

March 31/April 1, 2001

The Truth About Our Life in Christ
A Study in the Book of Ephesians
Off With the Old, On With the New
Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2
Pastor Bryan Clark

This morning as we dedicated the Mexicali Missions Team, you notice they all had on their blue T-shirts that identify them as part of that team. Did you ever stop to think about how much we use clothing to identify, or set apart, certain groups of people? If you were to travel around the United States you could identify various professionals simply by the clothing they're wearing. Whether we're talking about the medical field, the military, law enforcement, postal employees, or the UPS men, there is certain clothing that automatically identifies people in a profession. Their clothing sets them apart.

That's the imagery or the metaphor that Paul is using in Ephesians 4, when he says that, at one time, we were spiritually dead. And because we were spiritually dead we wore clothes that identified us as such—we wore the grave clothes. But when we were made spiritually alive, we should take off the old clothes and put on the new. Of course, he's not talking about the actual clothing, but it's an imagery—a metaphor. He's talking about the clothing in terms of attitudes and behavior which set us apart as those who have been made alive in Christ.

Last week I challenged you with coming to grips with this commitment to take off the old and put on the new. Leesa put together a prayer that was a response to that text in Ephesians and shared it with me. I thought it so beautifully summarized where we were last week, that I asked if I could read it to you to prepare us for what we will talk about today.

Wearing My Father's Clothes

by Leesa Sorensen

How could I have come so far and still be clothed in the rags of my death? Lord, how could I have known you so long and yet not known the need to stop being bound by my old clothing of death?

You've said to take up my cross and follow you. And I've failed to grasp the cross and I've shuffled behind you, at best. Now I see the hindrance these rags have been to my arms and feet. No wonder I've stumbled. No wonder I've wandered aimlessly at times – no doubt blinded in the garments of my life before you.

So here I stand in my rags. Now I must make a choice. Will I choose to continue to live in these rags that reek of death – these strips of cloth that signify the death I was bound in before I met Jesus? Or will I choose the robe of white, with the tag that says, "Designed by God – Made White as Snow by Christ"?

Lord, I see the robe of righteousness and holiness that you alone have prepared for me. Thank you, Lord, for removing the death rags from my eyes.

So now, Lord, in this brief moment of time I stand before you naked. I have chosen to take off the rags of death. And, Lord, I ask you now to cleanse me from the sins that came from my futile thinking. Forgive me, Lord, for not shedding this clothing of death sooner and for failing to wear your clothing of righteousness as a testimony of what Jesus did for me on the cross. Forgive me, Lord, for all the times I've lived in such a way that made me look as though I did not know you at all. Forgive me for using my rags of death as camouflage to live the selfish life I've chosen for me, instead of living the life you have designed for me. Lord, cleanse me from the stench of death that still lingers and take these rags of death and destroy them.

Now, Father, I submit myself to your robe of righteousness and holiness. Help me to wear it in a way that is pleasing and honoring to you. Thank you, Father, for my new clothes.

I think that's a beautiful summary of where we were last week. Hopefully you've made a commitment to take off the old—to take off the grave clothes and put on these new clothes—these attitudes and behaviors that are consistent with who you now are in Christ. That's what we need to talk about this morning from Ephesians 4. We need to talk about the specifics of that. What are those pieces of clothing? What do we take off? What do we put on?

In Ephesians 4:25 we have the word “therefore.” I mentioned last week that it's a very critical “therefore,” because it's really a pivotal moment in the text where we have made a choice to take off the old and put on the new. *Therefore*, there are some things we need to talk about. *Therefore*, let's talk about the specifics of that.

Paul outlines for us four pieces of clothing, in a sense. He talks about both what needs to come off and he talks about what needs to be put on. “Therefore, laying aside {*again, that's the clothing metaphor used to describe the taking off of clothing*} falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.”

