

Ephesians 4: 20-24: You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

You get to wear new clothes every day!

Our stewardship series this year has been on your personal use of the Word of God. Two weeks ago we looked at how we use the Word of God in our homes and in our family life. Last week, we looked at how we use God's Word in our Christian community, our church. And this week, we want to look at how important God's Word is in our daily life of repentance.

One of the mistakes that we often make is that we think we can repent once a week when we come to church, or maybe just when we go to bed at night. In the first of the ninety-five theses that Luther posted on the church in Wittenberg, Luther wrote, **"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."** Repentance in the life of the Christian is like breathing. We breathe out the foul, used up air in our lungs and breathe in the new. In the same way, we are constantly getting rid of the sins in our life and breathing in the Holy Spirit that gives us new life.

The Apostle Paul uses another analogy in our text. He tells us to put off the OLD SELF and to put on the NEW SELF. It's like changing clothes. You don't wear the same clothes every day. You throw the dirty clothes in the hamper and you reach into your dresser or closet for new, freshly cleaned clothes. In the same way, you put off your sinful desires and you put on your godly desires every day – and even every moment of every day. That sounds so easy, but it is not. In fact, for sinful people like ourselves, it is impossible without the work of the Holy Spirit and the power of God's Word working in our lives.

I. To change, I have to know Jesus

That's what Paul begins with. **"You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus."** Why is God's Word so important in our life of repentance? Because you wouldn't know Jesus without God's Word. This is something you have to learn. You have to be taught. Otherwise, you wouldn't know Jesus is the Son of God. You wouldn't know his death on the cross paid for your sins. You wouldn't know he rose from the dead so that someday you would rise as well. You wouldn't know it or believe it. And without knowing Jesus, it would be impossible to repent of your sins.

Let's just press this analogy about wearing clothes. Let's just imagine that you went to a party and you thought it was a costume party. You went dressed as Snow White and you made your husband dress up as one of the seven dwarfs. You knocked on the door and found out everyone else was wearing three piece suits and evening gowns. What would you do? Would you immediately take off

your silly costume? Think for a moment. You couldn't take off your inappropriate clothes, because you would have nothing at all to wear. It is better to be dressed as a dwarf than it is to be naked.

That's what happened to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. When they committed that first sin, they hid from God in the garden, because they knew they were naked and they were ashamed of their sins. When God came and asked them what they were doing, what did Adam and Eve do? They made excuses. Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent. Why didn't they just confess their sins to God and tell them they were sorry? Because they didn't have anything to wear to cover up their shame before God. Only when God told them about Savior could they come clean before God.

It is no different today. People who don't know Jesus, or who maybe just know something about him, but not really why he came, can't possibly admit how sinful they are, even to themselves. They believe that they have to live up to God's standards in order to get to heaven. And if they admit their sins, it would leave them naked before God. So people have to cover themselves up with excuses.

For example, you've heard people say, "Well, I really wasn't hurting anyone." Examine that for a moment. Of course you are hurting someone! If you are sitting in the basement looking at pornography, of course you are hurting someone. You're hurting the people who are exploited by the people who make it. You are hurting women in general, because you will never treat women with the honor they deserve if that's what's on your mind. The same is true of any sin. There is no such thing as a sin that doesn't hurt anyone!

And even if you really aren't hurting anyone, aren't you harming your relationship with God? Aren't you rebelling against your good and gracious God? Aren't you telling your dear Father in heaven that you don't think you have to live up to his rules, his commandments? There is no such thing as a harmless sin. And when you strip away the excuses, you are left naked and guilty before God.

That's why Paul points us to Jesus. **"You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus."** What if you have new clothes to wear every day? What if you are always dressed in the righteousness of Jesus? What if you knew and believed that all your sins have been washed away by his blood and righteousness? What if you believed that you are accepted before God, no matter what terrible evil you have done? Don't you see what a difference that makes? If you are already dressed in the righteousness of Jesus, you can come clean before God and confess to him the terrible corruption of our sinful nature.

II. To change, I have to put off my sinful nature

Paul says in our text: **"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires."** Let's take these words apart for a moment. You were born with this sinful nature, which you inherited from your parents all the way back to Adam and Eve. Because of your sinful nature, you are INCLINED to do evil. You see that sinful nature in a small child, who doesn't have to learn to rebel, because he does it naturally. Have you ever told a child not to touch something, and he looks you in the eye and reaches out to do it anyway? That's the sinful nature in a child, and you have that sinful nature in every one of you. God says, "Don't do that!" Your sinful nature hears the command and wants to do it anyway.

