

“A New Wardrobe”
Sermon Series in *A Household of Faith* on Ephesians
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(Eph. 4:17-32)

Introduction.

Have you ever been in a situation when you weren't dressed appropriately? Either you showed up in jeans, and everyone else was wearing a coat and tie. Or you wore your finest dress, and everyone else was wearing shorts and flip flops. There are few experiences more embarrassing than wearing the wrong thing at the wrong time in the wrong place for the wrong occasion.

Many years ago, a colleague of mine told me a story of a time when this happened to him. When Chris was in elementary school, he moved to South America with his family to be missionaries, and three years later they returned to the States when he was in middle school. The week before school started, his mother went shopping for clothes, and she came across a real bargain. There were these mix-and-match clothes called Garanimals on sale. Remember those? The tops and bottoms were interchangeable.

The only problem was – Garanimals were really cool with elementary school kids 3 years before, but now they were very out-of-fashion, especially for someone going into middle school! The first day Chris showed up for class, all the other kids laughed at him. He and his mom went shopping again the very next day for a new set of clothes!

My friend Chris needed a new wardrobe. In the passage before us this morning, the apostle Paul says much the same thing. However, it doesn't have to do with trading in a pair of Garanimals for skinny jeans and a cool t-shirt. Rather, Paul suggests that you and I need to exchange our rags of sin for the robes of righteous living.

As we consider this passage today, I want you to notice: 1) an old way of life; 2) a new set of clothes; and 3) a divine transformation.

I. An Old Way of Life.

Paul begins with an exhortation, and he describes the way of life that characterized the believers in Ephesus prior to their beginning a relationship with Jesus. And the apostle mentions four things that mark a person's life when they are apart from Christ. He says they're futile in their thinking, they're darkened in their understanding, they're separated from the life of God, and their hearts are

hardened. It's not a pretty picture Paul paints, and yet it's an accurate portrayal of someone who tries to live their life apart from Jesus. The mind, the heart, and the actions of a person are all affected whenever we wander away from God.

The word that is translated "hardening" in this passage is the Greek word *porosis*. Our English word "osteoporosis" comes from this Greek word. The Greek noun from which the word comes meant "stone," and it usually referred to a certain kind of marble. The word was also used in field of medicine, and there it meant "to callus", "to petrify", and "to harden." It applied to the joints when referring to their stiffening, like arthritis. And when the word was used to refer to the eyes, it meant "blindness." People who willfully harden themselves against God become blind to spiritual truth.

A few years ago, I received an email from an old friend I knew in high school and college. He had recently attended a high school reunion in Atlanta, and a mutual friend of ours told him where I was and how to get in touch with me. He had made several attempts in the past to try and find me on the internet, but most of the Peter Barneses he found were either British scholars in England or they were seminary professors in Australia. Go figure! When he narrowed his search to Colorado where I lived at the time, there I was.

Chip and I were thick as thieves back in high school and during the first part of college. We played a lot of basketball together, and we double-dated quite often. He had long flowing brown hair and a handsome beard that gave him a Jesus-like quality in his looks, and girls were always attracted to him. Not a bad guy to have as your wingman!

But things changed in our relationship during my sophomore year in college. I became more and more committed as a follower of Jesus, and Chip, while he had made a commitment to Christ in high school, still wanted to keep a foot in the world. He had a hard time straddling the fence, and eventually the world won out and we drifted apart. It wasn't long before I lost touch with him altogether. He hardened his heart against the things of God, and Chip is an example of the kind of person Paul is talking about in this passage. He didn't put off his old way of life

Don't fool yourself. Sin isn't morally neutral. If we choose poorly, the choices we make will leave a mark on us and they lead us down a path away from God. If we choose well, then we sow seeds of righteousness that can bear fruit in our lives and we grow more into the likeness of Christ. Paul encourages his readers to put off the old self, the old way of life, and put on a new set of clothes spiritually. That leads us to the second matter I want you to consider this morning.

II. A New Set of Clothes.

In his commentary on Ephesians the late John Stott writes¹ that the kind of clothing we wear depends on the kind of role we're fulfilling. For example, when

we go to a wedding, we wear one kind of clothing. When we go to the beach, we wear another. Soldiers and sailors wear different uniforms. Judges in a court of law have special clothing. So do prisoners and convicts.

When we change our role, we change our dress. Take a prisoner, for example. When they're released from custody and become a free person again, they change the clothes they're wearing. They take off the orange jumpsuit and they put on ordinary clothes. In a similar way, when a soldier leaves the army and becomes a civilian again, she gets out of her uniform and puts on her "civvies." In the same way, Paul says you and I are supposed to take off and put away our old ways of living and adopt new ones. Our new role as a follower of Christ means a new lifestyle which should seek to honor the Lord in everything we do.

Paul describes three specific areas of life which should be marked by one's relationship with Jesus. The person who seeks to cultivate the character of Christ should show it in their *speech, emotions, and their work*. **In the area of speech**, the apostle says that we should put off falsehood and instead speak truthfully to our neighbor. He also says we shouldn't let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths, but only that which is helpful for building others up.

In the area of emotions, Paul encourages his readers not to let the sun go down on their anger. This is advice I give to young couples in premarital counseling. In other words, don't go to bed angry. Paul also says to get rid of bitterness, rage and anger, along with every form of malice. Instead, he says we should be compassionate and forgive one another, just as Christ has forgiven us.

