

PUTTING ON CHRIST

Ephesians 4:17–32

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Our Scripture today is again from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

“So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality, so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ‘In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:17–32, NIV).

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I want to share with you a couple of struggles that I had in preparing this message, some personal reactions to the passage, as I began to encounter it earlier in the week.

One reaction that I had is almost the kind of attitude of self-righteousness. I've never been a Gentile, so I don't really know, in some sense, what Paul is talking about experientially. I've never really been ignorant of God. I was brought up in a minister's home. I have no sense of having terribly hardened my heart toward God at any time in my life. Although there have been a few calluses periodically. And I've not given myself over to, as Paul puts it, "every kind of sensuality" so that I've lost all sensitivity. As I look at this list of things which he is naming, lying is not a practice with me. I think my anger is fairly well-controlled. And when I do express my anger, it's righteous anger I express! I don't make a practice of stealing. I even pay for my own postage stamps, which are taken from the church. I don't think of myself as engaging in unwholesome talk. So what's this about being a Gentile?

There are probably people here who have been Gentiles, so I need to share that with them.

But then, that led to the second problem I had with this passage: You're such a good group of people I face on Sunday morning, it's difficult to imagine that you have need of what is here in this text. We've come out of a successful week. We've had tremendous family relationships. We're on top of the world. We just sort of come here to get our batteries recharged and then go out and live another successful week.

"So I guess," I said to myself, "I can approach this somewhat theoretically." There are two main parts to this message. There are the things you put off, such as ignorance of God and hardening of the heart and sensuality. And there are things you put on. That's Paul's basic two points in this passage. You put on the new self or the new attitude. And there are seven things he says you put on. We're to put on speaking truth. That includes not only speaking truth verbally but speaking

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truth with our body language. We're to put on a right anger and honest labor. We're to put on up-building speech. We're to put on responsiveness to the Spirit, so we don't grieve Him. We're to put on the purging of hate—in verse 31, there's a whole list of things that have to do with hate.

And we're to put on a gracious spirit (verse 32)—kind and compassionate and forgiving.

As I said, these were some of my early reactions to this passage, until the Lord began to level me in respect to this passage. That's what I'm going to share with you this morning, how I began to see this passage in a whole new light, as I opened my heart to what the Spirit of God was saying to me in it. It turned out I wasn't as good as I thought I was.

By sharing this with you, perhaps it'll give you the courage to let the Spirit sort of probe around in your life as well. There's a precedent for persons sharing their fears in the spiritual life. I think it's out of Paul's example, in 2 Corinthians 3:13, where he talks about the veil that Moses wore.

In the Old Testament, the veil was put on because he had such a glory in his face as a result of having encountered God, and people couldn't bear to look at him and they asked for the veil to be put there. But Paul lets us in on a little secret about Moses that the Old Testament never tells us. That is, the day came when the radiance of his face began to fade. Moses got up one morning and looked in the mirror and said, "My glory has slipped today! I don't want people to notice the fading of my glory, so I'll put the veil on as before." Paul tells us that he kept the veil on so that the slipping radiance could be in effect hidden. Paul then goes on to make a very neat point. He says, "But we, with unveiled faces, behold the Lord and are being changed from glory into glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18), as we have the courage to take the mask off, in order that, by being honest with one another, we might give each other the freedom to change in our lives.

As I meditated upon this passage and had some spiritual encounters this week, the Lord pointed out some areas in my life that were uncomfortable. Periodically, all of us have a problem with

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our anger. We forget that the Lord may have more important priorities than the thing we thought was the important priority.

The Scriptures say, “Don’t let unwholesome talk come out of your mouths” (Ephesians 4:29). I normally think of that as swearing—cursing—saying something awful. But maybe that’s not it at all. “Do not let unwholesome talk come out of your mouths but only what is helpful for building up others according to their needs.” In other words, unwholesome talk is whatever tears someone else down.

I don’t like it when Scripture comes at me this way. I prefer that the Lord would give me texts on things I’ve already worked through, and it wouldn’t convict me. Because, how can I convict you if I’m getting convicted? When the Lord got through working me over in these areas, I realized I needed the new man. Then I realized, too, I had a rationale for my behavior. The rationale was this: “George, you’ve had immense responsibility these last few months. With that, has come stress. When you have so much stress and responsibility, a certain amount of irritability can be expected.” That’s how we cope with our irritability. The Lord said to me, “That’s not the problem at all. It isn’t the responsibilities and stress. It’s just that you’ve moved a little too far away from Me in your inner life. You need to get back to a sensitivity, to Me.”

Maybe the Holy Spirit wanted me to share with you, because you’re going through some of the same things. “You’re not heathen at all—in terms of the classic description of someone totally indulging in sensuality. But you are irritable, mean, and petty. Some degree of irritableness, meanness, and pettiness has crept into your life.” The Lord is saying to you, through His Word today, “Put off the old and put on the new.” Just as in Christ God forgave you, forgive one another.

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My only right, to be able to minister to you on this whole subject today, is not because I'm a perfect example of all that the Scripture is saying. My only right to be here is that I know something about the Lord's forgiveness and His correction. I realize that we're in danger in our life if we ever reach the point in our spirituality where we can't be corrected by the Lord.

The Lord is neat when He really lays us low and reminds us of our failures. The Spirit is faithful to do that. When He has finished doing that with us, it's neat to see how the Lord comes along and restores us. It's the difference between the Lord's work in our life and the suggestions of our enemy, Satan. When we have sinned and done wrong, the enemy will come along and remind us, "What a failure you are. What a lousy Christian you are. Who told you that you could be a pastor? You can't even speak honestly to your neighbor. What gives you the right to be a pastor? You ought to write it off, because you'll never succeed." That's what the enemy does.

The Holy Spirit comes along and He picks up and says, "You have done wrong. Now repent and let your relationship be restored." The enemy is never interested in restoring a relationship with God. He's never interested in your putting on the new nature. He just wants to remind you of how bad your old nature really is. But the Lord, when we come to grips with ourselves, wants to bring us into a fresh and vital relationship with Him and go on—keep going.

After I'd sorted this out in the Lord's presence, I had a dream. God wants us to realize that underneath, and as a support of the whole ministry of this church, is the mighty rushing river of His Spirit, which is the premise on which we base the whole work that God, by His Spirit, will move. As I think of that mighty river in terms of the foundation for the whole thing that God wants to do in this church, and this whole construction project, I realize too that, in the individual sense, when we open our lives to God—when we really deal with some of the gunk that's

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there—He is then free to give us a new revelation of His presence. He is free to give us a river in our lives which washes away the old and brings in the new. A river of His Spirit.

Paul says that we are to really live as children of light. That word is given to us that we might look at our own lives, on this communion Sunday, and say to the Lord, “There are areas of my life You have spoken today. Let them be open now to You. Let them be purged and dealt with. In the place of that stored-up thing that is wrong in Your eyes, bring the release of the river of Your Spirit.”

Closing Prayer

Father, having known the comfort of God ourselves, we are able to comfort one another. I pray that, as we ponder these Scriptures in our own life, we will in a deeper way put on the new self in our lives, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. That you will cause us, with a fresh realization, to know that when we do not put off the old life, we not only become clogged up ourselves, but we become really unfruitful towards You and unfruitful in our relationship toward others. Lord, give us a greater filling of Your Spirit anew and let Your life flow deeply in us. We ask, in the name of Jesus. Amen.