

Week 9: Putting on the New Self: Ephesians 4:17–32

Hook



Main Point: Living as a new creation means putting aside our old way of life.

Q: Have you ever kept clothes in your closet that no longer fit? Why is it so hard to get rid of them?

*(*Teacher, bring in an old T-shirt or article of clothing that is too small or too big and hold it up as an example.)* Paul uses a simple but powerful picture in Ephesians 4. Becoming a Christian isn't like changing clothes every morning. It's like throwing away an old wardrobe because it no longer fits who you are. Christ has made you a new person, so your old way of life no longer belongs.

Q: What are some old habits, attitudes or ways of thinking that people tend to harbor even after becoming Christians?

Like someone trying to squeeze into outgrown clothes, returning to our old ways never fits the person Christ has made us to be. This is Paul's point: Christianity isn't behavior modification or a new list of rules. It's living out a new identity. The old self has been put away, and the new self is being renewed day by day. The Christian life is learning to live consistently with who we already are in Christ.

RECAP: In the first half of the letter to the Ephesians (chapters 1–3), Paul gave us doctrine – how the Gospel transforms us into new creations in Christ. In the second half, he described how to apply that doctrine to our lives – how to live as transformed people in the church community (4:1–5:21), in the home (5:22–6:9), and in the world (6:10–20).

The last lesson focused on unity in the body and our spiritual maturity in Christ. In this lesson, Paul will use the metaphor of “taking off” the old self and “putting on” the new self like a new wardrobe. Not like clothes we put on and take off, but like an old wardrobe we throw out because it doesn't fit anymore. With our new identity in Christ, our old ways of the world don't fit us anymore.

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Book

Main Point: Living as a new creation means putting aside our old way of life.

Ephesians 4:17–24 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Without Christ, our thinking leads to an empty life of worldly pleasure.

Q: How does this passage describe our old manner of life before Christ?

Q: How did Paul emphasize what happens in our *minds* in the old and new self?

Again, Paul started with the same Greek word, which is translated “now” this time but other times as “therefore,” pointing us back to what he had just said (4:17).¹ He also used “for this reason” several times. His repeated use of these phrases to start each section shows us how each of his points builds upon the others to help us understand how to live into our identity in Christ. Paul had just taught the Ephesians that Christ gave leaders spiritual gifts to equip the Church so that as every member does its part, the whole body grows up to spiritual maturity (4:12–16). This section will tell us how to do that.

This imagery of describing the “new self” as something you “put on” like clothing may seem kind of strange because we often think about putting on clothes and taking them off each day. But that’s not the way Paul was talking about the new self. It’s more like when a child outgrows her old clothes and her parents pack them up to donate. Putting on the old self would be like a kid digging through the donation pile to find an old pair of jeans and squeezing into them even though they’re four inches too short and the waist can’t be buttoned. This is what Paul said it’s like when try to go back to our old ways after being made a new creation in Christ; those old ways just don’t fit us anymore. Except instead of just looking silly squeezed into way-too-small jeans, we can do real damage to ourselves and others when we try to go back to our old ways.

Like a kid looking back at their favorite old jeans, we may romanticize the old ways and think we want to go back, but when we do, we see the damage it does. We see it’s no longer what we really want. It’s like someone who has gone through a recovery program and then tried to go back and hang out with old friends. That place just doesn’t fit anymore, and that’s a good thing because the person is in a much better place now. This is the imagery Paul used to talk about what it looks like to follow Jesus and live in Christian community. It’s not about following rules; it’s about walking in newness of life. It’s about living into our new identity as redeemed, beloved children of God. That old way of life doesn’t fit us anymore because we have changed. We have grown. We are in a much better place than we were.

When Paul described the old way of life in this passage, he said it was walking “as the Gentiles do” (4:17). This may seem confusing because, up to this point in the letter, he had said there was no dividing line between Jew and Gentile. But he wasn’t talking about Gentile Christians here. The word translated “Gentile” just means “people groups” or “nations.” It’s a word the Jews used to talk about “those other nations” who don’t know God. It could be used in an ethnic sense to talk about other literal nations that are not Jews or in a more figurative sense to talk about people who don’t know God, the same way we might use the word “pagan.” His exhortation was simply that since you are Christ-followers now, do not live like Gentiles (pagans or non-Christians).²

Paul said the issue starts in the mind (4:17-18) and showed how our thinking leads to the way we live (4:19). Without Christ, we are separated from God, which makes us darkened in our understanding because enlightenment comes from His Spirit (4:18). He said this makes us callous (4:19). If we don’t know the hope of eternal life through Jesus, if this life is all there is, then “all is vanity and a striving after wind” (Ecclesiastes 1:14). So we conclude that we might as well just “eat, drink, and be merry,” like the parable of the rich fool (4:19; Luke 12:16–21). This is where a humanistic worldview leads – pursuing earthly pleasure, because what else is there? Solomon tried pursuing pleasure but found that life to be empty (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

