

No More Prison Clothes!

Ephesians 4:17-24

Imagine a visitor attending one of our worship services. He would come in, sit down on one of the pews, and even participate in the service, praying, singing, reading the Bible, listening to the sermon. But as we moved through the service, this visitor would become more and more of a distraction. He's dressed in prison garb, and it is apparent to all of us that he is a prisoner. After the service is over, some of us might approach him to welcome him to our church and to find out more about him. Imagine the conversation going something like this:

“Welcome to Utica Baptist Church! What brings you here today?” “Well, I got out of prison just the other day, and I'm a free man now. I've got a second chance at life now and I thought I would begin by going to church.”

And we would think that that was a noble thing to do, and we would congratulate him on his decision. But we would walk away from that conversation with one question in our minds: “Why doesn't he change his clothes?” He was released from prison several days ago, and is no longer a prisoner. Yet he continues to wear the prison garb, just as if he were still in prison. Why doesn't he change his clothes? We would ask that question because wearing the prison garb does not match his new life of freedom.

That in essence is what Paul was saying to the Christians in Ephesus. He said, “I've got a very important message from the Lord for you—don't conduct your lives as do those who are without Christ.” He used the terminology of taking off a filthy, tattered set of clothing, in order to put on clean, fresh ones. In verse 22, he said “*put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires,*” and he follows that up in verse 24 by saying, “*put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*” You are now free in Christ—don't continue to wear your prison clothes! Take them off!

When we talk about becoming a follower of Christ, we're not just talking about including Christ in our lives, as if He were simply an “add-on” to everything else or anything else we might have going on in our lives and hearts. We are actually talking about making Jesus the absolute Lord and Sovereign of our lives and hearts. But in order to do that, there are some things to which we must say “No.” There may be some attitudes or lifestyle habits or thought processes that must be renounced, things to which we must deliberately and resoundingly say “No!” We must say “No” to some things so that we can say “Yes!” to Christ.

Today we focus on the “putting off,” the “taking off.” Why is this so important? Why can’t we just pick and choose what we want to keep in our lives and “add on” the aspects of Christianity that encourage us and comfort us and give us hope? This is so vital that we are going to look at the reasons as Paul shares them with us. We should take off our prison clothes...

1 Because the old self is darkened in its understanding, v. 17-18

Paul tells us that we should “*no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.*” Remember that Paul was a Jew, and he used the term “Gentiles” here to refer to those who were outside the kingdom of God. Look at that phrase “*futility of their thinking.*” He was not saying that everyone who is not a Christian is an imbecile. We know that’s not the case at all. There have been and still are many highly intelligent people who have chosen not to follow Christ. When Paul says that their thinking is futile, he doesn’t mean “brainless.” The literal word used here means “empty,” or “pointless.” It refers to a system of logic that goes nowhere.

A life without Christ may be fulfilling and meaningful, but in the end, it goes nowhere. That’s the thought here. Paul is encouraging us to take the long-range view of this. He is telling us to look down the road, and see that the only life that is going anywhere is the life in Christ. The thinking and logic of those without Christ may be impressive and clever. It may be convincing and extraordinary, but it is pointless!

But follow Paul’s next statement in verse eighteen: “*They are darkened in their understanding.*” He used a very descriptive term here. The word “darkened” simply means “to cover with darkness.” It was used to refer to a solar eclipse, when the moon passed in front of the sun, so that the earth was darkened. But it could also be used to refer to spiritual or mental confusion. The point here is that the old self, the one we are to put off, is a life of moral darkness and confusion. *The Message* says in verse eighteen, “They’ve refused for so long to deal with God that they’ve lost touch not only with God but with reality itself.” Englishman J. B. Phillips translated this verse, “They live blindfold in a world of illusion.”

2 Because the old self is separated from God, v. 18

Paul also says in verse eighteen that the old self is “*separated from the life of God.*” He had said earlier in chapter 2, verse 12, that those who are without Christ are “*without hope and without God in the world.*” Paul also wrote in the letter to the Colossians, “*Once you were alienated from God and were*

enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Colossians 1:21-22). That alienation is a hopelessness such as defies human description. This is alienation of a horror and a terror which the human brain cannot even imagine.

The word translated "separated" here means that those who have refused to acknowledge God in their lives have literally been shut out of God's Kingdom! It refers to someone who is a stranger, someone completely foreign to the family of God. Imagine yourself arriving at home after a long, hard day. You are looking forward to a good meal and relaxing with your family. As you walk in the door, you smell the wonderful aroma that tells you that your favorite dinner will soon be on the table! But in a few minutes, there is a knock on the door. You answer it, and there is a person who is a perfect stranger to you. No one in your family knows who this person is, and yet he is pretending to be one of you. He is expecting to be allowed entrance into your home and a seat at your dinner table, just as if he belonged there and ate there every evening. Do you let him in? Of course not! He is not part of your family, nor is he part of your circle of friends. You do not know him, and you close the door on him.

That is what this word means—to be such a stranger to God that the door is shut on you, and you are left outside. Paul tells us that the old self, the one before Christ, was like that, and that is the old self we are to put off, take off, and get rid of.

