

Ephesians 4:20-24, 31-32 (1984 NIV)
Dress Up for Jesus

Introduction

A woman bought an expensive dress. Her husband asked why she had to be so extravagant. She said defensively, "The devil made me buy it." Her husband asked, "Why didn't you command Satan to get behind you?" The woman said, "I did but the dress still looked as good at the back as it did in front. So I bought it."

People like to dress up well. As Christians, we want to "put on our Sunday best" when we come to church. That's good practice. But even more importantly, the Lord doesn't want us to dress up well outwardly for church only on Sunday. He wants us to dress up well in our inner self by living for Him every day of the week. Today's text is about dressing up—about taking off something old and putting on something new. It is about dressing up not so much for the world to admire us, but for the world to be attracted to Jesus Christ.

Life in Christ means we have to live in this world but we are not to conform to this world. To live for Jesus Christ is to dress up for Him. How? First ...

I. We take off the old life not in Jesus Christ (vv. 20-22, 31).

²⁰ That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹ when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²² 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 ...

What was your old life not in Jesus Christ like? What did you use to do that wasn't a good thing, but you no longer do it now? Everyone has some "not so nice" past, big or small. We've all sinned and come short of God's glory. We've all done things that we shouldn't have.

One man said to his friend, "You look depressed. What are you thinking about?" "My future," was the quick answer. "What makes your future look so bad?" "My past."

Some people think that their future is bad because they keep looking back to their past. But the truth is this—you can't dwell on the past if you want to make progress in your future.

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

Is there a part of your past that still hangs on? Is there something that you once did in the past that you still give in today? Or at least, still tempt you now? Paul said in v. 22, “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 ...”

“Put off your old self.” Or put off the old way of life. How? Only in Christ can we do this. Only through His power can we get over our past sins. We must allow the Spirit of God to help us put to death the misdeeds of the body. And how can God’s Spirit help us to overcome sin, past or present? The Spirit of God helps us as we respond in accordance to His prompting—immersing ourselves in God’s Word, in prayer, and in doing His will.

To dress up for Jesus Christ so that the world can be attracted to Him, we need to first take off the old way of life in us; to be convicted enough to want to break free from the bad habits that have become second nature to us.

What are the things we are to take off from our old way of life? Paul gives a long list in vv. 25ff. For our purpose this morning, I want us to just look at one. Paul says in v. 31, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.”

I view bitterness as the root of all these bad things that Paul has identified in this verse. Bitterness is the root because it is something that is deep inside us. And the others are just outward expressions of this inner problem. We commit outward acts of rage, anger, brawling (i.e. rough and loud quarrelling), slander (i.e. bad-mouthing), and all kinds of malicious deeds to harm others because we have a bitter root inside us—bitterness. Paul says, “Get rid, put away, remove the bitterness in you.” Let’s examine deeper this inner problem of bitterness by answering a few questions.

Q. 1: What makes a person bitter? It is often caused by perceived sin. When we think someone has sinned against us, we harbour resentment towards that person. And this can turn into bitterness.

We’ve gotten this idea that before we can forgive a person, he has to apologize to us first. But what if that person doesn’t realize that he has sinned against you? Or he has actually not sin against you, but you think he has? Then that person may never apologize. And you become bitter, waiting for and expecting an apology that will never come.

E.g. someone may come to you and let you know in no uncertain terms that you never visited him when he was in the hospital. He harboured resentment towards you because of your apparent lack of concern. And you asked, “I didn’t know you were in the hospital. Why didn’t you let me know?” And this person replied, “I didn’t want to bother you because I know you are very

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

busy.” In spite of what he said, he became bitter towards you because you didn’t visit him AND you have not apologized! Well, how could you apologize if you didn’t even know that you had done something (or had not done something) that had unintentionally hurt him?

The point is this: It doesn’t matter if someone has actually sinned against another or not. Very often, it is the perceived sin that causes bitterness.

Q. 2: Why can’t we let go of hurts/wrongs in our bitterness? One thing for sure, bitterness remembers details! When you are bitter about something, you can remember every detail! You have an elephant’s memory about it. Every word that was said; the tone of the voice; the expression of the face; the time, place, and circumstances of the event—you remember exactly what happened!