A focus on earthly pleasures leads to pursuing more earthly pleasures, like a downward spiral (4:19). When you take drugs, your body builds up a tolerance, and you need to take more and more drugs to get the same “high.”³ The same is true for any earthly pleasure; the more we indulge ourselves, the deeper we go into “*every kind of impurity*” and become “*full of greed*.”⁴ We “give ourselves over” to pleasure; we let it control us (Romans 1:24–32). We become enslaved to it (Romans 6:6). A life without Christ will always lead to this. Some people may seem happy in their pursuit of worldly pleasures for a while. But it will always end in futility, despair, and callousness. But there is hope. Paul will tell us how a life in Christ is the complete opposite of this. First, he painted this bleak picture of a life without Christ so we could really appreciate the goodness of life in Christ.

Q: How have you seen self-indulgence become self-destructive in people’s lives?

Q: How has the Holy Spirit changed your desires since you started following Jesus?

Q : What is one attitude, habit, or way of thinking from your “old self” that you are sometimes tempted to put back on—and what helps you recognize that it no longer fits who you are in Christ?

Ephesians 4:20–24 [Read (yes, reread it)]

Talking Point 2: The old self deteriorates, but the new self gets better every day.

Q: How did Paul describe the new self? How is this contrasted with the old self?

Paul made a clear contrast between the old self and the new self and declared emphatically that the old self is *not* the way of Christ (4:20). Indulging the flesh, pursuing earthly pleasures as if there is nothing more than this life – that was your old way of life before Christ transformed you into a new creation. But this lifestyle isn't just a new teaching or a new set of rules to follow, it's a new *self* (4:24). You are a different person now. You have a new identity. You are no longer that old person; the old is gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). Living in a manner worthy of the calling is not behavior modification; it's living out your new identity.

Paul didn't just say, "This is the old set of rules you followed, but here is a new set of rules." He said that was your old *self*; this is a new *self*. It really is as if your old self has died; it is gone. In other letters, Paul described it as being crucified and raised again with Christ, so that "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Romans 6:5–7; Galatians 2:20). Earlier in this letter, he said our new selves are God's workmanship (2:10). Paul used the language of "putting off" the old self and "putting on" the new self as if it were clothing, but this isn't meant to be a back-and-forth kind of thing. "Putting off" means to lay aside, stow away, or renounce. We are meant to take off that old self and throw it away. Renounce it. Declare it to no longer be who we are. It's not like changing your clothes on a daily basis. We are to put on the new self and not look back.⁵

It's harder to see in the English ("corrupt"), but the Greek creates a clear contrast: The old self is "being destroyed" by its deceitful desires, while the new self is "being renewed" (4:22–23).⁶ Living our lives in pursuit of earthly pleasures will destroy us. Drug addiction provides a tragic picture of this: What promises pleasure or escape ultimately enslaves and destroys a person. Their pleasures are killing them. The same is true for all kinds of sin, though it may not be as physically obvious as drug addiction. Sin destroys us.

We see this truth reflected in the very way that our bodies work. Our bodies get weaker and weaker until we die. Our flesh is being destroyed; it is headed on a downward slope toward physical death. In a humanistic worldview, this is all there is. But those who have been made new in Christ are going the opposite direction, toward eternal life.

But it's not just about what happens at the end, eternal life instead of death. It's about what's happening to us right now. The new self isn't decaying, it's getting stronger. "Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). We are growing in righteousness and holiness (4:24). As we "grow up" into spiritual maturity, we only get better with age (4:14–16). Living by the old ways destroys; living in the new self makes us stronger, wiser, better and happier than we ever thought we could be. In the new self, we find the purpose and meaning we could never find in a life pursuing pleasure. We find true joy and abundant life (John 10:10).

Q: How have you seen people's pursuit of pleasure lead to destruction?

Q: Why can it be hard to let go of our old ways? How can we set our minds on heavenly things and shift our desires to the things of God?

Q: If someone looked at the direction of your life, what evidence would show that you are becoming more like Christ?

Ephesians 4:25–32 [Read]

Talking Point 3: A community of Christians living by the new self will live in love.

Q: How would you describe the way “new self” people relate to one another?

Q: In context, what does this passage say grieves the Holy Spirit?

