

THE CHRISTIAN'S DRESS-UP BOX

EPHESIANS 4:17-32

This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Therefore, putting away lying, “Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,” for we are members of one another. “Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil.

Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.

And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

When our kids were little Kathy had a dress-up box. If I remember correctly, it was a big, yellow suitcase.

Every child likes to play dress-up.

In the dress-up box Kathy had hardhats, and fireman helmets, and baseball uniforms for the boys. *And lots of cowboy garb...* there were chaps, boots, holsters.

Zach would put on his little tie, and carrying his mini-briefcase... He was going off to work like his dad.

For Natalie, there was a ballet tutu, and a tiara - *every princess needs a tiara*. She also had a lab coat and stethoscope. She could be a nurse like her mom.

Natalie spent hours *putting on and putting off* her mock wedding dress, dreaming of a future day when she would walk the aisle, *and break her daddy's heart*.

Many hours were spent *putting on and putting off* clothes from that dress-up box. It stirred their young imaginations. Our children could try on new identities.

When you're not sure who you are - or don't like who you are - or you're thinking of who you could become - it's nice for a brief time to be whatever you want to be.

And here's how I want to title today's study - the final verses in Chapter 4 - "The Christian's Dress-up Box."

For Paul is encouraging us, now that we're *in Christ* we have a new identity, and we should see ourselves differently. We're no longer the person we once were.

In Christ we're *blessed*, and *chosen*, and *adopted*, and *accepted*, and *redeemed*, and *forgiven*, and *sealed* - and it's time we started dressing-up according.

A victorious Christian needs to *dress for success!*

Our spiritual wardrobe... our attitude, our mindset, our outlook, our habits - *how we see ourselves* - should match the inheritance we've been given in Christ.

In these last verses Paul reaches into the Christian's Dress-Up Box, pulls out life, and instructs us, "Put this on, and take this off... Put this on, and take this off..."

This is how we grow as Christians - we learn what's appropriate attire - what I need to *put on and put off*.

Paul lists for us the behaviors that will ultimately either *undermine* or *reinforce* our new life in Christ.

We begin in verse 17, "This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk..." It may surprise you, but you can tell a lot about a person by the way they walk.

Years ago, I read of a professor named "Sara Snodgrass," of Skidmore College, who did some scholarly research to decipher the language of walking.

Sarah linked motor skills to personality traits...

She found that usually people who waddle are impulsive and independent... People who drag their feet tend to be sad and frustrated... A stride is often indicative of a

person who's bold and confident... A person on tiptoes is often bashful and insecure... And a person who shuffles can be unorganized and lazy...

Obviously, this isn't an exact science. You have to take into account - corns, blisters, ingrown toenails, hemorrhoids, pregnancy - that effects how you walk.

But generally speaking *your gait is one gateway to your character*, and this is especially true spiritually.

Of course, when Paul speaks of a person's "*walk*" he's not thinking of their motor skills, but their lifestyle.

It's not how they move their feet, but how they move through life... It's about how they see themselves, and how they treat others, and how they navigate life...

Most importantly, it's about how they relate to God.

And the first thing Paul says is we "*should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk...*" In the OT, from God's vantage point, there were only two categories of people - Jews and Gentiles (*which was everyone else*).

But with the coming of Christ a third race was born.

Just like their friends and relatives the Ephesian believers were Gentiles, but they of a different breed. They were now Christians. Spiritually, they'd been born again. They now had a new nature, a new love, a new hope, a new power, new ties with a new community.

They were no longer like "*the rest of the Gentiles.*"

What if I spent big bucks to purchase a pure-bred dog, with an impeccable pedigree? He had papers and a bloodline. He was registered with the canine society.

Would I let that dog run with the pack? Hang out with the Heinz 57s - the mongrel dogs? Of course not! You don't treat *a registered dog* like *the rest of the dogs*.

And this is how Paul sees us who are Christians.

We're pure bred: we have a new nature - a new love and loyalty... We're part of an exclusive bloodline: we're cleansed by the blood of Jesus... And we're registered: in heaven, in the Lamb's book of life...

You've got papers and didn't even know it!

We're not like *"the rest of the Gentiles..."*

And just as you'd never allow a pedigreed poodle to run with the pack, God doesn't want us to run with this evil world. Don't *"walk as the rest of the Gentiles..."*

This is why the excuse, *"Well, everybody else is doing it..."* is so lame. *We're not like everybody else!* We're of a different stock - bought at the highest price!