Why is this so? Because you have reviewed it over and over in your mind ... a thousand times! We don’t even review the good things like that. We remember them, and enjoy them ... then we set them aside. But when you are bitter over something, you can’t let go of it. It haunts you, and you play it over and over again. You become obsessed with it.

E.g. a couple having a rocky marriage will soon become bitter with each other. There might have been thousands of good times in their marriage. They wouldn’t have gotten married in the first place, if they hadn’t loved each other at one time. But something happened, and they become bitter with each other. They can’t remember the good times. All they can remember are the unhappy things that they have been rehearsing in their minds over and over and over again. That’s bitterness.

When a person is bitter, no detail is forgotten. Worse still, some details are even exaggerated, making a big mountain out of a small mole hill.

Q. 3: Why is it that the closer the offender is to us, the greater is the bitterness in us? Bitterness isn’t always based on how big the offense against us is, but often how close the offender is to us. Thus, the most likely candidates for our bitterness are people close to us—our spouse, parent, child, sibling, boss, co-worker, close friend, church member, and even God!

Indeed, bitterness is often based on how close the offender is to us, not always on how big the offense is. If your spouse criticizes you once or twice, you likely won’t get bitter over it. But if the criticisms of you become a pattern of how you are treated, resentment will set in one day, and it then turns into bitterness ... not necessarily because the offense is big, but definitely because the offender is very close/dear to you. I really don’t care if someone who hardly knows me has commented that I am a bad husband, but if my wife says that and keeps saying that, I’ll take great offense to that.

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

Q. 4: What if the person whom you are bitter with doesn't ever "see the light" and apologize? What if he doesn't even know that he has offended you? What if in his last days on earth, he still does not come to you to ask for your forgiveness? Then you will be bitter for the rest of your life! And it will eat you up like cancer.

Now, imagine out of the blue one day, that somebody comes to you and apologizes. You have spent years being bitter against him. Finally, he comes begging for forgiveness. Are you going to forgive him?

No way! You can't just let bitterness go! It has become an obsession ... a way of life. Its tentacles have wrapped around you and have cut off all compassion in you. Indeed, bitterness finds it hard to forgive.

What does this tell us? Bitterness is really first and foremost your problem and my problem, not somebody else's problem. It is the problem of your old self and my old self, not that of another.

Q. 5: How do you get rid of bitterness? There are 3 things you can do:

- *One, keep it inside.* When you do, prepare to get really sick—physically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. You can sense bitterness on the face of a bitter person, in his walking, in his talking, in his working, in his thinking, in his feeling, and even in his praying (if he still prays at all).
- *Two, let it out.* Many people will tell you to go to the person you are bitter against, and let it out. Don't keep it in, share it with him, and give it to him. Why keep it in and make only yourself sick. Let it out of your system, and get everybody else sick. Boom!! You feel much, much better ... but everybody else is dead!
- *Three, uproot it.* This is God's better way—dig it out and uproot it. Hebrews 12:15 says, "See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many." The Bible describes bitterness as a root. Root is underground and it can't be seen on the surface. But you can see the evidence, like when the root cracks a sidewalk. Just because you can't see the root, doesn't mean it isn't there. Roots may be under the surface. But one day, it will bear fruit above the surface. A bitter root will bear bitter fruit. It won't bear any sweet fruit. And when roots grow, they spread and can thereby defile many. It can spread through a family, a church, a community. That's why you have to dig up and uproot the bitter root. How do you do this?

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

Firstly, you confess it as your sin against God. Until you do this, the root will continue to grow and spread. You have to quit focusing on the sin of the offender, and own your bitterness as your sin. If your bitterness has to do with the person who has offended you, then you wouldn't be bitter anymore once he has apologized. But very often, an apology won't get rid of the bitterness because it is really your problem. Bitterness isn't based on the offense that somebody had done to you. It's the result of what you have done with that offense.

Secondly, you claim God's forgiveness and move on. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

When I was a new Christian, I found it difficult to live the Christian way because I had problem loving my own father. I was bitter towards him because I felt he was a selfish man who only cared for himself.

One morning, my father suffered a stroke and had to be hospitalized. There was massive bleeding in his brain and he slipped into a coma. The doctor could not turn his condition around. One evening, God led me into the ICU where he was hanging on to his last moments with the help of a life-supporting system.

