

I LOVE YOUR NEW CLOTHES

21st in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"
Ephesians 4:20-24

Maybe you saw the story that hit the Internet a couple of weeks back. A couple back in New York, Lincoln Boehm and his wife, Dara, saw a puzzling sight. Sitting in the middle of a street in Queens was a double double hamburger from In-N-Out. It was the classic double double complete with the genuine In-N-Out wrapper, looking like it had just come off the grill. They knew that the nearest In-N-Out was in Texas, one thousand seven hundred miles away, so where did that burger come from? It was a mystery that lit up the Internet. The most likely candidate was that it was a hoax, that someone had gotten an In-N-Out wrapper, made a look alike burger and put it on the street. But why would someone do that? What would that achieve? Was this a PR stunt, maybe the beginning of a campaign announcing the arrival of that iconic burger chain in New York? Or wait, maybe it was a weird modern art project. But if so, what was the artist trying to say? Uh, I don't know, how about "I'm hungry"?

The In-N-Out burger in New York was a big mystery. When I read that story I was studying this passage, and I saw a connection. This passage suggests another sort of mystery. God wants there to be people who are a mystery because they live so differently than others. They live in ways that all humans wish to live. They are genuinely alive, they are hopeful, they are enthusiastic, they have great peace, are full of joy, are kind and humble, and are truly loving. Sounds to me like a unicorn. Some would say they have encountered the same number of those people as the number of unicorns they've seen. Yet the Bible claims that such people do exist. If that's true, where do these mysterious people come from? Could they be traced to Area 51 maybe? Because these people sound alien to me. Not alien like they've come to destroy the planet or its residents, but alien in that they are not anything like regular humans. Do they really exist at all, and if they do, how do they become the way they are? This passage says you and I not only could be but should be among these mysterious unicorn people, and it provides information about how that can happen. The mystery is revealed.

By the way, it turns out the burger wasn't a hoax or a PR stunt. In-N-Out is not opening in New York. Neither was it an art project. The truth is the burger was the real deal. It actually started out its life in San Diego. A 16 year old high school student from Flushing, New York, named Helen Vivas, had been visiting in San Diego and flew home on a Jet Blue redeye flight, landing at 5:27 AM the morning of the burger incident. Helen loves In-N-Out. She loves it so much that she packed 3 double doubles to take home with her, minus the sauce so they would still be fresh when she got home. But she had to run to catch a bus in Queens on her trip home, and as she did her bag split and one of the burgers fell out. She had to leave it because her bus was about to depart. And that was the burger the couple spotted on the street.

WE HAVE TAKEN OFF THE OLD CLOTHES

These verses cause an unnecessary conundrum for some people. They see what seems to be Paul telling us to “take off your old self” in verse 23 and then to “put on the new self” in verse 24. This is an illustration based on the idea of changing clothes. The “take off” and “put on” terms Paul used were those they would have used about changing clothes in his day, taking off one set of clothes and putting on another. Only in this case what is being changed out is the old self and the new self. Literally Paul wrote about the “old man” and the “new man.” In our world that is so sensitive to such old school chauvinistic terms as “man” standing for people, let’s just substitute the term “person.” So it sounds like Paul says we are to take off the old person and put on the new person.

This leads to a dilemma for some people who observe that in Colossians 3:9-10 Paul wrote, “Do not lie to each other since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self.” There he says that this change is already a done deal. It has happened in the past. So it sounds to some people like Paul is telling readers to take off the old and put on the new in Ephesians, but in Colossians it sounds like he says they have already done that. This leads to some scholars saying that there is both a past and present tense aspect of this process of taking off the old and putting on the new. You have taken off the old and put on the new, but now you have to keep doing that.

As I see it that makes no sense. Suppose that I am wearing my nice, comfy workout shorts and a not especially reputable t-shirt. But Laurie and I are going out to a nice restaurant for dinner that evening. So I take off my shorts and shirt, and put on a nice pair of pants and an appropriate shirt. Then at dinner Laurie says to me, “I know you took off your former clothes and put on new clothes, but now you need to take off the old clothes and put on new ones.” That would be idiotic unless she was complaining about the new clothes I put on for the evening. I already took off the old and put on the new. There is no more need to change. In fact I can’t take off the old clothes because I don’t have them on!

Some critics even suggest that Paul was contradicting himself. We can save ourselves those kinds of dumb suggestions and the hassle of trying to come up with tortured explanations of there being a past aspect and a present aspect of this action by simply paying attention to what Paul actually said in these verses. Let’s again read verses 20-21 and as we do pay attention to the tenses of the verbs. “That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.” Do you see that the verbs, learned, heard, were taught, are all past tense? Do you see that verse 22 starts with “you were taught,” again past tense? Paul is reminding them that when he first told them about Jesus he explained to them that to come to Jesus and believe in him involved being done with their old way of life and taking up a new way of living. It meant taking off the old

person, putting away the life they used to lead, and putting on the new person, living a whole new life.