The first piece of clothing that Paul talks about is taking off falsehood and putting on truth. The idea of falsehood is the idea, of course, of lying or deceit. But it's actually quite a bit broader than that. It would have to do with anything that reflects maybe a half truth, maybe slanting the facts your way in order to make your point, maybe allowing someone to believe something that you know isn't true, for whatever selfish reason there might be. All of that's captured in the idea of falsehood.

In the first century, lying was a very significant part of Greek culture. In fact, it was an accepted way of life. It was the mode of operation of most of the people. Last week Paul gave us a profile of someone who is spiritually dead. And when you narrow it all down, he said ultimately these are people who live for themselves. All that really matters to them is what benefits them. Well, if that's true, then whatever lie needs to be told or whatever deception needs to be put forth in order to accomplish my agenda or for my benefit, is perfectly acceptable. I think we live in a culture that's very much like that today. We live in a culture that doesn't believe that truth is absolute, but that truth is relative, and in a practical sense, truth is whatever I need it to be in order to have my way—to promote my own agenda.

We've seen this modeled for us in the White House the last several years. What was interesting was that when it became confirmed that the President had, indeed, been lying to the American people, it was interesting how few people thought that was really a scandalous thing. Most people shrugged it off as being no big deal. Well, the reason for that is they look in the mirror and they see their own grave clothes, so they aren't terribly appalled by someone else wearing the same grave clothes. That's the mode of operation of someone who's spiritually dead.

But Paul is saying that we aren't dead anymore. That way of life makes sense when our only agenda was selfish. But now that we've been made alive in Christ, then that falsehood needs to be taken off and needs to be replaced by truth. He talks about the reason why that is so important—because we are members of one another. Paul is still talking about this idea of unity in chapter 4, and we understand that falsehood produces mistrust, and mistrust always breaks down unity. So in order for us to really function together as members of the body of Christ and serve one another for the common good, as we've talked about, there needs to be truth, which produces trust, which then produces unity.

The idea of members of one another is this body imagery that he's used several times in Ephesians. It reminds us that we're all members of the body and we function together in order to accomplish the mission. So stop and think about that metaphor. What would happen in your physical body if members of your body lied to other members of your body? The word spastic comes to mind—it really would be a disaster. Let me give you an example of that.

My mom recently had eye surgery, as she struggles with glaucoma and cataracts. After the surgery there was bleeding in her eye, which isn't abnormal. But that blood gets into the eye and, if you're an eye doctor, I apologize for my description of all this, but it's just the way I understand it. Over time the blood absorbs back into the body—back into the system. But until then, the blood is just floating around the eyeball there. And apparently at times it floats past the pupil, and I'm not sure what it's doing, but my mom said it floats past in such a way that it makes this “white cloud” that goes across her eye. You have to put that together with the fact that my brother owns a couple of little white yipey-kind of dogs (this has to be our little secret here). These little yipey dogs run around under your feet, and you have to be careful you don't step on them and squish them. When they come to visit there's always these little dogs and lots of kids, and my mom says that when a “cloud” goes across her eye, it's a white cloud, and she thinks that one of those little white dogs is running through her feet. So she is startled and she steps back, trying not to step on the dogs. The problem is—there's nothing there. She says she's just thankful that no one's there to watch this when it happens! By the way, don't tell her that I've shared this—this has to be our little secret. But that is an example of one member of the body lying to another member of the body, that creates kind of a spastic behavior.

That's what Paul is talking about, really, in this text. We are members of one another. We have to be able to trust one another. We shouldn't have to guess whether or not we're being truthful, straightforward, honest with one another in our dealings, or we'll never really be unified. The first thing that we deal with is: Are we people of truth? Have we put off falsehood, any way that we mislead or deceive, and are we people committed to the truth?

The second piece of clothing he talks about is in verse 26: “Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.” Notice the way this verse is written. It doesn't say “don't be angry.” As a matter of fact, it's almost as if there's an assumption that we are going to be angry. It is a way of life, in the sense that because we live in an evil world, we're not always going to be treated fairly. We are going to be mistreated, and our initial reaction to that is to become angry, which is almost a normal, natural reaction.