I held his hand and said, "Pa, I have found it so hard to love you. But I know I am wrong and I have asked Jesus to forgive me. He also loves you and wants to forgive you. If you are listening and can understand me, you can pray to Jesus and say, 'Jesus, I believe in you and I now ask you to forgive my sins and bring me home to be with you in heaven.'"

I was not sure if he heard me, or understood me even if he did hear me. But I felt a great sense of peace upon me that moment. And with that, I settled things with my father. He died a few hours later.

Throughout the bereavement, I mourned for the death of my father. More than that, I celebrated the death of my own bitter spirit because I had recognized and confessed my sin of bitterness. I experienced God's great love and gracious forgiveness for me. This has been one of the major turning points in my Christian life up to this day.

Jesus is always listening, waiting to hear the sinner praying to Him in repentance. In His love, grace, and mercy, He is always waiting and willing to heal and cleanse.

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

To live for Jesus Christ is to dress up for Him. First, take off the old life not in Jesus Christ. Remove the root of any bitterness in us. Next ...

II. We put on the new life in Jesus Christ (vv. 23-24, 32).

²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

“Put on the new self.” What’s this? It is your better self in Christ. We are better when we are in Christ than when we are not in Him. We all look better (at least to God) when we have been cleansed from our sin and when we put on our new life in Jesus Christ. How do we put on the new self; the new life in Jesus Christ? There are at least two good ways for us to do so.

One way is by imitating other people of godly character. In this world, the people with the most popular following are usually the ones who have great competence, never mind if their character is the least godly. All we want is to see someone who can get things done. Whether he gets close to God or not in his character is between him and God. So, let’s mind our own business, and not get personal on such a thing as godliness.

But Paul says in 1 Cor. 11:1, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” Paul is saying, “Imitate me or follow me in the ways that I imitate or follow Christ.”

In the same way, there is much godliness in many people’s lives, and we need to imitate or follow their example. Who are the models of faith and faithfulness you see in the people whom God has led into your life? Observe them, imitate their Christlikeness, and you will learn to put on the new life in Jesus Christ.

A second way to put on the new life in Jesus Christ is to look to Christ. There is no one better. It is said that a couple will look very much like each other after many years of marriage. The reason is because they have spent so many years looking at each other, that they assimilate each other’s features into their respective faces. True?

The writer to the Hebrews seems to believe so. In Heb. 12:1-2, he talks about “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” so that we can persevere and not grow weary in living out our new life in Jesus Christ. When we fix our eyes on Jesus Christ and follow His example of living for the Father, we will become more and more like Him. We will put on the new life in Him.

To dress up for Jesus Christ so that the world can be attracted to Him, we

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

need to first take off the old way of life in us, and then to put on the new life in Jesus Christ—i.e. first flee from bad habits and then fill our lives with good ones.

I like for us to look at what Paul says in Eph. 4:32 for that one thing that exemplifies the new life in Jesus Christ, and indeed, that which the Lord Himself has exemplified in His own life—“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Yes, when we learn to be a forgiving person, we learn to put on the new life in Jesus Christ. In fact, we learn to be more like Christ. If anyone had a right not to forgive, it was Jesus. He could have the right to be unforgiving for all the wrong done to Him. But He chose to forgive, even while on the Cross. With His dying breath, He looked at those guilty of nailing Him onto the Cross and said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). He asked the Father to forgive them even without these people apologizing to Him first or asking to be forgiven. Indeed, Jesus Christ stands ever ready to forgive us. We receive it and we are to offer it to others.

What does it really mean to forgive? Let me try to answer that by explaining what forgiveness is not.

One, forgiveness is not about forgetting. People claim, “I’ll forgive, but I’ll never forget.” My answer to that is, “Don’t forget. But each time you remember the hurt, remember also you have forgiven.” That great “love chapter” in the Bible—1 Cor. 13—says that “love keeps no record of wrongs”. We don’t act like the past doesn’t exist or that a hurt didn’t occur. But we no longer use past hurts as a weapon. We can’t ignore that a hurt occurred, but we also can’t change the past, and wishing it never happened won’t make it go away. When we forgive we don’t change the past, but we sure do change the future.

Two, forgiveness is not about weakness. It takes strength to forgive. The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong. In fact, forgiving isn’t losing. When we don’t forgive, we are imprisoned by bitterness. To forgive is actually to win—to win our freedom from bitterness.

