

**“A Change of Clothes”**  
**Ephesians 4:17-24**  
**March 22, 2015**

---

**INTRODUCTION:**

Paul has just urged the Ephesians to pursue church unity so they can mature as a church. Now he turns his attention to purity, which is just as important as unity. An impure church is like salt that has lost its saltiness. Having lost its distinctiveness, it is about as valuable as sand. Paul’s command to pursue purity is dominated by this metaphor of putting off old clothes and putting on new ones. This metaphor is rich in instruction to us about how God changes us. For example, we learn from this that growth in purity is more about an approach to life than a behavior. I say that because taking off one set of clothes and putting on another is a matter of absolutes rather than of degree. That is, you are either wearing a particular shirt, or you’re not wearing that shirt. There are no degrees of wearing or not wearing. That’s why Paul must not be speaking here just about behaviors, because our behaviors do have degrees.

A related truth we learn from this metaphor of putting off the old man and putting on the new is that we don’t get purity incrementally. No one gets dressed incrementally. You don’t put one sleeve of your shirt on and two hours later put the other sleeve on. Similarly, to approach sin in such an incremental way will not work. If you have a problem with shoplifting, you don’t say, “Last year I shoplifted ten times. My goal this year is to cut that in half and only shoplift five times.” What’s needed is a more radical change of attitude, a change that will lead to putting off such an approach to life that results in shoplifting and putting on a different approach to life. As we are going to see, the approach Paul calls for, the only one that will lead to purity, is one that involves a direct and personal encounter with Jesus.

If you belong to Jesus, God has put in your heart a desire to be pure and holy. Let’s consider now what he says about how we are to go about that as we look at this putting off and putting on.

**I. Putting Off the Old Man Through Repentance**

Paul wants the Ephesians to make a complete break with their former manner of life prior to their conversion. He goes on to describe in some detail this life, and it is very bleak. Christianity is often criticized for being too dark and pessimistic about human nature. There is no doubt that Paul’s description of humanity’s natural state is not bright and sunny. Before looking in detail at his description, let’s respond to this criticism that Christianity is overly

pessimistic. There are at least two reasons it is important for us to take this to heart, no matter how negative it is.

The first reason is that it is an accurate description of our central problem. Before there can be any healing of a potentially fatal disease, there must be an accurate diagnosis. Sin works in our lives like undiagnosed cancer, working quietly to destroy until it's too late to do anything about it. But unlike many cancers, once the problem of sin is diagnosed and received, there is a one hundred percent cure rate for any who receive the medicine of the gospel of Jesus. It is only those who refuse to receive this medicine who think the Christian view of human nature is too dark. It's not hard to understand this. A doctor who diagnoses a disease for which there is no cure will not want to go into detail about the ugliness of the disease. But if there is a complete cure, he will not be so bashful about describing the disease in its full ugliness. It is a bad news/good news situation in which the good news completely obliterates the bad news.

The second reason for this bleak view of human nature is that we must learn to hate sin in order to put off the old man. Suppose you're sleeping in your bed and feel something smooth and leathery at your feet. You're half asleep, and it feels kind of nice on your feet. If you were fully awake, your response would be quite different. It's actually a large rattlesnake that has crawled into your bed for warmth. Being fully aware, you will want to separate yourself from that snake as quickly as possible. Similarly, Paul wants us to be aware that sin is far more destructive than a venomous snake, that we might put it off through repentance. So let's look more carefully at sin and the way it works in people's lives.

Paul begins with a description of two things happening in the minds of sinners. There is futility and darkness. A futile mind is one that values the wrong things. It gives itself to things that promise life but never are able to deliver life. The Bible calls these idols. The futile mind is the idolatrous mind, resulting in the giving of oneself to a path that will only disappoint. It is the person who believes that life will work if he only has enough money. But no matter how much money he manages to accumulate, it never seems like enough. This futility is expressed well in the account of King Sisyphus in Greek mythology. Because of his pride and deception, Sisyphus was punished by Zeus by making him roll a large stone up a steep mountain. But Zeus had cast a spell on the stone, making it roll back down the mountain just before reaching the top, forcing Sisyphus to start all over again. That is the futility of the idolatrous life, always striving for life and satisfaction and finding it just out of reach.

Why don't people see this futility of idolatry for what it is? Because their minds are darkened, they keep pursuing the same futile paths expecting a different result. They are like the Syrians who came to capture the prophet

Elisha because he was telling Israel's king every move made by the Syrian king, thus allowing the king of Israel to escape from the Syrians. At first, the king of Syria thought there was a traitor in his midst. But when told that it was the doing of the prophet Elisha, he sent his army to capture Elisha in the city of Dothan. Elisha prayed, **"Please strike this people with blindness"** (2 Kings 6:18). The Lord did so, after which Elisha went out and said to the army, **"This is not the way, and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek"** (v. 19). They gladly followed Elisha right into Israel's capital city, Samaria. They were essentially captured at that point, having marched into capture of their own will for the simple reason of their blindness. That's exactly what our sin has done to us.

The next element in this description of our fallen state is hardness of heart, a reference to willful stubbornness. It is such hardness that Paul says is the cause of the ignorance and the darkened understanding. This perspective challenges our ideas about the mind and the heart. We tend to think that the mind is in the driver's seat of our lives, leading us to do those things that are rational and make sense. But the Bible's view is different, saying that it is the heart that is in the driver's seat. We don't always act in accordance with what makes sense, but we act in accordance with what the heart wants. What that means is this. Those who conclude that atheism is correct haven't reached that conclusion by a neutral process of reasoning. Rather, their reason has been affected by what they want. They don't want God in their lives, thus allowing them to do what they want. As a result of this desire, they find persuasive the arguments against God.

