



FINERY

Ephesians 4:17-32

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It's time to talk about our wardrobes. Friends don't let friends commit "crimes of fashion" by wearing the wrong clothes. We need help to get our clothing right.

The Apostle Paul gives us just this kind of help in Ephesians 4:17-32. In it, he goes through our wardrobes, tossing out old junk that no longer fits. "Lying, cheating, stealing—why do you still have these old rags in your closet?" asks Paul. "Throw them away. It's time for something new." It's time for finery.

Paul sums up his fashion advice in this way:

Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22-24 ESV)

In other words, our beliefs and our actions ought to be connected and consistent. What we believe in our hearts, what we know in our heads, ought to be evident in the ways we live. Before we knew God and believed in him, we had no higher purpose than to live for ourselves. We were our own gods, so we could live selfishly. We could live as callous hedonists (4:19), because such a lifestyle was wholly consistent with what we believed, i.e. that we were sovereign over our own lives, answerable to no one else. But that was all before we met the victorious conqueror, Jesus Christ. When Jesus came and fought against sin and death, he captured us for himself. He showed us a new way to live. Then he gave us as gifts to his church, so that the whole church might grow up into maturity, for the life of the world. Because we know him and believe in him, we have a new dress code. No more old rags of selfishness. It's time for finery—time we dressed like Jesus. So put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (4:24).

Paul goes through our wardrobes in the next paragraph (vv 25-32) and tells us what to toss out and what we ought to wear instead. It's a code of conduct for believers, or in keeping with the theme of finery, a "Christian dress code." We'll take a closer look at this dress code in a moment, but before doing so, I'll make three preliminary observations regarding the who and why behind Paul's instructions.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION #1: A "CHRISTIAN DRESS CODE" IS FOR CHRISTIANS

What Ephesians 4:17-32 teaches us is not how to *become* a Christian, but rather how to *live* as one. This is a very important distinction.

In Ephesians 1-3, we heard a lot about how to *become* Christians. God loved our world so much that he sent Jesus, his Son, to put on human flesh and live amidst all our sinful brokenness. Jesus came to set our world to rights through a surprise attack against sin and death and the devil. Though Jesus never sinned, he was nevertheless regarded as the vilest of criminals, and was tortured and executed by the government. But this was all according to God's plan, because in dying on the cross, Jesus died *for us*—for all of us who *have* sinned against God and our neighbors. Jesus died in our place, and then rose again to reign forever over God's kingdom.

The risen Lord Jesus invites us to join him, to become a part of God's kingdom too. He is alive and real, and he wants to be in relationship with each of us. He wants to befriend us, and lead us in lives of meaning and purpose. All we have to do is call out to him in faith. We can become Christians by sending all our problems to the cross of Christ, and setting all our hopes on the risen Christ. We pledge allegiance to Jesus, making him king of our hearts and lives. That's how we *become* Christians.

If you haven't yet committed your life to Jesus, what's holding you back? He loves you! So much so that he died for you, to set you free from sin and death. The peace and joy and purpose that you see among the people in our church and Christians everywhere could be yours as well if you would give your life to him. Why not do so right now?

But again, vv. 25-32 won't teach you how to *become* a Christian. Instead, it will guide you regarding how to *live* as one. Ephesians 4 is very much about "next steps" rather than "first steps." Just as it would be really foolish to try to assemble new furniture starting in the middle of the instruction manual, it would also be absurd to try to become a Christian just by dressing like one. That would be putting the cart before the horse. But that's what people often think about Christianity, isn't it? It's just a bunch of rules people are to follow, rather than primarily a relationship with God.

Dressing like a Christian isn't the same as being a Christian. If you put on a red and white jersey and take your baseball mitt down to Nationals stadium, does your apparel automatically confer membership on the team? Of course not! In the same way, following a Christian dress code doesn't make you a Christian. Rather, it's following Jesus that makes you a Christian. Put your faith in him, and then let him teach you how to dress.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION #2: IT'S OK FOR CHRISTIANS TO HAVE A DRESS CODE

Every organization, be it a business or one of the armed forces or a government agency or a school or a voluntary society—any and every organization has the right to determine who constitutes its membership and to specify a code of conduct for its members. In fact, such details

are essential for the vitality and sustainability of any organization. Take the police department, for example. It would be absurd for the department not to know who its police officers are, or not to have rules and regulations for those police officers to follow. Without such definition, the whole department would quickly devolve into dysfunction, and the city would fall into chaos.

