

Ephesians 4:25-5.2

Replacing old habits with new

²⁵ So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸ Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

5 ¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

What are some good habits that you like to see in other people?
What are some good habits that you like to see in yourself?

When people are striving for good habits - everyone benefits. It's not just we ourselves, who benefit from good habits; but collectively, we all benefit as a community.

Schools promote habits such as being respectful, being polite, being courteous, being confident as a community member, being caring, and even being hygienic.

And what about bad habits. What kind of habits really annoy you? Do you have a bad habit – a regular habit you're trying to break at the moment?

Some people say buying too many pairs of shoes is a bad habit. Some people have financial habits, that don't work well. Some try to break out pokies, big-ticket lotteries & gambling – with different degrees of success. Some people wish their spouse would talk about something totally different for a change. Some talk about smoking, some talk about their volume of alcohol. Some talk about their eating habits – where the humble fridge & the pantry are never short of a visitor between meals. Then the doctors want to know what your habits are, so that they can try & fix you.

It's not easy to kick a bad habit or stop a bad habit even when we really want to. Motivation can be a problem. And, yet, we all have those habits that we would like to change – to a greater or lesser degree.

Our Ephesian text today, touches on a few different habits. The Apostle Paul talks about both good & bad habits. But it's more than just habits that Paul was writing about. Paul was giving practical instructions for Christian living, so that believers would bless one another in the unity of Christ.

So, from Ephesians chapter 4, we could say that the bad habits belong with our old sinful nature. The old nature is where our desires are selfish and deceptive – not concerned with learning the ways of Christ Jesus. To the New Testament Christians at Ephesus, Paul called this, 'The former way of life' (4:22)

But the good habits belong with our new Christlike nature. The new nature is the 'new self'. The new self comes with our baptism into God's everlasting name. Paul describes this 'new self' as being '*created to be like God in true righteousness & holiness*' (4:24).

Which basically means: Because we belong to God at all times, let's try to imitate God at all times. It is a call-to-action in all of our habits. Changing our habits is not going to make God love us more than he does now. God already loves you fully & completely – through the forgiveness of Christ. And with his perfect love, God calls us to action in all of our habits. Jesus had a habit of giving of himself to others during his ministry. Eventually Jesus gave up his life for us. How good it is when our habits are motivated by this self-giving nature of Christ our Lord.

And yes, it's not easy to stop an old habit. There is difficulty in simply stopping or breaking a habit. People too easily return to their old habits, if all they do is try to stop them. Saying, "Don't do this" or "Don't do that" is so discouraging. And it leaves us in an empty vacuum, wandering what to do next.

But where there is something fresh & new to consider, then we can replace our old habits with fresh, new ones. Surely this is how Christ Jesus has made us to be. Our old nature is being replaced with the new Christ-like nature which comes from God. So, we don't just stop bad habits, we change them and replace them with something better.

With this, Paul gives common-sense advice for Christian living.

The first 'habit to change', is all about honesty. Truth is the habit which should replace falsehood. Christians need honesty with one another, not gossip or stories that damage one another. Luther's Catechism tells us to explain people's actions in the kindest possible way.

Anger is the next habit mentioned by Paul. We all get angry & frustrated with ourselves or others. Even Jesus got angry at things that were unjust & oppressive on people. Jesus got angry at the way the Temple in Jerusalem was misused – so not all anger is unholy. Paul warned that prolonged anger lets the devil in, so we don't want anger to stay around too long. If we are so angry we can't sleep, we can let it all out to God, and maybe to someone we trust. Anger needs to be expressed in constructive & safe ways. Prolonged anger can be replaced with a new, constructive plan of action.

The next habit is stealing or being lazy by bludging off other people. This is not an anti-charity statement against the poor & needy; but people need to understand the effects of stealing on a community. If a shop owner buys a chocolate bar for \$1 and sell it for \$1.20. He earns 20 cents to pay the bills. If just one single chocolate bar is stolen, it will take 5 more chocolate bars to cover the loss of one. Then the shop owner will only make 20 cents after the next bar is sold. Only the 7th chocolate bar (after the theft) will start to gain a small profit. By then it has become much harder to pay the bills. That's how bad one single small theft really is – thieves do not understand this. Paul teaches that thieves can replace such habits with new ones of honest work – in order to share with the needy.

The next habit to replace is the old one of slandering people. To be practical Christians, we do sometimes need a private place to discuss issues of concern. But insulting people behind their back does damage to the body of Christ. To this habit, Paul says to let encouraging words replace the discouraging words. 'Building people up' benefits everyone and gives glory to God who makes people in his own image. So, let's build each other up.

Paul spoke of how bad habits grieve the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. But good habits bring about kindness, tenderness, & forgiveness in the faith community. And all these good things come from God who first forgave us.

The Bible certainly invites us to embrace good habits. As children of God, as imitators of God, we have the capacity to make some positive changes to the glory of God.

We can see ourselves as 'replacing' the old harmful habits with the new Christlike habits. This never stops in our Christian living. Every day gives us new opportunities to swap the old habits for the new – thanks to the Lord, Jesus Christ!

God is in the business of swapping the old for the new. The new nature of Christ is ready to swap the old for the new, just as Christ already lives in you. Amen.