

What Now?

Eph. 4:25-32

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²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. 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. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. – Eph. 4:25-32, ESV

Introduction: A Whole Different Life

Some life changes are so massive, so totally transformative, that no one can possibly fully prepare you for them:

1. When you leave home to go off to college or live on your own.
2. When you get married.
3. When you have children.

Each of these major life events brings with it such transformation of the fundamental realities of your life, that they become the defining moments by which our stages of life are measured. Paul is here in Ephesians 4 arguing that becoming a Christian, being united to Christ by faith, being redeemed from sin and death and judgment and being given forgiveness, life, hope, reconciliation with God and a place in the body of Christ should be so transforming that everything should change.

I. Pattern of Putting Off & On

Here in verses 25-32, Paul is giving specific application of the general principle of putting off the old self and putting on the new self that we looked at last week in verses 22-24. First, in verses 25-29, he explores four areas of life and in each of the four, he gives us instruction about what we need to stop doing (what to “put off”) and what we need to do instead (what to “put on.”) Another way to express this putting off and putting on is dying to sin and living to righteousness, or, if you want to sound like a geek and use really impressive theological terms, you could speak of mortification and vivification, but then most people won’t know what you mean. So Paul says “put off” and “put on.”

A. Tongue: Lies, Truth (v. 25)

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

The first area Paul addresses in the application of putting off and putting on is in the area of our speech toward one another, specifically that we need to stop lying and commit to speaking the truth to one another. Falsehood is antithetical to the life of a Christian because Jesus is the truth and God is the source of all truth. Satan is the father of lies and those who follow lies and speak lies are following and speaking his language.

Interestingly, Paul doesn’t give any of these truths as the basis for why we should speak the truth to one another, but rather he brings us back to our identity as the body of Christ and says “for we are members of one another.” When we lie to each other, when we deceive each other, we are lying to our co-members of the body, lying to ourselves and tearing apart the body of Christ.

It’s also interesting that when Paul gives the positive of this command, “each of you speak truth with his neighbor,” he is quoting Zechariah 8:16. It may seem a bit obscure to start this important ethical section with a quote from a minor prophet, especially when Paul doesn’t even introduce it or cite his source. He doesn’t say, “As it is written in the prophet Zechariah . . .” but this is a quote from that verse. Significantly, it is also the first command in a section I Zechariah about how the people of God should live after God redeems and blesses them.

Listen:

For thus says the LORD of hosts: “As I purposed to bring disaster to you when your fathers provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent, says the LORD of hosts, ¹⁵ so again have I purposed in these days to bring good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; fear not. ¹⁶ These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace; ¹⁷ do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath, for all these things I hate, declares the LORD.” (Zech 8:14-17, ESV)

Being redeemed, blessed and restored by God – receiving good from God – should bring forth a response of obedience and that response is marked first by truth-telling but also by justice, peace and kindness toward one another. The “one another” emphasis of the call of God on our lives is clear and strong in both Zechariah 8 and Ephesians 4.

B. Responses: Anger & Sin (vv. 26-27)

Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.

The next area Paul addresses is how we respond to wrong and how we respond to each other when irritated or frustrated. Paul says, “Be angry and do not sin.” Paul is not exactly commanding us to be angry as much as he is affirming that, in a fallen and sin-marred world, we will have just cause to be angry. Jesus got angry at the thieves and cheats who crowded the Temple courts with their money and livestock and He drove them out. But in His anger, Jesus never sinned. He never treated anyone unjustly. He was never cruel or vindictive and He never lashed out because of His own wounded pride or hurt feelings. His anger was controlled, measured and just.

James offers us sound advice regarding anger in *James 1:19-20*: “*Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.*” Notice that James doesn’t say we should never be angry, but he urges us to be slow to anger and then reminds us of a vital truth, that the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Besides avoiding sin in our anger, Paul tells us not to let the sun go down on our anger. Here the word for anger is more like a state of irritation caused by being provoked. If we live life with other sinful people in a fallen world, we will have times when we find ourselves irritated and even provoked to a state of frustration. Paul urges us to resolve such a situation before sundown, before the close of the day.

His reason for this command is that we need to avoid giving the devil a foothold. Literally, Paul says, "Give no place to the slanderer." When we allow our irritation at a person or a situation to fester for days unresolved, we become tempted to slanderous thoughts and base accusations in our mind. Such an unresolved irritation brings division and strife to a home, to a church, to any of our relationships. Satan loves to divide and he can do so by encouraging us to nurse our hurt feelings and fester in irritation day after day.

C. Hands: Stealing, Sharing (v. 28)

From our words to our reactions, Paul moves to our hands. He says, "*Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.*" Paul is probably speaking to a common cultural phenomenon in the ancient world, in which day laborers would steal food or small amounts of money when they had opportunity to do so, as a kind of insurance against any future unemployment.

Some of you know well what it means to live paycheck-to-paycheck. Well, for unskilled laborers in the ancient world, pay was given daily for that day's work and no future employment or pay was guaranteed. Knowing that he might not have work the next day, a laborer might steal some food from his master on the job. Or, if a laborer could not find work that day, he might sneak into a market or a house and steal food or a coin. It was a widespread practice and apparently many laborers even continued doing this after becoming Christians. Instead, Paul urged them to work with their hands diligently, not use them for stealing.

I wonder how many times we're tempted to steal in ways we're not even aware of. Maybe we fudge the numbers a bit on our taxes. Maybe we slack off a little bit at work, looking at sports or politics when we should be working. Maybe we cut corners on a job to save costs and

maximize our profits. We also might look for more ways to keep money for ourselves rather than sharing with those in need.