A bit of the confusion is caused by the translation of verse 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.” More literally that reads, “you were taught to put off your old self, the one corrupted by its deceitful desires.” So this is all about what Paul told them about what coming to faith in Jesus was about. So when they put their faith in Christ they did so understanding it involved taking off their old life and putting on a new way. That happened when they first believed. So Paul was saying exactly the same thing that he said when he wrote to the Colossians.

Why would you put your faith in Jesus unless you wanted something to change? In Ephesus those people had pagan beliefs and lives that went with those beliefs, but they knew something was wrong. Life would have gone considerably more easily and comfortably for them had they just sort of gone with the flow of their society, just gave lip service to what everyone else believed and continued life as they all lived. But they felt something was seriously missing. They knew how they wanted life to be and what they were living was not it. They took the risky step of choosing to follow Jesus because they were persuaded that was what was needed to fix what was wrong in them. That hasn’t changed much. There is a restlessness in human beings, a constant hunger for something more, driven by a lack of peace, a lack of joy, a lack of meaning in life. There is a common sense of unhappiness. People put their faith in Jesus and choose the life of following him because they think that will fill the empty place, bringing the healing and hope they are missing and longing for.

That old life was the one he talked about in verses 17-19, one based on ignorance and futile thinking. But in this passage we see another aspect of the life without Christ that has not so much to do with our thinking and much more to do with our desires. One of the issues with the old person, the old life, was that it was corrupted by deceitful desires. Hey, now wait just a minute. I know I wasn’t perfect, and I put my faith in Christ because my life was most definitely lacking in something. But I wasn’t corrupt. People who are corrupt are politicians who use their position for personal advantage and take bribes, or criminals who prey upon others to get gain for themselves, I know I had my problems, but I wasn’t corrupt.

Paul was not saying we were all awful people who were horrible, corrupt fiends. Not long ago Kyle, who works with our youth, sent me a text message. In it he said, “I just want to let you know that I will be a beating from the fusion for 7 through 16 on Sunday.” At first glance I thought, “Well, working with middle schoolers has finally gotten to Kyle. He’s gone over the edge. He’s sending me messages that show total mental breakdown and confusion.” In what way could he be a beating? And what is a beating from the fusion? What fusion was he talking about? Then I started to become very disturbed. This was something he was going to do on

Sunday, when he works with the youth, and there was going to be a beating involved. Oh no, was this the ranting of a young man who had completely lost it and now was threatening violence against the young people of our church? Fortunately, it turns out that Kyle was just fine.

I figured out what happened. He did not type that text message, he dictated it. Sometimes when we dictate things to our phones the technology doesn't quite figure out correctly what we are saying. When that happens it corrupts the message. The message that comes through isn't even close to what it was supposed to be. In Kyle's case, what he actually said was "I will be teaching (not beating) from Ephesians 4:7-16 on Sunday." There was no fusion involved at all, and fortunately, no beating. Kyle's message was corrupted, meaning what he sent was not what it was intended to be. When Paul says our old person was corrupted he meant our old life was not what it was intended to be, and we were not what we were intended to be. Another meaning of the Greek word translated "corrupted" was "spoiled." So our old life was spoiled by deceitful desires.

Laurie had a memorable moment when she was a kid. She got a bowl of ice cream and wanted a topping for it. She looked in the fridge and saw a jar of caramel sauce. Ah, that would be great, so she ladled the sauce on her ice cream. Then she dug in, and gagged. It wasn't caramel sauce. Her dad had saved some turkey grease in a jar and put it in the fridge. Needless to say, the turkey grease topping spoiled the ice cream. She dumped the whole mess.

Paul says our deceitful desires did that to our lives. They were ruined by them. The most obvious historical example of this happened in Eden. Eve had a desire, one she believed would make life great. But it spoiled her life. It, in fact, ruined it. That is what happened to us. Our old life was not what it should have been and we knew it. That's why people put their faith in Jesus.

We were created to live in relationship to God, experiencing his love and his presence. We were created to live lives of security and peace. We were created to experience unbounded joy, to have lives that were full of meaning and overflowing with hope. We were created to love and serve others. We were created to reflect the image of God, to be like him. But the old life was spoiled, corrupted. We were cut off from God, didn't know his love, lacked peace, joy, meaning and hope. The whole thing was spoiled, not anywhere close to what it was supposed to be, and we sensed that.