Likewise, the church has the right to define her membership and provide them with a code of conduct—even if that code differs in parts from the broader culture. For example, we Christians think about sex quite differently than our contemporary culture. We don't see it in casual, physiological terms, but rather as a sacred gift, given by God to a husband and wife. It functions as a sacramental sign, an outward and visible expression of the internal and invisible union that God forges when he binds together a man and a woman in holy matrimony, declaring them “one flesh.” From that time forward, exclusive sexual intimacy becomes a vital way that they maintain and demonstrate the unity that God forged between them.¹

Consequently, because we know God and believe in him, and because we understand the holy symbolism intrinsic to sex, our dress code prohibits sexual intimacy outside of a traditional marriage. And that's perfectly okay. Just as the “Washington Homebrewers' Club” can strictly prohibit its members from drinking cheap beer like Bud Light in our degenerate, permissive culture, so also can the church have its own peculiar set of rules—its own “dress code.”

However, the Christian dress code is completely unremarkable—and far from arbitrary—for those familiar with the Bible and Christian history.² Everything in our dress code is rooted in the biblical tradition of mere Christianity passed down to us over the centuries. It is a firm anchor point within the tumultuous, undulating sea of popular ethics. While times and fashions change, nothing looks or feels classier than putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION #3: OUR MISSION IS NOT OUR DRESS CODE

Our church does not exist for the sake of rule-keeping. Finery is not our mission. Rather, we're about loving God and serving our city as a growing community of disciples. The Bible teaches us that it furthers our mission whenever we put on Christ, i.e. when we look and act like Jesus. Experience confirms that this is true. But let's never think that our mission is simply a matter of keeping ourselves looking good.

Because our mission is not our dress code, we are committed to loving and serving our neighbors, including the great majority who do not live according to our dress code. We can love and serve them generously while also practicing our own dress code faithfully, and there should be no tension between the two. When our neighbors who aren't Christians don't wear the dress code of

¹ In Ephesians 5:32, we'll see the even greater spiritual significance of this sign, as Paul says it points to the unbreakable bond between Christ and the church.

² Within the Church of the Resurrection, our Membership Covenant summarizes what we believe is our “Christian dress code.” (See <http://rezchurch.org/resources-2/document-library/>) The Rez Essentials course, offered seasonally, is a great way to learn more about our beliefs and practices.

Christians, why should we be at all surprised? Don't be angry and push them away. Love God, love them, and keep praying for God's best for them. That's why we're here.

Having made these preliminary observations, let's now sort through our wardrobes in vv. 25-32. In what follows, I have summarized Paul's remarks in terms of four fashion directives: four old clothes we ought to throw away, and four elements of finery God gives us to wear instead.

1. TAKE OFF YOUR LYING AND PUT ON TRUTHFULNESS

Paul says in v. 25, "Put away falsehood and instead tell the truth." No more lying. No more hyperbolic rhetoric. No more half-truths or deception of any kind. Lying looks terrible on you. Truthfulness fits you so much better.

Why? Because, it says, "we are members one of another." This is the one body, many members theme that's everywhere in the New Testament. Think about how idiotic it would be for one of your body parts to deceive another. Imagine reaching your hand into a flame. Nerves instantly take note of the danger, synapses alert your brain, but your brain refuses to take action. Your brain thinks, "If I respond, then those field nerves may begin to think that they're in charge rather than me." So your brain says to your muscles, "False alarm. Nothing to worry about. Keep touching." What use is your brain's little victory when your whole body is on fire? In the same way, absolutely nothing good can come from lying to one another within the church, no matter how noble the reasons. We must instead speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15), and in so doing the whole church body will grow into maturity.

It takes skill to speak the truth in love. Some of us find it easier to speak the truth without love, some of us find it easier to love without telling the truth. Only through practice do we learn the skill of speaking the truth in love. Let's bear with one another as we practice and learn, so that we might become a well-dressed, truthful congregation.

2. TAKE OFF YOUR ANGER AND PUT ON FORGIVENESS

Does anger sometimes get the better of you? Paul says in v. 26, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil." We all need to be reminded of this from time to time.

Just as we have natural inclinations when it comes to speaking the truth in love, we also have natural leanings when it comes to being angry but not giving the devil a foothold. Some of us get angry all the time, and we feel justified in it, so we nurture the anger long after sunset and our anger gives the devil opportunity to tempt us toward the host of outcomes mentioned in v. 31: bitterness, wrath, clamor, slander or malice. Others never get angry, or at least are never aware of being angry, yet there are plenty of times when anger is appropriate. We all need to hone the skill of being angry about the right things but not giving in to sin.

