

Introduction

Good morning, brothers and sisters.

My name is Kyle Rodriguez, I'm one of the pastors here at Union Church. It's my joy to get to open up the word with you this morning, so would you please—if you haven't already—turn in your Bibles to Ephesians 4:17. We're already heard Lois read this passage, but I want you to have your Bibles open as we work our way through this deep and rich Biblical text this morning.

But, before we begin, this morning, let's pray once more.

Prayer of Illumination

Identity Crisis

Every culture throughout history has different places of contention or conflict with Christianity—areas where the values and worldview of the majority culture press against and are in tension with the values and assumptions of Christianity.

They are often easy to see in hindsight, but sometimes very difficult to see in the moment, because the air we breathe is the culture's air. The vocabulary we use is the world's vocabulary.

And I think one of the most significant points of contention that our current culture and world have with Christianity—and I think this will bear out even more in hindsight in 30 years—is how we think about the self, how we think about identity.

You see, the world thinks about identity in a way that Charles Taylor, one of the most insightful philosophers of the last century, termed "expressive individualism". There are quite a lot of factors that go into our culture's understanding of identity, but one simple way to describe it would be that we individually find "our meaning by giving expression to our own feelings and desires."¹ In other words, the world conceives of identity and self as something that is fundamentally a looking in and then creating. Looking inside oneself to figure out what our strongest feelings and desires are and then creating, building an external identity that expresses those desires. Inward discovery, outward creation (expression).

Now, of course, this is easy to map this kind of thinking on identity and self onto the rise of LGBTQ acceptance and even promotion. In a society that thinks of the self and identity through this lens, where one's strongest inner desires and feelings are what is most authentically true about themselves, what is our core identity, of course it makes sense that to reject someone's sexual preference would be paramount to rejecting their entire personhood, their identity. Of

¹ Carl Trueman summarizing Taylor in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Crossway, 2020), p. 46. See Trueman's work there or (in a more abbreviated, accessible fashion) in *Strange New World* (Crossway, 2022) for a brilliantly on-target history of how Western culture came to think this way about the self and the side effects it has wrought.

course it makes sense that to fail to affirm someone's feelings of gender confusion is to fail to affirm their very self, a failure to love "who they are."

And it's not just areas of sex and gender. Think about the mundane ways that our culture promotes this view of identity. The messaging in kids movies for decades was that the most fundamental way to personal success and fulfillment comes from "following their heart." That they could "be whoever they want to be." Think about the way that our social media profiles work, they are this concept of self put into practice—a façade we create that shows the world what we most love and long for, who we are.

And of course, that's not say that there are no good things that result from that way of thinking: It is generally a good thing to encourage kids to creatively dream about their future. It is a good thing to have spaces and language that we can use to communicate our desires and longings to one another.

But the conflict for Christians comes when this becomes the all-encompassing way to think about identity. Because the Bible doesn't think of identity like this.

Christianity says that our identity is fundamentally determined not by looking inward, but looking upward.²

In the Christian story, human identity is fundamentally determined by our relationship with God—our creator who created us with purpose and meaning. But through sin, we have rejected that meaning, we've taken on our own identity. And try as hard as we might to create a unique, individual identity that is solely ours, the Bible says; if we've rejected God, then our identity is fundamentally one of rebellion, of sin, of death. And every person who has ever lived at one time or another, has embraced that identity. It might look different from person to person, the sin, rebellion, and death will take on different flavors, but it's all largely the same substance—a rebel, addicted to sin, destined for death.

And that identity is where Paul starts this passage.

1. The Old Self is a completely futile life.

Paul starts out by saying: "You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds."

Now, when Paul says, "as the Gentiles do," He's referring to the Ephesians' "old self", their old identity as people far off from God, people who were fundamentally rebellious, sinful people. Even though these people are still culturally and ethnically Gentiles (Paul talks elsewhere about how the Gentile people did not need to become culturally Jewish when they were saved), their fundamental identity has shifted from someone who is far off from God to someone who is a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

² See Trevin Wax on this concept of "Looking Up" rather than "Looking In" in his book *Rethink Your Self* (B&H Publishing, 2020).

But before he paints a picture of this new identity, Paul spends a few minutes showing how ugly the Old Self was—how futile, impotent, powerless it was to be a meaningful identity in any way.

