**A new attitude**

Text: Ephesians 4:25-5:17

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 10:12-16; Matthew 15:10-20; Ephesians 4:25-5:17

**Songs Chosen:** ‘Behold Our God’, [SttL] 131, 138, 468, 525

**Series:** Ephesians (#18)

**Theme:** The Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesian believers about the attitude of the new self in which the image of God is being restored.

**Proposition:** Put on the attitude of Christ!

**Introduction**

I am not the most organised person when it comes to putting my clothes away tidily in my dresser or wardrobe. When we do put our clothes away, some of us are more orderly in keeping them grouped together methodically than others, but I think we can all see the benefit of categorising different garments so that we can retrieve them more readily. Having a good system helps.

Last week we saw from Ephesians 4:17-24 that the Apostle Paul uses the word picture of changing clothes to describe the pattern of life of the old unconverted self in contrast to the new self as a creation in Christ. In verse 24 he writes: “*put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*”. The clothing of the ‘new self’ is the restored image of God. In our text, Paul describes a number of items of ‘character clothing’ which make up the new self, in contrast to a number which are only fitting for the old self. Like a set of clothes in a wardrobe or dresser, it’s helpful to organize these items methodically and put them into categories. Having a good system helps.

With your physical clothes you could decide to sort them by colour, purchase date, or type of fabric, but generally most of us organize our clothes by type: socks in one place, jerseys in another, and so on. With our text, there are a number of ways that the different aspects of the old and new self could be categorized in a series of sermons to cover the truth which is revealed in our text. I have chosen to organize these items of ‘character clothing’ in three groups and to focus on each one of these in turn over the next three messages from the same text: Ephesians 4:25-5:17. The three categories refer to the type of ‘clothing’, they are: attitude, speech and behaviour. Today our focus is on the aspects of attitude which the Apostle Paul addresses in our text. Next week, God willing, we’ll look at verses dealing with speech. The following week, we’ll have the behaviour verses left to deal with.

Attitude may be defined as ‘a settled way of thinking or feeling about something’. Whereas a ‘mindset’ is ‘the established set of attitudes held by someone’. A mindset is a combination of attitudes which then strongly influence the way a person lives, for example consider these contrasting ways of thinking:

1. “I can’t learn now, I’m too old” versus “I can learn what I want to or need to, when I need to learn it”.
2. “There’s no point in trying if I’m going to fail” versus “I see failures as opportunities to learn, to reassess, and to do better next time”.
3. “I take feedback as a personal attack” versus “I find the value in every bit of feedback I receive”.

We’re going to look firstly at the mindset of the old self and then at the mindset of the new self.

1. **The old mindset**

Imagine for a moment that you are about to look in detail through the items in your ‘sock drawer’. However, hopefully unlike your real sock drawer, this one is really very unpleasant, the socks are smelly and dirty, full of holes and should be thrown in the bin because they are beyond repair. The following ‘items’ make up the mindset of the ‘old self’ as revealed in our text:

* Covetousness (5:3)
* Anger (4:26,31)
* Wrath (4:31)
* Malice (4:31)
* Bitterness (4:31)
* Foolishness (5:17)

We’re going to look now in detail at these items of character clothing:

**Covetousness**. This was the topic of the sermon last Sunday afternoon when we considered the tenth commandment. We saw then thatthe very heart of God’s Law is revealed in this last of the ten commandments “*You shall not covet*” (Exodus 20:17). The breath of this commandment is expressed well in Heidelberg Catechism answer 113 – “*not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God’s commandments should ever arise in our heart*.” Outward obedience and behaviour are not the essence of God’s law, but rather the inward attitude of the heart is what drives all else in life. We saw this truth expressed in our reading from Deuteronomy 10:16 where God says, ‘*circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart*’.

The Greek word translated ‘covetousness’ here (pleonexia) means literally ‘to have more’ and describes a strong desire to acquire ever more material possessions, especially those which are forbidden. This word can equally well be translated ‘greed’ (e.g. NASB, NIV). Jesus warns all who will listen to: "*Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions*" (Luke 12:15).

When Christ was tempted in the wilderness by Satan, “*The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me*" (Matt 4:8-9). Satan coveted the whole world, which belongs to God, not to Him. Satan covets God’s glory which is God’s alone. In contrast, Christ demonstrated His own complete lack of covetousness when He rejected the greedy mindset of the Deceiver saying:"*Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "' You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve*' (Matt 4:10).