Jesus is the perfect model when it comes to righteous anger. He knew when to get angry, especially when powerful leaders were taking advantage of people on the margins. He wasn't afraid to confront wicked tyrants and speak truth to power. Those of us who never get angry ought to reread the Gospels to see all the times Jesus got angry. We need to ask God for courage to be angry about the right things. We won't be much use to the King if we're always nice when confronting evil.

For everyone else, we need to see how Jesus always remembered that he was under orders, that he had a mission his Father had given him. Jesus would come back to the Father in prayer and say, "not my will, but thy will be done." If you're really good at getting angry, you'll find this hard to do. It's hard to relinquish control and hand off justice to God. We can be like Jonah, who knew that God has a tendency to be merciful rather than settle the score. But what we forget is that the same Lord who shows mercy to our offenders also showed mercy to us. Instead of remaining steadfast in our anger, we need to be steadfast in our allegiance to God, who commands us in v. 32 to "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." Before the sun goes down, we need to take off our anger and put on forgiveness, so that we might look like the one who has every right to be angry with us, but instead has forgiven us so much more.

3. TAKE OFF YOUR STEALING AND PUT ON GENEROSITY

Are you a freeloader? Paul says in v. 28, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands." So often in the contemporary world, our stealing clothes look identical to our work clothes. It's so easy to be present in body at the office without being useful or productive. Again, the broader culture may wink at those who cheat their employers all day, but the Christian dress code leaves no room for this sort of thing. No more stealing of any kind. Instead, we must do good work, honest work, and hopefully be known for it.

Why? So that we will have the means to be generous with those in need, Paul says in v. 28. There are always a few members of the body who are doing everything they can to make ends meet, yet they nevertheless find themselves in need. Since our essential unity trumps our subsidiary diversity, we must provide for all our members. God blesses most all of us with the ability to work and make a decent wage, so that we can then be a blessing to those in the church who are in need. Take off those old thieving rags. Generosity fits you so much better.

4. TAKE OFF YOUR CURSING AND PUT ON BLESSING

Do your words bless or destroy? Paul says in v. 29, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." To some extent, we ought to think about words the way we think about sex. Words, like sex, *aren't* cheap. Like sex, we ought not regard words casually. Rather, we ought to view words as sacred, holy instruments of the one who created and sustains the universe through his powerful speech. As God's image-bearers, he has given humanity the gift of language, so that

we might use it like God uses it, as stewards over all he puts under our care. We must use our words for good, to build up rather than destroy.

Watch how the presidential candidates rise and fall during the next year, and you'll see the breathtakingly destructive power of our words. What hope is there for the rest of us if the leaders of our country campaign and lead using inflammatory, corrosive speech? There's plenty of hope, for those who put on Christ. He helps us put on blessing instead of cursing, so that we might talk like he does.

So in summary, here they are again, four ways to get rid of those old rags and look the way you should:

1. Take off your lying and put on truthfulness
2. Take off your anger and put on forgiveness.
3. Take off your stealing and put on generosity.
4. Take off your cursing and put on blessing.

CONCLUSION

Remember the essential relationship behind all this finery. Why do we go to the trouble of putting on Christ? Because he's our Lord and Savior and Friend. It's because of the bond of love between us, because of our relationship, that we should endeavor to imitate him in word and deed.

Furthermore, not only is Jesus our *model* for finery, but he's also our *valet*. He helps us get dressed. As we struggle with truthfulness, forgiveness, generosity and blessing, we can return again and again and again to the Lord and ask him to help us put on these things. I find enormous comfort in knowing that he who was willing to die for me is always eager to help me grow up to be more like him.

Finally, Paul writes, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30 ESV). Opinions vary regarding what Paul means by the expression, "grieving the Holy Spirit." I take it very simply, as that which happens whenever we as Christians fall into sin. It's sad but true. As Christians, we all stumble and fall as we struggle to rip off the old rags and put on the new. And our sin always grieves the Holy Spirit. (If you're sensitive, it will grieve you too.) In such moments, Satan seizes the opportunity to condemn us, planting seeds of doubt or hopelessness or apathy. But remember the friend you have in Jesus. Remember the relationship you have with Jesus on the basis of faith (not clothes), a relationship that was sealed by the Holy Spirit as Paul reassures us here. And remember with certainty that Jesus is always eager to help you become more like him.