
Someone Old, Someone New

Ephesians 4:17-24³

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Illustration of a wedding -

Weddings bring about great changes in life. It is a big transition, a new name, new relationships, new realities, new responsibilities...

One of the old wedding traditions is of giving something old and something new. This tradition comes from an Old English rhyme ("Something Olde, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue, A Sixpence in your Shoe"). The bride is given four objects that the bride to add to her wedding outfit or to carry with her with her on the big day. It reminds her of something from the old life and something for the new life...

This idea is the old and the new is at the core of the Bible's teaching on how we are to live the Christian life. The way we live as Christians is governed both by who we are and by what God requires. They are inter-connected. Understanding both helps us to grow in our aim to reach doctrinal stability and spiritual maturity.

In the paragraphs just before ours this morning, some of the purposes for our loving and living and serving together are given. Through the abilities God has given us, and the enabled leaders He has given us, we are being equipped to serve each other and to grow up in Christ. Through our speaking and serving, God brings unity, stability and maturity.

Now that our purpose is settled, Paul turns to how that purpose is achieved. These admirable goals have to actually transform the way we think and live. Pursuing that purpose, we take up a critical text for understanding the Christian life.

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What is Old and Past

(v.17-19)

It is foundational to our living together as believers that we do not live as the world does in our relationships.

¹⁷ 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. 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. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

In its Command

(v.17a)

Paul signals that he is now moving from our character to our conduct. He is highlighting that what he is about to say is important. Furthermore, it is “in the Lord”. In other words, this is binding on all Christians. If you are “in the Lord” then what follows is the Apostolic commands for you.

We are commanded to live differently from the world, the unbelievers around us. See the “must” there? This is a strong imperative. It is not intended to be heard as a suggestion or even as wise counsel. This is a from-heaven-through-the-Apostle command to us. We must no longer conduct our lives like the unbelieving pagans. I want to clearly affirm that we believe that the New Testament has a way of life that is both commanded and involves obedience to commands. Every time you see a phrase in the New Testament that begins with “Let us” or “You must” you are hearing a command. Now the Bible never separates who we are from what we are to do. But neither does the Bible ever, ever give us who we are without telling us what it means for living. And often what it means comes to us in the form of commands to be obeyed.

All obedience is active. There is no such thing as “passive” obedience. Obedience does not just happen in the Christian’s life. Obeying God’s command is an intentional effort on our part that is enabled by grace. Truly obeying God flows from our response to God’s enabling grace. We receive the ability to obey the commands of God when we hear the commands of God. (John Owen)

Our obedience is the fruit of faith. We believe God. We believe Him when He tells us who we are and what that means. We believe Him when He says He gives us the power to do what He requires. We believe when what He says are commands. So behaving is the fruit believing bears.

In its Cause

(v.17b-18)

We are not being different from the world just to be different. We are not looking at what the world is doing now do something different just so that we are not like the world. We don’t just wear our hair different. We don’t just wear different clothes. No, it is a difference that is grounded in truth and values. The way pagans live is flows out of who they are, the way they think and how they behave. It is a world view and life values that are being lived. You see, there is a sort of ordinary way that unbelievers live. Over against that is the ordinary way that believers are to live.

The reason we are different in our relations is because of what their lifestyle comes from. There is a deep darkness in their minds because of ignorance and depravity. Their way of processing life (understanding) arises from their being alienated from the life of God and therefore ignorant of the light that comes through the truth. Their thinking is futile, dark, ignorant, stubborn ending in hardness of heart.

So we are not to live like they live because we do not think as they do.

In its Course

(v.19)

Here is the deadening, hardening effect of their course of life. Losing their sensitivity (sense of shame) they are given over to sensuality, hungering for more and more impurity. They are never satisfied and seek ever more ways of fulfilling their pleasures. The darkness of evil ways of thinking leads to ever deepening spirals of sensual and carnal conduct.

We must not live like the pagan because our course of life is to be different. Because of who we are as Christians, what God has done in saving us through the cross, we are to be growing in practical righteousness and holiness and wisdom. This is exactly the opposite course as the world.

Where does the pagan thinking and living come from? A hardened heart. What is the result of the unbelieving lifestyle? A hardened conscience.

What is New and Present

(v.20-24)

But this is not true of us now. This is not who we are or how we are to live now.

²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

We have present commands based on past facts. (Stott) We are to obey the commands God has given. But we do it in faith. We are to live differently in our thinking and in our conduct. We used to be in ignorance, darkness and blindness – now we are walking in truth.

How We Learn It**(v. 20-21)**

I want to highlight the three verb phrases in these verses and think about them. I am deeply indebted to John Stott for what I have learned from these paragraphs.