First, Paul says that the old self is *rationally blind*. The old self walks—goes through life—in the “futility of its mind” (v. 17). The old self is “darkened in its understanding” and alienated from God because of the “ignorance” that is within them.

The Old Self is futile first because it cannot see. Without Christ, humanity is blind to truth. The Old Self cannot understand what is truly good in this world, and all the wisdom that the world may seem to have is ultimately powerless to affect meaningful good.

This is what Paul describes elsewhere as people who are “always learning, but never arrive at a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7). The greatest wisdom of the world may seem to get some of the little things right, but it does not know God (1 Cor. 1:21) and is thus, useless.

Second, Paul goes on to say that the old self is *relationally alienated*. That’s the word Paul uses, there in verse 18: “alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them.” So, because humanity is foolish, darkened in its understanding, they don’t “know God” and because they don’t know him, they don’t comprehend him, they are alienated from his life, from his presence, from his power.

Third, Paul says that the old self is *morally corrupt*. They have a “hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”

It’s important to note here that to be morally corrupt is not merely to act in an immoral way. Do you see the depth at which these people that Paul is describing are corrupted? It goes down to the very core of their being. Their hearts are hard, callous to evil. They are the people that the prophet Isaiah describes as “those who call evil good and good evil” (Is. 5:20). But they don’t call evil good and good evil simply because of an intellectual ignorance. Rather, their cognitive futility, the failure to understand real good and real morality, combined with being alienated from the life of God—who is the source of all good—has made it so they love evil. They don’t merely have a misunderstanding in their head, they have corrupted desires in their heart.

This is what Jesus is talking about in John 3 when he said: “the light (himself) has come into the world, and the people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.”

It’s what Proverbs 2 (v. 14) describes as people who “rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil.”

The Old Self is rationally blind, relationally alienated, and morally corrupted. And each of us have been caught up in that identity.

2. The New Self is a completely redeemed life.

But the good news is that this is an “Old” Self. Because Christianity is all about an identity shift.

The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news of Christianity is that God the Father, seeing humanity trapped in a futile, powerless life of ignorance, alienation, and decay, seeing them embracing a distorted, ugly identity, sent his Son to earth to live out humanity’s original identity as children of God, his true image-bearer, perfectly living out God’s character and law. Not only did Jesus live out the intended identity of humanity, but then he willingly submitted himself to death on a cross for his sinful, broken people, taking on all the guilt and shame and wrath that they had stored up in their rebellion, and then rose from the dead after three days to declare victory over sin and death.

And through that work of Jesus Christ, God made a way for his people to shed the ugly, distorted identity of sin and death and take on a new identity: One of the perfect life and love and holiness of God. As Paul said earlier in Ephesians: “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19).

There has been an irreversible, radical, miraculous, unimaginable identity shift: From rebellious sinners to redeemed saints. From dead corpses to vibrant image-bearers of God Almighty. From strangers to citizens. From a purposeless, futile life to one of meaning and hope. That’s the Christian story of identity.

And here in Ephesians 4, Paul describes this new identity as one that completely flips upside down the limitations of the Old Self. The worst things about your old self have been completely redeemed.

The New Self, Paul says, is *rationaly enlightened*.

Look at how Paul describes the starting point for the New Self in verse 20: “learning Christ.” Receiving your new identity started with hearing about the gospel, being taught the truth of Jesus Christ. Paul goes on to say that to take off the old identity and be given a new one is to be “renewed in the spirit of your mind.” A Christian’s new identity is one in which the mind is equipped by the Holy Spirit to see and understand truth in its full glory. It’s one of the miracles of the gospel that the rationally blind can become enlightened to the beauty of real, honest truth.

But the New Self is also *relationally embraced*. Instead of being alienated from God, one who puts their faith in Christ is actually drawn in to the very life of God—and created after his likeness. We are united to the Son, reconciled with the Father, and then given his Spirit to reflect him in the world.

We have a vibrant, living relationship with the God of the universe—communion with him—through Jesus Christ. No longer relationally alienated, but drawn into the very life of God.

And the New Self is also *morally renewed*. The corruption of our moral compass in our Old Self is completely reversed in the New Self. Rather than being slaves to our deceitful desires, we have been enlightened to the truth in Christ and drawn into the life of God in power—so that we no longer are callous to evil, but sensitive to it.

We are created after the likeness of God in “true righteousness and holiness.” As we come to know God more and more, our sensitivity to sin and evil heightens. Our hearts soften. Our desires change. No longer can we watch the same movies we once did, move on from the same sins as we once did, or celebrate evil as we once did.