Three, forgiveness is not about a one-time event. There is no instant forgiveness in that true forgiveness takes effort. It is a lengthy process of steady growth as a relationship is gradually restored. Trust isn’t rebuilt overnight. We forgive ... one memory at a time. Forgiveness doesn’t mean we will suddenly and quickly like the person. The original level of trust and intimacy may not even be completely restored.

Four, forgiveness is not about condoning wrong. By forgiving, we’re not saying the action was OK; it’s not. Nor does it allow the wrong to happen

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

again. Forgiveness does not mean turning a criminal loose. When people hurt us accidentally, we excuse them. When they hurt us intentionally, we forgive. But we don't minimize what was done to us.

Five, forgiveness is not about a guaranteed closure. Some hurts aren't resolved till Heaven. There's no pain on earth that Heaven cannot heal. Even when there are consequences for those who've hurt us, some pain and scars may remain for all of this life. We have to ask God for His grace to bear them till Heaven comes. Sometimes, the best we can achieve is acceptance, forbearance, and peaceful coexistence. But we don't want to remain as people with clenched fists as if all ready to fight. People with clenched fists cannot shake hands.

Six, forgiveness is not about the impossible. When people say, "I can't forgive," they really mean to say, "I won't forgive." Forgiveness is a clear choice; a conscious decision. We can feel hurt, betrayed, and angry ... and can still forgive. The presence and power of Christ in us can do "all things" (Phi. 4:13). God by His Spirit working in and through us can enable us to forgive.

Corrie Ten Boom was sent to the Nazi concentration camp for hiding Jews in her home in Holland during WW II. There she suffered much hardship and humiliation, including the shame and trauma of being raped by a German guard.

After the war, she went to defeated Germany to give a message on God's forgiveness in 1947. As she was about to leave after her talk, she saw a man walking towards her. And as he drew closer, she froze, not with fright but with an intense sense of bitterness.

"It is him!" she said deep within herself, shivering all over now because all the painful memories came rushing back as if the whole violation only happened just yesterday.

Now standing right in front of her, the man said, "I want to thank you for a fine message. How good it is to know that all our sins, as you say, are at the bottom of the sea. You mentioned the concentration camp Ravensbruck in your talk. I was a guard there during WW II. But since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there and to the people of your country. But I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Will you forgive me?"

The man extended his hand to her, obviously not able to remember that she was that woman whom he had so cruelly raped in the concentration camp.

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

Corrie Ten Boom stood there for a long while, struggling within herself. Every fibre inside her screamed out as if to say, “No, I will not forgive!” But she sensed the Lord speaking to her even louder—“If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

After what seemed like eternity to her, she slowly extended her hand to him and said with voice quivering, “I forgive you, brother, and with all my heart!” For a long moment they grasped each other’s hands—his hand of repentance in her hand of forgiveness.

Corrie Ten Boom confessed, “I had never known God’s love as intensely as I did then.” She realized that when she forgave, she had set free a long-time prisoner ... and that prisoner was she herself, locked up in her own prison of unforgiveness.

(<http://www.familylifeeducation.org/gilliland/procgroupp/CorrieTenBoom.htm>)

Indeed, forgiveness is not always easy, but it is always possible in Christ who strengthens us. Jesus Christ exemplified forgiveness in His life and death. To put on the new life in Jesus Christ is to put on forgiveness as our way of life in Him.

Conclusion

The Church in Ephesus was praised by Paul in Eph. 1:15-16 this way—“For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.” This church was on fire in their faith and red hot in their love for God and one another.

But the sad thing is that in Rev. 2:4, the Lord Himself charged them for having forsaken their first love. I believe this refers to their loss of love for the Lord AND for one another. When people in church lack love for one another, they don’t do kind things to one another. Instead, they do all the unrighteous things that Paul lists down in Eph. 4:25ff.

Why did the Church in Ephesus lose that kind of love? I believe they became too caught up with dressing up to be admired by the world, and not to be the Lord’s witness before the world. They kept displaying their old self not in Christ and stopped displaying their new self in Jesus Christ.

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

I pray that the Lord will help us dress up for Jesus Christ not only on Sundays, but all the days of our lives, so that we can always be on fire in our faith and red hot in our love for the Lord AND for people both inside and outside the church. Amen!

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.