

DONE WITH MARTYBALL
Ephesians 4:21-24

Have I mentioned I love football? I caught some grief at a previous place of ministry for too frequently referring to sports in sermons. But as 2 Peter 2:22 says “a dog returns to its vomit.” Kind of an addiction I guess. So pity me. I’m going to talk about football on the first day of the new year. For a number of years the Chargers had a coach who was in such a rut, so committed to a particular style of play that it came to be named after him. Marty Schottenheimer was the man and Martyball was his game. He lived and died by the creed, “we have to establish the running game.” What that meant was that especially in playoff games, which he invariably lost, he would start off every offensive series by having his quarterback hand the ball to a tailback who would run right up the middle. Second down would be the same. Often that would mean little or no gain on first and second down because everyone on the planet knew what was coming. Time and time again the Chargers would end up with third down and 8 yards or more to go for a first down, would fall short and have to punt. It was a remarkably effective way for a coach to shut down his own offense.

Marty believed he would win football games through physical domination. He seemed to not care that the other team knew what was coming, he insisted that his team pound on the other team and simply beat them physically. He seemed to be unaware of the fact that many decades earlier it had been agreed that it was legal in football to actually advance the ball down the field by throwing it. He seemed allergic at times to this innovation called the forward pass. After about the third straight failure resulting in the third straight punt to open a game I would be yelling at the television. “Wake up Marty! It’s not working. All you’re establishing is the hole you’re putting your team in.” I wished I could share with him the alcoholics anonymous definition of insanity. It is doing the same thing that produces a negative result over and over again and expecting a different result. By that definition Marty was as crazy as a loon.

That’s a long and football-addicted way of saying that I want to talk about not doing things the same old way when they have not worked. To keep doing the same thing expecting it to turn out better when we’ve repeatedly gotten the same unsatisfactory result is absurd and foolish. On this first day of a new year I want to point us all to a new way of living. It is referred to in Ephesians 4:21-24.

WE GAVE UP THE OLD

Note the imagery of “putting off” and “putting on” Paul uses in these verses. These were expressions used of changing clothes. In today’s idiom we would say “take off” and “put on.” When we were on vacation in November we were in a place where the temperature was around 84 the day we left. We knew when we got off the plane in LA it was going to be more than 30 degrees colder. The shorts, t-shirt and flip flops I was wearing were not going to keep me warm as I waited for the shuttle to our car outside the airport. I went to the restroom, took those clothes off and put on warmer clothes.

Paul in this passage talks about changing a life that way. He writes about taking off the old self, the old life, the old way of living, and putting on a new life, a new self. It sounds like he’s telling us this is something that we Christians still need to do. This can cause a little confusion. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul said “**If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.**” That sounds like we’ve already put the old off and become something new. We’ve already changed clothes.

You see the same thing in Colossians 3:9-10 where Paul wrote, “**Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self.**” Sounds in both those passages like we’ve already changed clothes. Once I had taken off my shorts and t-shirts in that airport restroom and put on my jeans and long-sleeved shirt it would have been absurd if you had said to me when I came out, “take off your old clothes, your t-shirt and shorts, and put on the new, your jeans and long-sleeved shirt.” I didn’t need to do it again. It was already done. So how do we understand this?

Some Bible scholars discuss this question in their commentaries and come up with answers like there’s a past and a present tense to this putting off and putting on. We put off the old life and put on the new in the past, but we also need to do that in an ongoing present tense way. But that seems to spoil the imagery. Is there a past and present tense of changing your clothes? Would it make sense for me to tell you that you have taken off your old clothes and put on new so take off the old and put on the new? That’s nonsense. And it’s unnecessary. The solution is easier.

Look carefully at Ephesians 4:21-24 and you’ll see that Paul said the same thing here he said in those other passages. It is all past tense. He’s reminding us of some that has already happened in the past. Look at verse 22. Referring to when his

audience first heard about Christ and put their faith in him Paul says they were taught to do three things. First, “**You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires.**” The second part of that sentence should read, “which *was* being corrupted.” This was all past tense stuff. When you heard the good news of Jesus you were challenged to discard your old life (literally your old man, or the human being you used to be), which was being corrupted by deceitful desires. Second, they were told “**to be made new in the attitude of your minds.**” Third they were taught “**to put on the new self.**” When Paul told them about Jesus he offered them a whole new kind of life. He challenged them to say goodbye to how they used to live and to put on the new life in Christ. When they put their faith in Christ that’s exactly what they did, and so did you! This was something that has already happened.