The purity of God in holiness and righteousness has become ours, we no longer practice nor love every kind of impurity, sensuality, or greed. Instead of loving the darkness, we cling to the light, because we love it.

The New Self is rationally enlightened, relationally embraced, and morally renewed.

The New Self is nothing less than the person of Jesus.

“You learned Christ,” “heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus,” Paul says. Christ became to us the “wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:30), “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).

“Created after the likeness of God,” Paul says. Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb. 1:3) Those who have seen the Son have seen the Father (John 14:9).

“Created in true righteousness and holiness,” Paul says. Jesus was “the Holy and Righteous one,” Peter said in his second sermon in Acts 3, and it is in him we become the “righteousness of God,” Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21.

The transformation from Old Identity to New Identity is to be transformed into a picture of Jesus. When Paul says: “put off the Old Self and put on the New Self”, he is saying: Put on Christ! The Old is gone, the New has come. The Old, futile identity has been crucified with Christ, it is no longer you who live, but it is Christ who now lives in you. New Identity: Son of God, Daughter of God.

3. We must put on—or act out—the New in place of the Old.

So, having established that, that there is an Old Self—an identity that every human being apart from Christ falls into—and it’s a futile existence. But for Christians, those who are united to him by faith have been given a New Self—a new identity that is completely redeemed.

And so, Paul says, the work of the Christian—this is one way to summarize the entire Christian life—the work of the Christian is the put off the Old Self and put on the New Self. That is to say, Christians are called to seek to align their external living with an internal reality that might not always feel real, but that is real.

Again, this is the difference between the Christian understanding of their identity and the world’s. The World says, look inward to figure out your deepest desires—that’s who you really

are. But Jesus says look upward, look to me, to see who you really are. I am the standard of your new identity, not some fleeting desires you might have one day and be gone the next. And then, rather than construct a life that you think expresses your deepest desires, conform your life to mine.

Instead of looking inward to our feelings and then building a life that expresses them—a life that has to be constantly torn down and rebuilt again—we look upward to Christ and conform to him.

Now, the rest of our passage this morning, verses 25-32, lay out some specific ways in which that conforming work happens, that “working out” of our identity happens, in some very specific application. I’m not going to try and parse every single application that Paul gives here in these verses, I’ll let you and the Holy Spirit work out exactly which of these you need right now—which areas your life looks more like the Old Self than the New.

But, I want to offer you a few overarching observations that may be helpful. Five characteristics of the work of Putting off the Old and Putting on the New that may guide us in this work.

1. *This work is revealing who we really are, not putting a mask of who we wish to be.*

Friends, once you put your trust in Jesus, and receive the grace of God through him, your new identity kicks in. Your spiritual passport now has “Citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven” stamped on it. You are just as much a child of God as Jesus Christ.

And so, this work of “acting” like Jesus—is not putting on a mask.

Later today, we’re going to have a Trunk or Treat. Kids are going to get dressed up in their costumes. They’re going to put on a mask, or princess dress, or a jersey of some kind, and for two hours, those kids will act, pretend, as if they are Batman, or Elsa, or Steph Curry. But deep down, they know, you know, I know, that is not who they really are. No matter how elaborate their costume is, no matter how consistently they talk in the right voice or have the right props, their identity doesn’t fundamentally change—and eventually the façade drops.

And sometimes we think about the Christian life in a similar way. We think that we just have to put the right costume on, we’ll the right things, the things that Christians are supposed to do, we’ll try to act like Jesus, but we don’t really feel it. We know that deep down, we’re broken, and we’re not like Jesus. But we kind of think, maybe if just act like it, eventually I’ll become the person I want to be.

But friends, that is not how Paul talks about “putting on” Christ. The work of putting on Christ is not a gradual transformation into somebody you’re not, and it’s not putting on a mask to cover up the “real you.” God has given you a new identity in Christ, this is who you really are. Don’t let the world, don’t let Satan, and don’t let your weak body of flesh lie to you! When you act like Jesus, you’re not putting on a mask, you’re knocking off the layer of rust and filth that the old you left and revealing the glorious “real you” in Christ.

So, even when you don't "feel" holy and righteous, even when you don't "feel" like a child of God, you're still called to try to imitate the Son of God because that's who you really are. Your feelings will lie, the world will lie, people will lie, but the Lord God does not lie. He has declared you a new creation.