You learned Christ

Christ is the substance of our teaching. He is our primary subject. Who He is, what He has done, and how we are related to Him are what we must learn and know.

Christ is the person we know through our teaching. The point of speaking the truth in love about Christ is so that people will grow in their relationship to Him.

You heard Him

Notice that I have taken out the word "about". It is not in the original. In the teaching of the Word you are hearing Christ. He is speaking. The Word of God is living. The Word of God is speaking. Christ is speaking in the Word. When someone is speaking the Truth in love you are hearing the Lord Jesus speaking.

You were taught in Jesus

The change here to Jesus indicates that the teaching points to Christ as the fullness of the thinking and living that is being called for here. This is not merely referring to the gospels, the first 4 books of the Bible. This is referring to the whole Bible in how it explains Jesus as the embodiment of God, the fulfillment of God's promises and the One who pleased God in all ways at all times.

So Christians must be taught and they must learn some Christ centered truths in order to not live like the pagans. These Christ-centered truths transform our way of thinking and living. Now almost all Christians agree with this. There are some basic things that need to be taught to new or immature believers that are necessary for their growth.

What troubles me is what is in the booklets for new Christians or beginning discipleship. It is almost always important disciplines for spiritual growth. But not one that I have found over 37 years of ministries has included what Paul teaches us in the next paragraph. While Christian disciplines are important, Biblical truths are way more important. At the minimum, every book for new Christians should have a chapter that teaches the truths that Paul assumes every new believer is being taught. We know what these are by the two or three times he says, "Since you have been taught..." and "What, don't you know..."

How We Live It

(v. 22-24)

²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

What then is the truth that Paul taught the Ephesian church and expected them to recall and is fundamental to practical Christian living? John Stott puts it this way, “To ‘learn Christ’ is to grasp the new creation which he has made possible, and the entirely new life which results from it. It is nothing less than putting off our old humanity like a rotten garment and putting on like clean clothing the new humanity recreated in God’s image.”¹

The truth that is taught in Jesus is what has happened to us. Here, in these verses, to put off and to put on *are not commands*. This is what happened to us when we were converted. The verbs here point to something decisive that has happened once for all. Later on, we will be commanded to be putting on and putting off our sinful attitudes and actions. But here, this is what God did for us at our conversion. This is the basis for what we are to do. What God requires of us later, He has already done for us in the past.

What is that? The old self, the old person we were which was corrupted (depraved) and belonged to the old realm was put away. The new self, the new person we are was created in God’s likeness, in true righteousness and holiness. This is the same teaching as Colossians 3, Romans 6-7 and Galatians 5. At our conversion, God stripped off the old clothes of depravity corrupted by the world. He birthed us again from above through the Spirit so that we are a new person clothed in His own righteousness and holiness. The underlying truth here is the same; the analogy is different. In other texts Paul talks about death and resurrection. In some He talks about a change in location, in realms. Here he talks about a change in our clothing.

So there is a radical change in who we are that then is sustained by an ongoing renewing of the mind. The new person we are, is growing into maturity as God changes the way we think. Initially, there is radical reorientation of our thinking that is then sustained and applied through the Christian life.

Transformed and Transforming



Here is the “both-and” of this text. There is something God has done in taking off the old person and putting on the new person. And there is a process you are involved in by which you are becoming in this world who you truly are. At the center of that process is changing how you think.

Now, is all this new and foreign to you? If so, then listen and listen and listen some more. Think, apply, write it down. This is the most fundamental truth you need to know. It is rarely taught in churches today. The result is that Christian living falters and fails because it is being attempted *through the means of flesh, namely law, self-effort, legalism, mysticism*. All of these belong to the old realm. You cannot live the Christian life by the old. You must live the Christian life by the new. Transforming maturity comes through believing and living the truth. *But you cannot believe and live truth you do not know*. This is why we teach this. This is why we spend so much time showing you Christ, listening to Him in His Word and insisting that this is the truth as it is in Christ.

So, in an ongoing change of the way we think, we are to grow into the decisive completed actions or truths of the past. The old self has been put off and the new put on and this is fleshed out in a constantly being renewed mind.

Reflect and Respond

I want you to go away with three simple coins in your pocket.

Believe what you are being taught. It is critical to your growth into stability and maturity...

Study these things out for yourself. Memorize them. Diagram them. Write them on your hearts. You have put off the old person you were. You have put on the new person God has called you to be. The old is gone; the new has come.

By grace, engage in the process God has for you. This is what the rest of this series will be about. By speaking the truth in love we aim to enable you to grow up into stability and maturity.

Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, a sixpence in your shoe? No, someone old, someone now new. Something given, someone becoming and grace in your heart.

¹ Stott, John R. W. *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*. The Bible Speaks Today. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979. p. 180.