Every now and then you’ll encounter people who pound the pulpit about “repentance” because Jesus called people to repent and so did Peter in Acts 2:38 when he was asked by the crowd how to be saved. So some people cry “we need to preach repentance!” The word “repent,” unfortunately, has suffered in our culture. In the New Testament it was a simple, innocuous word with no religious connotations at all. The Greek word is *metanoeo*. It is a compound word made of a preposition and a verb. The verb *noeo*, means “to think.” The preposition, *meta*, means “beyond” or “after.” In this case it meant “after,” so altogether the verb meant “to think after,” or “to think again.” It meant to rethink something and change your mind. It had no special religious sense like “repent” seems to in our day, it simply meant to change your mind about something. My mother bought Laurie and me a present for Christmas that we had said we wanted. It was an electronic item. But as we found out a little more about it we realized it wouldn’t do what we wanted. After some discussion we decided to return it to the store even though we thought it was what we wanted. We thought again and changed our minds. That’s exactly what that word means.

In Acts 2 the crowd had rejected Jesus and supported executing him. Peter says, “change your mind about him. Accept him as your Messiah.” Paul is alluding to a similar thing here. He says at one point in your life you changed your mind. He tells his readers to remember that when he first told them about Jesus he taught them to reject the old life they had been living up to that point and accept a new life, a new way of thinking and living in Jesus Christ. So they did. They changed their minds and accepted the new life. If they hadn’t, they wouldn’t be reading this letter as followers of Jesus!

Why “repent,” or change one’s mind about the old life? Paul said the problem was it was it was being “**corrupted by its deceitful desires**.” That statement can easily cause us to run off track in a couple of directions. Some people are offended by the notion that our old life was “corrupted.” They object, “I wasn’t corrupt. I know I wasn’t perfect, but I wasn’t that bad. Corrupt people are politicians who take bribes or scam artists who rip off innocent people. Or they are people who are sexually depraved. I was never corrupt like that.”

Think of a computer that has been infected by a virus. When that happens they sometimes refer to it as its files being corrupted. It’s not that the computer has become depraved or satanic, although at times it might seem like it. It means that the computer can no longer perform the way it was intended and can even become useless. That’s what happened to us when our old life was corrupted. It didn’t work as intended. It became futile and frustrating, and may even have become almost useless to us. This is what Paul meant when he talked about the old life being corrupted. It didn’t work! That’s why people accept the new life, because the old life wasn’t working. It was corrupted.

What caused it to misfire so badly? Paul says the old life was corrupted by “deceitful desires.” The word translated “desires” in some older translations was rendered “lusts.” This leads to some people thinking especially of sex and thundering about how lust has taken some people over and turned them depraved. That has happened to some people, but Paul is saying this is something that happened to *everybody*. The whole world has had their lives corrupted by deceitful desires, not just a few really dark, twisted people. This is not about the shock troops of evil. Everyone had “deceitful desires” which dominated the life that we traded in for the new one.

What are these “deceitful desires”? Think about the concept of deceit. Deceit is about saying one thing while doing something else. If I try to deceive you I try to convince you of something not true. Imagine a scam artist who tells you that he lives in Nigeria and has \$10 million that he needs to park in a bank account in the USA. If you will let him use your account he will give you a 10% fee, \$1 million, just for letting him use your account. All he needs is your information to access your account and he’ll begin the process. That guy is trying to deceive you. He is telling you something that is not true and promising something he will not deliver. So deceitful desires are desires that try to convince us of something that is not true. They are desires that say one thing is going to happen when it actually isn’t. They promise something they will never deliver.

So what are those desires? They are not things that are necessarily evil in and of themselves. They are all the common human desires. Let me restate that for emphasis. ***All normal human desires can be deceitful.*** What do we desire? We want to be safe. We want to feel valuable and important, so we want at least some level of notice and approval. We want to feel good, so we want to avoid pain and we want pleasant circumstances. We want stuff. Money, toys, cars, houses. We want to succeed at something in life. Most of all we want to be loved. We want to have pleasure, whether the pleasure be fun, excitement, good food or sex.

Actually the list of our desires is long. There is nothing wrong with most of those desires. Nothing wrong with being safe, approved, feeling good, not hurting, having the things of this world, succeeding, being loved. Nothing wrong with fun, good food or sex. God created them all as good things we are to enjoy. But all of those desires can have a deceitful aspect to them. They can promise us that they will be the key to peace and joy in life, to the life we want. They can promise if we get them we will have all we want and that if we don't have them we can never have peace and joy. Unfortunately we believe them and so we pursue them with all the vigor we possess. We fail to realize it is all deception.

