

# The New Creation

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*According to Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus was an apocalyptic event that signaled the end of an old age and portended the beginning of the new. Paul's moral vision is intelligible only when his apocalyptic perspective is kept clearly in mind.*

Richard Hayes<sup>10</sup>

## **READ EPHESIANS 4:17-32**

### **New Replacing Old**

In the second half of this chapter, Paul shows us how to live as Christians, and the text becomes decidedly practical. Each point of moral emphasis is framed as taking off an old set of clothing and putting on a new one. There is always something to be repented of, and something to replace what is left behind.

The stated goal is to stop walking like the Gentiles (v. 17). Our walk is a common figure of speech describing our way of life. Each choice we make is a step along the road of life. As a Christian, our goal is to walk close to God, and we do that by following the footsteps of Jesus.

Paul says that the Gentile pagans walked in the “futility of their minds.” When we close our minds to God’s will, we will find it easier to do whatever we want in life. However, doing what we think is best is a dangerous road to walk. The Gentile walked a dark road of ignorance and alienation from the life of God (v.18). These selfish steps led further and further away from God. Their blindness was both of heart and mind. They became calloused.

A callous is the hard skin that develops over a wound. The first time a person hurts herself, she feels the pain, but after the callous develops, she stops feeling the hurt. We can create a callous on our heart and mind too. Sin is a wound, and the first time we do wrong, perhaps it causes us guilt. However, as we do it more and more, we stop feeling shame. The Gentiles had formed callouses on their hearts by following sensuality (physical desires) and every kind of impure practice (v. 19). The more they sinned, the more they calloused their heart. The more they calloused their heart, the more they sinned.

This is not the life learned from Christ (v.20-21). If a person knows about Christ, then they know that this kind of lifestyle must be left behind. In essence, Paul is now giving us a description of repentance from sin. It is like changing clothes. You have to take off the old to put on the new. Paul describes this process in three steps.

First, we “put off” the old way of life, like a dirty pair of clothes (v. 22). We might imagine a small child who has been playing in the mud. The little boy is not just dirty, he is covered in mud from head to toe. If he enters his house, every step he takes will leave behind mud throughout the home. Mom swoops in to the rescue, and the first demand she makes will be that the boy take off the filthy clothes. They have to be left in the entryway, or else every surface of her home is at risk. Likewise, the moral development of a Christian begins with leaving behind the mess we have created.

Second, we must invite God to renew us from within (v. 23). Having removed his muddy clothing, the little muddy boy cannot yet don new clothes, because he is not clean. The offending garments have already been set aside, but what

about the child himself? If you are muddy and put on clean clothing, you just make them muddy, too. Instead, mother throws the little troublemaker into a bath tub or – if the situation is truly dire – she assaults him with a water hose and soap in the backyard.

Likewise, we have to remember that even once we stop committing a particular sin, we are still the same person who chose to do that sin in the first place. If our heart and mind are not changed in some way, we will return to the same sin again in time, or else find another sin to take its place. Peter calls this a clean pig returning to roll in the mud or a dog eating to his own vomit (2 Peter 2:20-22). I am reminded also a cryptic statement made by Jesus about casting out demons. “It goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of the that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation” (Matthew 12:43-45).

This is the problem of all merely human attempts at change. We want to change our choices but never the chooser. We want different results from the same mind and heart. It cannot be done. The wound of sin that harms us is a supernatural wound, and so the cure must be supernatural as well. God has to change us or we will never be any different than we are.

Having been truly changed and cleaned up within, we can take the third step and put on the “new self” (v. 24). Just as a mother pulls out new clothing for the muddy boy after his bath, God hands us something new to wear. He does not leave a vacuum. The removal of one life is matched by a replacement with a new life. Old immorality is replaced by new morality. We are not just clean; we are a new creature and must act like one.

The following verses give a simple list of bad things to take off, and good things to put on, built on the assumption that in between those steps, God is changing us within.

First, Paul talks about what we say. Telling lies is wrong and is part of the old way of life. Lying is to be replaced with truth (v. 25). We have to learn to be honest with ourselves and with others in order to be like Jesus. Oddly enough, the Greek text here does not actually have a separate word for “speaking,” but instead it uses “truth” as a verb. Christians go around truthing in everything they do.

Second, Paul talks about our anger. We all get angry sometimes. Anger happens in every life, but we can control what we do with it. Paul says to be angry without sinning. We need to learn how to get rid of anger (“do not let the sun go down on your anger”) instead of letting it grow day after day. If we hang on to anger, we give the devil a place to tempt us and lead us into sin (v. 27). Unbridled anger is set aside, and the new creature puts restraint and reconciliation on in its place.