**Anger** is mentioned by the Apostle Paul in 4:26: “*Be* ***angry*** *and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger*” and again in verse 31: “*Let all bitterness and wrath and* ***anger*** *and clamour and slander be put away from you*”. The Greek word translated ‘anger’ here refers to an inner, deep resentment that seethes and smoulders. We could broadly describe this in human beings with a term like ‘cold anger’. This type of anger is generally internalized and results in withdrawing from the person that you are angry with by stopping, or significantly reducing, communication. This type of anger can linger for days, weeks, months, years, or decades. “*Do not let the sun go down on your anger*” calls for us to act in such a way that we rapidly resolve the issues which have led to our anger.

**Wrath** is similar in meaning to anger. The Greek word translated here ‘wrath’ was used to refer to violent movements of air or water and came to mean “well up” or “boil up”. Here it refers more to a passionate outburst of rage; an anger which is agitated and that rushes along relentlessly. We could broadly describe this in human beings with a term like ‘hot anger’.

Anger can be ‘cold’ or ‘hot’ it can also be categorized into either righteous or unrighteous anger. The anger of people of human beings is often unrighteous. It’s important to remember that anger is always a response to a situation, it is not a part of who a person is. We always have a choice as to how we will respond to injustice, provocation or when things do not go as we wish or expect.

God is not angry by nature, His righteous anger is His holy response to sin (e.g. Isaiah 30:27,28). When Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons He was perfectly righteously angry for the glory and honour of His Heavenly Father (Matt 21:12-13).

Proverbs 29:22 wisely states that “*A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression*”. 2nd century AD Roman Emperor and philosopher Marcus Aurelius wrote: “*How much more grievous are the consequences of anger than the causes of it*”. As an example of this, remember that Moses struck the rock in anger twice, when God had told him only to speak to it (Num 20:10-13), as a result, he never entered the promised land (Deut 32:51-52).

The anger of the ‘old mindset’ in human beings ‘*gives opportunity to the devil*’ (v27). This unrighteous anger undermines self-control and thereby makes us more vulnerable to temptation and sin. Our ‘shield of faith’ is weakened by such anger and the ‘*flaming darts of the evil one*’ can readily penetrate an angry person, causing much pain and suffering (Eph 6:16).

**Malice** is another aspect of the ‘old self’ which is identified in Ephesians 4:31. It refers to a vicious disposition, an evil character, a mean-spirited, spiteful nature. Malice has been described as "*that peculiar form of evil which manifests itself in a malignant interpretation of the actions of others, in attributing of them all to the worst motive*". There are plenty of examples of such malice in Scripture, for example:

* Cain’s attitude towards his brother Abel (Gen 4:8).
* Abraham’s wife Sarah’s mindset towards Hagar (Gen 21:10).
* Jezebel’s evil disposition towards Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-2).
* The unbelieving Jews hatred of Jesus (e.g. Matt 27:18; Mark 12:12).
* King Herod’s contempt for the Son of God (Luke 23:11).

In contrast to the complete lack of malice in Christ who spoke these words about those who crucified Him: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*” (Luke 23:34).

**Bitterness** is often closely associated with wrath and anger in fallen human beings like you and me. The word in Greek here originally meant pointed or sharp. It was also used to describe plants that produced inedible or poisonous fruit. When used of a person’ character, it describes long-standing resentment which refuses to be reconciled. Bitterness reflects a brooding grudge–filled attitude, an unwillingness to forgive or a harsh feeling. Bitterness harbours animosity and keeps score of wrongs (in contrast to love – 1 Cor 13:5). The bitter ‘old mindset’ is sour, ‘prickly’ and poisonous.

Warren Wiersbe (1929-2019), the American pastor and author, wrote: "*An unforgiving spirit is the devil’s playground and before long it becomes the Christian’s battleground. If somebody hurts us, either deliberately or unintentionally, and we do not forgive him, then we begin to develop* ***bitterness*** *within, which hardens the heart. We should be tender-hearted and kind, but instead we are hard-hearted and* ***bitter****. Actually, we are not hurting the person who hurt us; we are only hurting ourselves.* ***Bitterness*** *in the heart makes us treat others the way Satan treats them, when we should treat others the way God has treated us*”.

Simon, who had been a magician, wanted to purchase the power which he saw at work in the ministry of the Apostles. Peter confronted him because his heart was not right before God (Acts 8:21), saying “*for I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity*." Simon ‘Magus’ was displaying the mindset of the old self.

