace rips away at the armor but to no avail. Each time the scales grow back. Then the lion tells him, "You will have to let me undress you." C.S. Lewis describes the scene this way—the very first tear was so deep Eustace thought it had penetrated his heart. And when Aslan began pulling the skin off, it hurt like "billy-oh." Now, I'm not sure how "billy-oh" is translated in the Hebrew but the image of surgery comes to mind. Eustace then

remarks, "At first it smarted, but then it became perfectly delicious. I'd turned into a boy again and after a bit the Lion took me out of the water and dressed me. New clothes and all." This image of undressing and re-dressing serves as the framework for Paul's teaching about change. It's to be a continuous decision of refusing to act out of our old desires. At the same time, it's a choice to live our lives based upon God's Word and His values. This is the way that all the potential we have in Christ becomes a reality in our experience. This is the way we are changed, by practicing the process of growth laid out here.

In the next section, Paul gives us examples of what this looks like in six different areas. But before we come to his examples, let me just say that there are three things common to them all. First, they all concern our relationships. Being "spiritual" is not some mystical condition experienced in relation to God and yet in isolation from others. We can't be good in a vacuum, but only when we are rubbing shoulders with others. That's the acid test! Secondly, in each example a negative prohibition is balanced by a positive command. It's not enough to put off the old rags; we must also put on new garments. And thirdly, in each case a reason for the command is either given or implied, for in the teaching of Jesus, belief and behavior always dovetail into one another.

In v. 25, Paul addresses the problem of deception. He writes, **"Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE of you, WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another."** Paul begins with the most universal temptation of the human experience: the temptation to lie, be dishonest, to minimize or exaggerate truth. So he says, "Don't lie, but rather speak the truth." That's pretty simple! And the reason this is important is because any relationship is built on trust, and trust is built on truth. So all dishonesty (even the little "white lies") undermine our relationships, while truth strengthens it.

Then Paul says, in vv. 26-27, **"BE ANGRY AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity."** Anger in itself is not sin or even an unhealthy emotion, but rather a "red flag" that tells us that something we need is being blocked or interfered with. It is the red light that goes off on our dashboard as we are driving down the street, indicating the need to pull over, stop the car, pop the hood and examine what's going on with the motor. That would be the healthiest thing to do. But many of us don't understand what's really driving our anger. We feel justified in it. We get angry because someone cut us off on the freeway. Or because our spouses aren't measuring up to our expectations. Or because the can opener we're looking for is not in the drawer it's supposed to be. We tend to blame the externals when the real root is not circumstantial but internal. So Paul is telling us here to settle our anger before the clock strikes twelve. If we don't, it may then begin to control us rather than the other way around.

The next command deals with the problem associated with selfishness. In verse 28 Paul writes, **"Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor,**

**performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need."** Stealing can be defined as depriving anyone of anything, whether that be property, time or affections, without giving it's value in return. It's rooted in the self-centered desire to satisfy our own needs at the expense of others. Some people I've known, as a response perhaps to some wounding in the past, develop a sense of entitlement in regards to possessing what's not theirs. So Paul is saying here, "Rather than take from another, start giving to those in need." That's what it means to put on the "new self."

Then in vv. 29-30, Paul addresses unhealthy forms of communication by saying, **"Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you have been sealed for the day of redemption."** Words are mighty instruments with the power to enlighten, encourage, and heal; or when used carelessly, to wound and destroy. So the idea here is not to use our mouths for evil, for in some way it hurts the hearer and brings sorrow to the Spirit of God. Instead, we are to use our words constructively, to build up rather than tear down. Then, they will bring grace to those who hear. Refusing to speak evil is putting off the old self, while using our speech to build up is putting on the character of God.

The next command deals with unforgiveness. Starting in v. 31 Paul says, **"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma."** Here is a whole series of six attitudes and actions that God calls us to put away. This means to change our minds about them, to stop defending them as if we had a right to behave this way. Instead we should welcome the kind of qualities that characterize the behavior of God. We are to be kind to one another, even the ungrateful and the selfish. They too have their stories! We're to be tenderhearted and compassionate rather than hard and calloused. God calls every believer to be forgiving, which literally translates "acting in grace," as God in Christ has acted in grace towards us. Therefore, Paul is saying, just as children copy their parents, so we are to copy our Father in heaven. We are to walk in the love that He shares with us. But oftentimes, when we get right down to it, we want to be bitter. It helps to fuel a false sense of control. And it's been my experience that, with few exceptions, those who come in for counseling are harboring some level of bitterness

or resentment that must be put off if they are to move forward in their relationship with God and others. In the Lord's prayer, Jesus links our own needs for forgiveness with our willingness to forgive others. This doesn't mean that God's forgiveness is dependent on our having forgiven others first. But we should never expect to receive what we're unwilling to give.

The last command is in vv. 3-4 of Ephesians 5. To conclude Paul hits on the issue of controlling our sexual impulses by saying, **"But do not let immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks."** The Greek word *porneia* covers every form of sexual sin. So all forms, he writes, must be put aside. "Instead," Paul says, "let there be thanksgiving." He is suggesting we not abuse God's gift of sex, but rather thank Him for its goodness within His design. Our culture, however, encourages all kinds of sexual expressions, as long as both parties consent. But the truth is, acting out sexually has disastrous consequences for our spiritual lives.

