

“Putting Off and Putting On”
Ephesians 4:25-32
January 6, 2002

Text Comment

Now, remember where we are. Paul is calling upon us to live worthy, to walk worthy of the calling we have received. He wants us to walk worthy of the great salvation, the grace of God, the love of Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, that he described so magnificently in chapters 1-3. From 4:1 to the end of the letter, Paul will explain what a fit response on our part amounts to. And, in vv. 17-24, which we considered last Lord’s Day morning, he explained, in general, that this meant putting off the old man, or old self, and putting on the new. There must be a great difference between our lives before and after we became Christians or between our lives and the lives of those who remain in the world and who do not believe in Jesus Christ. But, he says, there can and will be this difference. God is not asking the impossible of you. For he has put the old man to death, he has struck it a fatal blow and he has given us a new self in its place. We have the resources from Christ to alter our way of living and to continue to alter it to make us more and more “like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Christ has broken the back of sin in our lives. Now it is for us to take that victory and live it out in our hearts and in our behavior day by day. Here in Ephesians, as everywhere else in the Bible, the cleansing, the perfecting, the maturing of a Christian life is presented both as the work of God and Christ – as, say, here in 2:10 – *and* as the responsibility of the believer himself or herself who must be diligent in putting sins to death and practicing righteousness in their place. In the verses we are about to read, the emphasis falls upon our effort, our obedience. Paul is telling us what to *do*! But we must always remember that our doing depends upon Christ’s doing for us and in us. “Work out your salvation in fear and trembling,” Paul says in another place, “for it is God who works in you both to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

Jeremy Taylor, the great 17th century Anglican, has a hymn in which he adapts the Lord’s cleansing of the temple as an image of Christ’s work in our hearts and lives. He wants the Lord to cleanse his heart and life of sin in the same way he cleansed the temple of the moneychangers.

Hosanna! Welcome to our hearts! for here
Thou hast a temple too, as Sion dear;
Yes, dear as Sion – and as full of sin;
How long shall thieves and robbers dwell therein?

Enter and chase them forth, and cleanse the floor;
O’erthrow them all, that they may never more
Profane with traffic vile that holy place,
Where Thou hast chosen, Lord, to set Thy face.

[Cited in Lloyd-Jones, *Ephesians*, v, 127-128]

Christ has made our hearts his temple. May he cleanse that temple of everything that is impure. Our great obligation to live a holy life and grow in that holiness and our great hope of doing so

rests on the same foundation: the Lord Christ himself *has delivered us* from sin and death and, by his Holy Spirit, *come to take up residence* in our hearts.

Now, in vv. 25ff. Paul descends to the particulars. What must we put off and what must we put on? What belongs to the old man that we must forsake completely and what belongs to the new man that we must practice more and more and make the habit of our lives? Paul does not leave us to figure this out for ourselves. He tells us plainly.

- v.25 The “therefore” which begins the section indicates that what follows is the application of what he has just said about putting off the old man and putting on the new. He is taking the general exhortation and now making it specific.

Notice the way in which Paul regards telling the truth as a special obligation of *Christian brotherhood*. Lies poison relationships in the family of God, or, as one commentator puts it, “a lie is a stab into the very vitals of the body of Christ.” [Cited in Lincoln, *WBC*, 301] Every missionary will tell you that lying is rife in the heathen world and spreading false reports is commonplace. We see it all the time in our public life as a nation. These new believers probably had some difficulty shedding habits so well established.

- v.26 “In your anger do not sin” is in quotations marks because it is a citation from Ps. 4:4 in the LXX. J.B. Phillips, in his version of the NT, captures the sense of the second half of the verse with his paraphrase: “Never go to bed angry.” This exhortation is an example of the biblical principle of doing good quickly. There is a story told of a young St. Francis that one day a rather rude and pushy beggar came along in the market square while Francis, who was that day selling cloth from a stall, was in the midst of a conversation with a merchant. He finished that conversation, but when he turned round, the beggar was gone. “Francis leapt from his booth, left all the bales of velvet and embroidery behind him apparently unprotected, and went racing across the market place like an arrow from the bow. Still running, he threaded the labyrinth of the narrow and crooked streets of the little town, looking for his beggar, whom he eventually discovered; and loaded that astonished mendicant with money.” [Chesterton, *St. Francis*, 40-41] We are all so ready to let a matter rest until the next day or the next time and, the result is, the matter is never handled at all. Do it now, says Paul.

