



NEW CLOTHES OF INTEGRITY

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

Catalog No. 907

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Fourteenth Message

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March 28, 1993

My father has always been an immaculate dresser. To me, his clothes seemed to mirror the high degree of skill and the meticulous attention to detail that he brought to his profession as a surgeon. I have a deep respect for him. I have always regarded him as "one of the best."

As a child, I longed for an opportunity to watch him work during surgery. One day, when I was about eleven years old, he invited me to join him in the operating room. Together we walked down a long corridor and entered the changing room. There he laid aside his immaculate street clothes and put on a simple bluish-green smock and pants. As he began to scrub his hands and arms, he glanced at me and told me that I too had to don surgical clothes and scrub up. My new clothes gave me instant access to his world. It was a thrill to walk past the "No Admittance" signs and enter the operating theater. For the next 90 minutes I was an awestruck observer, beholding the wonder of surgery as my father worked with extraordinary skill and speed. He was indeed the master I always dreamed he was.

In the same way that the surgical clothes I wore that day gave me access to my father's world, Christians are privileged to wear the wardrobe of the Savior Jesus Christ and behold the wonder of his work in the salvation of souls.

As we have been learning in our studies during the past few weeks, this is the astounding declaration of the apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus. In this matter of my putting on surgical garb there was one striking difference, however. Putting on the clothes of my father that day when I was 11 certainly did not make me a surgeon. In Christ, however, Christians become entirely new creations. Our new clothes declare our new identity — who we really are.

Last week, we saw that Paul described our walk as Christians in terms of taking off our old clothes and putting on the new man in Christ. In 4:17-24, we looked at this process in general. We found that three steps were involved: putting off the old man; being renewed in the spirit of our minds; and putting on the new man. Today, in 4:25-5:2, Paul applies this principle in four different areas of life. To help us grasp what the apostle is saying, I would like us to think of this text in terms of four different sets of clothing which we are privileged to wear, clothes that depict the work of Christ.

The first outfit is described in verses 25-27.

I. Developing Honesty: The Clothes of the Prophet (4:25-27)

Therefore, putting off falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH, EACH ONE 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 anger, nor give the devil an opportunity.

(a) Honesty In Speech

First, says the apostle, Christians should put off all forms of

lying. Lying, whether it be blatant, such as bearing false witness or slandering one another, or subtle, such as saying nothing at all, or appearing to agree when we really don't, is unacceptable behavior for Christians. We must not make the mistake of valuing peace in relationships over purity. "...the wisdom from above is *first pure*, then peaceful..." said James (3:17a). We shrink from telling the truth at times, however, because we would rather be man-pleasers than truth-tellers. But this is a form of lying.

Our clothing should be like that of a prophet who speaks the truth in all circumstances. Samuel, the first prophet, had an unenviable first assignment. As a mere boy he had to confront his tutor and professor Eli. The aged priest had allowed his sons to compromise the truth of God in the temple, thereby slandering the sacrifice. Samuel was terrified at the prospect of confronting Eli, but he did so and became a prophet of God. It is not an easy thing to confront members of the body, especially those who are older or perhaps more powerful than ourselves. But this is what we must do. Ray Stedman used to say that honesty is not the best policy, it's the only policy.

A young married woman who was once a member of our congregation before she and her husband moved to another city, telephoned me last week to ask for advice. Her father, a Christian who divorced her mother years ago, is planning to marry again and he asked his daughter to attend his wedding. She knows that he does not have biblical warrant for this marriage, so she was perturbed as to whether to attend or not. I asked her if she had spoken to him about his divorce, and she said that she had discussed it with him in the course of a long conversation a few months ago. She had asked him if he had ever repented of his sin and his hardness of heart toward her mother. When I heard this, I told her that whether she attended the wedding or not was a minor issue compared with the fact that she had lovingly confronting her father with the truth. She had put on the clothes of a prophetess, thus fulfilling the first requirement of Paul's injunction to Christians, to put off falsehood and speak the truth.

