

Ephesians 4:31-32

Introduction

Paul has been giving us some specifics of how we ought to be gladly living out the reality of the “new man” – the one created according to God in righteousness and holiness of the truth. He’s been following a basic pattern of “put off,” “put on,” “Gospel reason.”

Put OFF: Therefore, having put off the lie,
Put ON: speak truth—each of you—with his neighbor,
Gospel reason: because we are members of one another.

Put OFF: Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your wrath,
Gospel reason: nor give place to the devil.

Put OFF: The one who steals must no longer steal,
Put ON: but rather he must labor, working with his own hands what is GOOD
Gospel reason: so that he might have something to share with the one who has NEED.

Put OFF: Out of your mouth must not come any corrupt word,
Put ON: but if there is anything GOOD *let it come out of your mouth* for building up *according to* the NEED
Gospel reason: so that it may give grace to those who hear.
Gospel reason: And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Put OFF: All bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and yelling, and evil speaking must already be removed from you together with all malice.
Put ON: But be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another,
Gospel reason: just as also God in Christ forgave you.

I. “All bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and yelling, and evil speaking must already be removed from you together with all malice.”

This is an overwhelmingly thorough statement. It’s exhaustive, comprehensive, sweeping, and all-embracing. It’s also a very emphatic statement. It’s whole-hearted, forceful, and vigorous. The very first word is “all” and the second to last word is “all.” “**All** bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and yelling, and evil speaking must already be removed from you together with **all** malice.” Paul piles up five words, one on top of the other, describing every possible form or expression of ill-will towards a brother or sister in Christ. “All **bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and yelling, and evil speaking** must already be removed from you together with all malice.” Out of *eleven* commands or imperatives in this section (4:25-5:2), ten are in the present tense. This is the only command in the aorist tense, and so it seems to be heightening “the sense of urgency” (Hoehner; cf. Thielman). “All bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and yelling, and evil speaking **must already be removed from you** together with all malice.” And then when Paul has finished with his very thorough command, he adds a final summarizing statement to make it even more thorough. “All bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and yelling, and evil speaking must already be

removed from you **together with all malice.**” “[This] summarizing term... takes in any attitude or action [of any kind whatsoever] which intends harm to one’s neighbor [in any way shape or form].” (Lincoln) So we’re left with no ifs, ands, buts, or question marks of any kind whatsoever.

Now why is Paul so “worked up” about this? The answer is simple. It’s because Paul has **understood** the mystery of God’s purpose for the administration of the fullness of the times.

- ✓ Ephesians 1:9-10 — [God] made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Him for the administration of the fullness of the times to **unite all things in Christ**, things in heaven and things on earth, **in Him**.

If Paul knows that God’s great purpose for all of heaven and earth is to **unite all things in Christ**, then Paul also knows that God has worked to accomplish this great purpose through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ – and therefore at infinite **cost** to Himself.

- ✓ Ephesians 2:14-18 — For **[Christ] himself is our peace, who has made both things one, and has broken down the dividing wall of partition—the hostility**—having abolished in His flesh the law of commandments [expressed] in decrees, **that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace**, and might reconcile them both in **one body** to God through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him **we both** have access in **one Spirit** to the Father.

This theme of the **uniting** of **all things “in Christ”** has been the theme of Ephesians, and it’s really the theme and heartbeat of Paul’s entire life and ministry. How could it not be when this is actually the one supreme desire, and purpose, and passion of God Himself? God has made known to us the mystery of His will for the administration of the fullness of the times. And so therefore it’s the themes of **unity** and **love** in this end-times people of God that Paul emphasizes more strongly than anything else here in chapter four.

- ✓ Ephesians 4:1-3 (cf. 4:4-6) — I urge you therefore... to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all **humility** and **gentleness**, with **long-suffering, bearing with one another in love**, being **fervent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace**.
- ✓ Ephesians 4:11-13 — [Christ] himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints unto the work of ministry, unto the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the **unity of the faith** and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a full-grown man, **to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ**.
- ✓ Ephesians 4:15-16 — Speaking the truth **in love** we are to **grow up in every way into him who is the head—Christ**—from whom the whole body, being **joined together and united together** by every supporting connection, according to the working in measure of each single part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself **in love**.

And now every single one of Paul’s exhortations for the “putting off” of the old man and the “putting on” of the new man has to do with the maintaining and promoting of the unity that we have in Christ.

- ✓ Ephesians 4:25-29 — Therefore, having put off the lie, *speaking truth—each of you—with his neighbor, because we are members of one another. Be angry and do not sin*; do not let the sun go down on your provocation... The one who steals must no longer steal, but rather he must labor, working with his own hands what is good *so that he might have something to share with the one who has need*. Out of your mouth must not come any corrupt word, but if there is anything good [let that come out of your mouth] *for building up [according to] the need, so that it may give grace to those who hear*.

Next week, Paul will conclude this section with this summarizing statement:

- ✓ Ephesians 5:1-2 — Therefore be imitators of God as beloved children, and *walk in love*, just as also Christ loved us and gave up Himself for us, an offering and sacrifice to God, for a fragrant aroma.

