**Change from wretched rags to royal robes**

Text: Ephesians 4:17-24

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**Scriptures:** Ecclesiastes 2:1-11; Romans 1:18-32; Ephesians 4:17-5:5

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 359, 204, 92, 485, 527

**Series:** Ephesians (#17)

**Theme:** The Apostle Paul urges the Ephesian believers not to live like unbelievers who lack the revealed truth of God and who are separated from Him due to the hardness of their hearts. Having insensitive moral consciences, they give themselves over to uninhibited sexual indulgence, covetousness and impurity. In contrast, those who know the truth of Christ are called to live as the new people that they are in Him, being renewed in their thinking and bearing the image of God in righteousness and holiness.

**Proposition:** Brothers and sisters, live like the new human you are in Christ!

**Introduction**

I do like to hang onto my old clothes. Ask my wife Jenny! For me, these garments from my past have an attractive familiarity. Little thought is necessary in putting them on, as they have a long history of being chosen by me out of the wardrobe in the morning. When Jenny wants to get them out of the house and give them to an op shop, I tend to be more that a bit reluctant. I’d really rather keep them because, well you never know, I might want to wear them again someday. Perhaps I’m the only bloke with this hoarding/’hanging onto’ tendency when it comes to old clothes…. perhaps not😊

There’s a problem with these aged clothes though. They are worn, sometimes stretched or have holes, and occasionally they are stained by ink, and other permanent marks. Of course, the obvious solution is to wear new clothes, even though they are unfamiliar at first and require conscious thought in choosing them at first over the old clothes.

Changing clothes is the word picture which the Apostle Paul uses when He writes to the Ephesian believers in our text. In verse 22, he uses the words ‘*put off your old self*’. The verb translated ‘put off’ literally means to take something away from its normal location and put it out of the way. It was used of runners who participated in the Olympic games and who cast off their clothes to run in the stadium.

In verse 24 he writes ‘*put on the new self*’. The word in Greek here literally means to clothe or dress by putting on a garment. This word is used in Christ’s parable when the father was reunited with his wayward ‘prodigal son’ and said ‘'*Bring quickly the best robe, and* ***put it*** *on him*” (Luke 15:22).

Our text is a contrast between the ‘old self’ and the ‘new self’, as you can see from the word ‘but’ at the start of verse 20. We’re going to look firstly at the ‘old clothes’ of the ‘old self’ under the heading: “put off the old self”. Then we’ll consider the ‘new clothes’ of the ‘new self’ under the heading “put on the new self”.

1. **Put off the old self**

One of the reasons why I do like to hang onto, and wear, my old clothes is that they can be useful for jobs where paint, oil, glue, or other messy substances are involved. However, the ‘clothing’ associated with the old self has no value for the Christian who is a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). In fact, this ‘old clothing’ is very harmful; like garments saturated with toxins would be to the wearer. As we saw at the start of chapter 4, Paul uses the word ‘walk’ to refer to the ongoing pattern of life of a person. He returns to this word-picture in verse 17 and makes a solemn declaration: “*Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer* ***walk*** *as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds*”. Paul is mainly addressing Gentile converts to the Christian faith in this letter, but when he refers to Gentiles here, he’s speaking of those who live as ungodly pagans.

This is the way the Gentile Christians used to live before they came to Christ, their ‘old’ unconverted self is described in its wretchedness in our text: a futile mind; a darkened understanding; alienated from the life of God; callous; given up to sensuality, greed and impurity; corrupt through deceitful desires. Let’s examine this ‘wretched wardrobe’ which describes the clothing of the ‘old self’.