What he's getting at here is this: what do we *do* with that anger? So, really, what we're taking off is unresolved anger, and what we're putting on is the ability to resolve anger. It's not as simple as “off with anger” and “on with something else.” In fact, that initial anger is justified. We could say that it's righteous in most cases, because we should be somewhat appalled or even angered at unfair, unjust treatment. But what do we do with that? That's what separates those who are spiritually dead from those who are spiritually alive.

He goes on in verse 27 and says if we don't resolve our anger properly, we become fair game for the enemy. In other words, it provides an environment where the devil can have his way with us. We will be misled. We will be mistreated. We will suffer the consequences of holding onto that anger. So when he talks about not letting the sun go down on your wrath, he is talking about, in short order addressing and resolving that anger. So, yes, it's justified, and

that treatment was unfair—it was mistreatment. But I have to quickly regain some perspective. God, in His goodness, has lavished His grace upon me, and because of that, I realize the need to mediate out grace to others, which is an undeserved favor, and offer forgiveness to others as I have received forgiveness from God.

It talks about the idea of resolving our anger and not letting the sun go down on our wrath, which, by the way, is a general principle or metaphor. It's not really to be taken legalistically. In other words, if somebody upsets you at 8:15 in the evening, you don't have to get it resolved by 8:30 because the sun is going down. It's really talking about just doing it in short order. You know, if you lived in Alaska in the summer you could be angry for 22 hours or whatever it is. A couple of years ago when I came back from Thailand, I actually had one day that lasted 36 hours. I could have had a real temper tantrum that day. But that's really not what he's talking about. He's just saying to get it resolved in short order. Address it quickly. Because what happens is that immediately we're angry because we've been mistreated. We've been treated unfairly and we're angry. That's as it should be—that's justified. But rather than resolving it, we nurse it. We massage it. We wallow in it. We hold onto it, and it's gone from being an anger that was justified to an anger that's become selfish and sinful, and the enemy is going to have his way with you.

Frederick Buechner talks about anger this way:

Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontation still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back; in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

- Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*

I think that's right, and what he's talking about is true. We figure out ways to justify our anger because, at the root, there was something unfair. We were mistreated. And because of that we have a right to be angry. But rather than resolving it in the grace of God, we've nursed it, and we've wallowed in it. It's become a bitterness. It's become vengeful; and the skeleton at the feast is us.

Now let's be really honest here. Some of you have been angry all week. Some of you have been angry for a month, and some of you have been angry for years. In your mind you've figured out a way to rationalize and justify that. You go all the way back to some mistreatment and you have a right to be angry. That's the way people who are spiritually dead think. They're selfish to the core and they hang onto that anger. But you've been made alive. You are a recipient of unbelievable grace. And because you have so freely received, you're expected to freely give. That means anger must be quickly resolved and forgiveness extended, because that's part of what it means to be made alive in Christ.

The third piece of clothing he talks about is in verse 28: "Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need." Now, at first, we might think that the clothing to come off is stealing and that the clothing to put on would be not stealing, or working hard. But I think it's a little bit broader than that. What he's really talking about is that what needs to be taken off is selfishness. What needs to be put on is serving others. In fact, go all the way down to the core. There's a dramatic difference in how we live. The

spiritually dead person lives for himself or herself. And ultimately, everything is selfish and everything is what I can get for me.

In the first century stealing was a huge problem because of all the slavery. Slaves believed that whatever they could get without getting caught belonged to them—they felt it rightfully belonged to them. So whatever wasn't nailed down did get taken. That's just the way it was in that culture, and apparently that behavior filtered on into the church. But ultimately that goes back to the profile of the spiritually dead person, because that person has no real conscience and all that matters to them is what *they* want. Therefore, if they can take it and not get caught, then they figure out a way to rationalize and justify that.

