



Two Schools, Two Uniforms

Ephesians 4:17-24

Grace Church | 1.9.22

For the next couple of weeks, including last week's time in the first part of Ephesians 4, we will be examining in detail what it means to *walk worthy* of the calling that we have received. After the massive, eternity stretching, mind bending, theological and spiritual realities that the apostle Paul outlines in Ephesians 1-3, he turns now to the ethical implications. We saw last week how those implications should be grounded in true unity, and a desire for ministry that is inclusive of every member of the body, a ministry that is carried out by the saints and the congregation, not just the leaders, but a ministry that is supported by and spurred on by the word of God given from the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Remember that word speaks to us of Christ, so it is Christ whom we are growing into, and a mature church that is worthy of the calling of heaven and all the mysteries of Christ, is one that is being built together to look like Christ and display Christ to one another.

So moving forward, Paul will begin to get very practical. The expansive theological realities of Ephesians 1-3 actually have incredibly specific and intentional everyday implications. For example, Ephesians will say something like "God has blessed us in Christ with all the blessings of the heavenly places" or pray that we may be filled with "all the fullness of God", and the implications of that great reality is simply "not let the sun go down on your anger" or "to do honest work with your own hands." The implications of metaphysical jaw-dropping realities is not simply that nations and kings bow and oceans reroute their courses. Those are implications, but again and again in Scripture, we find God linking what is high and holy and mysterious to what is normal, menial, and simple. The whole point of God uniting all things in heaven and Earth in Christ, the whole point of adoption and election and redemption and otherwise, is not that he would fix the world, cure cancer, bring political peace, and global warming, feed hungry orphans, or end global pandemics and wars. He will do all that. But God's primary plan, as we saw at the end of chapter 2, is to make a people, and the primary identifier of those people is that they are holy. They have to be holy, if they are to be the place where God dwells, his unified Temple. So to put it another way, the very son of God is Born into the world and redeems the world not just to unite all things in heaven and earth, but also so you can put away falsehood and speak truth with your neighbor.

We cannot forget that God is just as much a God of mystery and transcendence as he is a God of relationship. As Francis Schaeffer always put it: he is the God who is *there*. He is not just concerned with the state of your eternity, he is concerned with the state of your reality. He wants you to not only be full of hope for what is to come, but full of holiness for what is now.



And so that is the topic of the next few weeks. I'm going to call it: "Getting used to a new self". Here is the main idea for the next few weeks: **in Christ, God has freed you from your old futility, clothed you in true holiness, and is teaching you how to get used to it.**

So today, we can call this part 1. We will tackle that first idea head on, about your old futility and being clothed in holiness. Then we will introduce the school of Christ where you learn to get used to it. Then next week pastor Buck will give us some of the lessons of that school. Here is what I will do: I believe this text introduces two ways of living as if enrolling in two schools: first, the school of futility. Then, the school of Christ. That's it: two ways of thinking and doing. So we will examine both in turn, and then ask: "how do I move from one school to the other?"

The School of Futility (17-19).

I call this first description the "school" of futility, because of how Paul describes the progression of our past life or former self. The purpose of a good school is not just to form minds, but to form actions, as well. And both the school of futility and the school of Christ have actions as their end. But they also form the mind, knowledge. This is why Paul says futility is "of the mind". Both schools also start with the heart. So it kind of goes this way: "heart, mind, action."

Heart	Mind	Action
Hardness/Deadness – Darkness – Futility – Immorality/Impurity		

In **verse 17**. Paul again starts authoritatively. Last week he urged us to walk worthy of our calling, this week he *testifies*, which means a decree or a declaration. Usually that word *testify* is meant to give force. The text is saying: here is a given, a non-optional reality: you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. Non-negotiable. What is the gentile walk? It's not cultural—Paul is writing to many Gentiles here, already affirming their palace in the family of God. The gentile walk is not categorized by ethnicity but by futility.

Futility, however, has a beginning. It starts, says the text, with hardness of heart, **verse 18**. This word has the connotation of *petrification*, which if you forgot what you learned in geology class, it's when something organic, like say a plank of wood, is exposed to specific minerals that it is not used to, like being submerged in water for a long time. Slowly it becomes stone-like, hardened, marbled. When your heart is hardened, it means that the sin and lies of Satan have seeped in and fossilized what should be warm and soft and tender towards God into a stony, rocky stump. Your heart, the seat of your emotions, your very being, doesn't even care to think anymore about the things of God. You just stop feeling. Your sin is not acknowledged, not confronted, and it sets up shop. Such is all of our life before Christ. Remember **2:1** you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked?