‘Futility’ describes emptiness, vanity, or nothingness. To have a futile mind is to be engaged and focused only on aims which are ultimately useless, non-productive and fruitless. We can see this with King Solomon’s mind when he aimed for pleasure, as He describes in Ecclesiastes chapter 2. He drank wine, built houses, planted vineyards, gardens and parks. He bought, flocks, herds, silver and gold. In the end, he wisely concluded that it ‘*was all vanity and a striving after the wind*’ (Eccl 2:11). It is not that pleasure is wrong, or that drinking wine, building projects or owning livestock and precious metals is somehow sinful, but that a mind which is only focused on such things that have no heavenly value is a futile, vain, empty mind.

When human beings, made in the image of God, do not honour God or give thanks to Him, they become ‘*futile in their thinking*’ (Rom 1:21). As Paul explains in Romans chapter 1, this futility, this emptiness, comes as a result of suppressing the truth about God which is plainly seen through the Creation which He has made. This clearly does not mean that those who have futile minds cannot think about anything useful or intelligent, but rather that their thoughts are completely empty of any true knowledge of who God is and of what He has done.

This futility of mind is seen in those who deny that a person’s life exists from the moment that they are conceived and who reject the logical truth that abortion is murder. This futility of mind is seen in those who deny that this world was created, but who suppose that everything came to be through a natural process of random chance. This futility of mind is seen in those who say that a person’s gender is defined by what they think it is and may therefore change over time, rather than being determined by how they are formed.

To have a futile mind is to be ‘***darkened in your understanding*’**. The verb ‘darkened’ here in the original language is written in a form (perfect passive) that conveys an ongoing lack of understanding of the truth. Naturally, human beings love the darkness of a mind without God (John 3:19) rather than the enlightened thinking which results from knowing Christ who is the Light of the World (John 8:12). To live life with a futile mind, darkened in your understanding, is ultimately to live life blindly. It is to be ignorant about spiritual truth.

It is to be ‘***alienated from the life of God*’**, as Paul identifies in verse 18. To be alienated is to be estranged, to be separated, to have no relationship with someone. Just as the darkness of understanding is a permanent, continuing condition, so is the separation from God for the ‘old self’. This alienation has ‘infected’ the whole human race descended from Adam (Romans 5:12) like a lethal virus passing through a whole population and defiling everyone. We might think that alienation from God is not a state that people are personally responsible for because they could not escape ‘catching’ the deadly all-pervasive ‘disease’ of sin.

But notice at the end of verse 18, Paul identifies that this ‘wardrobe of the old self’ is a result of ‘*their hardness of heart*’. Not only is the knowledge of God’s eternal power and divine nature plain to everyone (Rom 1:19) from His Creation. (Theologically we term this source of knowledge ‘general revelation’). Also, the knowledge of God’s law (part of His ‘special revelation’) is present in the human conscience, being ‘written on the human heart’ (Rom 2:15). When a person’s conscience progressively fails to convict them of wrongdoing, then their conscience becomes seared (1 Tim 4:2). Their heart is progressively hardened.

Imagine that you ignore the engine temperature gauge on your car when one day it starts to overheat. As you continue to drive, a red light appears on the dashboard to which you also pay little attention. Perhaps you think that the light is there for someone else, or perhaps you think that the car has some faulty wiring, or perhaps you think you can keep going to your destination without any problems. Then the red light begins to flash, and a loud beeping sound emits from within the vehicle. Now you are becoming quite annoyed so you put your headphones on with some loud music to drown out the warning sound and you put some tape over the warning light so that you can’t see it. If you drive your car like this it will not end well!

Spiritually, this is how a ‘hardened heart’ functions as the futile mind reasons in ignorance with ideas like: *“Everybody else does this, so it can’t be so wrong”, “I do many good things, so one little sin won’t matter”, “I deserve this pleasure because of all I have suffered”.* A hardened heart becomes ‘callous’ (v19). The literal meaning of the word in Greek is to cease to feel pain. From this word we derive our English term ‘analgesic’ – which means to take away pain. Here ‘callous’ means to be insensitive to honour or shame. It is to become so accustomed to something undesirable that one is not bothered by the consequences of what one is doing.