What is Paul's rationale for this? It is that we are "members of one another." In the body of Christ we are not isolated from one another. If one member suffers from a crack in his or her foundation of faith, then all suffer. John Stott commented, "Fellowship is built on trust, and trust is built on truth." There must be integrity between what Christians say and what is true.

So believers should be honest in their speech. And secondly, they should be honest in regard to expressing their emotions.

(b) Honesty In Emotions

Paul writes, "BE ANGRY AND DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, nor give the devil an opportunity" (4:26-27). Christians have had difficulty determining what Paul meant here. Was he commanding believers to be angry but to control it lest it get out of hand? Some commentators hold that righteous anger in the cause of God is proper, but it is improper in our own cause because it can easily become self-righteous. I

find this interpretation troubling, however, because everywhere in the NT we are told to put off anger. "...the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God," said James (1:20).

This text is not dealing with righteous anger, I think, but with the anger we feel at times in relating to one another. These words, "*be angry but do not sin*," come from Psalm 4:4. But the Hebrew does not convey this as a command to anger. What it is inferring is, tremble, and stop sinning. The Jews were angry at God, and the king was saying, "You are angry at God, so trouble yourself. Tremble, and stop sinning."

What then did Paul have in mind here? I am indebted to a brother from my fellowship group who linked this text with Leviticus 19:17-18. I think this is the context for Paul's words here. Leviticus says, "You shall not hate your fellow country-man in your heart; you may *surely reprove* your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD." This text assumes that it is easy to become angry at people, but we should not allow our anger to become hatred. What we should do, as the text says, is "reprove [our] neighbor." Tell him how you feel. Vent your emotions. And be careful to do this on the same day. If you do not, if you bury your anger, you are opening the door to the devil. The fire of anger will burn all night and keep burning until it consumes you. Then you will end up taking vengeance as the instrument of the devil.

Once you have told him, however, then leave everything in God's hands. Don't bear a grudge. Don't try to manipulate the situation. Trust God. This is what Sarah did with her husband Abraham. Sarah is portrayed by the church as an example for wives to submit to their husbands, but submission does not equal silence. When Sarah was wronged by Abraham, she spoke her mind clearly: "May the wrong done me be upon you...May the LORD judge between you and me!" (Gen. 16:5). She was angry at what Abraham had done, so she confronted him with the truth. Then she backed off and allowed the Lord to work on him.

Then, once you have done this, love your neighbor. Follow your honesty with love, then the fires of anger will be quenched. Even elders in the church have to do this on occasion. Most of our elders' meetings are models of love and harmony, but there are occasions when anger becomes stirred up. Our last meeting, held two weeks ago in my home, was such an occasion. Things took a strange turn, and I became very defensive. The meeting did not end until 12:30 a.m., and I didn't get to bed until 1:30. Even then I couldn't get to sleep all night. Next day I called a few of my brothers to express how I felt. They in turn shared with me how they felt and expressed their point of view. It wasn't long before my anger and resentment subsided. This past weekend at our annual pastors and elders retreat, we followed this up with little acts of kindness and love toward one another, further dampening any residual anger. This is what we should do in the body of Christ.

To summarize, there must be integrity between what Christians feel and what they say. We should be open with our emotions and not be afraid to tell people how we feel, so that anger and resentment are not allowed to fester among us. In the OT, at times a prophet had to tell Israel that God was angry with them, that he was emotionally damaged by their behavior. This was the work of a prophet, and it is our work at times, too.

The Christian's second set of clothing is described in verses 28-30.

II. Contributing To Needs: The Clothes of the Builder (4:28-30)

The one stealing no longer let him steal; 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 a need. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such as is good for edification according to the need, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Spirit, the Holy One of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Our second outfit is the work clothes of a builder. Notice the repeated use of the words "good" and "need." We are to contribute to the needs of others by our hands, and we are to do good to them through our speech.