- v.27 The Devil will use your lies and your anger to sinister effect in your own heart and in the body of Christ.

- v.29 I know believers, and perhaps you do as well, who have found it difficult to purify their speech of the words they used before they began to follow Christ.

- v.30 The language of “grieving the Holy Spirit” comes from the OT, from Isa. 63:10, and is similar to commands that we find elsewhere in the NT not to “quench” the Holy Spirit or “resist” the Holy Spirit. Here the idea is still more personal. The Spirit loves us, and when we sin we grieve him. As one commentator puts it, “the God proclaimed in Ephesians is not an unmoved mover.” [M. Barth in Lincoln, *WBC*, 307]

v.32 Here we have both motivation to be holy in our speech and behavior – as a way of thanking God and Christ for their kindness to us – and a pattern – we are to be to others as Christ was to us.

Now, we have before us a paragraph concerning Christian morality. It is what many people think about when they think about the Bible. Rules for our conduct. The way we ought to live. Many people imagine that this is all the Bible is about. It would not surprise them at all if I were to read this paragraph and tell them it is from the Bible. That is what they imagine religion is: teaching about how to live rightly and well. And, they would not at all be surprised to read Paul telling us these very things: be honest; don't be overcome by anger; be kind and compassionate, and the like. Nothing too controversial there.

And, to be sure, there is nothing even *distinctively Christian* in the particular commandments that Paul strings together in vv. 25-32. Christianity is hardly the only religion or philosophy of life that teaches that lying is wrong or that anger is destructive or that we ought to intend to do good to others with our words. Indeed, Paul was well aware, as he wrote these injunctions, that one could find similar things in the ethical literature of the Greco-Roman world.

Compare, for example, Paul's v. 26 with this statement from Plutarch's work on morals (*Moralia* 488c). Plutarch was a younger contemporary of Paul.

“We should...pattern ourselves after the Pythagoreans, who, though related not at all by birth, yet sharing a common discipline, if ever they were led by anger into recrimination, never let the sun go down before they joined right hands, embraced each other, and were reconciled.”

Or consider this description of anger that you will find quoted in any number of Christian commentaries, sermons, or works on the Christian life:

“[Anger is] The most outrageous, brutal, dangerous, and intractable of all passions, the most loathsome, and unmannerly, nay, the most ridiculous too.... If I were to describe it, I would...dress it up as the poets represent the furies, with whips, snakes, and flames: it should be sour, livid, full of scars, and wallowing in gore, raging up and down, destroying, grinning, bellowing, and pursuing, sick of all other things, and most of all of itself.” [Seneca, *De Ira*]

That is a wonderful description of anger in its malevolence and its futility. It forces us to see our anger for the destructive, ugly, and indefensible thing that it is. But it was not written by a Christian. It was, in fact, written by Seneca, Paul's immediate contemporary, the celebrated Stoic philosopher and moralist, who was at one time the tutor and later an advisor to Nero, the emperor who, as it happened, executed the Apostle Paul.

Now, this does not surprise us. You can find most of the ten commandments in other religious law books in some form or other and we are well aware that there is a fundamental agreement, at many points, on what constitutes good and bad behavior. When people stand on their feet and debate their philosophy of morality, they may claim that there are no absolute rules of right and

wrong that have authority always and everywhere. But when bad behavior touches them they know theft and anger and lying when they see it and know it is wrong. We had very few people willing to say that what the terrorists did on September 11th of last year was right for them, even if we would not have done it ourselves.

This is what we ought to expect, after all. The law of God has been written on the human heart Paul teaches us in Romans 1 and 2. Man has been made in the image of God and bears in his nature the stamp of God's holiness, however corrupted and muted that internal witness has become through a person's constant sinning. C.S. Lewis and other apologists have made a great argument for Christianity out of this very fact: that everyone acknowledges the reality of right and wrong, that no one can escape it, we are moral beings by nature, that we all know we are guilty of betraying these universal principles of morality, the very principles according to which we judge, sometimes quite harshly, the behavior of others.

So, in that sense, there is nothing distinctly *Christian* in these particular commandments or injunctions regarding behavior, though there is something universally and profoundly *human* in Paul's ethical instruction. But that is not at all to say that there is *nothing* here that is distinctly Christian.