That is why those with hardened hearts ‘give themselves over’ to sensuality, greed and impurity. ‘**Sensuality’** refers to shameless excess and the absence of restraint, especially with regard to sexual immorality. The Greeks defined this word to mean ‘a disposition of soul that resents all discipline’. The word here for **greed** literally means to have more and describes a strong desire to acquire more and more material possessions. Greedis insatiable selfishness, covetousness, a ‘grasping ambition’. Like that of the rich man who thought to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, so that he could say to himself ‘*you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry*’ (Luke 12:16-21). **Impurity** here refers to moral uncleanness in thought, word and deed. Sin defiles the sinner producing corruption and dishonour (e.g. Rom 1:24). A little like the stains which the paint, oil and glue have left on my old clothes but more like poisonous toxins which enter the body resulting in sickness and leading to death.

The description here of the ‘old self’ is a ‘wardrobe’ of wretched rags. This ‘clothing’ belonged to ‘*the former manner of life*’ of the Ephesian Christians who were once ‘*dead in trespasses and sins*’ (Eph 2:1) and to whom Paul wrote that the old, unconverted, self is ‘***corrupt through deceitful desires*’** (v22). The desires of the old self are deceiving, they promise good outcomes resulting from sin, but the truth is ultimately very different. The Apostle Paul personally knew about how deceptive sin really is. He wrote “*For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me*” (Rom 7:11).

The ‘wretched rags’ of the old self are not garments suitable or fitting for the sons and daughters of the Living God to be wearing. Brothers and sisters in Christ, that is why God’s will is for us to take them off and put on the new self, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Put on the new self**

The word ‘uniform’ literally means to have the same form or character in all cases and at all times. For example, we might say of a building that it is made up of ‘blocks of stone of uniform size’. However, we are most familiar with the word ‘uniform’ when it is used to describe the clothing to be worn by students at a school or the standardised garments worn by members of the armed forces.

Whilst there is no specific ‘dress code’ for Christians in the Bible, detailing what we must physically wear, there is a single, uniform, just one standard to which we are all called to live as new human beings created in Christ. That uniform dress standard is described for us in verse 24: “*put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*”. The character standard for the Christian is to be like God. We are all designed to accurately bear the image of our Creator. This is what our first ancestors Adam and Eve did before the image of God in them became marred by sin (ref. Gen 1:27).

Brothers and sisters, as ‘new humans in Christ’, we are all to look like our ‘Elder Brother’ Jesus who is the image of the Invisible God (Col 1:15). We are to look like Him in character because God has declared that we are part of His family as adopted sons and daughters (1 John 3:1). In broad terms this ‘Christian uniform’ is ‘*true righteousness and holiness*’ and we put on this new clothing; fit for living in the presence of our perfectly righteous and holy God, as we are ‘*renewed in the spirit of our minds*’ (v23).

As we learn about Christ Jesus and our previously spiritually empty minds are more and more filled with ‘the truth that is in Jesus’ we are increasingly able to put on the new self. Paul refers to this learning in what John Calvin called ‘the school of Christ’ in verse 20. ‘Learning Christ’ is an ongoing, life-long journey for the believer. We learn primarily through the revelation of God’s Word applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

There is an inward renewal as a result of the Spirit’s work, progressively transforming believers into the image of Christ their Lord and Saviour. The theological term for this transformation is ‘sanctification’. Paul expresses this progressive ‘change of character clothing’ in 2 Cor 3:18 “*we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another*”.

You might ask, well, is sanctification the work of God the Holy Spirit, or the work of the sinner who has been made right with God through the person and work of Christ? Or to put this another way, who puts on the ‘new clothes’ of the ‘new self’? Do we dress ourselves or are we dressed by God? Paul’s letter to the Colossians helps us to answer this question as he uses the same word-picture there to describe this change in character clothing. In Colossians 3.9-10 we read “*you have put off the old self with its practices and* ***have put on*** *the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator*”. Yet Paul also writes to these Colossian believers exhorting them to: “***Put on*** *then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive*” (Col 3.12-13).

