

## Ephesians 4.17-24

### Put off the Old, Put on the New

In the book of Leviticus there are a series of laws relating to holiness and uncleanness. “Unclean” was not so much a hygienic concern as it was a religious concern. Even when it came to the surface ailment usually translated “leprosy” in English Bibles, the concern was more religious than medical. To be unclean was to be cut off from the gracious presence of God dwelling among His people. So, this unclean skin disease was a judgment from God, such as we see in the case of Miriam, who was struck with this uncleanness when she opposed Moses. In Leviticus 14.33ff there are instructions on what to do if this disease is found on one’s house. The priest is to inspect. On determining that it is the unclean disease, the house is to be closed and unoccupied for seven days. If the disease has spread in those seven days, then the stones in which the disease is found are to be removed, and the entire inside of the house is to be scraped. Then the house is to be shut up again. At the end of seven days, if there is no spreading disease then the house is declared clean. If the disease persists, then the house is to be totally destroyed and carried away.

This is an apt illustration of the plight of humanity. We have a persistent disease—in fact, a death—that clings to the soul. In our therapeutic culture, we like to think that we can remove a few stones, those that are most offensive, and give a thorough scraping to the others, and in seven days or seven years or twelve steps later all is well. Sadly, the human condition is far more radically evil than any of our cures can affect. Oh, we can mask some of the undesirable symptoms of our depravity, but it is not in our power to remove the disease. Demolition of the person is required in order to remove the offense. But this is exactly what we are trying to avoid. We can’t settle for death, can we? And yet this demolition is part of God’s solution to our plight. Perhaps the most famous expression of this reality is Paul’s declaration in Galatians 2.20, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” Similarly, he says in Galatians 6.14, “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” An “I” has been destroyed! Paul doesn’t say merely that certain sins or parts of his life have been put to death. He says, “I have been crucified with Christ. I no longer live.” What’s more, in Romans 6.6 Paul says that this is the case for all who would be free from sin: “We know that our old man was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing.” The only way to deal with the disease that infects every pore of our being and separates from the life of God is to die—to be destroyed—but not just destroyed—to be crucified with Christ; because, as we are united with Christ in His death, we are also united with Him in the resurrection from the dead. This is true *ultimately* at the second coming of Christ, when our bodies will be raised from the grave and transformed from corruptible bodies to incorruptible bodies. It is true *now* in the regeneration of the soul. What was destroyed was a house riddled in every beam and fixture and joint and plaster with persistent uncleanness. What is raised in its place is a holy temple, a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. What Paul tells us here in Ephesians 4.17-24 is that as God’s children we have a new, Truth-based person that produces a new walk. We are going to follow the contrasts made in this text between the old and new walk, the old and new person, and the old and new relation to God. As we view these stark contrasts we will find heart-searching examination as well as encouragement from these verses. The examination will help us discern whether

we are living as old men or new men. The encouragement comes from the fact that if anyone is in Christ he *is* a new creation. Again, be what you are.

**The old walk versus the new walk.** Paul tells us no longer to walk or behave as the Gentiles do. “No longer” indicates that the readers had lived like this before their conversion to Christ. Now, outwardly our lives may have appeared very different than what Paul will describe as the Gentile life. No doubt Paul knew of many Gentiles who also objected to the debauchery of their societies. Would he condemn them along with those whose behavior he describes here? I believe he would because he teaches in his letter to the Romans that no one truly does good. People may do things relatively good, that is, when compared to their neighbor’s behavior. But no one “seeks God; all have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Rom 3.11-12). Our behavior is certainly curbed by our environment, but every human being is totally depraved, and in need of moral and spiritual transformation. This means that, as Isaiah said, even our righteous deeds are like filthy rags in God’s sight (64.6). So, how does Paul describe the old walk? Verse 19 says that they “have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” The word translated “sensuality” by the ESV is often used of sexual immorality, thus the translation “sensuality.” Yet the word is a bit more general, communicating the idea of indecency. It refers to shocking behavior that is usually restrained. So, the idea is “unrestrained.” This lack of self-control is further elucidated with further description of “greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” The Gentiles, says Paul, practically make a vocation out of coveting filthy experiences. In verse 22 he refers to this former way of life as corrupt. Like rust on iron, lust devours the soul, whether sexual lust, desire for power, vain-glory, or whatever we make our god.

