

“Put on the New Self”

The Tenth in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

Texts: Ephesians 4:17-32; Genesis 1:26-31

Have you ever been camping or hiking for a week or so in the woods? What do you look forward to the most when you return to civilization? How about a shower and change of clothing? According to the Apostle Paul, the desire to wash off the crud and to be clean is exactly how we as Christians ought to feel as we go through the process of sanctification. Those who have been made alive by Christ, by grace through faith, should be as disgusted by the guilt of our sins as we are with the stench of dirt and sweat on our bodies. In fact, in Ephesians 4:17-32, Paul discusses the Christian life in terms of a change in clothing. Paul instructs us to take off the old self with its sinful desires, and to put on the new self which is formed in the image of God.

As we continue our series on Paul’s letter to Ephesians, we are working our way through Ephesians 4, as Paul sets out the practical application of those same doctrines he set out in the first three chapters of this Epistle. I have divided this chapter into three sections so as not to rush through this very important discussion of the Christian life. In verses 1-6, Paul discusses the importance of Christian unity—a unity which is grounded in our common confession of faith. “One Lord, one Faith, one baptism, one God and Father over all, in all and through all.” In verses 7-16, Paul discusses Christ’s ascent into heaven and the gifts given to Christ’s church in the form of those who preach, teach, evangelize and shepherd God’s people, so as to bring the saints (as individual members of the one body of Christ) to maturity. Because Christ’s body is one, when it works together as it should, the members of that body are built up in love. As individual Christians mature, they grow together and the body functions properly. But there is a paradox here as well. When the body functions properly, the individual Christians mature more quickly.

In verses 17-32, Paul describes what amounts to a theological change of clothing. In verses 17-19, Paul begins by discussing the effects of sin upon the human race through the fall of Adam. Adam’s fall is the source of that which Paul calls the “old self”—which is that sinful human nature (or the “flesh”) into which we were all born. In verses 20-24, Paul exhorts us to take off this old self and to put on a new self, which is being renewed in the image of God. Then, in verses 25-32, Paul describes the specific conduct which should result from putting on the new self. This includes things such as speaking the truth, doing honest work, guarding our speech, and loving our brothers and sisters in Christ, all the while remembering that since Jesus has forgiven us despite our many sins, so too, we are to forgive others with kindness and tenderheartedness. This is the goal (maturity) of that body of believers which is functioning well and which has been built up in love. Throughout this chapter (indeed, throughout this epistle), Paul places priority on sound doctrine as the basis for proper practice. In order to grow to maturity, we need to believe the right things about God and the human predicament.

As we take up verses 17-32 of Ephesians 4, we begin with a discussion of the effects of human sinfulness upon human thinking.

In verse 17, Paul returns to the theme set forth in the three verses which opened this chapter. Recall the opening words from this chapter. “*I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*” Here, in verse 17 Paul writes, “*Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles*

do, in the futility of their minds.” Walking is a metaphor for behavior. To walk in a manner worthy of our calling, we must stop walking as the Gentiles do (a negative injunction). When Paul gives us positive instruction (in Ephesians 4:1-3), he directs us to look to the grace of God extended to us through the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is not a stretch to say that if we want to see how to walk (or live the Christian life), we follow the example set for us by Jesus.

But when Paul speaks in terms of how we are *not* to walk (those things we must stop doing), he points us to the godless Gentiles. Don’t do what they do. Their thinking is futile. If this sounds familiar, it should. This is the same verdict Paul gave in Romans 1:21—*“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”* The Gentiles (as used here the term “Gentile” is a synonym for “pagan,” not merely a non-Jew), may strive for truth, but they never get there. The pagans not only have trouble identifying what is right and wrong (even though this is written upon their hearts), but they do not have the ability to live up to their own self-professed ideals.¹

The reason for this futility is given in verse 18. *“They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.”* The idea that human sinfulness effects our thinking is a prominent theme in Paul’s writings. This is what we call the noetic effects of sin (*nous* meaning mind). In Romans 1 (where Paul discusses this in much more detail than he does here), he puts it this way. *“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.”* The “they” are pagans. Because they do not acknowledge what they know be true (namely that God exists and that he has standards of right and wrong to which they are accountable), he gives them over to their own sinfulness. The image is that of a snowball, rolling downhill, picking up more mass and greater speed. In “giving them up,” God ceases to restrain the evil inherent within us, that so we act upon our basest instincts—almost always grounded in self-interest, greed and lust.