It is true that the ‘new self’ has **already** been put on by every believer as God makes each one a new creation in Christ. This is part of justification in which the sinner is declared right with God because they share in the benefits of Christ’s work for them. It is also true that the ‘new self’ has **not yet** been completely put on by every believer for whom there are many character changes which have not yet taken place.

Brothers and sisters, it is true that God has already dressed us in the righteousness of Christ and that we have been declared to be holy saints, sharing in the holiness of the perfect man Jesus. It is also true that we are being dressed as the Holy Spirit progressively changes our character through a process of inward renewal, a transformation in which we are called to take an active part. We do ‘dress ourselves’ as we are also ‘dressed’ by the Holy Spirit. Paul expresses this ‘both/and’ reality in Philippians 2:12-13 “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*”.

Some people care more about what clothes they wear than others. Some people are meticulous, precise, conscientious and painstaking about selecting their garments. They are what we might call ‘sharp dressers’. Others do not pay much attention if any to their attire, they are what we might call ‘sloppy dressers’. Now remember, this is not a sermon about physical clothing. This message is not about an outward dress standard or an attempt to give you some fashion advice. The question is: should we be ‘sloppy dressers’ or ‘sharp dressers’ when it comes to ‘putting off the old self’ and ‘putting on the new self’? What do you think?

From our text it’s difficult to justify the answer ‘sloppy dressers’! We are to care about the character we have. We are to be concerned about futile thinking, darkened understanding, alienation from God. Having a conscience which is not troubled by sensuality, greed and impurity is to ‘dress like a pagan’. If such ‘character clothing’ is worn, then the very salvation of a person is brought into question. However, we also need to be careful with what we mean about being ‘sharp dressers’ remembering that whilst the word picture in our text is that of external clothing, the spiritual reality is of inward character. To be a ‘sharp dresser’ is actually to be very righteous and very holy; it is to imitate Christ (1 Cor 11:1). Brothers and sisters, in that sense we are all called to be ‘sharp dressers’ in Christ.

However, the reality is that we are all subject to ‘wardrobe malfunctions’ when we revert to our old clothing, our ‘old self’. At times we put our old wretched rags back on and put our royal robes aside. We revert to our old ways. Then we need to come to Christ the Saviour and confess that we are no longer walking on the excellent pathway that is laid out for us in God’s Word, but that we have gone astray. Perhaps that is you today. Your character clothing is familiar to you. In some ways it is comfortable because you have long been accustomed to it, but deep down inside yourself you know that it is not fitting to think, speak and act as you do at times. In part, you are living your life clothed in ‘wretched rags’; living like someone who does not appear to be part of God’s family.

Or perhaps for you, you’ve never seen the beautiful clothing of the perfect man Jesus. You’ve never come to Him in repentance and faith and asked Him to remove your wretched old clothes and dress you in His righteousness and holiness.

Today is the day to come to Christ, either for the first time (if you’ve come to realise that you’ve been living your life dressed in ‘wretched rags’) or as someone who has already come to faith to come to Christ as you have done many times before. Whoever you are, today is the day to change your clothes. Put off the old self, which belongs to your former way of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires. Wretched rags are not fitting for the child of the Great King.

Put on your new self, which is being renewed by the Holy Spirit, a new self which is created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Over the next few weeks, by God’s grace, we’ll look in more detail at the ‘wardrobe’ of the new self as Scripture unfolds the ‘garments’ of truth-telling (Eph 4:25-26), self-control (26-27), useful labour (28), helpful speech (30), love (4:31-5:2) and thankfulness to God (5:3-5). These are the ‘royal robes’ to be worn by the children of God. This is the uniform which helps to identify us as part of God’s glorious, well-dressed, family.

AMEN.