Eventually this then brings about Darkness, which is marked by *not knowing or acknowledging* God. or as "ignorance" in **verse 18**. No matter how intellectually enlightened you may be, your mind is



dark. Think of it this way: we try to solve our hopelessness and hardness with intellectual stimulation. We offer explanations for existence, for the universe, for life—but behind all of these explanations there is no true purpose. We hear things like: “the goal of life is to be happy” or to “be true to yourself”. But what is the *end* of these things? If God is not at the end of our happiness, if the true light of the world is not there, it will only eventually be darkness. This is how Paul viewed the Gentiles, particularly the Greeks and Romans. When in Athens, Paul encountered their statue to “the unknown God”. They had moved beyond idols, beyond paganism, true post-moderns! Their devotion was not to the idolatry of myths, but to the idolatry of uncertainty, of mystery! But what was beyond their paganism? Darkness—the unknown god. Ignorance is the right way to describe living your life as if God does not exist. But of course that is how you live, when you have hardened your heart towards him. And so we all live apart from God—in darkness and ignorance.

All of this is describing and contributing to futility of the mind, Paul says, is how we all used to walk. Futility is another way of describing hopelessness. This is the kind of futility that Ephesians 1-3 addresses. It's a futility that may feel purposeful in the moment, but has no real end. Remember back in Ephesians 1, where the text says that God has *predestined* us in Christ? That's the solution for hopeless futility—that we would have a destiny, an ultimate purpose, a destination. This is why Paul prays in **1:18** that we would know the *hope* of our calling. You can accomplish many things in life, but without a destiny, your life is futile. No destiny, no hope. Futility is what happens when everything we are doing is entirely meaningless. Nothing works. I once heard a story about a group of concentration camp survivors who said that right before they were liberated, their captors changed their routine. Instead of working to build new buildings or maintain the camp, they were forced everyday to move large boulders and debris back and forth. One day, they would move them several hundred yards away. The next day, they would move it back. Again and again and again. The futility drove some of them to suicide or insanity.¹ Living in sin is like banging your head against the wall. This is the way of life without Christ—you may seem to be working hard in the moment, but because you have no eternal destiny, purpose is fleeting. Like Ecclesiastes says, life is a vapor, like chasing after the wind.

So what are we to do in a vaporless, futile state? Here is the option most opt for: giving up. See **verse 19**. The giving up is marked by sensuality and greediness for impurity. Now, I think that can happen in two ways. One way is to admit you are giving up, and to drop into whatever makes you feel better—drugs, alcohol, sex, porn, binge watching, academic achievement —you get greedy for ways to numb and cope with futility. You look for “escape”. But the other way may be more common for many. It's to become greedy for the impurity and sensuality of pleasure not as an escape, but as an end. So you avoid drugs or drunkenness or pornography, but only so that you can receive success, self-confidence, wealth, fame, and comfort. It is just as futile to slack off and smoke weed as to go to work to build your own kingdom. It is just as impure to sleep around as it is to put on a false image to attract a sexy partner. It's just as impure to chase physical comfort as it is to chase a high. Both are ways to escape futility: one is through giving up to base sensuality, one is

¹ I'm not sure where I heard this story. If it's not true, count it as a metaphor.



by rejecting base sensuality to chase more respectable sensuality. All of it is greedy impurity, because impurity is the uniform of the school of futility.

So what is going on here? It's a certain kind of school, it's one option for living. It's the school of futility. Whenever you see someone wearing the uniform, the clothes of greed for impurity, you know: they are learning and enrolled in an exercise in futility. And what we have to acknowledge today is that it is not an option for Christians. You must no longer learn from this school. You must put off this school's uniform and take up another.

The School of Christ (20-24).

Heart	Mind	Action
Newness	— Knowledge of God	— Renewal — Holiness

Now, let me be clear the emphasis in the text today is not yet on describing in detail the school of Christ (that comes later). Rather, the emphasis is on *not walking* in the school of futility. But let's compare the two. First though notice the language of learning in **verse 20**, this is not how we learned Christ, and in **verse 21**, this is not what we heard and were taught in him.