Now maybe some of you have that problem. Maybe you do have a problem with stealing. Obviously, that really is completely inconsistent with who you now are in Christ. But it would also be easy for the majority of us to say, "Yeah, yeah, that is a problem. One shouldn't steal. What's the next one?" But let's not pass this one by quite that quickly. There are different ways that we can be guilty of this. April 15 is coming up very soon. A lot of people steal on their taxes and they figure out all kinds of ways to justify that—that they have it coming and "the government this and the government that." Ultimately, that's the way the spiritually dead person would think. But we're certainly called to a higher standard than that. What about employee theft? What about things that disappear from the workplace and we justify the fact that they really belong to us, or we have it coming, or it's no big deal. The American Psychological Association recently did a study, and they found that employee theft happens to the tune of 16 million dollars per day. 16 million dollars per day! I would be willing to guess that over 90 percent of those people have completely justified it in their own mind that they have it coming.

That is the way someone who is spiritually dead and consumed with their own selfish desires thinks. But we've been made spiritually alive. If you get paid for 8 hours of work and you don't work 8 hours, that's stealing. Anything that we take that doesn't belong to us, in any way, is stealing. But let's get back to the core. What we're really talking about is the difference between being completely selfish and living for my needs and my agenda, and the new life—the new clothing. The "new clothing" means not just working hard to pay for my own things but, as the text says, working hard so that you have something to give to someone else. So, rather than being consumed with selfishness, I am motivated to be a person of honor, and in the process of that, I gain so that I can give—not just so I can accumulate more. It's a completely different attitude. I was selfish to the core; now I should be serving to the core.

The last one is in verse 29: "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear." The clothing to be taken off are words that tear down. The clothing to be put on are words that build up. Paul uses the word "unwholesome" which is a very graphic term. It's a word that was used to describe rotting fruit, and it means putrid or rotten. It was also used to describe rotting fish, and I don't know of a worse smell than the smell of rotting fish. It is the smell of death and decay. So this word is very strategically used, remembering that Jesus said that what's in my heart is what comes out of my mouth. When I was spiritually dead, I opened my mouth and out came the aroma of death. It was rotten—it was putrid. That's what was in my heart. But when I was made spiritually alive and I opened my mouth, it shouldn't be the smell of death. It should be the sweet smell of life, because I'm not dead anymore. That's the meaning of the word being used there.

Augustine, one of the old church fathers, had a sign that hung in his dining room, which read: “Anyone who speaks evil of an absent man or woman is not welcome at this table.” That’s a pretty good sign to hang in the dining room: “Anyone who speaks evil of an absent man or woman is not welcome at this table.” Ask yourself this question: “What comes out of my mouth?” Are they words that are filled with the stench of death—that tear down? Or are they words that are filled with the smell of life and they build up?

It’s interesting when you look at these four pieces of clothing, they all have to do with relationships. All four of them have to do with relationships, because we’re still talking about unity. We’re still talking about our mutual responsibility to one another as members of the body. You know, if I get new clothing, such as a new suit, I don’t dress up in new clothing so I can sit by myself in front of the television at home. That would be quite a sight, wouldn’t it? No, we put on new clothing so that we can go out. That’s what he’s talking about. Our new clothing in Christ is to be worn in the context of community. I can sit at home in isolation and I can believe that I’m wearing all my new clothes in Christ. I can believe I’m doing pretty good. But I really don’t know whether that’s true or not until I go out into community and I exist in relationship. And then I start to find out whether I really am putting on Christ. So, evaluating these in your own life, you evaluate them in the context of community. What would the people around you say? What do they see in terms of the clothing you wear?

Then he says quite a remarkable thing in verse 30. He says, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” Remember in chapter 1 we were told that at the moment of salvation we received the Spirit of God—the very presence of God Himself—and God dwells within us. That’s incredibly intimate and personal. It’s a celebration of life and it’s a guarantee of our redemption. It’s a guarantee that He will get us to that glorious day when our redemption will be fulfilled. It’s a down payment. And when we talked about that in chapter 1, that was a glorious truth that we celebrated. Paul is saying that, remembering how glorious that is, why would we take the Spirit of God that was given to us to celebrate life, and why would we drag Him back to the cemetery? Why would we drag Him back into the grave with us? Why would we wallow through the muck and the mire of the grave, when He was given to us to celebrate life? Really the question he is asking is: Why would we do that to Him? It’s such a glorious truth, why would we treat Him that way?