The final step is despondency and hopelessness that leads them to live for momentary pleasure. The word translated "callous" in our versions really should be translated "despondent." They have become despondent, which results in becoming **"greedy to practice every kind of impurity"** (v. 19). When life no longer has meaning, things get reduced to whatever a person thinks will bring pleasure. And they become "greedy" in the pursuit of such pleasure. They give themselves to sensuality, which indicates a kind of commitment. Their answer to strong desire is to give in to it, which serves not to reduce the desire but to strengthen it. Paul reflects here an understanding of the addictive nature of sin. When sinners give themselves to sinful pleasure, whether it's the pleasure of success or of sexual fulfillment, it is all characterized by a self-centeredness that destroys community and ultimately dehumanizes people.

The progression we read of here is the same one Paul described in Romans 1. There, he spoke of ungodliness that leads to unrighteousness. Here, he speaks of the futility of idolatry that leads to destructive sensuality. In both cases, the feature that lies at the heart of our sinfulness and at the heart of the old man that we are to put off is ungodliness. We don't want God in our lives as God, as the one to whom we submit ourselves. We are happy to have him in

our lives as co-pilot, taking directions from us about the destination we have in mind for ourselves. But we don't want him present as King and Ruler.

So Paul's instruction about this is to put off this old man like we would take off a filthy set of clothes. We are to hate our sin and remove it through repentance. We are not to seek to tame our sin. It is as untamable as a cat. I heard an interview a while back with an animal trainer for Hollywood movies. When asked how he trains cats, he said that you can't train cats. You simply have to find a cat who already wants to do what you need it to do. That's the way it is with our sinful nature. It cannot be tamed, but must be discarded through repentance. Repentance is our friend, not an unwelcome intruder.

## II. Putting on the New Man Through the Renewing of the Mind

It is not enough to cast off the old through repentance. A new man must be put on. Our need is **“to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness”** (v. 24). Note that this new self or new man is not something we are required to make, but something God has created. We don't have to sew our own new clothes, but simply wear what God has already created for us. Paul's use of that word “created” takes us back to Genesis 1 and 2, where we see the mighty word of God creating the heavens and earth. This teaches us that at the heart of our purity of life is not learning to achieve something but learning to receive something God has created. We are to receive and put on this new man. Another phrase from the creation account of Genesis is “the likeness of God.” Just as God created Adam and Eve after his likeness, so he now creates this new man after his likeness.

How is it exactly that we put on this new man created by God after his likeness? The previous verse speaks a little more specifically about this by saying that it comes through renewal in the spirit of our minds. The verb is a present passive infinitive. The present tense indicates something that happens continually. The passive means that the action is done by another. The idea is that we are to continually have our minds being renewed.

So what does it mean to continually have our minds renewed? Verses 20 and 21 give us the heart of this in an unusual way they are worded. **“But that is not the way you learned Christ!”** It doesn't say “the way you learned *about* Christ.” That would be the normal way we speak. We don't normally refer to learning a person, but rather speak of learning about a person. To speak of learning Christ instead of learning *about* Christ speaks of the importance of a relationship with Jesus. To put on the new man is to enter into a relationship with Jesus and to love Jesus. Christianity is not just about following the teachings of Jesus, but first of all about following Jesus. You can't reject Christ and take Christianity.

Essential to this relationship with Jesus is to listen to Jesus. Verse 21 goes on to say, **“assuming you have heard about him.”** The New American Standard is a better translation here because it reflects the fact that there is no preposition. It translates the phrase, **“if indeed you have heard him.”** But Paul is writing these words several decades after the life of Jesus, and probably all the Ephesians were converted after Jesus had ascended into heaven. How could Paul say that they have heard Jesus? He means that they have heard Jesus through the teachings of the Apostles like Paul. God has worked through his Word to speak into their hearts. Through the living word of God the living Jesus comes to them and speaks to them.

God calls us to purity of life and brings it to us through a person and not through a law. I like what Alexander Maclaren says about this passage. “The sum of all duty, the height of all moral perfectness, the realized ideal of humanity, is in Christ, and that the true way to know what a man... ought to do is to study Him... How blessed it is that all the harshness of ‘Obey this law or die’ is by His life changed into ‘Look at Me, and, for My love’s sake, study Me and be like Me!’” One of the biggest reasons we don’t experience the power of God to change our lives is that we are trying to train our sinful nature with the law, when what we should be doing is taking off the sinful nature and putting on the new man through close fellowship with Jesus. We want three steps to conquer some sin when what we really need is a fresh encounter with Jesus to love us and give us his new identity.

## **CONCLUSION:**

We are going to consider in next week’s passage the way this works out in reference to four specific sins: lying, anger, stealing and what Paul calls “corrupting talk.” So let me close by choosing a different sin than one of these four and walking us through this putting off and putting on process as it relates to that sin. So let’s look at the sin of laziness. How do we put off laziness? We must first learn to hate it that we might repent of it. We learn to hate it by seeing the idolatrous futility of it. When we are being lazy, we are trying to enter our rest on our terms instead of by God’s terms. Instead of providing rest, it is futile and only makes things worse. It then leads to many other kinds of sins. We may start lying to excuse our lack of being able to accomplish much of anything. We may start speaking ill of others because they do get a great deal done and they make us feel guilty. As we see what is at stake, we repent of this sin and put it off. Then we remember Jesus. He says to you, “I love you and I forgive you fully. Follow me instead of trying to provide your own rest. I know how to bring you into rest even through the scary challenges you may be tempted to run from. Venture forth in trust, follow me, and find rest for your soul.” Can you hear Jesus speaking to you?