Third, Paul talks about our work. We all have things that we need, and even more things that we want. The selfish way of getting those things is by stealing. Paul says that stealing is to be replaced with hard work (v. 28). God created us to work, and there is no shortcut around it. More than that, God has showed us the true purpose of honest work. We labor, not just so we can have more stuff, but so that we can “share with anyone in need” (v. 28). God changes not only the action (stealing vs. earning) but also the internal motive (spending vs. giving).

Fourth, Paul returns to the topic of speech. This time, instead of talking about what we say, Paul talks about how we say what we say. We should not let any speech come out

of our mouth that is “corrupt” or designed to hurt others. Hurtful speech is to be replaced by speech that builds people up (v. 29). Before you speak, ask yourself, “Helping or hurting?” Our hurtful speech makes God sad, like a parent who is disappointed to hear hate and filth come out of their child’s mouth. By only speaking in helpful ways, we stop causing the Spirit to feel grief (v. 30).

Finally, Paul says that we must change how we treat others. The Christian does not have room in his life for bitterness, wrath, anger, or malice, which are all forms of anger and desire to hurt others. He also says to get rid of clamor, which is our petty “fussing” about other people. On top of that, we need to put away slander, which is lies and gossip about other people. Instead, we need to treat people with kindness and forgiveness, remembering the forgiveness received through Christ (v. 31-32). If we remember how kind Christ has been to us, it will be no problem to get over anything that others do to us.

## **A Vision for New Creation**

This passage in Ephesians is an ethical passage, and all too often we reduce it to a list of rules. Don’t lie. Don’t steal. Don’t lose your temper.

However, New Testament scholar Richard Hays argues that Paul is doing a lot more than that in his ethical passages. Paul is giving us a “moral vision.” He is describing to use an image of what the new creature would look like so that we can be transformed into it, “created after the likeness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Specifically, Hays calls the morality of Ephesians a

“Cosmic” view of the church in the world. The death and resurrection of Jesus has so fully altered the universe that it requires a new set of rules to live by. It is as if the Christian went to sleep on Earth but woke up on Mars. To live in the new place, we have to change our rules, goals, and expectations from top to bottom. Ephesians 4 then becomes, in Hays’ words, “a visionary description of the character of the reconciled community.”

The concept of change is the true challenge of this passage, not the rule. Change is hard for everyone. It is not a matter of traditionalist as opposed to progressive, or conservative against liberal. We all dislike change. The progressive is just as unwilling to give up his point of view and way of life as the traditionalist. No one wants to acknowledge the sea change created by Jesus Christ. We all want to carry on as we have with at most a few minor modifications.

Modern identity therefore says, “I am what I am. Don’t try to change me.” William Henley wrote “Invictus” in 1875, concluding, “It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishment the scroll, I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.” I am what I am, and no circumstance will change that. More recently, Chris Cornell wrote a proud song about a proactive woman who is “going to change the world / but she can’t change me.” Why not? “Suddenly I can see everything that’s wrong with me / what can I do I’m the only thing I really have at all.” It isn’t that the singer can’t see reason for change. It’s just that my flawed identity is all I’ve ever known, and so like my most precious treasure, I refuse to give it up.

I am what I am. Don’t try to change me.

Thus, we turn to Christianity with suspicion. Is

Christianity trying to change me into something I'm not?  
Why can't you accept me as I am?

Why not? Because who I am is prepared to live in God's new world. I was a liar, but now he is making me honest (Ephesians 4:25). I was a hothead, but now he is making me balanced (4:26-27). I was lazy, but now he is making me diligent (4:28a). I was greedy, but now he is making me generous (4:28b). I was hateful, but now he is making me kind (4:29-32). To sum it all up, I was a mess, but now God is making me more like him. "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children" (5:1).

Is Christianity trying to change me into something I'm not? Yes. God is helping you become the best human you could be.

## **Who Am I?**

I am someone who wants to be different. Not everything about me is wrong, but not everything about me is right either. I need to change in order to be better, and I want to be better.

I am someone who needs help to change. I cannot do it on my own. The person who made me a mess will make me a mess all over again unless he is changed. I need God to change who I am, so that I can change what I'm doing.

I am a new creature, or at least, I am becoming one. It has not happened all at once, and it certainly isn't over yet, but the change is happening. Thanks to God, I am somewhere in between what I was and who I will be. My identity is not set in stone. It is changing and becoming. It is new and renewed.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what ways does Paul describe the old self in verses 18-19? How does this contrast with the new self in Christ?
2. How does Paul emphasize the importance of renewing the mind in verse 23? Why is this crucial for a believer's transformation? What are practical ways believers can renew their minds according to biblical principles?
3. Explore verses 25-32 and identify specific behaviors that reflect the new identity in Christ. How do these behaviors differ from those associated with the old self?
4. Verses 31-32 highlight the importance of forgiveness and love in the context of the new identity. How does forgiveness contribute to the transformation of the believer's identity? Discuss practical ways believers can cultivate a spirit of forgiveness and love in their daily lives.