Put Off the Old, 
Put On the New

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Ephesians 4:17-5:2

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It’s been quite a week of news: new indictments in the Russian investigation, hearings with leaders of social media companies, more people being accused of sexual harassment and even abuse, a car attack in New York City, and a mass shooting in Colorado. Falsehood, sexual immorality, and violence permeate our culture as it did in the first century. Not much has changed.

In Ephesians, the Apostle Paul is writing to Gentile Christians. These people are followers of Christ, but they didn’t grow up hearing God’s Big Story. They did grow up with the overriding belief that the good life was found in the one true God and the practices of listening to His word and obeying His commands.

The Gentiles had religion, but the stories of their gods and goddesses had no moral content to them. They were entertaining, but characterized by sexual immorality and violence. So, in the Gentile imagination of that time, religion and morality didn’t mix.

Our culture, though rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition, has become increasingly secular. If Paul were writing today, he might say, “Don’t be like the American.” This passage has a lot to say to us today in our cultural context.

As Pete said last week, the first three chapters of Ephesians offers an exposition on theology, and the second half of this letter is an exhortation on ethics. Paul beautifully unpacks all that God has done for us by grace so that our belief is reflected in
transformed behavior. What we actually believe is revealed in how we live (or literally, walk) in our everyday, ordinary lives.

Last week, Pete summarized the beginning of Ephesians 4 as “walking in unity toward maturity.” Today, I want to add the word purity because it summarizes our text for today. To walk in unity towards maturity and purity means we have choices to make—ethical, moral choices that reflect who we really are in Christ. Our choices matter.

C.S. Lewis writes this: “Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature; either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow-creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.”

These believers have already made the choice to believe in Christ—who he is as Lord and all he has done by grace. But believing is not a one-time decision. That choice directs every other choice we make.
Paul was concerned that it would be easy for these young believers to remove the trappings of the old culture and continue to make bad choices. Out of habit, they might continue to assume that religion has nothing to do with morals. We can make the same mistake in our day.

Paul uses a clothing metaphor to help us understand that at conversion, the Christian sheds the old, ragged, filthy garment of the sinful self and puts on a fresh, new cloak.

Paul uses the image of darkness and light to contrast and make clear that living or walking in Christ is a different way of life. True belief impacts our behavior. Those who are in Christ put off the old Gentile way of life and put on the new life in Christ.

On the left-hand side of the slide, you see that the sinful life is characterized by futility of mind, darkness, ignorance, and hardness of heart. All of these are terms given to help explain a life separated from the life of God. Such a life is characterized by deceit, corruption, licentiousness, impurity, and lust (4:18-19).

On the right, you see that those who believe are to live in the light as they clothe themselves with the new self. They have been taught the truth in Jesus. They are being renewed in the spirit of their minds. They are created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.
I want to emphasize those last two words. Righteousness and holiness describe God. We are created in the image of God, and we have been set apart to become like Christ specifically in our behavior. In his wonderful book *Streams of Living Water*, Richard Foster helps us understand this concept: “Holiness means the ability to do what needs to be done when it needs to be done. It means being “response-able,” able to respond appropriately to the demands of life. It means living with *virtue*—good habits we can rely upon to make our lives work. Conversely, *vice* is bad habits we can rely upon to make our lives not work, to make it dysfunctional, as we say. So a holy life simply is a life that works.”

What does a life that works look like? Well, we don’t actually have to wonder because Paul goes on in the passage to give concrete examples. We read in Ephesians 4:25, “So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” In our world and especially here in the DC area, it’s all about spin, which can be a form of lying. Let’s be honest, we all do it to varying degrees. We are all guilty of image management—exaggerating a story to sound a little better or to be admired or to make another look a little more ridiculous so we feel better. But exaggeration is a lie because it can distort reality.

