

**Ephesians 4:14-32 (NIV)**

<sup>14</sup> Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup> Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. <sup>16</sup> From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

<sup>20</sup> That, however, is not the way of life you learned <sup>21</sup> when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. <sup>22</sup> 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; <sup>23</sup> to be made new in the attitude of your minds; <sup>24</sup> and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

<sup>25</sup> Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. <sup>26</sup> "In your anger do not sin"<sup>[a]</sup>: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, <sup>27</sup> and do not give the devil a foothold. <sup>28</sup> Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

<sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup> Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. <sup>32</sup> Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

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I invite you to turn back with me to Chapter Four of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church. The book of Ephesians, the end of the fourth chapter.

We all know that we ought to read some from the Bible every day. We know we ought to get even a little bit of God's Word into us day by day because there is a spiritual power that comes from our willing engagement with what God has to say.

Our opening ourselves to His Word creates opportunity for this catalytic event between God's Spirit and ours that pushes us forward, spiritually.

That doesn't just happen on its own.

Growth in faith requires some intentionality on our part, even if that's as simple as choosing to, as God's Spirit said to Augustine, "Take up and read."

So, we all know we ought to read at least a bit of the Bible every day, and there are lots of strategies for doing that. There are Bible reading calendars—some right out at the Welcome Center in the foyer. There are devotional books, topical studies, online tools, blogs and podcasts—some will even read the Bible to us.

Here's one strategy I've found interesting: reading the individual books in order to determine, in just one sentence, why the writer wrote it.

In preparing for today, I tried that with Ephesians, and I think Paul's main point is to communicate to that group of believers that God's great work and purpose in Jesus is to bring all things and peoples back together.

Paul expresses it specifically in Chapter 1, verses 9 and 10: Jesus is God's way to the reunification and restoration of all creation, including us.

Jesus is not only the center of all things, but He is also the glue that holds all things together.

I think that is Paul's main point here, and that is significant because he's writing to a people experiencing extraordinary disunity and disharmony.

That is the world in which Paul lived, and of course it is still the world in which *we* live today.

Apart from Jesus (wherever Jesus is neglected or ignored), there is division, separation and fragmentation: in the cosmos, in nature, *between* persons, *within* persons *and* between *God* and persons.

God did not create the world to be like that, though, and so He sent Jesus to repair it, which is why Jesus is the one—the only one—who can bring restoration to these damaged, fragmented relationships.

That is, I think, the message that Paul is writing to the church here—a church of largely gentile converts, who did not have the spiritual background of the Jews.

Paul is writing them here an announcement of *hope*, declaring that it is God's desire and purpose that we find harmony and unity in Jesus.

E. F. Scott put it this way, "All of the many broken strands of our world are to be knotted together again in Christ, restored to the way God created them in the beginning."

Now, that was big news to the gentiles to whom Paul wrote.

Of course, it was news to Jews too, to some degree, but it was world-changing news to those gentile Christians, because they had no concept of savior or redemption or restoration or messiah. To their understanding, their world would always be broken.

But that's not the case! God is bringing our world back together through Jesus!

That's the gospel, you see? That is God's good news for the world.

But how do these verses of Chapter 4 here fit into that larger point?

Well, as He does in nearly all things of life, God works *with us* in order to accomplish His purposes.

So, if we choose to receive this greater truth that Jesus is the centerpiece of the world's restoration and

renewal, how does that work itself out in our individual lives?

What part do we play? What's required of us to participate in this?

That's the natural question that, especially, a non-Jew would ask.

And Paul's answer is just this: *we have to go all the way with Jesus*. If we want to experience the fullness of God's restoration and renewal—if we want to receive God's maximum, then we can't just give Jesus our minimum.

God has much to give, but He asks for *all* of us in order for us to receive it.

That's the nature of working with God. He walks *with us* and works *with us*, as we will walk and work *with Him*.

We see this from Paul beginning back in verse 15, where he issues this call to grow up in our faith.

You see, we all begin in Christ as immature. Spiritual infants. But we're called to move ahead—to grow up into Christ, "*for He is the head*," Paul says, "*that holds everything together*."

If we want to experience restoration and unity, not just around us but also within us, we have to move forward in Jesus.

And, we can't do that by making the same choices as we did before coming to Christ. Paul writes in verse 17 there, "*You can't be in Christ but just keep living the same way you lived before*."