Paul is full of zeal and passion for unity and love in the body because he understands that God's great purpose for all of heaven and earth is to *unite all things in Christ*; and he understands that God has worked to accomplish this great purpose at infinite cost to Himself – through the suffering and death of His only Son. Therefore, anything that undermines love and unity in the body must be *anathema* (“put off”!). Only an active building up and promoting of love and unity in the body can ever be pleasing to God (“put on”!). Now we can understand why Paul is so thorough and so emphatic: “*All bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and yelling, and evil speaking must already be removed from you together with all malice.*”

Fergusson says of bitterness: “Whereby must be understood... all secret, smothered displeasure and alienation of affection, which hath more of discontent and grudge than of revenge in it.” That may be a little too narrow a meaning, but it's certainly true as far as it goes, and I think very helpful. Are you entertaining any secret, or even suppressed displeasure with someone else? That's bitterness, and it must already be removed from you. Is there anyone from whom your *affections* have been *alienated* – even in some small way? That's bitterness, and it must already be removed from you. When you think of any person, is there a subtle feeling of discontent or any grudge that springs up in your heart? That's bitterness. And *all* bitterness, Paul says, must already be removed from you. Christ died so that we might put off the old man. There can never be any place in the Christian life for bitterness, because this is always opposed to God's purpose for the *uniting* of all things in Christ.

After “bitterness,” Paul mentions “wrath” and “anger.” “Wrath” and “anger” build up and gradually take over when bitterness is in any way allowed to continue, instead of being immediately put to death. “Bitterness” is the seed. “Wrath” and “anger” is the seed all sprouted and grown. Rarely are those feelings of wrath and anger ever truly righteous – completely unmixed with any selfishness or pride. Rarely is that feeling of anger completely lacking in any carnal desire for “payment” to be made.

- ✓ James 1:20 — The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

So Paul is very clear. *All* wrath and *all* anger must already be removed from you. Christ died so that we might put off the old man. There can never be any place in the Christian life for wrath or anger, because this is always opposed to God’s purpose for the *uniting* of all things in Christ.

After “bitterness,” and “wrath,” and “anger,” Paul mentions “yelling,” and “evil speaking.” If “bitterness” is the seed, and “wrath” and “anger” is the seed all sprouted and grown, then “yelling” and “evil speaking” is the ripened fruit. That subtle feeling of discontent and displeasure (bitterness) eventually grows into anger and vengefulness, and then that more blatant feeling of anger and vengefulness eventually bursts out in yelling and evil speaking.

“So subtle is sin, and so impotent and unskillful are we to resist it, where it once gets entry, that one degree of sin makes way for a further, and so goes on from evil to worse: and therefore the wisest course is to oppose it at the very beginning, lest by our negligence it gather strength: for Paul sets down several degrees of sinful anger where the former makes way for the latter, and the latter is always worse, and a step closer to the height than the former.” (Fergusson paraphrased)

The Greek word translated “clamor” by the ESV and NASB always refers to “shouting” (Luke 4:41; Jn. 12:13) or “[crying] out with loud voice” (Jn. 11:43; Acts 22:23; 23:9). In case we’re still confused about what this means, Braune says, “[it] refers to the voice, improperly strained and sharpened.” (cf. Lincoln) So the HCSB translates, “All... shouting... must be removed from you” (cf. NCV). Some people (even some Christians) justify yelling as a healthy venting of emotions. They excuse yelling as a better alternative than holding everything inside and letting pent up emotions build and simmer. But what are we doing? We’re just choosing one evil in place of the other, and ignoring the true solution which we find in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. “[Yelling] is the steed of anger” (Braune), and so as an expression of anger, yelling is always a sin against God. Yelling is abusive, demeaning, hurtful, and never, ever, ever expressive of the mind of Christ. Matthew shows how Christ fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

✓ Matthew 12:19 — He will not quarrel or *cry aloud*, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.

As the fruit of bitterness, and anger, and wrath, Paul mentions not only yelling, but evil speaking. The Greek word is actually the word for “blasphemy,” so it usually refers to speaking evil of God. But here it refers to speaking evil of one another. Almost all versions translate “slander,” but we might think of slander as saying something *false* about someone else *behind their back* when “evil speaking” could also include saying something *true* about someone else *to their face*. “Evil speaking” is *anything* we say that’s *motivated* by any kind of bitterness or anger. And so the NCV sums up the fruits of bitterness, and anger, and wrath like this: “Never shout angrily or say things to hurt others.” (NCV; cf. Hodge) These are the things Christian parents may tell their children from the very beginning, and yet how often do we ourselves fail – and never even give our own failures a second thought?

Once again, the law condemns us. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... the wages of sin is death.” (Rom. 3:23; 6:23) And yet through faith in Christ, our sins are forgiven and we are made new. Now we can put off the old man (“All bitterness, and wrath, and anger,

and yelling, and evil speaking must already be removed from you together with all malice”) and put on the new man.

II. **“But be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another”**

The only way to “put off” is to be always “putting on.” There’s truly no other way.