If anyone had a ‘right’ to be bitter, surely it was Christ. He suffered so much injustice during His life on this earth. However, Jesus is perfectly righteous and holy. Peter records the Lord’s ‘character clothing’ in these words: “*When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly*” (1 Peter 2:23).

Finally, in this ‘dirty sock drawer’ of items which are part of the mindset of the ‘old self’ we come to **foolishness** which Paul refers to in chapter 5 verse 17: “*Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is*”. Foolishness does not mean to be ‘dim witted’ or to ‘play the clown’. The underlying Greek word was used in the ancient world to describe a person who had lost the correct measure of him or herself or the world around him or her.

Foolishness refers to a lack of good judgement. In Ephesians 5:15 Paul writes: *“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise*”. The wise person does not wear the character clothing of the old self, but puts off a foolish mindset which includes the damaging attitudes associated with covetousness, anger, wrath, malice and bitterness.

How have you found this brief look into the ‘sock drawer’ of the old self? Have you spotted some items which are familiar and which you tend to put on from time to time even though they are harmful to you and to others? Brothers and sisters, we need to throw out all those useless old clothes and put on some new ones, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The new mindset**

The clothes which characterise the ‘new self’ are like new, clean, attractive, well-coordinated garments which hang in the wardrobes of the well-dressed; ready to be put on each morning. The following ‘items’ make up the mindset of the new self as revealed in our text:

* Kindness (4:32)
* Tender-heartedness (4:32)
* Forgiveness (4:32)
* Understanding (5:17)

We’re going to look now in detail at these items of character clothing. We find the first three in chapter 4 verse 32: “*Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you*”.

The word translated ‘**kind**’ has the basic meaning of being well adapted to fulfil a purpose and so describes that which is useful, suitable, excellent, serviceable. Kindness embodies the attributes of loving affection, sympathy, friendliness, patience, pleasantness, gentleness, and goodness. When Jesus said, “*My yoke is easy*” (Matt 11:30), He used this word which can also be translated ‘kind’ – “*My yoke is kind*”. Jesus is a kind Master, and walking with Him makes us ‘serviceable’. Think of the way in which Christ spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well as recorded in John 4. He was kind to this sinful woman, perfectly displaying the character clothing of which Paul writes here.

Kindness and tender-heartedness are closely related. The Greek word underlying ‘**tender-hearted**’ literally means "having strong, healthy bowels". The inner organs of the heart, lungs, liver and upper bowels were considered the seat of emotion and intention in the ancient world. We have an expression in English which captures this idea somewhat when we say “I feel it in the pit of my stomach” or when we express deep feeling and say “I am broken hearted” or “that was gut-wrenching”. The word ‘tender-hearted’ means compassionate, easily and quickly moved to love, pity, or sorrow. It describes a person having tender feeling for someone else.

We see the tender-heartedness of Jesus recorded in the gospels, for example: “*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*” (Matt 9:36). “*When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick*” (Matt 14:14) When Jesus arrived in a town called Nain, He met with a funeral procession for the only son of a widow there. He could have responded in a variety of different ways. He could have just continued on his way. He was not a member of the widow’s family or of her community. He could have stopped to raise her son from the dead **just** because that would show everyone His power and authority. He could have performed a miracle **just** to give glory to God. Jesus did demonstrate his power and authority and He did give glory to God when He said to the young man “arise”. He also demonstrated His perfect tender-heartedness. Luke records that “*When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep*" (Luke 7:13).

The third ‘item of new-self mindset’ here is ‘**forgiving**’. This word in Greek has the basic meaning of ‘to give’. To forgive someone is to grant as a favour to them. It is to give gratuitously, generously and in tender-hearted kindness. Forgiveness gives out of grace to help those who do not deserve the gift given. Forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel. Apart from God’s forgiveness of sin through the work of Christ, there is no ‘good news’.

Let’s now look at the motivation to put on kind, tender-hearted forgiveness. Sometimes my wife Jenny tries to encourage me to put on the new clothes which she has kindly bought for me. She might say: ‘You look really good in that new suit”, or “That shirt might feel a bit uncomfortable, but that’s because you’re not familiar with wearing it yet” or “I’m throwing out your old clothes so you’ll have to wear the new ones!”