3 Because the old self causes a hardening of the heart and an insensitivity to the things of God, vv. 18-19

Toward the end of verse eighteen, Paul says that this separation from God is caused by *"the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts."* Pay attention to what he said here, and see if it doesn't sound familiar. The word for "hardening" is the Greek word *porosis*, and it is a word that has survived all these many years as a medical term. Ever heard of "osteoporosis"? If you have ever broken or fractured a bone, when that bone was healing, it formed a callus along the fracture. "Porosis" refers to the process of that reformation of bone along the fracture. Scientists tell us that that section of bone along the break is even harder than the original bone. The person Paul is describing here is one whose heart and spirit have become calloused to sin and its consequences. It also means "hard" in the sense of being so stubborn that one deliberately closes his heart against God.

Then Paul continues to describe them in in verse nineteen, “*Having lost all sensitivity....*” The word Paul used there was a medical term which hints at a paralysis of their conscience. It implies that at one time there was feeling and sensitivity, but they’ve gotten over it! Their consciences used to bother them when they did something wrong, but not anymore! Paul says that the old self before Christ has so hardened itself against God that it can no longer feel anything of a spiritual nature or of spiritual value.

We might look at that word and think that certainly does describe many people in our society today. When human life seems to mean nothing anymore to some, when people are killed for the slightest little thing, it certainly appears that they have lost the capacity for feeling anything that even looks like remorse or guilt.

But let’s understand something here: this could also refer to our growing incapacity to feel moral outrage. We hear of yet another young person whose life has been snuffed out in a drive-by shooting, and we shake our heads in bewilderment, but we are no longer outraged. We hear of a child beaten to death by its mother’s live-in boyfriend, and we are no longer outraged. We hear of a man who repeatedly turns his back on God and refuses to accept Christ as Lord of his life, and we are no longer burdened for him. We have grown dull and insensitive. We are not even concerned that we are not concerned. Getting past the pain of sin could mean that we no longer feel guilt when we have sinned, but also includes growing apathetic. The life of Christ is not apathetic—it is passionate! Paul says “get rid of that kind of attitude. Take it off and get rid of it!”

4 Because the old self is never satisfied, v. 19

Paul says here in verse nineteen, “...*they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.*” You see, one sin leads to another, and when we continually feed that old self with its lustful desires, we soon find that it is never satisfied. It never gets enough. It is absolutely insatiable. Its appetite is voracious. No matter what it gets, it always wants more.

5 Because the life of the old self is foreign to the life in Christ, v. 20

After getting a pretty good picture of the life without Christ, we read in verse twenty that this way of life is totally foreign to the life we find in Christ: “*You, however, did not come to know Christ that way.*” The reference here is to the kinds of things we learn from experience. So think about your experience

with Christ, Paul says here. Are these the kinds of things you learned from Christ? Of course not! And to think that a person would knowingly live in sin after meeting and experiencing Christ is so totally foreign to everything Christ means as to be unthinkable!

6 Because the old self is being “corrupted by its deceitful desires,” v. 22

Paul further describes the old self as being “*corrupted by its deceitful desires*.” The word for “corrupted” he used there refers to the decomposition of a corpse. One paraphrase (*The Message*) of this verse says that this “old way of life has to go. It’s rotten through and through.”

It is just getting worse and worse. That natural bent we all have toward sin, and away from God, is only getting worse all the time. It is a rotting, stinking corpse that brings disease and death, and it has to go. Paul says, “Stop carrying it around. Deal with it. It belongs to your old life without Christ, and you should no longer be identified with the things of death and decay. Have nothing to do with those kinds of things. Choose Life!”

There is something exciting here that we need to see. Look again at verses 22-24, this time more closely. “*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 like God in true righteousness and holiness.*” Let’s point out some key phrases here which will help to pull all this together for us. The key phrases are “*put off your old self*,” in verse 22; “*to be made new in the attitude of your minds*” in verse 23; and “*to put on the new self*” in verse 24. Why are they important? Let’s take them one at a time.

First, in verse 22, “*put off your old self.*” The tense of the verb used here means to put off the old way of living deliberately, quickly and permanently. Do it and get it done with. Do it with such decisive action that there is no question lurking in your mind as to whether you meant it or not. Be done with the old self—put it in your past.

Second, in verse 23, “*to be made new in the attitude of your minds.*” The tense of the words there mean that this is a continual and progressive thing that we must do. Just as we must bathe every day because of the accumulation of the day’s dirt, we must also be remade and renewed in our minds on a regular basis as well.

Third, in verse 24, “*to put on the new self.*” The verbs here tell us that this is something that is done in the past, once and for all, never to be repeated.

So what do we have here? We are to deliberately and permanently be done with the old way of life, while at the same time we are to make the decision once and for all to put on the new self. Settle it! But even with making those decisions, we must continually be renewed in this new life Christ has given us. We can no longer be content to merely “get by” in our walk with Christ. It must constantly be renewed and restored.

Matthew Doebler has written about a college roommate:

“A college classmate of mine was sort of wild. For instance, he once had some friends tie him in between two mattresses and launch him off the balcony of the auditorium. I think that was just one of the times he had to be rushed to the hospital for a concussion. Years later, I saw him, dressed nicely, sitting on a couch talking in a quiet and gentle voice. Surprised to see him I said, ‘Nice to see you, Matt!’ The first words out of his mouth were, ‘I’m sorry.’ ‘For what?’ ‘For what you remember me as.’ He was trying to put his old self behind him.”

Listen, folks! It’s time we take off our prison clothes and stop living as if we were still prisoners! We have been given freedom in Christ! Let’s take off the prison clothes of the old life and put on the Lord Jesus Christ!