In Colossians 1:21, Paul describes the behavior of Christians before they came to faith. *“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds . . .”* In fact, in Ephesian 2:3, Paul has already described our own condition as common to fallen humanity—*“among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”* In 1 Timothy 4:2, Paul speaks of the human condition in terms of a “seared conscience.” People are by nature hostile toward God because God is holy and we are sinful.

Paul does not see the human condition through the rosy lens of most modern Americans who think that people are basically good, and if given the right information and left to their own devices they will probably do the right thing (or what seems right to them). Paul, on the other hand, is a realist. He knows that when people with seared consciences, hard hearts, and who are willfully ignorant of the truth, do what seems “right” to them, in almost every case they will do what is in their self-interest. The issue here is not intelligence or intellectual wattage. The issue is the sinful nature which causes us to distort, deny, or evade what God says about us and our condition. This is the condition into which we are all born.

To be darkened in understanding is not to be dumb. Rather, it is to refuse to submit to the truth God has revealed. We refuse to see it and embrace it. According to Jesus, *“the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil”* (John 3:13). To be

¹ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 355.

alienated from God is to reject his revelation and instead seek truth within—in other words, what we *feel* is the truth. And what we feel is the truth—apart from God’s revelation—is inevitably a distortion of the truth. To be ignorant in the sense Paul is speaking, is to accept human folly as wisdom, all the while rejecting God’s word. This comes from the sinful human heart, which hates the truth and which hates even more the demand that we submit all our thinking and doing to the will of God. Because we are sinners, we act as a law unto ourselves. This is what the Reformed speak of as “autonomy.”

In verse 19, Paul continues to unpack the horrible effects of human sinfulness. *“They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”* Because we willfully reject what we know to be true, we are guilty for doing so. In this we see the moral component of knowledge, rejecting the truth and accepting the lie. Over time, suppressing the truth becomes easier and easier. We become “calloused” to the truth as Paul describes it. We come to like the smell of our dirty body. We come to like the stains on our clothing. And because we reject the light of the revelation of God gives to us in his word, we give ourselves over to sensuality—which simply means that we sin without remorse or shame.

The slogan of my generation was “if it feels good, do it,” the very behavior Paul is calling out. Paul is primarily thinking of sexual immorality (sex before marriage, or sex outside of marriage), but the term extends beyond sexual sin to the attitude which says “it is all about what gives me pleasure and makes me happy right now.” Such people never seem to be satisfied (“greedy to practice every kind of impurity”—as Paul puts it) because these things bring a sort of passing pleasure, but can never bring true joy or lasting contentment. Trust me when I say that pastors frequently encounter people who have indulged themselves to the point of weariness, but who never find true happiness or joy in indulging themselves. Such people are worn out and are too tired to struggle with guilt. Sin has consequences.

But denying the truth and giving into sinful desires (the old self) is the way of all forms of paganism. Says Paul in verses 20-21, *“But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus.”* Obviously, Paul is speaking to Christian believers and reminding them of the fundamental changes in one’s mental and moral orientation when we become Christians. You didn’t learn about Jesus through denying the truth and indulging every bodily urge. You heard about the Savior through the truth—the gospel which was preached to you!

As Paul has already told us in the first chapter of this epistle, that truth of the gospel (the proclamation of the saving work of Jesus Christ) was applied to us by the Holy Spirit, who having called us to faith, seals us until the day of redemption (the resurrection at the end of the age). Having been made alive with Christ when we were dead in sin (regeneration), then raised and seated with Christ in heavenly places, we are, says Paul *“to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”*

In effect, Paul is telling us to change our spiritual clothing. We are to put off (take off) the old self, and put on the new self. We are to act like what we are.² We are no longer pagans. We are now Christians. Like a set of filthy clothes, we are to strip off that behavior associated with our former (and pagan) way of life—smelly and soiled from ignorance and hardness of heart—and we are to put on the new self, which is renewed after the image of Christ to whose image we are being conformed.

² Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 357.

There are some very important things here we need to clarify. While some speak of Christians as having two natures (a sinful nature and a new nature, the two natures duking it out inside of us), we have but one nature. When God made us alive with Christ, the old nature was made new. This occurs in regeneration, as the divine image, which was defaced and distorted by the fall, is renewed in Christ in true righteousness and holiness. Although Adam and Eve possessed this true righteousness and holiness before the fall (as recounted in the creation account, a portion of which we read during our Old Testament lesson), Adam and Eve lost this righteousness and holiness when the curse came upon the human race. We were born without this righteousness and holiness, making us by nature children of wrath (as Paul says in Ephesians 2:1-3). Once regenerate, this righteousness and holiness is progressively restored to us by virtue of our union with Christ.