In his book, *Jesus Nation*, Joe Stowell relates a story that illustrates the lie. He and his wife moved out of Chicago to the western suburbs of that city several years back. They bought a piece of land and built their dream house on it. It wasn't a mansion, but it was what they'd long talked about, long dreamed of having. When they built it they thought it was perfect for them and they loved it. It was just what they had always wanted. Here's what happened. Joe wrote, "About six months after we built our house, I was driving through a beautiful neighborhood and saw a house that caught my attention. The colors, the architecture, the lot, the location all had a big wow factor for me. And my first thought was, 'Boy do I wish I had that house!'" He had been deceived by a desire. This house is perfect, it is what we've always wanted. When we have that we'll be at peace, not wanting anything else. It's an illusion. Within months he found that out. Nothing wrong with the house, but the desire for it was deceitful.

There is an Emmy-nominated television show on the A&E network called *Hoarders*. It's about people who have been deceived into thinking that holding on to stuff will bring them peace and happiness and security in life. In one episode they feature a man who has collected so many games, action figures and novelties that it's almost impossible to move through his house. The A&E website describes

the show as “a look inside the lives of ...people whose inability to part with their belongings is so out of control that they are on the verge of a personal crisis.” They have a desire to hold on to those things because they believe they will bring them joy, peace, life. Instead the very things they seek to hold are destroying them! Their lives are corrupted by deceitful desires!

All of us live on the verge of a personal crisis. While it may not be for the same reason as the Hoarders, it is has a similar pathology. It is because of deceitful desires that we have listened to. Instead of bringing peace, joy, meaning and love they have brought crisis. Paul’s readers put their faith in Jesus because they saw the deception and traded in that old dysfunctional life for a new one in Christ. If you are a believer in Jesus somewhere along the line you did the same thing. It may have come at a dramatic crisis point, or it may have been a gradual process. You may have seen the truth over time. You might not even be able to identify the point when it happened, but somewhere in there you turned from the old way and said yes to a new life in Jesus Christ.

AT SOME POINT WE PUT ON THE NEW JESUS LIFE

This passage reminds us that we did do that. We may not have understood all that it meant, but we said at some point no to the old and yes to the new. That old life was dominated and driven by deceitful desires. We believed with every fiber of our being that if only I could have these things, if only I could achieve that one thing, then I would be fulfilled. My life would be perfect.

But we came to a place where we realized the old life was corrupted. It wasn’t working. In Christ we see that those things may well be just fine, but that they can never deliver what they promise. They most certainly could not deliver certainty and hope for eternity. We got to the place where we believed that peace, joy, fulfillment and the hope of eternal life come not from finally getting those desires fulfilled, but from being forgiven, accepted and loved by God and having an on-going close connection with him. That forgiveness, that hope, that relationship with God comes through putting our faith in Jesus Christ. So we did that and got an entirely new way of living and thinking.

Sometimes we struggle with this idea that this has already happened. But the Bible is quite insistent on this. We saw that 2 Corinthians 5:17 says that in Christ we are a whole new thing. The old has passed away. It’s gone and something entirely new has taken its place. In some cases this is obvious. When I was in college there was a guy who lived in my dorm named Bruce. He was a dashing young college guy.

He was handsome, had a witty and winsome personality, was very intelligent and urbane, he was athletic and he was wealthy. He was quite a hit with the ladies. One year at Christmas his family went skiing at Mammoth and he brought a friend along. The two of them pretended to be from France. They put on French accents and sought to convince girls that they were on the French national ski team as a way of gaining some new conquests. Reports were that they were quite successful. To be honest, as I looked around at people I knew and wondered who of them might be interested in becoming followers of Christ, not only did Bruce not top the list, he wasn't even on it. He was in a mad pursuit of his lifestyle and it had nothing to do with following Jesus. To my great surprise Bruce came to a place where he professed that he had put his faith in Jesus Christ and let him be Lord of his life. He put off the old life and put on a new life in Christ. At first I was dubious. I wondered if it was for real. After we graduated Bruce went to Dallas Theological Seminary, then later went on to get a Ph. D. in classics at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. Today he is a professor at a Christian college. The change was for real.