(a) Contributing With the Hands

"The one stealing no longer let him steal; 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 a need" (4:28-30). Paul was concerned that Christians in the churches he founded not be lazy. We know that in Thessalonica, for instance, some Christians were lazy and were refusing to work. They were taking advantage of the generosity of members of the body, as if they had a right to be subsidized. To Paul, this was tantamount to stealing. Christians, says the apostle, should work hard, making more than they need so they can contribute to the needs of others. Paul himself modeled this attitude and practice wherever he went. He gave up his right to be paid by the church and worked as a tentmaker to set a good example for all.

Christians should not ask what they can get out of the government (especially at tax time), the insurance company, their family or friends. Our concern should be for what we can contribute. As citizens, we should be thankful for the fine amenities that we have. We should not be reluctant to contribute our share to maintaining them. In Corinth, according to F.F. Bruce, a marble paving block has been unearthed with the inscription: "ERASTVS. PRO. AED. S. P. STRAVIT" ("Erastus, in return for his aedileship [commissioner for public works] laid this pavement at his own expense.") This man Erastus did such an excellent job as city clerk that he was promoted, and in appreciation he laid a slab of marble pavement at own expense. What an excellent example he was for Christians in his congregation!

A number of years ago, I planned a major addition to my house. When I was ready to pour the cement foundations, a man whom I had never met came and offered to help. He was dressed in dark blue work clothes, and he told me he was a building contractor. He went to work, and began to direct a number of college students who were helping me. At the end of the day he entrusted to us his expensive tools which we needed to continue the work. Then he became part of our High School ministry to Mexicali each year, roofing churches and adding Sunday School rooms as the need arose. In my mind I always picture him as a gentle, humble brother, wearing dark blue work clothes. Even today he is still ready to contribute with his hands to Christians who have need. This is exactly what Paul has in mind here.

(b) Contribution In Speech

The apostle continues, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such as is good for edification according to the need, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Spirit, the Holy One of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (4:29-30). "Unwholesome" means rotten. The word was used of spoiled fish or

rotten fruit. If we are not careful, it is easy for rotten speech to proceed out of our mouths, perverting what is good and defiling someone in the process.

The book of Proverbs says, “When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (10:19). I am painfully aware of this tendency when I am preaching. Every week I spend 20 hours thinking through the text I will be preaching on, carefully crafting my words so that I might build you up. Yet I know that I cannot speak for 40 minutes and not have some words miss the mark. (Last week, for instance, a number of people telephoned me to say I had missed the mark!) I pray that when I am preaching, God will feed you with what is good and protect you from what is chaff. My social speech, which I do not prepare, of course, gives me even more reason for pause. I often say things that are not edifying, things that fail to build up.

Paul’s rationale for saying this is, not only do we hurt the person on the receiving end of the unwholesome word, but the Spirit, the Holy One of God who has given us our new wardrobe, is grieved. This should be ample motivation for us. We damage the Holy Spirit emotionally when our speech does not edify.

So the new man in Christ assesses the need, thinks it through and then carefully crafts his words so as to impart grace to the one who hears. Proverbs has a word for this type of person: “A man has joy in an apt answer, and how delightful is a timely word!” (15:23). “Like apple of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances” (25:11). Words have great value! We are not dealing in common metals like copper or brass. Words are like gold. We should take care to present them in the right setting. Let us use graceful, loving words to build up, not unwholesome words which tear down. I was on the receiving end of “timely words” this past week. On three different occasions, a timely word from individuals, unbeknownst to them, ministered greatly to me and lifted my spirit in my time of need. This is what we should be doing for each other.

So our work as prophets is to tell the truth, to clothe with integrity our speech and our emotions. And our work as builders is to build up others, materially, with our hands, and spiritually, through our speech. Let the work of both our hands and our tongues therefore be edifying in all that we do and say.

We find the third part of our wardrobe in verses 31-32.

III. Nurturing Good Attitudes: The Clothes of the Surgeon (4:31-32)

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

We should put off destructive perspectives and in their place nurture good attitudes toward all.