Because regeneration brings about this “new self” of which Paul is speaking, the new self is the basis for the complete break with the former way of thinking and doing. From the new self springs the process of sanctification. And just as a freed slave has to learn to live as a freedman, so too, a Christian with a new nature has to learn how to behave as a Christian. For Paul, this change in nature involves a change in thinking. Our behavior changes because our orientation has changed from that of a pagan to a Christian. And because our orientation has changed, we are to self-consciously reckon ourselves dead to sin, but alive to God (the pattern of which is Christ’s death and resurrection which is signed and sealed to us in our baptism). Therefore, it is appropriate for Paul (and for us) to speak of this change in behavior in terms of a change in clothing. Now that we are Christians, we are to take off the old grave clothes (as one old preacher used to say), and put on the garments of righteousness (even though we already possess these garments because the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to us).

So, we take off the sweaty, dirty garments which characterize the old way of life. In other words, we stop doing those things associated with our former, corrupt manner of life with all of its sinful desires. We put on the righteousness garments given to us by Christ by both thinking and then acting like a Christian. In Romans 12:2, Paul puts it this way: *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* If we think like Christians (that is, we see things through the lens of Scripture), we will begin to act like Christians, and reflect in our conduct that righteousness which has already been imputed to us through faith.

Being the realist that he is, Paul now moves from the metaphor of changing our spiritual clothes to speak in very specific terms of what is associated with the old self, and what belongs to the new. Throughout what follows in verses 25-32, Paul lists one of the sins associated with the old self before contrasting that sin with the conduct that should replace it (the “new self”). The vice is contrasted with the virtue.

The first matter Paul discusses in verse 25 is falsehood and truth. *“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.”* Paul is citing from Zechariah 8:16. The old self is stained with lies. When we strip off the old self and put on the new, we are to cease from lying and instead become truth tellers. When Paul mentions the need to speak truth to our neighbor, he doesn’t say whether he is referring to a Christian or not, but he does appeal to the unity of the body as the reason why truth telling is so important. Speaking falsely (as we saw during our time in the Book of James), can do more damage than a forest fire. One lie can destroy someone’s entire life of integrity. Paul’s point is that Christians are to be characterized as truthful people. Our “yes” should mean “yes” and our “no” should mean “no.” If the old self is stained with lies, the new self should reflect the very same truth which unites us, which we confess in the creed, and which we now speak to others. We must strip off the lies, and put on the truth.

The next matter to be addressed is anger, and the need to resolve it so that it does not fester. In verses 26-27, Paul tells us *“be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.”* Readers of Ephesians have long asked what does Paul mean when he says “be angry, but do not sin.” It helps to know that Paul is citing from Psalm 4:4 and is probably making the point that there is such a thing as righteous indignation. In these cases, anger—as a response to that conduct which violates Scripture and which offends Christian sensitivities—may be justified. But as one writer reminds us, “there is a subtle temptation to regard my anger as righteousness indignation and other’s people’s anger as sheer bad temper.”³

Since this can be the case, our own anger (however righteous it may be) cannot be allowed to continue on for an indefinite period of time. In fact, Paul places a very practical time limit on us which prevents anger from degenerating into sin—the end of the day. If we let our anger spill over into subsequent days, the probability increases greatly that our “righteous indignation” is really sin in disguise. In any case, we are to strip off the stain of anger, and cloth ourselves in the knowledge that God will deal those who do wrong. As Paul reminds in Romans 12:19, *“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”* As we strip off anger, and determine to resolve things before they linger and fester, in doing so, we eliminate one of the most powerful of tools the devil uses to divide families, friends, and the church—the festering sore of anger.

Next on the list of stains associated with the old self is theft. Theft is a sin. Not only does Scripture teach that stealing is a sin, but it is one of the strongest elements of natural law. Try stealing from a thief, who will react indignantly when you take something from them, which they have stolen from someone else. Says Paul, *“Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.”* So, when we change our spiritual clothes, we must cease stealing that which does not belong to us. This is a comprehensive command and applies to all manner of things, such as the theft of time (from our employer), honest dealings with others (so that we don’t rip people off with false claims, lies, etc.).

