

## Putting On, Putting Off

by Ray C. Stedman

One way or another, put in their own way, Christians everywhere are asking the same question. They do not ask, "How can we be sure that when we die we will go to heaven?" Those who are newly introduced to Christian life are concerned in these areas, and quite properly so. But for the most part Christians are everywhere increasingly aware that there is far more to Christianity than a promise that when we die we will go to heaven. They are not even asking the question, "How can I know that the sins of my past are forgiven?" Again, this is an area of proper concern to those first entering the Christian faith. But the question I find Christians asking, arising from a deep concern evident almost everywhere, is this question: "If Jesus Christ can really live and love through me, then how do I let him do this? What is the process, what must I actually do, to have this happening in my life?"

I am greatly encouraged by the fact that question is being asked, for it reveals that Christians are getting away from the concept that Christianity is merely a way to escape hell and go to heaven some day. True as those facts are, they are not the essential issue in Christian faith. It is very encouraging to see Christians becoming aware at last of all the great provisions in Jesus Christ for living today, right now, that this is what he is primarily aiming at in our lives. Christianity is intended to change men to love differently in the midst of the kind of world in which we are now living. There is a hunger being created by the Spirit of God everywhere for this kind of life. There is a spreading discontent with mediocrity and it is a very welcome change. There is a dissatisfaction with the anemic, pallid, lukewarm, lusterless Christian living that so many have experienced for so long and which is disgusting both to men and to God. In the book of the Revelation the Lord Jesus puts it plainly to the

church at Laodicea. He says, "because you are lukewarm I will spew you out of my mouth," {cf, Rev 3:16 RSV}. That kind of Christianity is the reason for the restless movements of our day which challenge and charge the church with impotence and irrelevance.

Now Paul gives the answer to this basic Christian question in the fourth chapter of Ephesians. He has declared already that the place to begin living the Christian life is with a change of thought. We saw before, in Verses 17-20, that we must begin by having our mind changed. Our thought life must become different. We cannot go on thinking the same way we did before we were Christians. We cannot imitate or adopt the thinking of the non-Christian with regard to life in general, the thinking of the world. Paul showed us why. He traced the darkened, pointless thinking of the world and he bluntly terms it "ignorance."

Now that is a hard word to many to accept. There are those who ask, "How can you say this in the face of the intellectual achievements of men today? How can you deny the tremendous accomplishments of science in our day and age? How do you dare say this in a community which has more Nobel Prize winners and Pulitzer Prize winners per square inch than perhaps any other place on the earth? How can you say that the thinking of the world is ignorance? How can you set aside so easily the careful study and impeccable logic of the great thinkers of the world?" The answer, of course, is: "We are not attempting to deny logic or brilliance of intellect at all." These are very obvious in the world's thinking.

The aspect which the apostle is challenging is not the world's logic, but its premise, i.e., its underlying assumptions and goals, what it is aiming at, what it thinks will be accomplished by its present

thinking. Therefore, there must be a change in our thinking, for the thinking of the world is faulted, it is imperfect, shadowed, darkened with error.

Any of you who have learned the clever art of balancing a checkbook (I never have mastered it myself) know how one error can change the whole picture. You do not have to have a lot of errors in a checkbook, you need only one, one slight transposition in figures, one error in subtraction, and the rest of your addition can be absolutely faultless, perfectly logical, arithmetically correct all the way down the line – but it is all wrong. There is nothing quite as disheartening as to come to the end of a long column of figures and discover that you are three cents off and do not know where it is.

In that same way, error underlies the thinking of the world. There is much truth in the world's reasoning, there is a lot of logic. As we pointed out before, there is much genuine truth which the world has picked up through exposure to the truth of God through many centuries, but it is intermingled with error, and the problem is how to distinguish the true from the false – how to tell what is false. But the apostle is pointing out there is a fundamental error which has crept into human thinking which reveals itself in the basic assumptions with which people begin. It is here we must start in making changes in the Christian life. Christianity is a totally different way of life and therefore we must think differently.

Now, how do you do this? This is the question. Paul comes to grips with this question in Verses 22-24. In a very practical way he puts the answer before us, as he always does, first in a general statement that reveals the principle involved. This general statement is all we shall have time for now, but he goes on in the chapter to apply this principle to various situations, all practical applications of this basic, underlying principle. Now let us look at the principle itself.

**Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. {Eph 4:22-24 RSV}**

Now there it is. You cannot put it any plainer than that. Put off the old and put on the new. That is the principle by which the possibilities which are

in Christ can become evident in terms of our experience. It is by following this specific procedure of putting off the old and putting on the new. It only needs to be thought through carefully for us to understand exactly what this means.

Notice, first, there is a recognition of the pull of the old life on the Christian. There is the presence of the old nature recognized, this “old man” – as it is, literally, in the Greek. The admonition of the apostle is to be constantly recognizing and rejecting these false, underlying assumptions which come from the old man, the old life, the old way of living. It is not merely deeds, you will notice, but outlooks, attitudes. This is what causes the problem and this is what we must reject.

The Apostle Paul here uses a very helpful figure in these two phrases, “put off” and “put on.” *Put off* means to divest yourself of something, to take it off. When you go into your bedroom at night to get ready for bed you put off your clothes, you divest yourself of them, and lay them aside. If you have a soiled garment, you put it off and put on something new. He is using the very simplest of terms to illustrate what we must do in the realm of thought, of the attitudes of life. We must reject those basic assumptions which have caused our trouble, putting them off, rejecting them, divesting ourselves of them, just as you would put off your dirty clothes.

We must do this because, from these wrong attitudes, the corruption of life comes. He says the former manner of life is corrupt – decayed, dead, foul, selfish, unhappy, restless. These are the things which have made life unhappy or miserable. He points out we can recognize these attitudes by the way they operate. They are “deceitful lusts.” Unfortunately this word *lust* is greatly misunderstood in our day. We invariably associate it with something sexual. Lust is sex desire, that is the way we usually interpret it. But this word is much broader than that. It does not mean only sexual desire, although it does include that, but it means any urge or basic drive. We will get closer to the essential meaning of this word if we use the term *urge*. These *deceitful urges* are constantly coming to us as we react to various situations in which we find ourselves.

For instance there is the urge to fulfill yourself by indulging in an orgy of spending. That is one kind of urge he is describing here, the urge to make

yourself happy by owning things. Such an urge is deceitful, as the Word of God tells us, for man was never made to be satisfied with owning things. Yet who of us does not daily experience this kind of an urge? We flip through the pages of a magazine and see the beautiful gadgets and remarkable gimmicks that science has made available to us. We look at the drab, worn out gadgets and gimmicks in our house and we feel an urge, do we not? We want to go out and buy a color TV set. We cannot any longer be satisfied with that black and white set which once so enthralled us when we first got it. We simply must have a new car – the old one has gotten dusty! There is a continual exposure to this kind of urge, is there not?

You see how he is talking about life? These basic urges seem to promise much but never deliver. Therefore they are deceitful, they do not come through, they do not really satisfy. It is possible to live our lives, as many Christians do and as worldlings invariably do, trying continually to satisfy these urges which never satisfy.

I think in this connection of riding on the commuter train to San Francisco some years ago, and I saw a young woman sitting across the aisle from me chain-smoking. She lit one right after another all the way to the city, and finally she crumpled up the pack and threw it on the floor. I noticed that it was the brand that has written across the face of it “They Satisfy,” and I thought to myself, “I wonder how many it takes?” Thus, these are *deceitful urges*:

- There is the urge to use others for our own advantage. Did you ever feel the urge to manipulate others, to maneuver them in subtle, devious, cleverly hidden ways to get them to do what you want them to do for your advantage, with little concern for them? You do not have their interests at heart, but yours. Such an urge seems to offer us much. We think if we can be clever at this, or be unusually subtle, we can get people to do what we want, and then we will have the world at our fingertips – we can have whatever we want. But it does not happen. It is a deceitful urge.
- There is the urge to nag others into compliance with what we want. This is a different approach to the same thing. It is the urge to keep after them, pester them, picket them, surround

them, hound them, beat them, badger them into getting done what we want done. This is another way of satisfying the ego, ministering to the basic urge of life. It looks like it is going to make us happy because we are constantly feeling this basic urge to satisfy ourselves, to be an empire builder, king in our own dominion. But this is the basic lie, the deceitfulness of life, because it does not work. It never has worked, and it never will work.

- Perhaps the urge we feel is the urge to lie or cheat to get by, to gain an advantage. All these are basically urges to do the same thing, to satisfy that basic desire to be in the center of things, the center of attention, the focus of life around us.
- There is the urge to criticize what we do not understand, the urge to have our feelings hurt and indulge in self-pity, the urge to adopt a martyr attitude and feel humiliated at any failure on our part.
- There is the urge to be impatient with others, or the urge to be irritated when our opinion is not accepted, and the urge to defensiveness when our position is attacked.
- There is the urge to fight those who do not think as we do, to despise or to blame others.
- There is the holier-than-thou urge which makes us feel righteous, better, cleaner, more respectable than someone else.