“Be kind to one another.” Once again, how many parents have said this to their children? And how easily do the words “be kind” sound to us like moralism and legalism? “Be kind” sounds like “be good,” and by themselves these words can only minister hopelessness, and condemnation, and death. But here’s the thing – For Paul, that word “*kind*” is just a meaningless, non-sensical word apart from a true knowledge of God. Jesus said to the rich young ruler, “There is only one who is good.” (Mat. 19:17) And so we could also say, “There is only one who is kind.” Apart from an understanding of *God’s* gracious actions towards us (Romans 2:4; 11:22; Mat. 11:30), it becomes impossible for us to speak intelligibly of true kindness.

- ✓ 1 Peter 2:2–3 (NASB) — Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, if you have tasted the *kindness* of the Lord.
- ✓ Titus 3:4–5 (NASB) — But when the *kindness* of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us... according to His mercy.

And then right here in Ephesians:

- ✓ Ephesians 2:5–7 — [God] made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in *kindness* toward us in Christ Jesus.

When Paul uses this same word now to describe how we are to act toward each other, he’s calling our attention back to the kindness of God and so reminding us that we can only ever know a derivative kindness – a kindness that’s patterned after, and rooted in God’s immeasurable kindness to us in Christ Jesus. It’s only when we have an understanding of God’s gracious actions towards us that verses like these can ever truly make sense.

- ✓ 1 Corinthians 13:4 (NASB) — Love is kind.
- ✓ Galatians 5:22 — The fruit of the Spirit is... kindness.
- ✓ Ephesians 4:32 (cf. Col. 3:12) — Be kind to one another.

Now these words have lost all the gloom and burden of moralism, and taken on all the joy and freedom of the Gospel.

“Be kind to one another, *tenderhearted* [eusplachnos]” Seven times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it’s said that Jesus “felt compassion” or was “moved with compassion” (“splachnizomai”; Mat. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). In the Jewish thinking of Paul’s day, it was God who could be supremely described as “tenderhearted.” (cf. Thielman)

Prayer of Manasseh 5–7, 9, 11 — Immeasurable and unsearchable is your promised mercy, for you are the Lord Most High, of great compassion [*tenderhearted*], long-suffering, and very merciful... The sins I have committed are more in number than the sand of the sea... And now I bend the knee of my heart, imploring you for your *kindness*.

But what the Jewish people didn't understand was revealed in the Gospel of Luke:

- ✓ Luke 1:76–78 — And you, [John], will... go before the Lord [Jesus] to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the *tender* [splanchnon] mercy of our God.

In a very real sense, there's only one who is tenderhearted. Apart from God's tender compassions towards us, it's impossible to speak intelligibly of our tenderheartedness towards one another. It's only when we have an understanding of God's tender heart towards us that verses like these can ever truly make sense.

- ✓ 1 Peter 3:8 (NKJV) — Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted.
- ✓ Ephesians 4:32 — Be kind to one another, tenderhearted.

Now this is technically still the “put on” section. We technically still haven't arrived at the “Gospel reason.” But practically speaking, this is already the Gospel in full force. This is already the joy and the freedom of living out God's holy law empowered and motivated by the Gospel.

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, *forgiving one another*.” Forgiveness, here, is simply being kind and tenderhearted to those who are *undeserving* – to those whom we might otherwise think of with bitterness, and anger, and wrath, or treat with yelling and evil-speaking.

- ✓ Luke 6:35 (NASB) — *Love your enemies*... and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is *kind* to ungrateful and evil men.

Forgiveness is simply being kind and tenderhearted to those who are undeserving. When Paul says that we are to forgive *one another* he reminds us that we ourselves will often have reason to desire that others forgive *us* (cf. Fergusson). But more than anything else, how can we think of forgiveness without thinking first of all of how God has forgiven us – of how God has been so infinitely kind and tenderhearted to undeserving sinners like we are. And so now Paul finally says explicitly what he's really been saying all along. “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another...”

III. “...just as also God in Christ forgave you.”

This isn't meant to guilt us into grudging forgiveness (if there was such a thing). The point isn't that since God has done so much for us, we owe Him at least this “favor.” The point is that when we understand how God has been kind and tenderhearted toward undeserving sinners like us, then this will well up and overflow in kindness and tender compassion towards any brother or sister in Christ who might ever sin against us. “To forgive ‘just as God in Christ’ forgave means:

just as freely, generously, wholeheartedly, spontaneously, and eagerly.” (Hendriksen; cf. Fergusson)

So we *must* daily be living at the foot of the cross. Only there can we find the perspective, and the motivation, and the power necessary to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another. Paul said in Ephesians chapter one:

- ✓ Ephesians 1:7-8 – In [Christ] we have redemption through His blood—the forgiveness of trespasses—according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us.

So then, may we lavish this same kindness and tenderheartedness that God has shown to us upon each other. It’s not enough to be disinterested or neutral towards each other. Are your Christian affections for all of your brothers and sisters in Christ completely unhindered and unrestrained? Can you say this of all your brothers and sisters in Christ without exception? Because it’s *in this way* that we ourselves *participate* in the mystery of God’s purpose for the administration of the fullness of the times – to unite all things *in Christ*, things in heaven and things on earth, in Him.