Imagine you're pure-bred pup asking, *"Why can't I play in the garbage like the junkyard dogs?"* Or *"Other dogs get fleas, why can't I?"* Yet this is how Christians are acting when they fail to live a holy life, and blend in with the crowd. They don't see themselves in Christ!

They don't realize how special they've become!

Do you remember the story of the ugly duckling?

The ugly duck was a beautiful swan, but got separated at birth and was bound to a mother duck. His siblings made fun of him, and his peculiar traits.

Every day the ugly duck gazed across the pond at the gorgeous swans and wished he could be a swan.

That is until one day, the ugly duckling glanced at his reflection in the edge of the water, and realized he was a swan after all. For the rest of his days he would be who and what God made him to be - a beautiful swan.

This is what we should realize. We're not like *"the rest of the Gentiles."* We're different. Let's act like it! Let's be what God has called us and made us to be.

And in this morning's text Paul tells us how...

First, he gives us some walking styles to avoid...

He begins in verse 17, *"in the futility of their mind,"* or literally, *"empty-headed."* Their life is void of any over-arching direction. They're on a wild goose chase and there's no goose. They always search, but never find.

Without Jesus people are like pinballs. They bounce from paddle to paddle. Their life has no master plan. Like the bumper sticker, *"Don't follow me, I'm lost too."*

A life that's *empty-headed* - that has no transcendent purpose - will also be cold and *empty-hearted*.

CS Lewis described the Christ-less world as, *"A land where it's winter all year long, but never Christmas."* There're nothing meaningful to break up the bleak.

Our world isn't short on pleasures and their promises... *drugs, money, sex, fame*, all come with the promise of fulfillment. Yet all they yield is drabness. In verse 22 Paul refers to them as "*deceitful pleasures.*"

The pleasures of this world promise peace and joy and community, but inevitably they disappoint. Apart from Jesus nothing satisfies and fills the hollowness.

The Gentiles walk "*in the futility of their mind having their understanding darkened...*" Imagine, living life blindfolded, or always in a heavy mist... never able to see clearly - always having your vision obscured.

A lot blurs our understanding... *an alcoholic wants more - a sex addict wants different*. Even anger blurs our judgment. An organization, [Mothers Against Angry Drivers](#), says you drive 20 mph faster when mad.

Revenge and jealousy also distort our perspective and cause rash decisions. It's scary to think how many impulsive choices are made without any forethought.

Actually, all kinds of sin blur our understanding, for sin separates us from God. Paul tells us in verse 18, "*being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart...*" Turn your back on God, and morally and spiritually your visibility is zero. Your heart is blind.

Like a pilot who loses his instruments while flying in a fog bank... He has no bearings - no communication with the tower - he's disoriented and destined to crash.

For a person without God, life is a jigsaw puzzle with no box top. You have no idea what the completed puzzle should look like. Life doesn't make sense.

Sin alienates us from God, and keeps us in the dark. But that's only for starters. We're also told in verse 19, "who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness."

Sin also creates a spiritual callousness, a hardness.

In HS I played so much basketball, the bottoms of my feet were one big callous. When the season began I had aching blisters, but by the final game the blisters had calloused over. The soles of my feet were so tough you could prick them with a pin, and I wouldn't feel it.

And what happened to the *soles of my feet*, can occur to a *human soul*. We can harden our hearts over and over until we're "*past feeling...*" We're no longer touched by the needs around us... Our conscience becomes muted... We grow deaf and insensitive to the calling and convicting whispers of the Holy Spirit...

There's a poem by Lois Cheney, "Once, a boy cheated on a test. He got a good grade and passed the course. He told his friends, "I had no choice."

Later, as a man he took a job that denied another's need, but the money was good, and he had his family to think of, and he told a friend, "I had no choice."

Later, the man denied his calling and chose a different role that made him famous, and he became well thought of... He told a friend, "I had no choice."

Later, the man reviewed his life before God, the Almighty God. He shrugged his shoulders as he told God, "I had no choice." And God said to the man as He turned His back and walked away... "I have no choice."

A life blurred by sin, and alienated from God, and ignorant and blind to the truth of God - grows more and more calloused until one day that life is judged by God.

Paul says a calloused life has been "given over to lewdness, and uncleanness, and greediness..." Here's a person who sins with no shame. They sin for shock effect - to attract attention, sell tickets, make money.

This is the person who makes no attempt to hide their sin. It's flaunted. It's outed. They push the limits of decency. Here's a Miley Cyrus attitude - a person out to prove she can be just as crass as she wants to be.