At this point we see Paul’s doctrine of hard work—especially directed to men. Paul has no sympathy for people who are allergic to sweat—that is, people who don’t like to work and who are lazy. The new self should be characterized by hard work and good stewardship so that we are not consumers (who spend money we don’t have on things we don’t need), but producers. We are to work hard, live within our means, and share any extra we may have with those who may be in need. The old self is lazy and a thief. When we strip off the old self, we put on a biblical work ethic and become good stewards. Paul is rather passionate about this. In 1 Timothy 5:8, he writes *“but if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”* In 2 Thessalonians 3:10, he warns the lazy, *“if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”*

In verse 29, Paul takes up the subject of our speech. *“Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”* The old self spews forth vulgarity and slander, demonstrating contempt for both God and neighbor. The new self is to speak those things which build up Christ’s body, not which tear it down. We are to speak as “fits the occasion,” and to consider that our words can be a blessing (in the sense of being gracious) to others within the body of Christ. Proverbs 12:18, comes to mind. *“There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”* Paul’s point is that the speech from the old

³ Bruce, The Epistle to the Ephesians, 361.

self is aimed at doing others harm, while speech from the new self is anchored in the truth and builds up our brothers and sisters and does not tear them down.

Paul ends his series of contrasts by reminding us of the doctrine which lay at the heart of the need to reflect the new self, not the old self—namely our regeneration. In verse 30, he repeats his assertion from 1:13-14, and then makes the application which brings this discussion to its conclusion. *“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”* That conduct which springs from the new self builds up the body of Christ, preserves its unity and reflects a growing maturity which manifests itself in love. But that conduct which springs from the old self tears down, and not only eats away at our unity, but reflects the darkness, hardness and ignorance of a pagan heart. Such conduct grieves the Holy Spirit because the body of Christ is the temple of the Spirit. Conduct which eats away at the peace and unity of Christ’s body likewise grieves the Spirit who indwells the living temple.

Paul concludes his discussion of putting on the new self by summarizing the main points in the previous verses, before he reminds us the importance of keeping in mind that we are forgiven sinners ourselves. *“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”* The old self loves its own stench and dirt, thinking of this as righteousness—its really self-righteousness. But the new self sees the old self for what it is—it has no claims on Christ, and all that we have is a gift from God—a gift which we cannot earn and which we do not deserve. The old self smells of bitterness, anger, slander, while the new self understands that kindness and tenderness toward others is the best expression of that grace which God has given to us in Christ.

As we wrap up, what should we take with us from this passage?

The application is remarkably simple. We all stink and need to change our spiritual clothes. The old man has spiritual b.o. and bad breath. The old man has spiritual gravy stains and caked-on dirt and grime. The old man lies, steals, is lazy, speaks evil, and loves darkness rather than light. The old self is willfully ignorant of the things of God, is hard of heart, and even when it indulges its basest desires, ends up in a state of futility. The way most religions attempt to deal with spiritual stench of the old self is to either teach that the stench is really not a stench, or that religious ceremonies, rituals, self-denial, or more rules and regulations is the solution to the problem.

For Paul, the solution is the gospel. Yes, Paul commands us to strip off the old self, because we have been made alive in Christ. The law tells us that the spiritual stench is really a stench, a stench which is far worse than we think because we’ve become accustomed to it. But Paul doesn’t just tell us to take off the old self, he also points to a complete cleansing and the most glorious set of clothing imaginable. Remember the story in Zechariah 3 of Joshua the high priest, whose sin Satan brought to the attention of the Lord? And what was the Lord’s response to Satan’s accusations against one of God’s own. *“Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Remove the filthy garments from him.’ And to him he said, ‘Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.’ And I said, ‘Let them put a clean turban on his head.’ So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the Lord was standing by.”* Beloved, Jesus Christ has already washed away the spiritual stench and clothed us with his own perfect righteousness (the image in Zechariah 3). No doubt, this is in the back of Paul’s mind when he uses the image of a change in clothing.

And because God has given us the garment of the righteousness of Christ through faith, let us make it our

practice to daily strip off the old self, and put on the new self, which is being renewed in the image of Jesus Christ. Just like we take a shower and put on clean clothes, let us take off the old self. Then, let us speak the truth and guard our tongues, deal with our anger, work hard, and strive to build up our neighbor. In doing this, we reflect the righteousness which Jesus has already imputed to us through faith, a righteousness which is a sweet smell to our neighbor and which delights our father in heaven. Amen.