Have you ever stopped to think about what a staggering reality it is that you can cause the God of the universe to grieve? That is a staggering concept! If today I put on my grave clothes, and it was brought to the attention of Governor Johanns, I doubt he would grieve. Not because he’s not a good man—I think he is. But he doesn’t know me. We don’t have a relationship, and he’s got other things to worry about. And if it was brought to the attention of President Bush, he wouldn’t grieve for the same reasons: he doesn’t know me and he has no relationship with me. But what a staggering thought that today, if I choose to wear my grave clothes, I grieve the heart of the Creator God of the universe, because I am intimate with Him. That’s a sobering reality that I, in my behavior, can break the heart of God. But I do. I break the heart of God every time I put on those old grave clothes and drag Him through it with me.

Verses 31 and 32 are kind of a summary of where we’ve been. Again, I don’t think these pieces of clothing are meant to be all-inclusive. I think this is just a sampling of what this new pathway looks like—what these new clothes look like. And it’s just a sampling of what needs to be taken off. He summarizes in verse 31 what needs to come off: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor {*verbal abuse, such as yelling and screaming*} and slander be put away from you, along with all malice {*evil intent*}.” So Paul says all of those need to be

put away. They need to be taken off—they shouldn't be a part of you anymore. Verse 32: "And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you." What we put on is the kindness, the tenderness, the forgiveness of Christ. We are to be like Christ.

I think it's unfortunate that the chapter division falls here, because the thought isn't over. I think it probably should fall after verse 2, because he's continuing the same thought in chapter 5. "Therefore be imitators *{that's the Greek word "mimic"—we are to be mimics of God as His beloved children}* and walk in love." We're still talking about walking worthy of our calling that started in chapter 4, verse 1. Walk how? "In love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma."

Remembering how Christ loved us and sacrificed Himself on a cross that we might experience His grace and His mercy and His love, when we put on Christ we then sacrifice ourselves. In an act of worship before God, we sacrifice ourselves to love others as we have been loved. And we do that in order to become imitators of God.

He was driving home one evening on a two-lane country road. Work, in this small mid-western community, was almost as slow as his beat-up Pontiac. But he never quit looking. Ever since the factory closed, he'd been unemployed, and with winter raging on, the chill had finally hit home.

It was a lonely road. Not very many people had a reason to be on it. It was starting to get dark and light snow flurries were coming down. He almost didn't see the lady stranded on the side of the road. He could see she needed help, so he pulled up in front of her Mercedes and got out. Even with the smile on his face, she was worried. No one had stopped to help for the last hour or so. Was he going to hurt her? He didn't look safe; he looked poor and hungry.

He could see that she was frightened, and he said, "I'm here to help you, ma'am. Why don't you wait in the car where it's warm. By the way, my name is Joe." All she had was a flat tire. Joe crawled under the car looking for a place to put the jack, skinning his knuckles a time or two. Soon he was able to change the tire. As he was tightening up the lug nuts, she rolled down her window and began to talk to him. She told him that she was from St. Louis and was only passing through. She couldn't thank him enough for coming to her aid.

Joe just smiled as he closed her trunk. She asked him how much she owed him. Any amount would have been all right with her. She had already imagined all the awful things that could have happened had he not stopped. Joe never thought twice about the money. This was not a job to him. This was helping someone in need, and God knows there were plenty who had given him a hand in the past. He told her that if she really wanted to pay him back, the next time she saw someone who needed help, she could give that person the assistance that they needed, and Joe added "...and think of me." He waited until she started her car and drove off. It had been a cold and depressing day, but he felt good as he headed for home, disappearing into the twilight.