This is the gambler who steals from his own family.

This is the addict who hits the streets to find a fix.

This is the hot-head who makes a scene, or hits his wife... His problem is no longer a secret. He's now out-of-control. Consequences are no longer a deterrent.

And this is "*the way the rest of the Gentiles walk.*" It's a slippery slope... *Turning from God - to blurring the lines - to hardening the heart - to living in shame.*

Verse 20, "But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus..." As Christians we know better than to walk this path! When we sin we repent, we keep open to God, we keep our hearts soft, we avoid what's shameful. This is how we "*learned Christ.*"

And you've got to love the language here... This is exclusively Christian lingo. No one would ever say "*as you have learned Buddha,*" or "*learned Mohammed.*"

I can learn the teachings of the Buddha, but how can "*I learn Buddha?*" He's been dead for 2500 years.

This is a reminder that Christianity isn't just following a creed, or a code, or a set of conduct - we follow Christ.

Paul is writing to a people who were living 600 miles and 30 years from Jesus' crucifixion - yet they knew the living Lord. They'd even been taught by Christ.

Christianity is a relationship with Jesus. It's His life in me. Only Christians can say we've *"learned Christ."*

And Jesus has taught us a better way to walk!

Here's where we need to dress-up! Verse 22, *"put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts..."*

If you're going for a jog you don't wear a suit or high heels - clothing that restricts movement and hurts your feet. You wear appropriate attire - shorts and sneakers.

And the same is true with a Christian's *"walk."*

You go to the Dress-Up Box and dress yourself with attitudes that are fitting for a life of faith and holiness.

This is what Paul tells us in verse 23, *"And be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness."* You take off the old attitudes and put on a new identity - a new outlook.

When you came to Christ you were made a new creation on the inside. Spiritually you were born again. With the new birth came new loves, desires, ambitions.

But we're like a diamond in the rough - a sunrise behind the smog. On the inside we're new, but on the outside - our thoughts, language, habits in many ways still reflect the old life. Jesus changes us on the inside, now we need a new wardrobe - put on the godly garb!

I realize some old habits die hard! Patterns can be difficult to break. The lag time on what happens to us when we become Christians, and when it shows up in our conduct and character can be painfully slow.

For years I drove a car with a standard transmission, and when I changed to an automatic, it took months for me to stop reaching for the stick. Some habits linger even after the reason for them has long since passed.

And this is true in our outlook and behavior.

This is why we need to *“be renewed in the spirit of our mind.”* When my kids played in the Dress-Up Box it gave them the opportunity to try on new identities.

They could be a princess, or cowboy, if just for a day.

The act of *putting on and putting off* gave my kids an opportunity to *feel different - look different*. They could imagine being someone they one day hoped to be.

And this is what *putting on and putting off* does in our relationship with God. When you take off what you learned while *alienated from God* - and live as Jesus sees you, *dedicated to God* - you start to feel different.

You *put on* a new identity - develop a new outlook.

And this isn't a pretend identity. It's not imaginary. You're affirming in deed what He's done in your heart.

This is how faith works! Jesus died to give us a new identity, but we don't feel like it... until we spend some time in the Dress-Up Box - [putting on and putting off](#).

Recall when Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave, the man had been dead for four days. His corpse was decomposing. Mary warned, "[By this time he stinketh.](#)"

Yet when Jesus called Lazarus front and center the corpse obeyed. Lazarus bounced out into the mouth of the grave, standing there still encased in his shroud.

He had new life, but was still wearing grave clothes.

And this is our portrait. When Jesus saves us He raises us to new life, but we're wearing the old identity and the old attitudes that go with it - *we need to put off the old and put on the new*. [See yourself as Christ sees you and swap grave clothes for grace clothes!](#)

I love the story of Augustine. At one time he was far from a Christian. He lived with a woman, and bore a son out of wedlock. One day after his conversion his former mistress saw him on the street and ran his way.

She shouted, "[Augustine, it is I, it is I...](#)"

That's when the new believer, Augustine, took off in the opposite direction shouting, "[Yes, but it is not I, it is not I...](#)" He'd put off the old man, and put on the new.

He was now living a new identity and a new purpose. Augustine was "[renewed in the spirit of \(his\) mind.](#)"

Putting off is shedding the old habits. *Putting on* is adding new habits that reinforce my identity in Christ.

Each time we think or act it carves a rut into our personality, so that it becomes easier to think or act that way again. Over time the rut becomes larger and larger until it takes over. Rather than be shaped by my thoughts - it's now a channel for those thoughts. One day you wake up and find "the rut is now the rudder."