Instead of this, Paul says that the new way of life is characterized by “righteousness and holiness.” Righteousness means living according to the standard of God’s law, following in the steps of Jesus, being led by the Holy Spirit. The Christian life does have an objective standard. God’s law is the revelation of His will. The promise of the New Covenant was not a promise of a lawless covenant. It was a promise that the law would be written on our hearts. Jesus said that He did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Matt 5.17). So we have the law written in the Scriptures and on our hearts. We have it embodied in Jesus Christ. And we have the Holy Spirit who comes from Christ indwelling us and leading us in this way. Beloved, Christians should not fear the law. We should love it and rejoice in it as the Psalmist in Psalm 119. The longest chapter in the Bible is a song of praise for God’s righteous law. The righteous man of Psalm 1 meditates on God’s law day and night. When you hang a picture in your house, you like it to be straight, right? This makes it more aesthetically pleasing to you and your guests. But what do you do when the level shows that it is crooked? Do you despise the level and throw it out? “You vile level, all you are good for is showing me what is out of line!!” That would be ridiculous. Well, God’s law is like a level, it shows us where we are out of line. Now the level was not made to fix the problem, only to reveal it. But we don’t despise the level for not being able to do something it wasn’t made to do. Paul says that the law is not able to fix us. Does that mean that the law is no good? Of course not! It is able to show us what is out of line with God’s righteousness. Then we repair to Jesus for forgiveness and power for godliness.

The other word that Paul uses is “holiness.” This refers especially to the humble and reverent attitude of the heart toward God that is evident in one’s conduct. We live in a profane society where nothing is sacred except for humanity’s right to commit sacrilege. But, our conduct is to honor God. The third commandment says “Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.” We are not to treat God as some light matter. All of our conduct and conversation should display the weightiness and glory of our God. And when we hear God being made light of in this world it should provoke us more than if they said the vilest thing about our precious children or about our mothers. What would be wrong with saying, “Dear sir or Dear lady, if you don’t care for your own soul, at least have pity on me; because the way you are talking about my Jesus is killing me. If you knew Him as I know Him you wouldn’t speak this way of Him. He is the most tender and compassionate friend who laid down His life for His friends. Now, I confess that I don’t honor Him as He deserves and as I ought. And I thank you for reminding me of this. So will you help me to hold Him in high esteem by not treating Him with contempt?” Please, tell me that we can be holy without being “holier than thou.” Sometimes people go to the extreme of avoiding being “holier than thou” and give up entirely on living reverently before the face of God. The choice is not between “holier than thou” and irreverence, is it? Can we not be holy without being high minded? In fact, isn’t true holiness the very opposite of high mindedness? Can we not communicate the sacred glory of Christ without being of a censorious spirit?

“In righteousness and holiness” versus “have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” But these old and new walks are merely the product of the old and new men or persons.

**The old person versus the new person.** The “old man” is humanity in Adam. The “new man” is humanity in Christ. That old man in Adam was not just poorly behaved, he was ill disposed. His whole person was bent on rebellion. Paul lays out a chain of cause and effect that begins in the heart or seat of the affections and intellect and works itself out in behavior. Futility comes from darkness which comes from ignorance which is due to hardness of heart. In contrast to this old man, Paul describes the new man as one who has been to the school of Christ. The Christian has “learned Christ,” “heard Him” and has been “taught in Him.” Being taught in Him refers to the sphere of existence in which the student has learned Christ. In this case, it is in vital union with Christ. Furthermore, he has been taught according to the truth as it is in Jesus—and that’s pure truth. In verse 24 a more faithful translation of the Greek would read “created after the likeness of God in righteousness and holiness *from the truth.*” “From the truth” gives the origin of this new person. This new person is born “from the truth.” This is the truth, verse 21, as it is in Jesus. So, Christians are born from the truth and then taught the truth in the context of their union with Christ.