No, even when Paul is saying what Plutarch and Seneca might just as well have said, even when he gives us instruction for life that we might also find, at least in part, even in the teaching of the secular psychologists and self-help gurus who populate the airwaves and appear on PBS or Oprah, his instruction is distinctly and uniquely Christian. And it is the Christian character of that instruction that makes it so much more than simply good advice, that makes it what it is: the living Word of God which is light and life to all who recognize it for what it is.

I. The first distinctly Christian characteristic of Paul's moral instructions is the old man/new man opposition within a believer's life in which these instructions are framed. Paul connects his ethical instructions to his account of how God's grace and salvation has changed us. To live rightly we must live out of the nature of that change and that change of our nature.

Paul sees this kind of living to which he is calling us in terms of the outworking of our original sinful nature and its being overcome by the grace of God and the victory of Christ for us over sin and death. He is not talking at all about what sinful men and women can do in themselves. He is not interested in that. He is talking about the ethical outworking of the salvation that we have got from God through faith in Jesus Christ.

The first thing you may have noticed about Paul's exhortations in the section we read is the way in which they are instances of precisely that double action that Paul said growing up in godliness required: putting off the old man and putting on the new. We are not to lie, rather we are to speak the truth. We are not to be angry, rather we are to reconcile our disturbed relationships at once. We must put away stealing and, instead, must by hard work gain the resources by which to be generous to those in need. We must put away unwholesome speech. Rather, we must use our tongues to build others up. We must get rid of bitterness. And, in its place, we must practice the kindness and compassion toward others that Christ practiced toward us.

Mortification – putting our sins to death – and vivification – bringing our righteousness more and more to life. Always this double action. Never one without the other. Why? Because we were born in sin and sin was the fundamental principle of our lives. But Christ has broken the back of sin and put within us a new life of righteousness and purity. There is within us constantly a jockeying between these two principles, these two powers: the flesh and the spirit, the old man and the new man. Our life must be lived in the full recognition of this interior reality. Men and women who are not Christians do not see the moral life in these terms, in terms of a divine conquest of their original sinful nature, of two fundamental powers at work within them. And so they are not as serious about the moral life and, what is more, they do not understand how true goodness can be brought about in a human life, a goodness that goes right down to the bottom of things, to the heart and the attitudes and the motives of the heart.

My own personal opinion is that even many Christians are unbalanced at this point. They seek to grow spiritually more by mortification than by vivification. They tell themselves “no” and, perhaps, they even fast and pray against the rising of those wrong thoughts, words, and deeds. They take steps to avoid the temptations that have led them into those sins in the past. All of that is well and good and should be done.

But they do not make a similar commitment to the putting on of righteousness, to the cultivation of that grace that stands opposite the sin they are trying to put to death. A Christian miser will not likely put to death his miserliness by confessing its evil, by telling himself to stop it, and by refusing to count his money or look at his bank statements. More important even than those steps will be his practicing of generosity. It is when he gives his money away and discovers what satisfaction there is in serving the Lord that way, how much more beautiful Christlikeness is than money, when he finds how much people love him and are grateful to him for his gifts, and realizes how much more delight there is in using money than hoarding it that the compulsion to treasure up his money withers.

A Christian who is a harsh husband and father is less likely to overcome his harshness by telling himself how wrong it is and that he must stop. Rather he must begin earnestly and systematically to practice affection, gentleness, patience, and interestedness toward his wife and children. That love given to them will bring such confirmation and such reward that he will fall in love with loving his wife and children and come to do it more and more easily and naturally. The woman who cannot get past her fears and her critical tongue will not succeed by mortification only. No she must practice the spirit and speech of forgiveness, compassion, humility. And she will find that when she does, the rewards of that goodness will far outstrip anything she ever thought she got from her anger and her contempt and her sharp tongue.

The ordinary Christian who knows himself far too selfish and preoccupied with himself or herself, will break the back of that pride and that dimly small life far more effectively by giving himself or herself to others than simply by condemning the selfish spirit.

It is always this way in the Bible. We must stand with might and main against our sins, but, at the same time, we must set ourselves to practicing the virtues of which our sins are the contradiction. Sin is best killed in the soul and removed from the life not by kicking it

repeatedly, though that must be done to weaken it, but by crowding it out with virtue until there is no room left for it within our hearts and our behavior.