Notice the “one another” motivation in this command, too. We are to work hard in order to have money that can be used to meet the needs of others. We’re not to work hard just to earn more money so we can hoard it for ourselves.

D. Words: Rotten, Edifying (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.

From our hands, Paul returns to our mouths, this time covering other kinds of bad speech besides lying. He says that all corrupting – literally rotten and decaying – speech must not come out of our mouths. The word Paul uses here to describe this kind of speaking is a word that was used to describe rotten wood, withered flowers and rancid fish. Sometimes we can be speaking true things but the words may not be helpful at all. This command echoes what Paul said in verse 15 about speaking the truth in love. Just because something is accurate doesn’t mean that it is loving, helpful, wise, kind, useful, God-honoring or good. Some words are spoken to wound, to divide, to tear down, to distract, to tarnish someone’s reputation or to exalt the speaker in pride. These kinds of words are rotten, rancid, foul and decaying.

Rather than speaking to harm, divide, cast doubt or exalt ourselves, we need to speak words that build others up and that give grace. The Rotary Club is famous for its 4-Way Test, which asks its members to consider the following questions in respect to what they say:

- Is it the truth?
- Is it fair to all concerned?
- Will it build goodwill and better friendships?
- Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

These guidelines would be good for all of us to think about. Or perhaps, using Paul’s language, we could change the four questions a little to:

1. Is it true?
2. Does it build up?
3. Does it fit the need of the occasion?
4. Does it impart grace?

II. The Spirit & the Believer

A. Grieving the Spirit (v. 30)

From these four areas of application for the principle of putting off and putting on, Paul now turns our attention to the Holy Spirit, saying in verse 30, *“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”*

Now, at first, this might seem like an abrupt change in direction from what Paul has been saying, but if we pay attention to the “one another” emphasis in verses 25-29 and understand the role of the Holy Spirit in the church, we can see that this verse is actually a kind of summary of all of the negative things Paul has been telling us to stop doing. When we lie to one another, when we act sinfully in anger toward one another, when we hold onto bitterness and irritation against each other, when we steal or fail to be generous toward one another, when we use caustic, bitter, poisonous speech – these things all grieve the Holy Spirit of God because He is the One who has marked us as belonging to God and who has joined us to Christ and to one another.

B. Fighting the Spirit & Gospel (v. 31)

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

In the final verses, Paul gives us the final, sweeping “put off” and “put on” instructions, emphasizing and summarizing all that he has said so far. He tells us to not only put off but to put away from us five things: bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander and malice. Clamor is just

another word for shouting, so Paul is picturing here all kinds of abusive, selfish, hurtful language and actions – bitterness is what happens when we let the sun go down on our irritation, wrath and anger are the kind of out-of-control sinful anger Paul warned us against, slander is the kind of rotten speech Paul told us should not come out of our mouths. “All malice” can mean narrowly all desire to injure or do harm, but it can also be a catch-all expression for all evil and wickedness.

In other words, we need to throw away – literally lift up and carry off – all words, responses, emotional states and actions that seek to harm others.

C. Living the Gospel by the Spirit (v. 32)

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

And instead of this way of acting, we need to be kind and tenderhearted, forgiving one another. Forgiveness is given the final word for a reason: We will be sinned against. We will have just cause for anger and bitterness. We will get our feelings hurt and be provoked to wrath. I can guarantee that if we live life together as a community, these things will happen. And so we need - above all, at the end of it all – to forgive. And our motivation, our ground, our basis for forgiveness when we really, really don't feel like it is the reality that God in Christ has forgiven us.

Conclusion: A Whole New Life

What we can see clearly in the whole scope of Ephesians 4 that the vital heart of Christian morality is not about a list of dos and don'ts. This is one possible way to mis-read this section of practical application of the “putting off” and “putting on” – as a list of dos and don'ts:

- Don't lie, rage, stay irritated, steal, slander, abuse or attack.
- Do speak the truth, be reconciled, share generously, build up, be kind and forgive.

It's not a checklist. It's a way of living with one another, a way of seeing and treasuring one another as fellow image-bearers redeemed by the blood of Jesus and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

It began in verse 1 of chapter 4 with *“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.”*

If there is one body and one Spirit, then we grieve the Spirit when we treat the other members of the body like our enemies or we simply use them for our own purposes – when we lie to them, steal from them, act sinfully in anger toward them, slander them, abuse them or attack them. We honor the Spirit of God who unites us to Christ and to each other in one body when we act in truth, in love, in self-control, in generosity, in kindness and in forgiveness. It’s about living in keeping with our new life and our new identity in the Spirit.

Have you met people who got married and yet lived like they weren’t? Maybe “guys’ night out” or “girls’ night out” was more important than time with their husband or wife. Maybe they kept flirting and interacting with others like they were still single. Or have you met parents who still tried to live and act like they weren’t parents, still very self-centered and irresponsible? This is what it’s like when we as Christians live in the same old patterns of thinking and living and relating as unbelievers.

All of us slip up at times, of course, sometimes fairly often. Even healthy married couples don’t always make their marriage and their spouse the priority and conscientious parents don’t always love and nurture and discipline their children as they should. The same is true of our Christian lives in the body of Christ, and so we forgive, even as we have been forgiven, but we never lose sight of who we are in Christ, what it means to be a member of the body, who our fellow Christians are as our brothers and sisters and fellows members of the same body. And that’s what Paul is helping us understand and better live out in our daily lives. May the Lord give us the grace to do so.