

## LIVING THE NEW LIFE (1)

*Ephesians 4:17-32*

Having called the Ephesians to unity in the one faith of Christ and to unity in the church (4:1-16), Paul urges his readers to abandon former ways that have nothing to do with Christ. He reminds these Ephesian Christians of their previous life apart from God (17-19) and challenges them to discard the ‘old sinful nature’ since they have been made new in Christ (20-24). The remainder of the chapter (25-31) are practical examples of what this new life might look like.

This whole section (4:17-6:9), with a few cultural differences, is very straightforward. It does not take a lot of exposition to explain it, rather it is a call to obedience. It covers many aspects of life, though it is not intended to be a complete compendium of Christian ethics. Paul takes examples of specific situations from the realms of personal behaviour, family relationship and the workplace and gives guidance about both what is not permissible and what is expected from followers of Jesus.

The obedience aspect comes over clearly in Paul’s opening words: “I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord...” Or, as the New Living Translation puts it, “With the Lord’s authority I say this...” (17) This is the way Christians are to behave! We may balk at the idea that someone (other than Jesus himself, of course) should dare tell us what to do or not do, but the relevance of Paul’s commands to us today can be brought home by making a simple change to his words. If we change the word ‘Gentile’ to ‘British’ and reread 17-19 we have no problem in bringing the meaning of this whole section home. It becomes a mirror on our lives.

*Ephesians 4:17-19 (NLT)*

As Paul gives us these examples he is at pains not to be negative. Each time he tells the Ephesians to not do something he adds a positive balance: put off your old self – put on the new (22-24), put off falsehood – speak neighbour (25), stop stealing – do something useful (28), no unwholesome talk – say things that benefit those who listen (29), get rid of

bitterness and malice – be kind and compassionate (31f). It is never enough to simply be negative, to be defined by the things we are against. It is unfortunate, not to say unbiblical, that Christians are often perceived as negative people, quick to tell others their failings and what they may not do. Of course, speaking the truth will never be popular with those who are ‘darkened in their understanding’ (18), even when we speak the truth in love (15), but let’s make sure we can never be justly accused of being negative.

These injunctions raise an inevitable and important question: can we really do what Paul asks? Can we really put off the old and put on the new? To ask this is to ask about the truth of Christianity, for if we cannot do so, the Christian faith is meaningless. No matter how nice its teaching, it will not deal with the core of our problem, our own sin. But how can I put off what I am, my personality, and my desires?

This is an issue of our identity. Becoming a Christian is a renunciation of a self-centred identity in favour of a Christ-defined one. All that shapes us is given over to Christ, and his mindset of self-giving love becomes our mindset. Conversion is the restructuring of a person's thinking by the Holy Spirit as the result of a direct encounter with the love of God in the person of Christ (see 5:1-2; cf. Romans 5:5; 8:5-9). Otherwise, we are not Christians. In effect, we take off what we thought was life and put on Christ.

Desires are deceitful and powerful, however. Can we lay them aside so easily? ‘Putting off’ and ‘putting on’ clearly call for us to act, but it is not merely human activity. All is done in union with Christ, the one to whom we are joined and who teaches and enables us, and his Spirit is the agent of renewal. These verses emphasize both God's activity and human responsibility. We put on what he has created (4:24). To ask how much is God’s part and how much ours is to misunderstand the process. Salvation is totally the work of God in which we are totally involved. This alone does justice to the thought of being in Christ.

If this ‘putting off’ and ‘putting on’ is a one-time event, something done at a moment of conversion, why does Paul seem to imply his readers should do it again? Why is the old self with its selfish desires still so present? We continue as the same person with many of our same weaknesses, desires, and characteristics. Or, as someone has said, “The old being should be drowned in baptism, but the rascal can swim!”

Biblical texts can be produced to suggest that change occurs at baptism, repeatedly throughout life, or at the end of time. Once again the now and not-yet character of Christian faith is obvious. A change has already occurred, is occurring, and will be completed at the end of time. What happened at conversion is a real putting off of self and a putting on of Christ. If there is no transformation, there is no salvation. But this is not merely a decision or a onetime event. Conversion is a process, as the present tense of 4:23 shows. 'Putting off' and 'putting on' (or dying and rising) is the pattern by which Christians live. The event by which we are saved is the process by which we live and the completion of which we still await.

In summery them: don't live like the British with their futile thinking, be a Christ-learner ever renewing your life, die continually to self and its desires and put on Christ along with his truth and love.

Amen.

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