How was that life spoiled? Paul says it was by our "deceitful desires." Is he saying that we all had all these dark, evil desires and that's what messed things up for us? That's a problem for me, because I don't recall having any sick, twisted, evil desires. What desires was Paul referring to? Pretty much all of our natural human desires. Having desires is not the problem. To be human is to have desires. You can't be a living human being and not desire. The desires

are not bad, in and of themselves. The problem is that they are deceitful. That doesn't mean that we have desires to deceive and use other people, although those desires do exist. The problem is that our own desires lie to us. They deceive us.

Seminary professor Dr. Thomas Constable wrote that our desires "are deceitful because they promise joy, but fail to deliver it." That is right on point, but you could expand it. Our desires promise so much. They promise fullness of life, meaning, security, peace, and they can't deliver any of it. So we spend our lives chasing one desire after another, and never get the life we seek.

The late Ray Stedman tells of an ironic scene he observed once when he was on a commuter train going into San Francisco. This was years ago when people were still allowed to smoke in public places and poison other people. There was a woman sitting near him that was chain smoking. As soon as she finished one cigarette she would light up another. She was smoking the entire time. She finished the pack, and just threw the empty pack on the floor. Stedman took note of the brand. This is where the irony comes in. He knew that the motto of this brand of cigarettes was "they satisfy." He said he thought, "Really? When?" She kept smoking one right after another and never got satisfaction. That's a good picture of our pursuit of our desires, constantly trying to be satisfied but somehow never getting there.

Some of those desires are urges like the urge to use others for our own advantage, to manipulate them to get what we want, or to criticize others in order to feel good about ourselves, or to be impatient and irritated with other people, or to try to buy our way into having a full life because of all the things we have. But many of them are neutral or even good desires. But they deceive us by telling us they are what life is about, that we will have joy, fullness, meaning, if we can only gain them. So we pursue them, only to find that they are never enough. Those desires promise much, but they don't deliver.

A recent survey of American kids aged eight to twelve asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. One of the most common answers was to be a You Tube personality. Twenty-nine percent listed that as their desire. The world has really changed, hasn't it? But Chris Boutte, just such a YouTube star, recently described his life this way, "Imagine looking for a treasure chest all your life, and you finally find it and open it up. And there's nothing in it."

Elle Mills is a YouTube personality with over a million subscribers and she's only 19. She has what so many kids think they desire. She recently made a video titled "Burnout At 19." In it she said, "My anxiety and depression keep getting worse and worse. This is all I ever wanted and why the (expletive deleted) am I so (expletive deleted) unhappy? It doesn't make any sense. It's so stupid. It's so stupid." Actually it makes perfect sense. It's what will always

happen when your life is owned by deceitful desires that promise the world, but can never deliver. It is indeed pursuing a treasure chest that has nothing inside. There's nothing inherently wrong with being a YouTube star, or with many of our desires, but they are sneaky scam artists, promising something they cannot ever give us.

A literal translation of verse 22 would be that you were taught "to take off from yourselves the according to the former way of living old person, the one being corrupted by deceitful desires." The life we once had was according to that way of living, meaning it was driven by it, directed and dominated by those deceitful desires. They determined how we lived, and thought, what we valued and what our priorities and decisions would be. And they were inevitably futile.

Laurie and I just completed getting new carpet upstairs in our house. We had needed it for a long time. Our old carpet was all right if you didn't look very closely at it. It was worn, irretrievably dirty in places, and so stretched out it was wrinkling up in places. So we really desired to replace it. We finally have done so, oddly, kind of involuntarily. It has been an epiphany, a turning point. Our lives are changed, so much more satisfying, so full of joy, so much deeper and richer, and so peaceful and full of meaning. We ourselves are better people because of it, more loving, more patient, more kind. Do you believe that? If you do then you're dumber than Lily Belle, Michael and Carissa's rabbit, who is sure that true fulfillment comes from being given Craisins to eat. Yes, things are more comfortable in our house, but we are no closer to God now. We don't experience his love more. We are no happier, no more joyful than we were before we replaced the carpet. Our lives don't have any more meaning than they did at the beginning of the year. And we are the same people we have always been. If our lives had been lived according to the desire to have new carpet, we'd have had a huge let down. Our lives would have been spoiled. That's how it always is. We came to faith in Christ because at some level we understood that life is not found in those desires. We understood what we long for is in Christ, so we put off the old person, whose whole life was according to the old way of living.