Lying is a “false statement made knowingly, with the intent to deceive.” It is not about the correctness of what a person says but about the intent of the heart. What are the reasons we lie? Fear of what will happen if we tell the truth.
Kids and adults don’t want to get in trouble, so we try to hide our wrong behavior to minimize fallout, but lying often leads to worse consequences. Another reason people lie is a desire for personal gain. This is why so many lie on their income taxes, cheat on tests, exaggerate their resumes and college applications, or engage in political spin. The false belief that drives their behavior is this: I need to lie to get by.

As Christ’s followers, we are called to put away lying and speak the truth. God is truth; He cannot lie. The Spirit of Truth dwells within us, so we are called to walk in truth.

In this passage, the reason given to speak truth is that “We are members of one body.” This is so important because lying tears at the fabric of the unity we have in Christ. Relationships are built on trust. Lying destroys trust and tears apart relationships in families, churches, and communities. We are to put off lying and put on speaking the truth.

We are also to put off anger. In verses 26-27 we read, “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.”

Anger is a normal part of human life. We all feel angry at times. There is such a thing as legitimate anger. In his book, The Good and Beautiful Life, James Bryan Smith writes, “Righteous anger consists of getting angry at the things that anger God, and then seeking a proper remedy to correct the wrong. We ought to be angry about things like child abuse, the rich exploiting the poor, fraud, deception, and neglect.”
However, most of the anger we experience is because our will has been crossed. Again, Smith says that most anger is fueled by two ingredients: unmet expectations and fear. Again, false beliefs drive our behavior. These beliefs might include: I am alone, I can’t make a mistake, I have to be perfect, I have to stay in control or be perfect. When these false beliefs kick in, they impact our emotions leading to anger. This anger can be reflected in hostile behaviors toward others.

For Christians to deny anger is dangerous and self-defeating because it’s an emotion everyone experiences. The challenge is to recognize it and learn to deal with it appropriately. Paul actually identifies four ways to put off anger:

1. **Don’t sin in your anger.** This is not easy because it is hard to be angry and not hurt anyone with it. However, it is possible. We really do need to learn to control our anger because there is very little in life that can be done with anger that can’t be done better without it.

2. **Get over it.** Deal with your anger quickly, because if you don’t, you will nurse it and meditate on it, and it will grow and rob you of the joy, peace, and love God wants you to experience. If you don’t deal with anger, you will end up hurting yourself first and then others.

3. **Seek resolution for the sake of saving a relationship.** Do not let anger develop into bitterness, resentment, or contempt. If at all possible, seek to be reconciled to the person with whom you are angry.

4. **Don’t give the devil an opportunity.** Outbursts of anger and holding in anger give the devil a “foothold” (literal translation). Be careful not to let Satan exploit
your anger, turning it into hostility or using it to disrupt the unity and fellowship we are meant to enjoy. So, put off anger.

Let’s look at Ephesians 4:28: “Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.”

In the early church, there were people coming together from different economic backgrounds, and apparently some were relying on the community for their well-being rather than working. Paul wants to encourage respectable, honorable behavior among the community, so he encourages them to do what he himself did: do honest work and be productive members of the community. This was not only so that each would provide for their own needs but so that they would have something to share with the needy.

There is this tension in the passage we need to recognize and learn to live into: Helping can hurt; but hurt people do need help. All of us have something to do and give; all of us have needs that can be addressed in the body of Christ.

We are to put off stealing and put on work.

Ephesians 4:29 says, “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” We are all familiar with the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” It’s not
true. Words can and do hurt others and cause real damage. Social media provides even more opportunities to use words to destroy. But Paul makes clear that words are meant to build up, give grace to those who hear.

Before you speak: THINK
T = Is it True?
H = Is it Helpful?
I = Is it Inspiring?
N = Is it Necessary?
K = Is it Kind?

So before you speak (and I would add text, tweet, or post), THINK! Is what I am about to say true, helpful, inspiring, necessary, kind? You could tell me you don’t like what I’m wearing, which could be true, but it’s not really necessary or kind. There are many things in life that are better left unsaid.