2. *The Old and the New Self cannot co-exist—one of them has to die.*

It's not a coincidence that Paul, in many of these exhortations to action in verses 25-32, matches a negative command (a "put off" the Old Self) with a positive (a "put on" the New).

Put away falsehood, speak the truth (v. 25)

No longer steal, do honest work (v. 28)

No corrupting talk, build another up (v. 29)

Put away bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander and malice, be kind to one another, tenderhearted

I don't think it is a coincidence that the "put off the Old" command is paired with the "put on the New." Because the New Self and the Old Self cannot co-exist. It's like Jesus said about having two masters, you cannot serve both God and money, you will love one and hate the other (Matt. 6:24). And the same is true of your identity.

You cannot claim Christ as your identity and then act as if you are still an ignorant, alienated, corrupt Old Self. One identity will choke the other out. If you do not allow Christ to kill your sin, your sin will destroy you.

In other words, friends, there is no such thing as gospel conversion without gospel transformation. That's fairy tale. There is no such thing as somebody whose real identity is changed to a child of God, but whose lived expression of that identity never changes. Gospel conversion without gospel transformation is a figment of the imagination that only serves to trap us in complacency.

The new identity in Christ starts with a new understanding of reality, but then it leads to a transformed experience of relationship with God and—over time—renewed desires of holiness and righteousness. Faith leads to action. There is no such thing as justification without sanctification.

That doesn't mean that it happens all at once, it doesn't mean that we never sin (1 John 1:8). But it does mean that if you never produce any fruit of the Spirit, then the Spirit may not be at work.

If your heart is still hard toward sin, if you don't long to reflect God's holiness in the world, if you don't long for his presence regularly, if you don't grow to love his people more and more, then you have not learned Christ, you've just learned a pacifying religiosity.

If you've put your faith in Jesus, then by his power, put the Old Self to death, that the New may flourish.

3. *This work is supernatural work, with supernatural consequences.*

Paul says that for Christians, to fail to kill the Old Self is to give the Devil opportunity. Now, when Paul says this in verse 27, he's primarily talking about how letting anger take root gives the Devil opportunity, but it's true of any of these things that he's talking about.

Allowing the Old Self to linger on in your actions and attitudes and words, despite the fact that Christ has given you a new identity, is to give the Devil ammunition against you. The more you walk in the sin of your old self, the more he will use that sin to harden your heart, to desensitize you to other sins. He will use your sin to keep you from good and holy things, he will use your sin to keep you from the Word of God, to keep you from gathering with God's people. He will use your sin to cause you to doubt and despair, as you recognize the dissonance between what God calls his people to and what the fruit of your life is.

Do not be content to let even a smidgen of the Old Self stay alive, or Satan will use it to breed a whole host of sin in you.

The fight to put on Christ is spiritual warfare. By putting on Christ, by engaging in holiness, by seeking to conform your life to Jesus, you are advancing the front against Satan's work in the world. We'll talk more about this in a few weeks, when we get to Ephesians 6, but know now that unrepentant sin, living in the shadows and echoes of your old self, is simply storing up ammunition in the Devil's camp.

4. *The New Self is radically others-focused.*

Quickly, look at how much of the "New Self" that Paul commands us to here is centered around others:

- "Speak the truth to your neighbor, for we are members of one another" (25)
- Do "honest work with your own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need." (28)
- "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up... that it may give grace to those who hear." (29)
- "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit." (30)
- "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another." (32)

The New Self is radically others-focused. The Old Self is a fearful self, a self that worries about what will happen if they can't express and fulfill their desires. It's an identity that is completely self-consumed. But the New Self is one that is so secure in its identity as a child of God, a brother of Jesus, a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, that it is free to base its actions on how he or she might best serve another.

True charity, true selflessness, can only come from a secure identity—an identity that is ultimately not based on our feelings or desires, but the unchanging person of Christ.

5. *The New Self acts as an overflow from God's work.*

Just as we cannot truly focus on others if our identity is insecure, so we cannot truly serve God if it's not coming from the identity change. The identity change comes first, and only then, out of a grateful response to God and in an attempt to reflect his work back to him, can we do anything of value.

We forgive because God in Christ first forgave us. We seek to please the Spirit, rather than grieve him, because he's already sealed us for redemption. We seek to be more like Jesus, because that's who we really are, given a new identity by grace alone.