The final area about which the apostle writes has to do with **work**. Paul says that the person who has been stealing in the past must steal no longer. Rather, he should work and do something useful, so that he might have something to share with people in need. Integrity, honesty, and industry should mark the Christian's life in the way they work.

In what ways do you cut corners, shade the truth, or tilt the playing field your way in order to gain an advantage at work? Where do you fudge on our expense reports or cheat on your tax returns thinking you deserve more? In what ways do you fail to carry the load with your co-workers and say to yourself, "That's not my job"? How might God be calling you to put off some of your old attitudes and habits and develop a new way of working?

The word "habit" comes from the Latin word *habitus*. Catholic priests and nuns actually wear a *habitus*, clothing that represents a commitment to a holy life. Normal Christians like you and me should also put on *habits*, but not by wearing special clothes like priests and nuns. Instead, we're supposed to develop new habits that are formed in practice so that godliness becomes a built-in instinct. It literally becomes our second nature.

The Holy Spirit is God's tailor. He's ready to give you a new set of clothes and discard the old wardrobe you've been holding onto. But the old way of life dies a slow and bitter death, doesn't it? It doesn't want to give up its grip on our lives. Martin Luther once said, "I tried to drown the old man in the waters of baptism, but I discovered the wretch can swim!" It requires radical spiritual surgery that is often painful, and you can't do it all by yourself. You need God's help. And that leads us to the final matter I want you to consider today.

III. A Divine Transformation.

In the third book of the Chronicles of Narnia, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C.S. Lewis tells the story of a difficult boy named Eustace.² Eustace was a passenger on a ship named the *Dawn Treader*, which was sailing under the command of Prince Caspian. The boy was obnoxious, he complained all the time, and he alienated his fellow travelers.

When the ship docked on an island one day, all the passengers got out to explore. But Eustace intentionally separated himself from the rest, feeling that he wasn't welcome. Soon he came face to face with a fire-breathing dragon. Much to the boy's relief, the dragon died right in front of him. But after a dream-filled night, Eustace awakened to find that he himself had become a green, scaly dragon. This was Lewis' way of saying that Eustace became on the outside what he was on the inside.

The boy sobbed when he realized the meaning of the symbol, and he wondered how he could get rid of the scaly skin and be recognized and accepted by those he'd estranged before. Another night passed full of dreams, or so he thought. In his dream, he was approached by Aslan – a lion who is the Christ figure in the story. Aslan took Eustace to a bubbling well, shaped like a round bath with marble stairs descending into it. The water was very inviting, but Aslan said that before Eustace could get into the pool he must first undress. Eustace knew that he must remove his scaly surface like a snake sheds its skin.

He stripped off his skin, as if peeling a banana, and he walked over to the edge of the pool. However, he saw that his reflection in the pool revealed the same rough and wrinkled skin. Two more times he attempted to remove his outer coat with the same results. No matter how much he stripped away himself, he didn't change.

Then Aslan said, "You will have to let me undress you." Even though Eustace was afraid of Aslan's claws, he was desperate by now. So the boy lay on his back and allowed Aslan to do what needed to be done. Here is how C.S. Lewis puts it in the book. Eustace is speaking.

The very first tear was so deep that I thought he had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt.

The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling that stuff peel off. After he peeled off the skin, I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch. He caught hold of me and threw me into the water. At first it smarted, but then it became perfectly delicious. I turned into a boy again....And after a bit the Lion took me out of the water and dressed me. New clothes and all.³

God intends to make us into new people who reflect His godly image. To do that He must remove the old skin that represents our old way of life and clothe us with new skin made in the likeness of Him. The image of undressing and redressing frames Paul's teaching in this latter half of Ephesians 4. The apostle says that the Christian life is a lifelong process of taking off the old soiled tattered garments of our sinful nature and being dressed with a fresh set of clothes that will transform us into people who reflect God's holiness and His righteousness.

Conclusion.

Earlier I told you about my friend Chip, the one who hardened his heart against God. When he emailed me, he gave me his phone number, and I called him up. We talked on the phone for about an hour, and we had a great time catching up. It turns out that after college he owned and operated a number of bars in Florida, but he discovered that running from God wasn't as fun as he hoped it would be. Eventually he settled down and got married, and he went back to school and earned a PhD. Now he's the dean of the business school at a university in Boston. Go figure. He said that in the classes he teaches his case studies of owning and operating a bar provide a lively source of discussion!

Chip and his wife now have three children. When the first child was born, they decided to seek out a church. She grew up Catholic, so they went there. Slowly, the Lord began to work in Chip's heart. When his youngest daughter went through confirmation to prepare for her first communion, he decided to attend with her. And at the end of the class, he himself "converted," as he called it, and he joined the church. Today he's walking with Christ. It's an amazing story of grace.

What you believe will show up in how you live. Paul understood that, and he writes about it here in this passage. The apostle urges his readers to put off the old self and put on the new. Our prayer should be, "Lord, do whatever it takes, reach as deep as you need. Go straight to the heart with whatever my problem is, because my desire is to be made over into the likeness of Jesus. I need a transformation." It worked for Eustace. It worked for Chip. It worked for me, and it can work for you, too, my friend. Amen.

¹ John R.W. Stott, *God's New Society*, p. 183.

² This illustration is adapted from Greg Ogden's *Discipleship Essentials*, pp. 209-212.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, p. 90.