WE HAVE PUT ON THE NEW CLOTHES

Years ago there was a show on TV that Laurie used to love to watch that was called *What Not To Wear*. It was on for 10 years until 2013, but the TLC network recently announced they are bringing the show back in 2020. The premise of the reality show was that a person with terrible taste and awful clothes would be nominated by family and friends unbeknownst to them to be on the show. They would then be confronted by the two fashion expert stars of the show, and would be given \$8,000 to buy a whole new wardrobe. They would be given something of a makeover. It occurred to me that the name of the show really is inadequate. How effective would it be if all they did on the show is tell someone what they shouldn't wear? Do you know what would happen if they just said, "Look how bad these clothes are that

you have. Don't wear them"? They would maybe not wear them, but then they'd go right out and buy similar clothes. In fact, that typically happened on the show. When they gave the people money to buy new clothes they'd tend to go out and buy the same kind of clothes they had before.

The genius of the show was that they would guide the tasteless person in buying new clothes and create for them a whole new vision of their look and persona. They would help the person have a whole new fashion world view. Really the show should have been called *What To Wear*, because that's what they tried to help the person learn. If they didn't learn it they would not have made any lasting positive change for the poor, taste-challenged individual. If the gospel of Christ was just a theological version of *What Not To Wear*, if all it had for us was "don't live like that," it would also not make any real change in our lives. We would inevitably just go back to what we used to be and do because it is all we know. But the gospel of Christ is not merely a call *away* from something. It is also a call *to* a new way of living. We were challenged not just to take off those old clothes, but to get a whole new wardrobe, a shiny new bunch of clothes that are way better than anything we've ever had or anything else we could have.

When we turned to Jesus Christ, putting our faith in him, we put on a new set of clothes; meaning, we put on a whole new way of living. We became new people. In what way was this life new? That process of putting our faith in Christ involved first, as verse 23 says, being "made new in the attitude of your minds." This relates to what we saw in verses 17-19. Rather than continuing the futile thinking of the world, we have our minds made new. We adopt an entirely new way of thinking, God's way. We look at the world, at ourselves, at other people, as he does. We think in ways we described last week.

But we also change our lives by putting on the new person that is "according to God in righteousness and holiness of the truth." This is the key point where we see the difference between old and new. The old life was according to our own desires. Our desires determined how we thought and what we pursued. They drove our lives, our choices, our priorities, our feelings and our actions. But this new life is "according to God." That means it is driven and dominated by God rather than selfish desires. In this new life God drives our choices, our priorities, our feelings and our actions.

In this new life, we still feel the old urges, the ones that dominated and directed our lives, but we know that they lie to us. We know that living only to satisfy them always ends up with us being alienated from real life. So now in this new life we let God direct us. We have new urges, the kinds of urges that God has. This new life is in the likeness of God, so it has urges to love with genuine, unfeigned love, to patiently endure, to accept even difficult people, to be faithful, and most of all, to bring honor to God by the way we live.

It is likely that most of us did not grasp the full implications of that change when we put our faith in Christ. We did not know all that it involved. But we did have some inkling at least of it. We knew that what we had been doing wasn't working. We sensed that life should be different than we were experiencing and we were convinced that Jesus had something to do with what we wanted. We also had a sense that living this new life would mean living in a different way.

So we knew at some level that we were putting on a new way of life with God being the focal point of it. As we grow, we gain ever greater understanding of what that means. The problem is that we easily turn this into a list of do's and don'ts, a lot of rules to follow, and obligations to fulfill. But that is not the new life at all.

This new life is a transformed life, and rules cannot transform. In his book, *Darkness and Light*, the late Martyn Lloyd Jones wrote, "The teaching of morality and ethics alone has never been capable of changing people." When it comes to living a new way, if all it is amounts to a bunch of rules, it won't inspire us, it won't transform us, it won't give us life; it will defeat us.

Why do you suppose people would submit the name of someone they knew and loved to the show *What Not To Wear*? That could be taken as a real slam. Hey, we want a TV show to feature you in all of your horrific splendor of terrible taste and slovenliness. But people didn't do it to humiliate their friend or loved one. They did it because they hoped for the best for them. They hoped for a transformation into something more lovely. And I know that when Laurie watched the show that in every episode there came the big reveal, and showed hope that this person would be the caterpillar turned into a beautiful butterfly. That is what this new suit of clothes, this new life, is to be for us. It is to be about transforming us into something more full of life, more full of love, more joyful and glorious.

Verses 20-21 have an unfortunate translation in the NIV. "That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ." The most literal translation of that text is, "That is not how you learned Christ." When we learned about this new life we did not learn a system of doctrine or a set of moral codes. We learned a person. We learned so much more than just *about* Jesus. We learned Jesus himself, and his new way of life. Yes, there is doctrine we need to know and moral direction we should follow, but the heart of it is knowing Jesus. It is experiencing his goodness, forgiveness, love and power.