The old man has futility of mind while the new man has a mind being renewed by truth. This does not mean that unbelievers are stupid. There are some very intelligent unbelievers who have produced literary masterpieces, made brilliant scientific discoveries in medicine and technology, and won political debates. And yet their minds are futile because, in their minds, all of this knowledge of the world does not answer to the end for which God created the world. Children, why did God make you and all things? Right! “for His own glory.” Without this knowledge, the understanding is darkened. So the child who

delights in the twinkling stars because in them she hears the witness of the heavens for God's glory and the proclamation of the skies for God's handiwork, has more true light on the subject than, say, a Richard Dawkins who says, "It is time to leave superstition behind and embrace the beauty and challenges of the world without supernatural beings." Carl Sagan may have begun his famous "Cosmos" series with the words, "The Cosmos is all that is, ever was, and ever will be. Our contemplations of the cosmos stir us." But the bankruptcy of his philosophy is evident from the fact that he wants people to take up the cause of preserving the earth's environment with a sense of moral responsibility. But moral obligation is necessitated by a lawgiver and judge, not by impersonal forces.

The great minds of this age who reject the knowledge of God are much more sophisticated in their suppression of the truth than their ancient, pagan counterparts, but they have accomplished essentially the same thing. "They became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. . . . They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!" (Rom 1.21-25). What Paul called "foolish hearts" in Romans, he calls "hardness of heart" and callousness in Ephesians. Man's ignorance of God does not result from any deficiency in God's witnesses—whether in creation or in the written Word of God. Man's ignorance of God is the result of a heart hardened against God. This is the heart of Pharaoh who said to Moses, "Who is the LORD that I should listen to Him? I do not know the LORD. Nor will I let the people go." Pharaoh was saying more than that he hadn't heard of this particular deity. He was saying, "I don't recognize the authority of this God over me and my kingdom." But God had told Moses: "When I'm done with him, Egypt will know that I AM THE LORD." In other words, Egypt would recognize God's authority in the end.

The Christian, who has put on the new man lives differently than the old man because he has been to the school of Christ—he has learned Christ, been taught in Christ, been born from the truth. His will is informed by the light of Christ. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4.6: "*For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*" This knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus leads us to look for the light of God's glory in all things. All of creation exists for the glory of God. History progresses toward the goal of the glory of God. All true knowledge is connected by this *telos* or purpose. Calvin said that the natural man is lost in a labyrinth to which he does not possess the plan. Man gropes helplessly trying to find his way. But his only salvation is that God would give Him the guidance of the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Spirit as a schoolmaster to open his eyes. With these the labyrinth is transformed from a maze of confusion into a garden full of vistas of the glory and majesty of the Lord. Knowing the truth as it is in Jesus allows us to see all things as they exist for the glory of God. When I say "all things" I mean even our afflictions. When we think rightly our conduct is transformed accordingly. "If you abide in My word," said Jesus, "you are truly My disciples. And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8.31-32). But this new person is defined as much by a relationship as by a new nature.

The old relation to God versus the new relation to God. The old relation to God is referred to as "alienated from the life of God." The old man is separated from God and cut off from the life that He gives. God is a stranger to the lost, unregenerate person. This is why his understanding is darkened and

his mind is futile. In contrast, the new man is “created in the likeness of God.” Now this may make us think merely of getting a new heart and a renewed mind, but it is more than that. It of course recalls the original creation account in which man is made in the image of God. In Genesis the image of God is relational. Just as Adam bore Seth in his own image and likeness, indicating a relationship of sonship, so Adam was created in the image and likeness of God. In the Fall, when Adam rebelled against his Creator this image was marred as man became alienated from the life of God. Now, in Christ Jesus, the image has been restored—man is reconciled to God so that we can say “Our Father which art in heaven.” Just as the old man was the you in Adam, the new man is the you in Christ. We don’t “walk as the Gentiles” because now we walk with God. We converse with God in prayer and hear His voice in Holy Scripture. We experience the faithfulness of God as we trust Him through life’s varied circumstances. We enjoy the deliverances of God from sin. We are pleased to know the comfort of God in our trials. We receive His benevolences as personal kindness. We have a new man and a new way of life because we have a new relationship to God as our Father. You are God’s child. Now live like it!

*“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:5–10).*

You may be saying to yourself: “I think I am a new person in a living relationship with God, but I seem to see a lot of the old man in me.” Notice that Paul says in Colossians, “since you have put off the old and put on the new, therefore, put to death what is earthly in you.” All things are new, but that new man is not complete yet. There is the increasing working out of this new life. There is a call to war to put to death the characteristics of the old and continue to be renewed in the spirit of your mind. The good news is that you are not fighting a losing battle. In Christ you are new. You have a new, vital relationship with God, a new existence born from truth, and a new walk—a walk with God.

Benediction:

*“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24, ESV)*