But, of course, and this is Paul's point, you can only truly do that if you are a new man or a new woman, if those pure and holy motives, that hunger and thirst for true righteousness, that capacity to delight yourself in God and in all that pleases God *actually exist in your heart*. You cannot cultivate a life you do not have, you cannot bring more and more to expression what does not yet exist in your soul. *Only Christians can do what Paul commands us here to do, because only Christians have a new self to put on; only Christians are able to put off the old man whom Christ has struck down.*

II. The second distinctively Christian dimension of this ethical teaching is the theological pattern of it. At every point Paul's meaning and the power of his words depends upon our experience of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and his great salvation.

We will see this throughout the ethical material that follows the verses we read this morning and we see it here. Why must we put off lying and speak the truth. Because God has made us members of a sacred brotherhood, we are one another's brothers and sisters. Such a family life cannot be sustained with lies. Why not dally with anger? Because it gives the Devil a foothold, God's enemy and ours, the Devil whom Christ conquered on the cross. Why not be careless with your words and fill your speech with the sort of conversation that is common among the people of this world? Because speech that is impure, unkind, abusive, or malicious grieves the Holy Spirit who is God's great gift to you, the seal of your eternal life. Why forsake bitterness and, instead, practice kindness and compassion? Because this is what Christ did for you and you cannot possibly claim to embrace his salvation if you are unwilling to practice its principle of self-forgetfulness and self-sacrifice and forgiving love in your own life.

Woven through all of these commandments is the reminder that this life we are being summoned to live is that life and no other that flows from love for God and faith in Christ and a dependence upon the Holy Spirit working in our hearts. The reasons attached to these commandments are *decidedly Christian reasons*. The unbeliever, try as he might to be good, does not have these reasons: he does not have these resources, does not have these motivations, and does not have these examples to follow.

You see the pattern Paul follows here in describing the Christian life. You see the scheme: negative – don't do this – positive –do this instead – and then the reason. And that scheme is fundamentally, profoundly theological and Christian. It rests on the nature of our salvation and the knowledge of God.

There have been, through the ages, and there are still today forms of ethical teaching – even some that use the name Christianity – but have only the commandments, not Paul's ethical pattern or scheme or system. They have a moral code, but they do not base it on the work of Christ and do not summon righteousness out of us on the strength of those things that are true because we know God. But a moral code without the new man, a moral summons without the looming and the elevating realities of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit will

—as all history as proved — leave man just where he was before, a *slave* to his sins, not their master.

But what power, what love, what warmth, what reality there is in this teaching of Paul. Sin taken so seriously! Sin vanquished by Christ himself. We all summoned to apply his victory in our own hearts. The Holy Spirit present to help us. The Lord's love and example to sustain us. There is nothing artificial, nothing cold and lifeless here as in the ethical systems of unbelief.

Lloyd-Jones, in one of his sermons on this passage, tells the story of an old man he knew who became a Christian at 77 years of age. He was a terrible character, a drunkard, an abusive husband, a gambler, everything a man should not be. But he became a Christian, and in this way. He was drinking beer one afternoon and happened to hear two other men talking about the gospel. As he listened he heard one man say, "You know, I felt that there was hope for me there." And something at that moment hit that old man; he said to himself, "If there is hope for him, there is hope for me." He knew his life was wrong but he didn't think it would ever be put right. He couldn't put it right. He was 77 years old after all. But he wasn't being told to pull himself up by his bootstraps. He wasn't being told simply to do what he knew full well he would never manage to do. He was being told that there was a power in the world that could destroy his sinful nature and replace it with another, and a God of love who would draw near to make possible what otherwise could never be: viz. goodness right down into the bottom of his sick heart and flowing up into his behavior in every way.

No ethical system can produce that. No ethical system ever has. The Marxists used to talk about the creation of "new men." That was the language they used. Lenin wrote in 1919, "The workers are building the new society without having turned themselves into new men who would be free from the dirt of the world. They are still in it up to their knees." The communist ethical writers would use terms like "regeneration" and "conscience" and describe the true virtues of the new man as trustworthiness, kindness, readiness to pardon and forgive, patience, modesty, and purity of heart." [K. Bockmuehl, *The Challenge of Marxism*, 127-133] Very like the list Paul has begun here. But they never created this new man, never came remotely close; and no other ethical system has either.

Only the grace and salvation of God can create a new man. And, those of us who have that salvation, how much more ought we to put this wonderful deliverance to work and demonstrate to the world the reality of the new man that Christ has made. Let us content ourselves with nothing less than true righteousness and holiness. Paul has told us what to do, now let us do it...quickly.