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, the late Dallas Willard wrote, "I am learning from Jesus to live my life as he would live my life if he were I. I am not necessarily learning to do everything he did, but I am learning how to do everything I do in the manner that he did all that he did...I am learning from Jesus how to lead my life, my whole life, my real life."

George Mueller was a believer who lived in the 19th century and led a remarkable life, one of incredible service, faith, power and answers to prayer. When he was 90 years old he gave a speech to an audience of pastors and Christian workers. In it he said there was a point when he truly gave up his life to Christ. He said after that he realized his love for money, prominence, position, power and worldly pleasure was gone. In other words, he quit being driven by deceitful desires. God alone became the focus of his life, the driving factor in everything. He said that at that point he found that in God he had everything he needed and he desired nothing else. In the speech he made this statement. “By God’s grace, my understanding of his sufficiency has remained to this day, making me an exceedingly happy man.” He put on the new life, and the result was that he led a powerful life, but also an exceedingly happy one.

APPLICATION

REMEMBER YOU HAVE NEW CLOTHES

When you asked Jesus to be Lord of your life you took off that old set of clothes. You turned away from the old way of living that was run by your own desires. Yes, you slip back into old habits. But that’s not the core of who you are. In the deepest part of your being you are a person who is loved by God, who is forgiven and completely accepted because of grace and for no other reason. You have nothing to prove, nothing to earn. You are free of the guilt and the failure of trying to deserve something before God or anyone else. That was all a part of the old life, and it is over.

At your core, you have a new life, one that is alive to God, that is according to him, driven by him, by the desire to be like him, to follow in his footsteps. At your core you are a person with the life of Jesus inside you. You are a person who still has desires but sees them for what they are. You are not owned and controlled by those desires, but by the desire to know God better, to serve him and bring him honor in everything you do. You need to understand this is who you are now. These are the clothes you have on, and they are glorious. They truly are what to wear.

RECOGNIZE WE GROW INTO OUR NEW CLOTHES

One of the problems of buying clothes for our grandchildren is that if we buy them something that fits them today, in six months it won’t fit anymore. You have to buy things that they can grow into. That’s a bit like us. We are growing into this new life, and we need to remember that. We are not all George Muellers from day one. In his book, *In A Pit With A Lion On A Snowy Day*, Mark Batterson wrote, “think of spiritual maturity as a continuum. On one side is God consciousness and on the other side is self consciousness. To become more like Christ is to become less self conscious and more God conscious.”

Self consciousness is awful. Do you like feeling self conscious? One Sunday morning before church I went to the restroom. I was in a bit of a rush because it was getting near time for church to start. After I finished my business I washed my hands, and in my haste I managed to splash water on the front of my pants. Oh no! That did not look good at all. I could envision people seeing me coming out of the restroom and thinking, “Wow, I didn’t realize Rick was so old he is having *that* kind of problem! Maybe he should get some Depends.” Worse, I feared I was going to have to stand up in front of everyone looking like that. Man, did that make me self conscious, and it felt awful. Being self conscious makes us want to hide, to cover up. It does not make us free and joyful. It does not make us exceedingly happy people. In fact, it makes us miserable. The more focused on self we are, the more miserable we will be. We will push others away from us, we will foul our relationships, and we will never be happy because we will never have enough of whatever we want.

But Mueller’s experience reminds us that God consciousness brings us love, freedom, acceptance, courage, hope and strength. It will lead us into his sufficiency. We will have enough. We will become the kind of exceedingly happy persons that he was.

Our daughter in law, Anna, is an outgoing person who knows tons of people. She was actually in radio for several years, but oddly, doesn’t relish being the center of attention of a large group of people. It makes her self conscious. At Toby and Anna’s wedding there were a lot of people, about 300. There came a moment when it was time for her, the bride, to walk down the aisle and all 300 of them stood and turned to look...at her. She had that classic deer in the headlights look on her face. She turned pale, and I was afraid that she was going to pass out. I’m not sure I’ve ever had a bride come down the aisle looking more uncomfortable than her. I was concerned with how she was going to get through the whole ceremony. But an interesting thing happened. When she got up to the front and was able to look at Toby, the man she loved, all that disappeared. She got a huge smile on her face, and from that point on she was happy, comfortable and excited, having forgotten about all those people. She was happy because she was marrying Toby, and that was all that mattered. By looking at him, being conscious of him, she lost her self consciousness and the misery that went with it. And that is what happens to us when we become more God conscious and less self conscious. Self consciousness is the old clothes, God consciousness is the new clothes.