So the idea is that there is a catechis, a school of Christ. And it starts with a newness of heart. Look how we are taught: not about him, but *in him*, **verse 21**. Remember then the truth of Ephesians: we are made alive, made new, in Christ. Previously we were dead in sin, hard of heart, but he has made us in him soft towards God. And then, instead of darkness of mind and ignorance, what does a new heart lead to? Again **verse 21**, to the "truth in Jesus", to learning Christ and knowing Christ. Jesus said: "whoever has seen me has seen the Father". The opposite of darkness of mind is knowledge of God, and if we are in Christ, we have knowledge of God. Instead of worshipping the "unknown" of classical Athens or the "unknown" of post-modern agnosticism, we worship the true and living God of the universe! What a school this is: here in this school is true knowledge, true wisdom, true truth. God, the "why" and "what" and "how" behind all things, is not just assumed, but named and known in Jesus. Again, as Francis Scafeffer used to say, not only is God the God who is there, he is the God who is there and he is not silent. He is not unknown, and so all knowing finds it's end in him.

What is the result of knowledge of God? **Verse 23**, in the school of Christ we have renewal in the spirit of our minds. The opposite of futility is *renewal*. What is renewal? It's the constant bubbling up of life towards a great and glorious end. In 2 Corinthians 4, as Paul speaks of the weakness of our bodies, he says that our dependence on God is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory. In other words: though all around us the physical world might be "fleeting, like chasing after wind", in the school of Christ, everything has a purpose. Every single moment, every single menial passing of time and ache of your body is a purposeful preparation for an avalanche of glory to come. So what kind of disposition do we have, when we learn in the school of Christ? Our hearts are strong, says 2 Corinthians 4:16;



So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

Renewal is like a constant fountain of hope. And here is how it works: we are renewed in the spirit of our minds, literally in our thoughts. We take every thought captive to obey Christ, and slowly but surely our very thoughts, our very minds, everything about us is renewed, day by day, drop by drop, until we inherit eternity of blessing, until heaven reaches earth totally, until the weight of glory crushes all the dim drab of sin.

That's renewal: the hope that every day we are moving upward, that our future is bright, that every single nanosecond of the Christian life has meaning and momentum. That is the opposite of futility, and it's life-changing. Suddenly, though the world is passing away, we are growing brighter day by day. The world becomes charged with joy, our meals are tastier, the sunsets are more beautiful. Breaking free from futility and embracing true renewal in the gospel is like moving from eating sand to eating steak.

And what happens when our minds are renewed? Well it's very simple. Instead of being greedy for sensuality, for impurity, we stop settling for second best. Why eat the sand of futility when you can have the steak of purity? The robes of the school of futility may seem appealing, but in reality they are rags in comparison to what we are clothed in the school of Christ. Why? Look at **verse 24**. What is the description of the new self? In the school of futility, we are given impurity to wear, the result of our own sin. But in the school of Christ, Christ clothes us with himself! We become created, as we were always meant to be, after the likeness of God. What could be more pure than that! What could be more rich than that? You were created to be royalty—clothed in Christ and seated with Christ at the right hand of God, in true righteousness and holiness—why settle for impurity, why settle for porn or drugs or pride or love of money or worldly success?

These two schools of living could not be more different. One is purposeless, hopeless, darkened, futile, and worthless. The other is marked by new life, intimacy with the divine, constant renewal of hope, and holy enjoyment of all the blessings of God. No one Paul can say in **verse 17**: you must no longer walk in the school of futility. It's laughable. Why would we not, as we read in **verse 22** "put off the old self", and **verse 24** "put on the new self"?

But the reality is, we love to settle. We often *are* greedy for impurity, we often *do* trade the joy of holiness for the filth of impurity, we often are, as C.S. Lewis famously has said: "too easily pleased". We are so often informant to the joys of holiness, choosing "sex and ambition when infite joy is offered us like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea."²

² C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*



So how do we do it? How do we take off the old and put on the new, how do we trade impurity for righteousness? Here is where I could end this sermon with a drastic misstep. I could say: the way you put off the old self is to simply stop doing bad things. Stop being impure, and start being pure. But that would be legalism, if I said that the way to holiness is simply to stop sinning and start acting better. You would leave today, not crushed by the weight of glory, but by the weight of self-expectation and self-motivation.