A few miles down the road the lady saw a small café. She went in to grab a bite to eat, and take the chill off before she made the last leg of her trip home. It was a dingy looking restaurant. Outside were two old gas pumps.

Her waitress came over and brought a clean towel to wipe her wet hair. She had a sweet smile, one that even being on her feet for the whole day couldn't erase. The lady noticed that the waitress was nearly eight months pregnant, but she never let

the strain and aches change her attitude. The lady wondered how someone who had so little could be so giving to a stranger. Then she remembered Joe.

After the lady finished her meal, and the waitress went to get her change from a hundred-dollar bill, the lady slipped right out the door. She was gone by the time the waitress came back. He wondered where the lady could be, and then she noticed something written on a napkin.

There were tears in her eyes when she read what the lady wrote. It said, “You don’t owe me a thing. I’ve been there, too. Someone once helped me out, the way I’m helping you. If you really want to pay me back, here’s what you do. Don’t let the chain of love end with you.”

That night when she got home from work and climbed into bed, she was thinking about the money and what the lady had written. How could she have known how much she and her husband needed it? With the baby due next month, it was going to be hard. She knew how worried her husband was, and as he lay sleeping next to her, she gave him a soft kiss and whispered soft and low, “Everything’s gonna be alright, Joe.”

-author and original source unknown

That is a beautiful picture of what Paul is talking about. It’s the picture of how deeply we have been loved. We have gone from death to life in Christ, and because of that we are to become imitators of God. We are to pass the love along, that we might be identified by our new clothing—as those who are in Christ.

Off With the Old, On With the New

Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

Study Questions

Opening Discussion

1. Identify various professions that could be recognized by the uniform or the clothes they wear.
2. What is the value or benefit of having recognizable uniforms or clothing?
3. What might be the down side of having such recognizable clothing?

Bible Study

1. Based on Ephesians 4:17-24, we must make a commitment to “put off” the old and “put on” the new. At salvation, we understood at the basic level that it had to be God’s way and no longer our way. Paul is urging us to follow through on that commitment by choosing to live in light of what is true of us in Christ.

Read Ephesians 4:25-5:2. The list of behaviors is not meant to be exhaustive. It provides specifics of how this new life in Christ differs from our former way of life when we were spiritually dead.

2. According to 4:25 we are to lay aside falsehood and speak truth. What evidence is there that “falsehood” has become an accepted way of life for many? Is falsehood limited to just an outright lie, or are there other ways we can communicate falsely?

Do people today take lying as a serious issue? Why or why not?

3. How does this compare with Proverbs 6:17?

How does lying or falsehood break down relationships and unity?

4. In what ways can a legitimate anger turn to sinful anger? According to 4:26, how do we prevent this from happening?
5. How does our anger make us vulnerable to the enemy’s attack?
6. According to the APA, 16 million dollars a day are lost to employee theft. What are some other ways people might steal from others without giving it a second thought?

7. Compare 4:29 with Proverbs 6:19. The word “unwholesome” was used to describe rotten fish. Compare 4:29 with James 3:1-12.

Is this a serious problem? In what way? Have you been hurt by “rotten speech” in the past?

Have you been built up by a timely word?

8. What do you think it means to grieve the Holy Spirit? Do you stop and consider the grief you cause the God of the universe when you fail to lay aside the old grave clothes?
9. Ephesians 4:31,32 seem to summarize what Paul is trying to say. As a group, come up with your own summary based on Paul’s words in these verses. What does it mean to “put on” Christ?
10. According to 5:1,2 we are to imitate God by walking in love, as Christ loved us. According to the Epistle to the Ephesians, what does this mean?

Application

1. Prayerfully consider the “clothing” we are to put on to imitate Christ. Ask God to reveal to you which of these areas you need to work on. List those areas.
2. Share with the group those areas you need to address. Invite the group members to hold you accountable to “put on Christ” in these areas.
3. In what areas have you experienced growth from your former manner of life? Celebrate those areas together as a group.
4. Spend time in prayer asking God to help you imitate God as beloved children.