Notice that the sinful nature is TOTALLY corrupted by its deceitful desires. You can't convert your sinful nature. That's why the scripture uses such strong terms in regard to your sinful nature. It tells you to crucify your sinful nature, nail it to the cross (Galatians 2:20). Jesus said that if we are going to follow him we have to "deny" ourselves (Matthew 16:24). He said in the Sermon on that Mount that if our eye causes us to sin, we should gouge it out. If our hand causes us to sin, we should cut it off (Matthew 5:29-30). Here Paul uses the picture of changing our clothes. We should put off the sinful nature and put on the new man.

What does it mean? It does not mean that we take our sinful desires and set them aside for a while, or put them back in the closet so we can take them out another day. Once upon a time, I used to smoke a pipe off and on. Sometimes more on than off! When I wanted to quit, I would run out of tobacco and try not to buy some more ... until I couldn't stand it any longer and went buy some. The only way I could really quit is if I threw away the pipe as well. Sometimes I think we fail to repent of our sins completely. We don't want to let go of that sin entirely. So instead of taking off the particular desire of our sinful nature but we leave ourselves open to going back to it. We put it in the closet to wear another day instead of throwing it away. Is this true of the sin or sins that you are struggling with right now? Are you leaving a door open so that you can return to your sin?

This repentance isn't easy. It is hard and painful work! Our sinful nature clings to us until the day we die so that we must always be putting off its desires, every day, every moment of every day. It is the most unnatural thing for us to do, because we were born that way. And the deeper you dig down, the more sin you see. Do you know how hard it is not to be selfish? Maybe you think you are not a selfish person, but is that really so? Then why does it bug you when your spouse squeezes the toothpaste the wrong way? Why does it upset you if your brother starts playing with your toy? Why do you hate to lose an argument? And even if you show restraint on the outside, if you let yourself be upset on the inside, aren't you still being selfish?

Friends, this work is so hard to do that you cannot do it alone. God the Holy Spirit must do this work in your heart as he works through his Word. Jesus said about the Holy Spirit, **"When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned."** Only the Holy Spirit can open your eyes to the lies of your sinful nature. Only the Holy Spirit can show you that there is a righteousness that satisfies your heavenly Father, the righteousness of Jesus, which is yours by faith.

And to make that change complete, you have to not only put off the old self, you have to put on the new self.

III. To change, I have to put on the new man

"You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." "You were taught," Paul says. God's Word is essential if we are going to make any real changes in our lives. The Holy Spirit doesn't

change us with a magic wand. He doesn't sprinkle us with fairy dust. The Holy Spirit works through the Word of God. If you want to wear new clothes every day, then stay connected to God's Word.

Notice that he says you were taught **"to be made new in the attitude of your minds, and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."** When we believe in Jesus, when we apply his forgiveness to our sins, then God creates a new self in us that is just the opposite of our old self. This new self has a whole new attitude. The new self doesn't see God's commandments as terrible rules that restrict our freedom. The new self doesn't find ways to get around God's commandments. The new self delights in God's law and meditates on it day and night (Psalm 1).

The new self is created to be like God and is righteous and holy. Can you imagine having no desire to sin at all? Can you imagine getting up every morning and thanking God for the circumstances of your life? Can you imagine loving your spouse with an unconditional love? Can you imagine never having the urge to fight, or argue? Can you imagine not having any evil desires or cravings? That's what life will be like for us in heaven. And that's the way it is like in our new self.

Sometimes we see that new man break through and shine in our lives. We have a beautiful example of that in our gospel lesson for this morning about a tax collector named Zacchaeus. What were the tax collectors like? They had a bad reputation for a reason. They liked money. They made lots and lots of money by hiring themselves out to the Romans to collect taxes from people. Who was to know if they collected an extra ten percent from everyone and kept that for themselves? But what happened when Zacchaeus met Jesus and Jesus invited himself to his house? "Look, Lord," he said, "I'm going to give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I cheated anyone, I will pay him back four times the amount." Did he do this because he had to do it? No. Knowing Jesus changed him. It changed his attitude. Money didn't mean anything to him anymore. Suddenly he had compassion on the poor. He felt an obligation to give back anything he stole with interest and then some.

The gospel does the same thing in our hearts and minds as well. The only problem is that the old self, the sinful nature, is still clinging to us and won't let go. So we have a battle on our hands. I grew up on a dairy farm. Milking cows can be smelly business. We had clothes we wore in the barn and clothes we wore in the house. We didn't want to bring the barn smell into the house, so we changed clothes whenever we came in to meals or went outside to work. So on average, we changed clothes eight times a day. Our life of repentance is like that. The Holy Spirit works in our heart and we are always putting off the stinky old self and putting on the perfectly holy new self.

And that's the good news for us this morning. We get to put on new clothes, the clothes of Jesus' righteousness, every single day. Every moment of every day. We can throw away the corruption of our sinful nature with its deceitful desires and live by the Spirit instead. And one day, when Jesus comes again, that nasty old self will die one last time and forever. So stay connected to God's Word and live by the Spirit in a life of repentance. Amen.