On the other hand, I appreciate when friends tell me I have lettuce in my teeth. Some truth is embarrassing. Some is even difficult, so it’s inspiring when people have courage to speak the truth in love because it is helpful, necessary, and kind. Understand that verbal abuse, foul language, gossip, and slander always hurt rather than help. We are to put off evil talk of every kind. Instead, we are to give grace to those who hear.

In verse 30, Paul writes, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.”

This verse is central to the application of this passage. It stands out among all the rest. Those who are in Christ have the Holy Spirit living within them. The Holy Spirit has sealed us, assuring us that we belong to God and our future is secure in Christ. To grieve the Holy Spirit is to turn away to live according to old, sinful worldly patterns by relying on our own human resources.
Please understand, we cannot change ourselves. We need the Holy Spirit to enable us to live in righteousness and holiness. The Holy Spirit renews our minds, transforms our hearts, leads us into truth. The Holy Spirit fills us and empowers us to live a life that works as we put off the old and put on the new.

We are exhorted to “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling slander together with all malice.” An angry Christian is an oxymoron. Belief in Christ is inconsistent with hostile behavior. We are to put off hostility and put on holiness. We are to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children and live in love” (Ephesians 4:32-5:2).

This is what a life that works looks like. Kindness, compassion, forgiveness all reflect the character of Christ, and the fruit of the Holy Spirit. How do we put off the old and put on the new? How does transformation happen? Dallas Willard answers that question as well as any: “Putting on the new person, growing in grace, is something we must do. Appropriate action is the key. True, as Jesus said, ‘Without me you can do nothing’ (John 15:5). But it is also true that if we do nothing it will be without him. Grace is not opposed to effort, only to earning.” Growing up in Christ will require effort.
We cannot make transformation happen by our own human striving, but neither can we wait for it to somehow happen magically. We are called to actively participate with God in the transformation process. Spiritual disciplines are the means of grace. “A discipline is something in my power that I do to enable me to do what I cannot do by direct effort.” So in the spiritual life, I can’t change myself, but I can practice spiritual disciplines—not to earn brownie points with God but to offer myself to God so He can do in and through and for me what only He can do.

In this series, Pete has mentioned a number of times the spiritual disciplines God uses to help us become like Christ together for the world. Spiritual disciplines help us to know God, to know who I am, and what my purpose is.

We read scripture and pray, not out of duty but devotion. We live in a world in which we are bombarded by false messages that are distorting our perception of reality. I read, study, and meditate on scripture because I want to discover the truth about God, my true identity and purpose in life. The Holy Spirit uses the word of God to speak to me, transform my heart, change my life, and direct me in my real everyday life. Prayer is simply the way I live in an ongoing conversation with God. Reading the Bible and praying are behaviors I take on because I believe in Jesus and want to know him and I want to know his will so I can do it. I read scripture and pray because I want a life that works.

As believers, we are to worship regularly. If we believe that we were created and redeemed by God for God—to
glorify and enjoy Him forever—then spending an hour each week in corporate worship makes all the sense in the world. When and where else in life or in the world is there time and space created to focus on God alone? Where else can we experience the reality of being immersed in the Trinitian presence as we worship God in the company of others in whom the Holy Spirit dwells? I confess I don’t necessarily feel different each week after worship, but I do feel centered in something real, important, and substantive. And I can testify from many years of immersing myself in that practice that God has used it to change me—not as a pastor but a person.

We live in community because we are not meant to go it alone. God has created us in His image, so we are relational with a deep embedded need to be known, loved, and cared for. That happens as we live life together. That’s why we encourage small groups. Even thousands of Facebook friends and followers cannot fill the relational need that only face-to-face spiritual friendships can fill.

We practice generosity. If we really believe we are saved by grace alone and that all that we are and all that we have are gifts, then generosity is the behavior that reflects that belief. We gladly share the good news, use our time and talent to serve, and give of our resources to the Lord’s work.

God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. We have the Holy Spirit living within us to enable us to live in holiness—to live a life that works. How’s that going for you? Really? We live what we believe. What do your behaviors say about what you believe? How is God inviting you to put off the old and put on the new?