You were once ignorant, Paul says. You didn't know who Jesus is and what God is up to in Him.

But now you do—now you know, and so you can't go backward. Now we have to keep moving forward with God if we want to be restored, to the point that Paul writes, there in verse 22, that "*the old self must be put off*."

The work God is up to in us and in our world is nothing short of a total change—a new way of existing—of living, and of looking at life.

God is *not out* to just *improve* us a little bit here and there. No, God, through Christ, is out to *transform* us *completely*.

The metaphor Paul uses there in verses 22 through 24 is a change of clothing, but it's not just about what's on the outside. Paul is talking about a change that reaches deep into our mind and soul, changing how we think, how we process reality, how we evaluate good and bad.

A deep change needs to happen.

That's how we will survive difficult days: not by hunkering down and just muddling through in our own power, but instead by working with God in His *re-creation* of us. Taking off the ways we used to live when we were ignorant of Jesus, and putting on the ways of Christ.

And it requires decisions from us: the decision, once-for-all, to trust Jesus to forgive us of our sin, and then the daily decision to follow Jesus with our lives—to clothe ourselves with Christ.

Will we follow Jesus in this or that, or will we fall back into our old clothes—our former patterns of thought and behavior that were based on our ignorance of Jesus?

Now, over the next few verses there, Paul gives several examples of what it means to put on, and then live in, the new clothes of Jesus.

In verse 25 there, he mentions speaking truthfully and not falsely. Choosing truth.

In verse 26, he says to deal forthrightly with anger, never allowing it to cause us to act in sinful ways.

The truth is, there is a place for anger in Christ, but never for a sinful outcome.

These are totally new ways of thinking and being, you see? All this involves the upending, by the power of Christ, the effects of the fall within us. God will help us do these things, but we have to make the conscious choice to work with Him.

In verse 28, Paul says that those in Christ must replace any patterns of theft with patterns of work. Get rid of the entitlement mentality. We're not to expect others to provide for us, but instead, we're to choose to work and provide, not only for ourselves, but also for those who are truly in need.

All this is new clothes, you see?

Verse 29 talks of controlling our speech: putting on words that build others up, and taking off words that tear down those around us.

And then, in verse 31 there, Paul, in one sentence, gathers up a whole raft of un-Christian qualities that Christ followers are to take off.

We're to take off bitterness, that long-standing resentment that refuses to be reconciled with someone else. Paul says Christ followers must lose bitterness, the nursing of wrath.

We're also to take off rage and anger.

Rage here is that kind of flame that comes from lighting dry straw: it flashes quickly and then, just as quickly, goes away.

Anger, on the other hand, is rage over time that winds up becoming a part of us. Paul says we cannot live with ongoing anger and successfully follow Christ.

We are also to take off the practices of shouting and slander: all harsh, critical and unkind words—that loud, brash assertiveness that demands our way.

Can you even imagine what the world would be like without these practices? If people spoke only softly and kindly?

Nearly all volatile situations would be diffused, since, as Barclay writes, "the argument which must be supported by shout and insult is no real argument at all."

Paul then says we are to get rid of every form of malice, which is an all-inclusive word for evil behavior.

These are the practices, the ways, the clothing of the Christ-less that promote division and destruction in the world instead of reunification and restoration.

Consider for a moment how many practice just these sorts of behaviors today! How pervasive they are! These

are the societally accepted and encouraged ways of politicians, newscasters, reporters, lawmakers, commentators.

Nearly everywhere you look in our world, you get bitterness, rage, anger, shouting, slander and malice.

Now, please note that none of these are about the elimination of differences of opinion. Not at all.

There are enormous differences between unity and uniformity, so of course differences will exist.

What Paul is talking about here is how to think of and engage with others.

There is no doubt that Jesus transforms our opinions.

But He goes further than that. His purpose is to transform our attitudes and manners so we might be His instruments of restoration in our world and with one another.

Heaven knows Jesus had every right to act with superiority. He was absolutely right in every instance and conflict.

But He did not act in those ways. Instead, Jesus' manner was – well, it was just as Paul says that our manner should be there in verse 32.

After taking off all of those previous characteristics, we are to put on, then, "*kindness, compassion and forgiveness,*" which are the polar opposites of that which we're to take off.