It is not hard to see that Bruce changed his mind about the old life he was living and accepted a new life. The difference between the old and new in his case was obvious. And some of you have experienced just such a dramatic change. Some of us, however, struggle with the idea that we left behind the old life and are something new. You want to know the old life I left behind to follow Christ? It was bad. I recall all the terrible things I did in third grade. I remember getting in a fight with a guy while we were playing baseball because he wanted to play the position I was playing and I wouldn't let him. The whole thing amounted to I shoved him and he fell down. Yeah, it was really awful. Then there was the time I made fun of a kid named Mumford because of the way he wore his pants. It's painful to recall my sinful past.

Some of those things were crummy. Making fun of another human being is cruel and unkind. But such things are pretty innocent. I suspect that someone observing my life from the outside would have difficulty identifying any particular point where there was a dramatic change. From the outside my whole life probably would look mostly homogenous. Pretty much the same all along. They would likely say if they could plot the trajectory of my life it would be a pretty straight line with no radical changes of direction morally.

However, what *appears* to be is not the whole story. People are like icebergs. They say that 90% of an iceberg is out of sight under the water. I don't know what the

exact percentage is for humans, but an awful lot of what we are is out of sight, going on underneath the surface. Every one of us who follows Jesus would admit that in the hidden place at least there has been a dramatic change from the old way of living to the new.

I believed in Jesus at an early age. But there was a battle that had to be fought over whether I was going to change my mind about the old way of living and become a new thing. The old way of living, corrupted by those deceitful desires, is the human default. As part of a fallen race that's original equipment. It comes standard on the fallen human model. It is in place on every single one of us!

There was a time in my life when I was dominated by those deceitful desires and they corrupted my life. They made it not work right. I remember a time when in high school I experienced something very common for teenagers. I was left out. It happened on more than one occasion, but I recall one particular night where I felt the pain of that slight particularly acutely. Many of my "friends" were invited to an event, and I was not. I found myself at home alone on a Friday night. Even my parents were out some place. Not being included seemed like an enormous thing. It said something about me. People don't like me. They don't want to be my friend, and that makes me nearly worthless. I had a desire that had to be met. I desired to be liked, to be popular, to have friends. Is there anything wrong with that desire? No. We're made to share life, to be in relationship. But at that stage in my life I was buying the deception that if I could have friends and be liked, if I could be included, then my life would be good, and if I didn't then it could never be whole. That's just one of the desires that ran my life. There came a point where I had to reject a life dominated by those desires and choose a new life in Christ. I made that choice. That didn't mean I didn't feel lonely when I had some Saturday nights in college when I was all alone doing calculus homework in my dorm room and didn't wish I had friends to hang with. But I had accepted a new way of living that allowed that to merely be an unmet desire and to live with purpose and joy anyway. It didn't control who I was.

That was a long and perhaps torturous way of reminding you that you are a new creation. On this first day of a new year I want to remind you that something new has happened in you if you have chosen to believe in Jesus Christ and make him your Lord. You have a new way of living, a way that still has desires, but doesn't accept the lies that come with them. It is a way of living that can say no to them when necessary and can still be joyful, peaceful and purposeful if they are not met.

It is a strong life, a beautiful life, a life that gives to others because it is not about its own desires. You are a new thing, a different thing this world can't produce.

Here's the thing you need to know. In Ezekiel 36:26-27 the prophet said that in the new covenant, the new relationship with God we now have, God would give us a new heart and put his Spirit in us. You have the Spirit of Jesus in you and you have a new heart that beats to live for God's will and for his glory. You want to be like Jesus. That's at the very core of your new heart. That new heart recognizes its human desires, but is not controlled by them and the lies they bring. It beats for God's will and his glory.

In his book, *God Without Religion*, Andrew Farley wrote that we typically think we believe that we *should* live uprightly but that deep down we don't really want to. However, he wrote that because of the new life we have in Christ, "I dare you to consider the following thought: *I never really want to sin*...Sinning goes against everything in our being." He goes on to say that while we think sin is the stuff we want to do but aren't supposed to do in reality it's the last thing we want to do. *I never really want to sin*. That's the truth about me and if you are a believer in Christ it is the truth about you!

We have the Spirit of Jesus in us. We want what he wants. That's who we are in our deepest, truest part in Christ. That's our heart. We still have desires floating around. They are not wrong of themselves, but they lie to us about what life is all about and what fills it. Something still urges us to believe the lies, but we don't have to. We have a new heart that decides those desires will be submitted to God's will.