(a) Putting Off Destructive Attitudes: The Clothes of a Patient

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice” (4:31). “Bitterness” is the critical word here, because this is what gives rise to everything that follows. Bitterness springs from a hard heart that refuses to let go of grievances and be reconciled. If this is our state of mind, we will find ourselves slipping into all of these other things which the apostle lists: *anger* (an emotional outburst of rage); *wrath* (a controlled form of anger which methodically plots someone’s downfall); *outcry* (shouting matches); *slander*

(speaking evil of someone behind his back); *malice* (harboring ill will toward others which leads to plotting harm).

Notice what Paul says about these evils: “*Let* [these things] be put away from you.” We cannot do this ourselves. We are to passively allow God to expose our sin to us and then permit him to weed the garden of our souls. This was David’s prayer in Psalm 139:

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxious thoughts;
And see if there be any way of pain in me, (139:23-24a).

In this instance we become the patient and allow God to be the surgeon. Here is where we take off our surgeon’s garb and don the humble, barely adequate gown of a patient ready for surgery, thus allowing ourselves to be completely vulnerable. This is what we must do so that God can have his way with us. We must remain passive as he probes the deep recesses of our hearts, excising the weeds of bitterness, anger, wrath, outcry, slander and malice.

If we do this, then God will give us his clothing.

(b) Put On Gracious Attitudes: The Clothes of an Obstetrician

“And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (4:31). Now we become active again: we put on “kindness.” The Greek word for this is “*chrestos*,” from the word “*Christos*,” from which we get “*Christian*.” “Kindness” means imparting good to others in a gentle and generous way. This was the mark of Christians in the first century. They went around Christ-like, sowing seeds of kindness wherever they traveled.

And be “tender-hearted.” This word literally means, “well kidneys.” It means we allow our emotions to be moved by the plight of others. I try to foster tender-heartedness in our men’s Bible studies by asking newcomers to share their life stories with us. This helps the men empathize with them and become involved with them.

“Forgiving” involves more than merely relinquishing a debt. It ought to be translated “imparting grace” to others, just as God has graced us. Do not treat people as they deserve to be treated, in other words. If you insist on treating your own family members as they deserve, showing little tolerance for their frailties, then your home life will be hell. When we are wronged, we have opportunity to show more and more grace in order to lead people to Christ.

When I put on my father’s surgical gown years ago, I was allowed to watch the surgeon in action, but I was no surgeon. When we put on the clothes of Christ, however, we become surgeons — obstetricians, in fact, who help give birth to others. What a holy job description this is! Through kindness, tender-heartedness and acceptance, we are privileged to deliver people from darkness into the realm of light as it is seen in the face of Christ. As a pastor, I have the joy of observing you as you learn to wear your new clothes — some as prophets, some as builders, some as holy surgeons — and I can tell you there is no greater reward for a pastor than watching this occur among the body.

Now we come to the last set of clothes that Christians put on. These are the ultimate “God clothes,” in a manner of speaking.

IV. Imitating Holy Love: The Clothes of a Priest (5:1-2)

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave Him-

self up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

(a) The Example of Love

“Be imitators of God,” says Paul. Our final outfit, the clothes of the Father himself, surpass all the others. These are the clothes that Christ wore in his supreme act of love — giving up his life so that we might have life. These are the clothes of a priest, the holiest of all clothes. In Gethsemane, as he sweat great drops of blood, Jesus knew that the betrayal, the spitting, the mocking, the beating, the crucifixion that he was about to endure was the most holy worship he could offer the Father whom he loved from the beginning. His flesh would be the offering, his death that fragrant aroma.

(b) The Motivation of Love

As we become aware of this we are motivated to holiness. The key to motivation lies not in mere ethical commands, but in telling a story. God tells us his story to demonstrate his love for us, and when we see it, it becomes our story. Notice here that as we wear these clothes of a priest our motivation is so exalted that Paul does not have to tell us to put off the old man. This is no longer an issue when we see what God has done in Christ. Love transcends everything, so we begin to imitate what we see has been done for us. We will want to be priests, to live and die for others so that our Father whom we love can smell that sweet fragrance.