Have you ever noticed that the things that ultimately hurt us most have a tendency to be habit-forming? We keep doing them because they provide a certain degree of pleasure. That's why the consequences can be so easily denied. It's a good trade off. But if we keep giving ourselves over to sexual habits that lie outside the parameters of God's will, we will become increasingly broken. It's like handing over little pieces of our self until the strength of our identity in Christ becomes truly fragmented. When, and only when, we flee from fleshly behaviors and turn toward God in thanksgiving are we in a position to receive of His abundant blessings.

So as we reflect on this past year, what has God revealed that's in need of change? What do we need to consider in regards to those patterns that may be particularly stubborn? First of all, *consider the cost of change*. Are we really committed, or merely complying with some external source of pressure? Most have mixed feelings about this. We want to experience the benefit, but avoid the cost. And so the question is, what are we willing to give up? Something is going to have to die in order to live out of the fullness that God intended. It may be a relationship to a person or object that has become idolatrous. It may be a romanticized image of a perfect partner. We may need to give up our anger to feel the sadness or hurt inside. Or find expression for pain in ways we've never learned. Certainly our self-centeredness will need to die. And this will always mean that in some area of our lives we will need to give up control to Jesus. The most critical dynamic regarding change has to do with the depth and decisiveness of our repentance and our ability to maintain it over the long haul. As we have already said, most start out the year in full stride. But the more distance we get from the painful event that motivated our desire for change the more likely we are to go back to what's familiar. But if you are one of those people who aren't really motivated I don't believe it's because you don't want

to. Either you don't know how or you are too fearful of what God will ask you to let go of. So assess your motivation, that's the first thing.

Secondly, *recognize that suffering is a normal part of any change*. Any authentic struggle with deeper relational patterns will involve deprivation. As with any habit, the more we stop doing it, the more it will hurt. Withdrawal symptoms are real and one way or another they'll be experienced. But the more we suffer by not giving in to the flesh, the closer we come to crucifying it altogether. In the words of the apostle Peter, **"Therefore since Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose; because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin."** Although God perceives the inadequacies in each of us, He is not content to leave us in our weakness. C.S. Lewis writes, "That is why Jesus warned people to 'count the cost' before entering into relationship with Him. 'Make no mistake,' He says, 'if you let me, I will make you perfect. The moment you put yourself in My hands, that is what you are in for. Whatever suffering it may cost you, whatever it costs Me, I will never rest, nor let you rest until my Father can say without reservation that He is well pleased. This I can and will do. But I will do nothing less.' Yet - and, this is the other and equally important side of it - this Helper who will, in the long run, be satisfied with nothing less than absolute perfection, will also be delighted with the first, feeble, stumbling efforts we make. Every father is pleased at the baby's first attempt to walk."

Finally, *recognize that supports are required in order to maintain our commitment to change*. God never intended us to travel this spiritual path alone. There are far too many potholes along the road. Because we were formed for family and fashioned for fellowship we need the experience that seasoned veterans can offer. And it certainly makes sense that if we had had the capacity within ourselves we would have changed long before the turn of the year. That would have saved some of us a lot of humiliation. Think about what it takes to turn a tanker in the middle of the Alameda estuary. For that tanker to turn around, at least two tugboats are required to push against its hull. We have to understand that some of these relational patterns have accumulated a lot of algae and barnacles along the way. It's going to take some time to get it going in a different direction and clean it up from the inside out. So a wise person will enlist the help and support of others to keep them on track, to be those tugboats throughout the process.

As the Lord has examined my own heart in these relational areas He's revealed that, at times, I can be insensitive and rough around the edges. This is not new news to me. One doesn't grow up on street corners and prison yards cultivating the softer virtues. And I probably wouldn't even have noticed if God had not blessed me with three very sensitive females at home—my wife Laura, my daughter Jessica, and our

silky terrier, Cookie, the most sensitive of the three! As God has worked in my heart He's revealed that the real issue behind the tough exterior is not that I'm insensitive. I'm very sensitive. But I never learned to trust you with that information. Consequently I've had to ask the Lord, repeatedly, to help me put off the fear and protective insulation and allow what's already true of myself to find expression through my relationships with others. It's taken some time to experience significant progress. And yet, in all honesty, I'm still not where I want to be. That's the tension we all live in regarding our relationships. They all take place right smack-dab in the middle of something. And that something is the story of God's redemptive activity. Already, Scripture declares, the power of sin has been broken. But the presence of sin within us has not yet been completely eradicated. Already we have tasted the sweetness of God's grace, but its fullness is never quite within our grasp. So we live as broken people who are being repaired, among loved ones in the same condition – always thankful for what has already been done, but ever aware of our need for what we have not yet become. Nevertheless, when God recreates us in Christ, it's our calling to allow His truth to transform us on a daily basis and to practice the process of growth outlined for us in this passage—putting off the old and yielding into the new life He has created within us, embracing it and welcoming it with joy.

### **Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi**

*Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace!  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love  
Where there is injury, pardon  
Where there is discord, harmony  
Where there is doubt, faith  
Where there is despair, hope  
Where there is darkness, light  
Where there is sorrow, joy  
Grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console  
To be understood as to understand  
To be loved as to love  
For it is in giving that we receive  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned  
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life.  
AMEN*