We can be greatly encouraged to put on the new clothes of the mindset of Christ: kind, tender-hearted and forgiving because this is what the ‘new self’, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24) looks like. Paul expresses this good motivation at the start of chapter 5: “*Be imitators of God, as beloved children*”. Literally ‘mimic’ the character of God because you are part of His family as adopted sons and daughters.

There is another, closely related motivation expressed when Paul writes “*Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you*”. The Apostle is describing the mindset of the new self as being ‘gospel clothing’ to be put on. Put on an attitude of kind tender-hearted forgiveness **because** “*God in Christ forgave you*”. The saved sinner’s gratitude for forgiveness in Christ is the greatest motivation to have a new attitude.

Yet, for some, perhaps, many of us, forgiveness of others has been, is, or may in the future, be a struggle. We may have been deeply hurt and our old self protests against letting go injustices, perceived or real. How can we be encouraged that we are making real progress in having a new attitude, enabled by God’s grace, to forgive others from the heart? Here are four indications:

1. **An eagerness to forgive**. Do you remember how quickly the King forgave the indebted servant in the parable Jesus taught in Matthew 18? The King was like the Father of the prodigal son who ‘*while he was still a long way off, …. saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him*’. Our disposition, our mindset, towards others must be one of being constantly desiring to forgive, straining forward with this goal constantly in mind.
2. **Not keeping score**. When we remember past offences it is almost impossible to forgive from the heart. That’s why Jesus answered Peter’s question: "*Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?*" This way "*I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven*” (Matt 18.21-22).

The number 490 is symbolic. Jesus takes two ‘perfect’ numbers, 10 and 7 and then multiplies them again by 7. The message is that a truly forgiving heart knows no limit to being enabled to cancel the debt incurred by others. What tends to happen in our lives when a person, perhaps a husband, wife, brother or sister in Christ, repeatedly sins against us, or otherwise offends us, is that we progressively become angrier and more frustrated with that person. The reason is that we are keeping score. God’s grace in making new creations in Christ is that He enables the willing regenerated heart to sincerely forgive others; again and again and again.

1. **Not repeatedly bringing up the offence**, either in our own mind, to the offender, or to others. Proverbs 17:9 wisely says, “*Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends*”.
2. **Experiencing Joy.** Freedom in Christ to put on the gospel clothing of the new self brings great joy. In spiritual terms, this joy arises from a deep appreciation for the enormous debt which Christ has paid to free us from bondage to sin and death.

In Christ we can experience deep joy and pleasure in our relationships with others, especially those we have freely forgiven.

In Psalm 51, David writes: **“***Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit*”. There is both joy in being forgiven by God for our sins and in being willing to forgive others. In light of God’s forgiveness for which he pleads, David writes: “*Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you*” (Ps 51:13). One of the ways in which we teach others about the grace of God is by demonstrating the effect of His grace in our lives through the way in which we are, in the words of Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 51 to be “*fully determined wholeheartedly to forgive others”.*

In Biblical terms, those who do not forgive are ‘foolish’. The character clothing of the foolish unforgiving person is the ‘old self’ ‘wardrobe’ of anger, wrath, malice and bitterness, but God’s gracious Word says, in light of all that we have seen of the contrast between the old and the new mindsets: “*Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is*” (5:17). The Greek word translated “understanding” here is interesting. It literally means to send together or bring together. The idea is like that of putting together the pieces of the puzzle. This word describes the ability to understand concepts and see relationships between them.

Brothers and sisters, when you and I willingly and readily put on the new attitude of a new creation in Christ we demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of God’s will. This new attitude is the attitude, the mindset, of Christ Himself who “*though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil 2:6-8). This new attitude is the central component of the uniform dress standard for all followers of Christ who are called to“*put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*”. We are called to kindness, tender-heartedness, forgiveness of others as we more fully understand the concepts and relationships revealed in Scripture.

Perhaps you’re someone who struggles with ongoing ‘wardrobe malfunctions’ in the area of anger, malice, bitterness or lack of forgiveness for others. Perhaps you too readily ‘keep score’ of offences committed against you (real or perceived) and you lack joy in your salvation.

Whoever you are today, whether you’ve long worn this glorious gospel clothing, or whether you’ve come to realise that you cannot be a new creation because you have not yet believed on Jesus, the call is to come to Christ now in repentance and faith. To admit to having chosen the clothing of the ‘old self’ and to put on the ‘new self’ with a new attitude. “*Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you*” (Eph 4:32). “*Be imitators of God, as beloved children*” (5:1). *“Understand what the will of the Lord is*” (5:17).

AMEN.