So let's look at how Paul says to "put off" your old self. Something else is going on here other than "do better". The curious thing is that this phrase "put off" is rightly read in it's tense as "have put off". The foundation of right living is not that you trade the uniform of impurity for the uniform of holiness. The foundation of right living is that you already have traded the uniform, you have put off the old self! The gospel is that Christ climbed the long steps up to the place of the skull to be nailed to a wooden cross, willingly walking into impurity and darkness and an exercise in futility, so that your impurity and your darkness and your futility could die up there with him! The gospel is that by the life, death and resurrection of Jesu Christ, you no longer have a hard heart, but if you repent of sin and trust in faith, you are been enrolled in the school of Christ. Not because of your GPA or your lineage, but because of Christ's perfect score and his family line! The gospel is that by no merit of your own, God has brought you into his school to learn from his very son and clothe you with his own righteousness as your uniform.

So what gives? How do we put on righteousness? Not by trying harder to be nice—but by submitting ourselves to the school of Christ. Christianity isn't about making people nice, it's about making people new.³ We put on the new self by going back and remembering that we've made new, and now we have the opportunity and the privilege, day by day to learn Jesus. Putting on the old self is not about striving to be better, it's about striving to know God, love God, and enjoy God in Jesus. It's about savoring the gospel, about waking up and praying that you would be renewed day by day. It requires work and effort, but not that you would change your clothes, but that you would learn to live in them.

The Emperor Has No Clothes

Let me end with an example. You no doubt have all heard the story about "The Emperor's New Clothes". It's a folktale by Hans Christian Anderson, which tells the story of a foolish and self-absorbed emperor who loves spending money on clothes. He is tricked by some travelling merchants who convince him that for an absorbent price they can make him new clothes, better than any others. When they finally bring the clothes to the emperor, they bring nothing at all. The emperor is so consumed with having the best clothes that he pays to be dressed in nothing. He then flaunts his new clothes, which is really just his nakedness, and nearly all of his subjects play along, afraid to upset him or appear stupid, uncultured, or foolish themselves. Finally, a small boy

³ I heard this in a sermon by Tim Keller called "The New Self".
<https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/the-new-self-6154/>



blurts out the emperor's folly, but it doesn't stop the emperor continuing his naked march through the streets.

Now, I'm not attempting to add meaning here. The moral story is an example of many things. But I find it fascinating how it can illustrate for us the picture of futility. The emperor is hard of heart, stubborn and proud. He refuses to admit to anyone that he may not be as fashionable as he presumes. That hardness is what causes darkness, where he is ignorant and foolish. He assumes he is wise and cultured, but he is silly enough to walk around the streets naked. So ultimately, his exercise in flaunting his nakedness is futile: it accomplishes nothing. No work of beautiful clothes can be admired, his money goes nowhere, all of it is pointless. And in the end, it simply showcases his impurity, his lust for sensuality, for fine things and for all eyes to be on him. The school of futility is like the emperor with no clothes. But like the people who watch him, we are easily fooled too. We don't want to be out of step with what is popular, we don't want to be seen as a fraud, we don't want to admit we've been swindled. So we go along with impurity, with futility, with sin.

What does it take then, to no longer approve of the emperor's new clothes? What does it take to no longer walk in futility and impurity? It's not by greater moral effort. It's just the faith, like a child, to step up in courage and say: "the emperor has no clothes!" It's the faith to say to ourselves and others: "sin is futile! It's not worth it, it's empty, it's naked, it's false." We don't have to have the skill and moral uprightness to make for ourselves new, beautiful clothes: those are already offered to us in Christ's righteousness, they already adorn our backs! All that we need is faith, as small as a mustard seed, as innocent as a child, to recognize the counterfeit from the real. How do we put on the new self? We stop following the deceitful desires of the emperor with no clothes, and we start trusting the real emperor who is clothed in beauty like no other.

In Christ, God has freed you from your old futility, clothed you in true holiness, and is teaching you how to get used to it. Trust him, learn to get used to his clothes, and you will grow in holiness in order to see the Lord.