IMPLICATIONS

IF YOU HAVEN'T ALREADY, CHANGE YOUR MIND

I encountered some interesting research. One psychologist did a study in which he asked people to record their thoughts at points as they went through their day. An interesting pattern was revealed. What was found was that when people stopped and were quiet, had reflective moments, they by and large were aware of a vague sense of discontentment, of something lacking in their lives. In most cases they couldn't identify what they felt was lacking. They just knew something was wrong.

That awareness reminds us the old life is corrupted. It's not working. And that is borne out by the profusion of self-help books, seminars, articles, television shows, and philosophies floating around. People try to distract themselves from this

background discontentment by keeping insanely busy so they don't have to think about it or by pursuing excitement or pleasure or achievement thinking they can fill the lack with something. But that's just more of the same. That's pursuing another deceitful desire. It's going to have the same result. It is insane to keep doing the same thing over and over and expect a different result.

If you have been listening to those deceitful desires, chasing one after the other, good things all, but in the end finding your life is corrupted and you in fact are left with background discontentment, change your mind. I would say repent, but that might confuse the issue. Change your mind about where peace and joy come from. Put off that old life dominated by those old ways, and put on the new life that is alive to Jesus Christ.

REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE A NEW THING

If you put your faith in Jesus you are a new creation. This new thing is created according to the end of verse 24 "to be like God." This is not some new age idea that you are really God. Paul tells us what he means by being like God. It is living "in true righteousness and holiness."

That sounds religious and many people think that means obeying lots of rules. That's not at all what it means. Righteousness and holiness in the true biblical sense are very cool things. Today you describe someone as righteous or holy and people tend to think of someone who has a stick up his rear end and an expression on his face like he just bit into a rotten tomato. He looks down his nose at everyone around him and is sure to spoil a good time just by showing up. He's a person that non-religious people, people who like to have a good time, don't want to be in the same time zone with, much less the room.

Consider this: the most righteous and holy person who has ever lived was Jesus. How did the non-religious people of his day feel about him? The people who were viewed by religious people as the worst scum of their society flocked to Jesus. The religious people looked at him with that bit the rotten tomato look, but the prostitutes, the partiers, the outcasts, they loved him!

I don't have time today to do a whole sermon on righteousness and holiness, but I will tell you that they have to do with being whole, truly healthy, with being secure in who we are and being at peace. They have to do with being truly good, not in a phony sense, but the real thing. Good through and through in a way that people are drawn to. It also means knowing you have a special role to play in this world. You

are “set apart” for a significant purpose. Your life means something. At your core, this is your new life in Christ. This is who you are!

MAKE CHOICES OUT OF THE NEW

Living the new life of freedom in Christ sounds great, but I must warn you that it won't always be easy. There are going to be times when we will need to say no to our normal human desires because they are, in fact deceiving us, and must say yes to the desires that God has put in us that are unfortunately at times a little more muted.

In other words, we will have to make some hard choices that might feel like not much fun. But the truth is that we all understand that we make such choices all the time to get the life that we want. My mother came home one day in the week before Christmas with a box of doughnuts from VG's. Honestly VG's cannot compare with Smith's Bakery in Bakersfield, but they are the best that I've found in this area. They are awfully good, and for me, that's unfortunate.

At times people have told me how amazed they are at my discipline because I don't eat desserts much. It's not discipline. It takes no discipline for me to say no to most desserts because usually I don't like them. Go to a fancy restaurant, have them wheel the desert tray by and there won't be a thing on it that appeals to me at all. But there are some chinks in my armor. One of the big ones is doughnuts. I'm a sucker for doughnuts. Faced with a box of VG's doughnuts I become a culinary sinner. My philosophy becomes if you can see it, eat it.

As you know VG's is easily accessible. Given my addiction to doughnuts why don't I make a steady diet of them? I could buy them every day. I don't do that because if I did I would become larger than the Goodyear Blimp in short order. I might die a happy man, but the problem is I'd die, my system clogged with fat and cholesterol. So though I will give in and eat doughnuts occasionally, I don't make a steady diet of it. I desire them, but I desire something else more. I desire a healthy life and a reasonably fit body.

God has placed within us new desires, desires for righteousness and holiness, desires to be like him. Desires to fulfill his purpose for us in this world and do his will, desires to bring him honor in every thing we are, do and say. We still have our normal human desires, but those desires will be bounded by greater desires. We will say no to them at times because we desire to be like God even more.

The old life totally controlled by normal human desires, is corrupted. It doesn't function properly. The new life in Christ is full of the life of God, the God of joy, the God of peace, the God of hope, the God of love. Let's remember who we are, and go live out the new life that has been planted deep in our being.