These are the urges the apostle is talking about.

The Christian is to put off these things because he has discovered a secret. He still feels these as strongly as he did before he became a Christian. He feels them as strongly as the worldling does, but he has learned a secret: They are part of the old life, the old man, which was judged on the cross of Christ.

That is what the Lord’s Supper portrays. It is a pictorial reminder to us that in the cross of Jesus Christ God did an amazing thing. It is recorded for us in Second Corinthians 5:21, “He who knew no sin became sin for us.” He became our old life, our old egocentric life. Jesus became that on the cross.

If the Word of God did not tell us that we would never know it and we would never be able to understand anything of the depths of the mystery of the cross. Why this terrible judgment on this holy man? Why this awful darkness, why this terrible convulsion of nature? Why these impenetrable mysteries? It comes down to this basic thing, "he became sin for us." He was made to be what we are as born of Adam. When he became sin, he died, he was put to death. The sentence of death was executed upon him. It is God's eloquent way of saying to us that all these urges that arise out of the self life, the old man, are utterly valueless. They do not do anything for us, they are deceitful. They promise much, they deliver nothing.

Therefore, the first step in experiencing what God intends for us is to recognize that. Put off the old, divest yourself of it, lay it aside, refuse to accept it, no longer justify it or give it place in your life. That is the first step, but it is only half the picture. The other is to recognize, as Paul does, the wonderful possibilities of the new life, of the new man. He says (let me translate it a bit differently here) "being renewed, having been renewed in the spirit of your minds put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." In that phrase, "having been renewed in the spirit of your mind," you have the fundamental difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. It is true, or course, that non-Christians sometimes realize that things are wrong in their lives, that the attitudes they show are destructive, and there are things they are doing that are wrong, and so they change them. But they merely change to another expression of the same basic egocentricity. That is the problem. They change the outer form, but the problem remains basically the same. They manifest a different expression of the basic pride of life.

But the Christian, alone of all human beings (and I do not hesitate to say this because it is clearly the teaching of the Word of God from beginning to end), has the possibility of doing something entirely different, living on an entirely different principle, a different level, because he has been renewed in the spirit of his mind. That describes the regeneration of the life by the Spirit of God coming into the heart that believes in Jesus Christ. When we believe in Jesus Christ and receive him as our Lord, our Savior, we are renewed in the spirit of our mind. Our basic, fundamental life is changed. In Verse 22, the RSV translation says,

"put off your old nature." I reject that word, "your." It is not in the original. It is "put off *the* old nature." The point is, it is no longer yours. It is there, but it is no longer identified with you. Christ is your life now, a radical difference has come in. You are now identified with him. If you want to leave that word *your* in the passage itself, pick it up and move it out of Verse 22 and put it down in Verse 24, "put on *your* new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

There is the word of deliverance. The new man is in the likeness of God, it is the life of God, it is the image of Jesus Christ, it is his life lived in you. So put on that kind of life because it is available to you, it is yours. If you are a Christian, you have Christ already and these new urges to love, to patiently endure, to understand, to accept even difficult, hard people, to gently correct those who need correction, to be faithful in a difficult time, all these are part of the new nature. Notice how it is described as resulting in a true righteousness in contrast with the false, a pretense, a posture, a facade. But this is real, it is genuine, it is love unfeigned. It is not something put on the for moment, it is not a smile painted on the face with a hostile heart behind it, but it is a genuineness of heart, true righteousness, right behavior that is purposeful.

And, not only that, it is holy. Now there is a word we squirm at, *holiness*. We usually think of some pious Joe who looks like he has been soaked in embalming fluid. That is our picture of holiness. But let me use another word that is an accurate translation of this word – *wholeness*.

That means health of being, wholeness of personality, a whole man, as God intended man to be. Now, that results from the life of the Lord Jesus within. But the process to it is twofold: Put off, and put on. Our problem is that we are afraid to put off the old man, for fear we will be left with an empty husk of life. It never seems to dawn on us that the Holy Spirit is simply waiting for us to put these things off in order that he might rush in and fill us with the wholeness that is God's intention for man, the wholeness of Christ.