It's said, "We first make our habits, then our habits make us." The job of *putting off* and *putting on* is *ditching* old habits and *developing* new ones. When this is done repeatedly it creates a new identity in us.

And in these last eight verses of Chapter 4 Paul gives the Ephesians specific habits in which to dress...

Verse 25, "Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another." Notice, it's "*putting away, lying*" - and it's *putting on, honesty*. It's not just taking off a wrong attitude, but it's adopting the right attitude.

Once a farmer wanted to stop folks from stealing watermelons from his field. He posted a sign near the gate that read, "One of these melons is poisonous."

But the plan backfired. A few days later the sign was replaced by one that read, "Two of these melons are poisonous." And because the farmer didn't know which one was the second melon, he lost his whole crop.

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!" Honesty is always the best policy.

And notice the reason Paul gives for honest relationships... *“we are members of one another...”*

If we can come clean before God, and He’s willing to accept us as we are, then we should be able to open up to each other and extend that same acceptance.

Since the Garden of Eden mankind has tried to hide our sin. Adam and Eve launched a fig-leaf cover up.

But God wanted them to come out into the open - out from the bushes - and be honest about what they’d done. *Now when we come clean, God cleanses us.*

And here’s another positive habit to *put on*, verse 26, *“Be angry, and do not sin...”* Notice, we’re commanded to be angry! For some of us this is a surprise... *that there is an appropriate kind of anger... It has a place...*

Think of Jesus... He was perfect, yet still got angry!

The anger of Jesus boiled over in the synagogue at Capernaum. He wanted to heal a man with a crippled hand, but legalistic Jews forbid healing on the Sabbath.

Jesus was angry that they *put law above love*, and *tradition over people*. Mark 3:5 tells us, *“So when (Jesus) had looked around at them in anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other.”*

Jesus also got angry in the Temple. Twice He ran out the moneychangers - once with a homemade whip Jesus made Himself, and once with His bare knuckles.

This idea that God wants Christians to be wallflowers and namby-pambies couldn't be further from the truth.

There is nothing spiritual about being sissy. God wants believers who are tempered with appropriate passion. **Jesus takes away our sin, not our backbone.**

When it comes to unrighteousness, and hypocrisy, and injustice (*especially our own*) we need to get mad. We should get angry, then use that passion for good...

It's interesting, we get angry when *we're* mistreated, but Jesus loved His enemies. They nailed Him to the cross, but rather than anger, He prayed for their pardon. Jesus always got angry for the right reasons.

It was Aristotle who said, **"Anyone can become angry, but to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right reason, and in the right way - this is not easy."** ***"Be angry, and do not sin."***

Then, verse 26, **"do not let the sun go down on your wrath."** Be angry at sin - be passionate about what's right - but at the end of the day try to settle your differences. Don't go to bed cuddled up with anger!

Most forest fires start with a simple spark, or a smoldering ash - that could've easily been put out. But it was given time to flame up, and burn out of control.

The same is true with anger. Don't let it smolder. It'll flare up and do great damage. This is why Jesus said in Matthew 5:25, **"Agree with your adversary quickly."**

In marriage or friendship or church - let unresolved anger linger and somebody will eventually get burned.

And then we're told, "nor give place to the devil." It literally reads, "Don't give the devil an opportunity."

Years ago now, Kathy got a phone call promising us a free prize if we allowed a salesman to drop by the house and give his sale's pitch for a vacuum cleaner.

The only catch was both spouses had be home. Well, I hate sale's pitches. *I'd rather go to the dentist.*

Yet somehow Kathy talked me into it... But I was determined - no matter how good a salesman he was, I didn't have the money for a vacuum cleaner. No way!

I'll never forget this guy - he was Super-salesman!

And his vacuum... according to him it could fix meals and rock the kids to sleep at night. I'll never forget at the end of his presentation, I was getting out my checkbook. It was Kathy who had to talk me out of it!

And Satan is also a Super-salesman. If he can get one foot in the door, he can sell you on his schemes.

Realize, Satan has no code of ethics. He'll lie. He'll exaggerate. He'll tell you what you want to hear.

If he can just gain a hearing - a foot in the door - he's got you. Just start toying with temptation - just start nibbling at his bait - and sadly, he's got you hooked.

This is why when Satan knocks on your door, let Jesus answer! "Don't give the devil an opportunity."

I've heard people say, "I have a terrible problem with lust. Every time I pick up a Playboy magazine..."