Richard Wurmbbrand is a Romanian pastor who spent many years imprisoned for his faith. He beautifully captures this idea in his book, *One Hundred Prison Meditations*. He wrote,

Suppose you were living 2,000 years ago in Palestine, that you were sinful, heavy with guilt, and Jesus told you, “Your sin is grave and deserves punishment. ‘The wages of sin are death.’ But tomorrow I will be flogged and crowned with a crown of thorns for you. I invite you to assist them when they drive nails into my hands and feet and fix me to a cross. I will cry in anguish, and I will share the sorrow of my holy mother whose heart will be pierced by compassion for me as if by a sword. You should be there to hear my cries. And when I have died, you shall know that your sins are forgiven forever, that I was your substitute, your scapegoat. This is how a man gets saved. Will you accept my suffering for your offenses, or do you prefer to bear the punishment yourself?” What would you have answered?

Would you accept? More than once in Communist prisons I have seen a pastor receive a beating to the blood in place of another prisoner. A name would be called and the pastor would simply say, “It is I.” In Auschwitz, Maximilian Kolbe, a priest, offered to take the place of a Pole sentenced to death by the Nazis. The Pole was the father of many children. The commandant of the camp accepted the substitution and the Pole was spared. Kolbe died by asphyxiation. Had you been that Pole, what would you have decided? I believed that to accept would be a greater wickedness than all I might ever have

done in my life and I flatly refused this proposal. Jesus was glad of my “No.”

Then came the real question, the thing He had in mind from the beginning. “What if I incorporate your being into mine, if you become part of my body, if you deny yourself as an independent self, and I will live in you henceforth and you will be ‘crucified with me’ (Gal. 2:20), ‘buried with me’ (Romans 6:4), and share the fellowship of my suffering? People in churches will sing ‘safe in the arms of Jesus,’ while you will be safe as an arm of Jesus, nailed like His to a cross, but also imparting goodness like His. Do you wish to become my co-worker for the salvation of mankind, alleviating sufferings, filling up ‘that which is lacking in the afflictions of Christ’ (Co. 1:24), and imparting eternal life to others? By virtue of my presence in you, the real fruits of my wounds will appear in your soul.”

I accepted this proposal. It is this consciousness of a high calling and of partnership with Jesus which brings gladness in tribulation, which makes Christians enter prisons for their faith with the joy of a bridegroom entering the bridal room.

When George Vins, the general secretary of the Baptist Union of USSR, was sentenced for his faith, ...his little daughter, hoisted on a stool, recited in front of the Communist judges, “Father, with Christ you are free in prison, and freedom without Him is prison.”

Because sacrifice is implicit in a conversion, the call of the Evangelist has the name “altar-call.” Every being placed upon the altar in Jerusalem, lambs, rams and pigeons, died. Someone dies for you. This time it is not an animal, but the Son of God. He has decreed it and nothing you can do will change His mind. You can only ask for the privilege of being able to sacrifice yourself as well henceforth for the glory of God and for the good of your fellow men. In return, you receive the right to die to sin and to the world and its laws.

Once when I was eleven years old, I donned a surgeon’s gown and entered a mysterious place, way beyond my skill and years. But the awe and wonder I felt that day will never compare with what I have experienced among you in recent days. This year I have watched a chosen number of you put on the gown of a priest and go to the altar in holy worship to offer sacrifice to the Father as a fragrant aroma. One couple came bearing their son in their arms. Another couple came bearing their daughter. Three women came, each bearing her spouse. One young man brought us as a congregation and a nation to Romania and laid his life on the altar to live in that land. All of these brothers and sisters came to bear the wounds of Christ so that others might be healed. As their sacrifice was offered, and their wounds inflicted, I beheld the most holy love of God in the beautiful garments of Christ. At those moments I said in my soul, “This is holy ground. I am not worthy to be here.”

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