The rest of this passage shifts from an individual to a corporate focus. Paul applied what it looks like for us to live as the “new self” not just as individuals but also in Christian community. He returned to the same “put away” language in verse 25—“having put away falsehood”—and followed it with a series of practical contrasts showing how believers should replace their old conduct with conduct consistent with their new identity.⁷ The contrast is clear:

Old Self

- Put away falsehood
- No longer steal
- Let no corrupting talk come out
- Put away bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, malice

New Self

- Speak truthfully to each other
- Work so you can share with the needy
- Build others up with your words
- Be kind, tenderhearted and forgiving of each other

Paul grounded these practical instructions in theological truths. We speak truth because we are members of one another. We deal with anger promptly so that we do not give the devil an opportunity. We work so we can share with those in need. We use words that build others up because corrupt speech grieves the Holy Spirit. Finally, we forgive one another because God has forgiven us in Christ.⁸

The warning not to grieve the Holy Spirit is most immediately connected to the discussion of corrupting speech in verse 29, although all the sins mentioned in this section grieve Him.⁹ In the way a parent is grieved when their kids tear one another down, so the Spirit is grieved when His children do.

Each of these “old self” behaviors are ways we tend to be self-centered and look out for our own needs, while the “new self” behaviors are ways we look out for others’ needs. Lies are told to serve ourselves – to get out of trouble, make others look bad, hide who we really are. Speaking the truth is a desire to be honest about who we really are and build authentic relationships with each other. The same is true about building up instead of tearing down one another and being kind and compassionate instead of malicious.

The reason Paul gave for working hard wasn't to accumulate stuff for ourselves but to be able to give to those in need.

All these shift the focus from what we may think is best for ourselves to considering what is best for others and for the community as a whole. Putting others' needs ahead of your own is the very definition of humility, which is what Paul described as having the mindset of Jesus in our relationships with one another (Philippians 2:1–5). This is how we live in a Christ-centered community: we all put one another's needs ahead of our own (Romans 12:3–21). When we *all* do it, everyone's needs get met without anyone having to hoard for themselves.

This is how we find unity in the diversity of the body. This is what it looks like to be His people, loving each other the way Christ has loved us (John 15:12). When we live this way, we are a light to the world around us. People will see how well we love one another, how different that is from the ways of the world, and they will want to be a part of it. They will be drawn to our communities because of the love and goodness of Jesus they see there.

Q: How have you seen church communities act this way toward one another? How did this impact their spiritual growth? How did it impact the world around them?

Q: How might our communities be different if everyone put the needs of others ahead of their own? What would it look like for you to do that in your family?

Q: How should the way Christians handle disagreement, anger, and forgiveness look noticeably different from the way the world handles them—and what might an unbeliever learn about Christ by watching us?

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Took

Main Point: Living as a new creation means putting aside our old way of life.

**Teacher, hold up the old shirt or article of clothing that you introduced in your Hook.*

"I've kept this longer than I should have. People have even asked me, "Why are you still holding onto that? It doesn't fit you anymore.'"

Paul says the same thing about our old lives. We often hold on to things that no longer fit who we are in Christ. Maybe it's the entertainment we consume. Maybe it's the words that come out of our mouths. Maybe it's bitterness, gossip, selfishness, anger or the way we think about other people. We know Christ has made us new, yet we still keep those old habits.

But Paul doesn't say to store the old self in the closet. He says to put it away.

(Throw the shirt into a trash can.)

Just as this shirt no longer fits me, there are things that no longer fit someone who belongs to Christ. Ask God to show you what you've been holding on to that needs to be thrown away – not because you're earning His love, but because you've already been made new in Christ.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Be honest with yourself about your own life. In what ways are you still struggling with pursuing earthly pleasures instead of the things of God? In what ways are you still looking out for yourself instead of considering the needs of others? How do you see this way of living leading to destruction in your life? How can you speak truth to yourself, to see that the old way of life leads to death and destruction? How might shifting your focus to the things of God and serving others lead to joy, peace and other fruit of the Spirit and a more abundant life in Christ?

PRAY: Pray for yourself to walk in newness of life, to see the freedom, joy and peace that come from walking in the new self. Pray for our church to be a place where people treat one another with grace, compassion and self-sacrificial love, the way Jesus loves us. Pray that we can have patience with one another and pursue what is best for everyone instead of only looking out for our own interests. Ask God to use that as a light to the world, to show the world the goodness and love of Christ.

ACT: Put away the old self. Reflect on one thing you are holding on to from your old way of life and make the intentional choice to put it away for good. You can write it on a piece of paper and throw it away (or even burn it!) or use some other tangible sign that you are putting away your old self.

¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 105.

² Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 105.

³ National Institute on Drug Abuse, "Understanding Drug Use and Addiction DrugFacts," June 6, 2018, <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/understanding-drug-use-addiction>.

⁴ Harold W. Hoehner, "Ephesians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 636.

⁵ Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 108–10; Hoehner, "Ephesians," 636–37.

⁶ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2269; Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 109–10.

⁷ Hoehner, "Ephesians," 637.

⁸ Hoehner, "Ephesians," 637; Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 110–11.

⁹ Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 114; Hoehner, "Ephesians," 637.