Putting off the old man is like squeezing the water out of a half-drowned man's lungs. You do not do that because you want his lungs to be empty, you do it because you want the air to get in so that he can live. What the Scripture reveals to us is that this old egocentric life of ours, this old man, the

self, has been asphyxiating, killing us. It has been cutting off the breath which we were designed to breathe. The only air we were designed to breathe is God. Yet we find such difficulty believing this and therefore we do not experience it. The whole matter comes down to an appeal to the will. Put off, put on. That is a choice you are asked to make whenever you recognize the deceitful urges that come from within – put off and put on. Reject the old and turn to the Lord within and say, “Thank you, Lord, for the fact that you in me are able to do through me and in me that which you have desired to do.” Put off the old, refuse to let the old nature manifest itself or to have any place, and then the new will be right there to take its place.

Now right here we meet with some timeworn, familiar excuses. Someone says, “Well, I’ve tried this, but it doesn’t work for me. It works for other people, I can see that. But I’ve tried it, and it doesn’t work.” Now that statement needs to be very carefully examined, for it is one of the subtle ways by which the flesh, the self-life, blames God for our failure. It is really saying that God is partial, he gives some people help but he will not give you help. He plays favorites. Some he lets in on the great secret, but for others, like you, he makes it so difficult and complicated that you cannot catch on to it. That is a lie. The truth is, you never really wanted it, at least not badly enough to do what the apostle says, to put off the old. You still try to cling to the pleasure of manifesting this ego-centric flesh. And as long as you cling to that, then of course you cannot put on God, you cannot put on the new life.

“Well, I do my best,” someone says, but from the results, it is not much better than your worst. Your best, you see, is still only refined flesh, the refined old man. That excuse is a way of justifying our unwillingness to give up, our reluctance to reject these ideas and really treat them as what God has labeled them in the cross, sinful, evil, wrong, but under the guise of at least making an effort in this direction. “Well, we tried.” But this is not an experimental matter, this is a process that is absolutely sure. There is no question about this, this is not subject to half-way results. This works. Put off, and you can put on. Put on, and you must have put off. There is no other way. These are utterly contradictory principles, but the choice is ours.

Yesterday, in Southern California, a man knocked on my door and asked to talk with me about a problem. He was a Christian man and his problem was this: He had gone into business with some other Christian men and the business, through circumstances that were not wholly his own fault, had failed and he had to go into bankruptcy. Now he was facing the urge within to accept the position that he had before the law and write off his debts and let his creditors suffer the loss. He was facing the urge to take advantage of that. All his friends were telling him it was the thing to do and even his wife agreed to this. But he was troubled. He wondered if he had the moral right, as a Christian, to do this and to ask his creditors to bear the loss. As we went over the Scriptures together it became clear that he did not have that right. The Word of God says, “Owe no man anything, but to love one another” {Rom 13:8 KJV}, and “Provide things honest in the sight of all men,” {Rom 12:17 KJV}. As he faced that he was confronted with a definite choice – to put off the urge to take the apparently easy way out at the price of the peace of God within the heart. As we talked, he made that choice. He said, “I see what I need to do. I will accept this obligation to pay back those men. Not one of them will lose a dime over this business. It will take me some time, but I am going to pay them back.” At that his face brightened and he looked at me and said, “What a load has been lifted from my life. I know this is going to be hard to do, and even my wife is not going to accept this, but already I have a sense of peace over this whole matter, and that’s worth it all.”

Now that is exactly it. The Christian is called to live on a different basis. When he does, he will discover there is an adequacy from God that sustains the inner life, that keeps him poised, adjusted, happy, whole, in the midst of the problems and pressures and demands that are made upon him. That is what Paul is talking about, and that is where we must live.

As we come to the table of the Lord, we are being reminded again, in God’s graphic way, that this is the basic principle of Christian living. We are cut off from the old life by the acceptance of the death of Jesus Christ as a valid experience for us, cut off from these false, egocentric philosophies of living. And we are exposed now to the manifestation of a quite different attitude of life, a quite different way of reacting to situations.

**Prayer:**

Father, grant to us now clarity of understanding of this great principle, as we gather about this table today. May it have new meaning for us. May we realize that this is not concerned only with making it possible for us to go to heaven when we die, but it is declaring something that

makes it possible to be free from the inner tensions, the nagging, plaguing, neuroses, the inner divisions and fightings and fears that plague us in our Christian life. Help us to be single-eyed, whole people, manifesting in our lives the fragrance, the love, the compassion, the understanding, the acceptance of Jesus Christ our Lord. We ask in his name, Amen.

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