Or "I struggle with alcohol. Every time I walk into a bar the desire returns..." *Really, how naive can we be?*

If we want to *put on the new man*, and *put off the old man* we can't afford to the "give place to the devil."

And there's more dressing up, verse 28. *Put off..* "Let him who stole steal no longer.." And *put on..* "but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need."

Again, it's not just "stop stealing" - it's also get a job, learn to work hard, and make enough money so you can bless others. A thief goes from *burglar* to *blessing*.

He's a Christian now! He's putting on a new identity.

The man goes from *the thrill of the heist* to *the thrill of the help!* He takes joy in giving to someone in need.

And "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers." Whenever I travel to other parts of the country, it doesn't take long for people to figure out that I'm from the South... "Ya'll know why!"

Open my mouth and out comes a Southern accent.

And it should be just as easy for folks to identify us as Christians. As soon as we open our mouths they should know us by our grace-filled, encouraging words.

Rather than corrupt - our conversation builds up.

Verse 30, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

This is a huge verse. To build a new identity in Christ we need the help of the Holy Spirit - and the last thing we would want to do is to *grieve Him* or *quench Him*.

Quenching the Spirit is to neglect what God desires. It's our failure to cooperate... Whereas, **grieving the Spirit** is to do what God forbids. It's our disobedience...

And both are serious sins that we should avoid.

But notice this word “*grieve*” is a love word.

I don't have to love you for you to make me mad, or angry, or disappointed, or impatient - but only a person I love can “*grieve*” me. Grief is a wound to the heart.

And it's because the Holy Spirit loves us so much, and has such high hopes for us, that we can cause Him great grief by our unwillingness to follow His lead.

And then verse 31, “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.” Nothing grieves God's Spirit more than when His people refuse to get along... when they get bitter, and go ballistic, and speak slanderous words...

Notice, this list begins with “*bitterness.*” It refers to a longstanding resentment - a deep-seeded hatred. Most of our bad attitudes begin with unresolved bitterness.

It reminds me of artist, Leonardo Da Vinci, working on his famous painting, “[The Last Supper](#).” Da Vinci had a falling out with a fellow painter, and he retaliated by painting his enemy’s face into the face of Judas.

Everyone at the time knew this man, and Leonardo’s artistry would immortalize him as a treacherous Judas.

But when Leonardo went to work on the face of Jesus, he hit that creative wall. His inspiration left him. It wasn’t until he erased the face of his enemy that the inspiration returned, for him to paint the face of Jesus.

If we’re to be like Christ the first thing that has to be *put off* is “*bitterness, wrath, clamor, and evil speaking.*”

“*And be kind to one another...*” Kindness is treating each other with grace - extending undeserved favor.

And when we act graciously it reinforces the grace we’ve received. It helps us *put on* the new man.

Just as it does to be “*tenderhearted...*” Jesus was God, yet He wanted to know and share in our plight.

Thus, God became a man. He got down on our level.

And this is our example. It’s easy to judge a brother before we’ve walked a mile in his shoes. We get a different picture when we’re sensitive to his situation.

The old Sandy I’m putting off was thin-skinned and hard-hearted. Whereas, *the new Sandy I’m putting on* - that I’ve learned from Christ - is “*tenderhearted.*”

Then Paul says, “**forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.**” One year the men of our church went whitewater rafting down the Chattooga River.

One of us wanted to start a water fight with the other boat. But our guide was reluctant. He didn’t want to stir up friction - cause any hard feelings with other boaters.

That’s when Tracy Waters told him, “**Aw, don’t worry, those guys are Christians they’ve got to forgive us!**”

I’m not sure Tracy’s *application* was biblical, but his *theology* was. As a Christian how can we not forgive a brother when Jesus has so abundantly forgiven us.

If Paul had left off the last seven words in Ephesians 4 then we could find a loop-hole - some kind of rationale to hold on to a grudge - to remain bitter and not forgive.

We’d read it, “**forgiving one another, but... or if... or unless... or until... or when... or once... or after...**”

But the last phrase of the verse removes all excuses, “**forgiving... even as God in Christ forgave you.**” As the new you in Christ we should forgive one another *just as fully and just as freely* as Jesus has forgiven us.

I want to end with a quote. *John Knox said this about Jesus*, “**Other gods have been as devoutly worshipped; but no other God has been so devoutly loved.**”

Worshippers of Jesus also want to be like Him!

They *put on and put off*, and dress like Jesus. Let’s not walk like **the rest of the Gentiles**, let’s follow Jesus.