*Kindness:* that way of mind that thinks as much of the other as of self.

Where have we heard that before?

Jesus, right? Matthew 22:39 – "*Love others as much as you love yourself.*"

Kindness.

Also, *compassion* or tender-heartedness. That's the opposite of harshness. It means we feel for others and their well-being.

And then, *forgiving*.

*Forgiving* and *forgiven* are simply forms of grace.

How do we show grace to someone else? We forgive them. We show favor to them, even though it's undeserved – which makes sense, since there is no such thing as "deserved favor."

If grace is required, then something offensive must have been done, unfortunately, to require it – just as we have done to offend God.

And there is the theological basis for what Paul writes here: we have offended God with our sin, but God, in Christ, has forgiven us.

So, in just that same way, we are, Paul says, to forgive those who have offended us. We are to extend kindness, compassion and forgiving grace to them.

Those are the clothes of the Christ-follower.

Those are *not* the clothes of our *culture*.

They're *not* the clothes of our *past*.

They're *not* the clothes that we were *born wearing*.

But those *are* the clothes of the Christ-follower, because those are the *clothes of Jesus, the Christ*.

You see, we can't drag the old clothes of the old earthly kingdom with us into the Kingdom of God.

If we are in Jesus, we have moved! We live in *another* place now, and so we have another wardrobe we are to wear.

That is the image Paul presents, which is why he wants to know: *will we live in all Christ has for us by changing our clothes?*

Will we take off the old ways that the new may be put on?

This, Paul says, is growing up in Christ.

This is the way to keep from being tossed back and forth by the ways of our world.

And, this is the way we participate in the repair and restoration and reunification of our world, both in *here* and out *there*.

There is no doubt that these are trying times in which to live. But, in spite of the common practices of our society, there is no amount of bitterness or whining or shouting or complaining or fighting that is going to make any difference.

Paul says we have to get past all that. We have to go all the way with Jesus, not just to salvation, but to transformation of the way we think of others and speak of others and engage with others.

That is change at the motive level.

In a word, that is *sanctification*: working with God as His Spirit purifies our heart.

And it all comes down to this: are we willing to change our spiritual clothes?

Are we willing to take off bitterness toward others and let the Spirit of Christ bring kindness to our heart?

Are we willing to take off rage and anger toward others and let the Spirit of Christ bring compassion?

Are we willing to give up harshness and slander and let the Spirit of Christ bring forgiveness?

Are we willing to relinquish these clothes of days past (the ways the world works) and let God's Spirit work His ways in us?

Hey, aren't you really just sick of being angry?

Aren't you exhausted from being bitter?

Are you tired of holding that grudge you've been holding on to against that person?

Are you weary of carrying all that baggage through life?

Don't you want to be done with division?

God did not make us to live in any of these ways. And, Jesus did not die on the cross for us so that we might just stay that way.

Jesus invites us to be done with whatever remnant of our fallen world we're still carrying. Whatever that remnant is, Jesus invites us to give it up, to take it off and *give it over to Him*, and then to receive what He has for us in its place.

That's the way to real restoration – both out there – and also in here.

He has new clothes of kindness and compassion and forgiveness that He'd like to fit to us.

Do you need to let Him do that for you today?

Closing Prayer:

Father, I believe that, even now, you're pointing out some article of clothing in some of us – maybe most of us – that you would like to change out for something better, something more fitting for Your Kingdom.

It may be one of these that we've talked about; it may be something completely different.

And there are likely some here today who are fighting you about that, because they like their old clothes. Capture them, Holy Spirit, we pray.

There are also those here today who are ready and willing for the change You want to make, so Father, on behalf of them, we take off that which displeases you so that you might clothe us with what will probably be the exact opposite: an attitude, a motive, a manner, a disposition – thoughts and words that are appropriate for your Kingdom.

Father, clothe us as you would choose, that we might work with you in the restoration of your world.

Closing Song: *May the Mind of Christ, My Savior*

Benediction:

Kindness, compassion and forgiveness: God calls us to these. He provides the power, but to put them on, that is our decision.

It's like the Israelites and the manna in the wilderness: God provided it, but they had to collect it and choose to trust that it would come again in the morning.

We trust Christ for salvation.

May we trust Him for re-creation to empower us to be the people He wants us and calls us and created us to be.