

The Old Way Has to Go Ephesians 4:17-24

Many people like to say that Christianity is a religion of faith, while Eastern religions are about practice. There's some truth to that. How are we saved in Christianity? By faith. In Buddhism, how do you reach enlightenment or nirvana? Through awakening—and that takes discipline and practice. In Confucianism, how do you become a noble person? By constantly cultivating yourself, refining your character through self-discipline.

But here's the danger: if we over-simplify Christianity as just being about faith, we can end up living as if nothing in our lives needs to change. You hear people say, "I believe in Jesus, so I'm saved," and they go on living like nothing has to be different. This misunderstanding can create a gap between faith and real transformation.

Today, the Apostle Paul tells the Ephesians they must become new people. In verses 22-24, he says: "*to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*"

Paul is calling for more than just a shift in belief. He's talking about a total change in life and how we live—letting go of the old ways and becoming new people, living in the righteousness and holiness of God.

In verse 17, Paul says, "*So I tell you this and insist on it in the Lord.*" He's not just making a suggestion; he's urging us to pay attention. Why the emphasis? Because it's not enough to say we believe if our lives don't reflect that change. But here's the reality: change is hard. It's uncomfortable. One thing you'll never hear in church is someone saying, "I love it when we sing hymns I've never heard before!" Right? We like what we know. We sit in the same pew every week. We resist change because it's uncomfortable.

The truth is, becoming a new person isn't easy for any of us. And it wasn't easy for the Ephesians either. They, like us, were good at saying sorry for their sins—good at taking off the old clothes—but not so good at putting on the new clothes. We're quick to repent for our past mistakes, but where's the effort to change, to grow, to train ourselves in faith? Too often, we ask for God's grace and blessings but fail to make the sacrifices required to become real disciples. Because of that, our spiritual lives don't grow—we end up stuck in the same place, going in circles.

One of the words that refers to a gang of robbers in Korean is 불한당 (*bulhandang*). But if you break down the Chinese characters, it literally means "a group that does not sweat." These are people who don't work for themselves but go around taking what others have worked hard to achieve. Now, what if that describes us as Christians? We expect God's blessings without putting in any of our own sweat and effort. We cling to the old self while hoping for God's grace, thinking that just believing in Jesus will make everything fall into place. But faith without effort is what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." Bonhoeffer reminds us that the grace that justifies sinners—the grace of Christ's sacrifice—isn't cheap; it's costly grace. Don't be a 불한당 (*bulhandang*).

Of course, salvation is a gift. We can't earn it, no matter how hard we work. But living as a new person, "*created to be like God in righteousness and holiness,*" takes intentional effort. It requires commitment and discipline. It's the process we call sanctification—growing in our faith, maturing through effort and perseverance.

Putting on the New Self

Becoming a new person isn't easy, but it's definitely possible. That's why Paul tells us, "*Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness*" (Ephesians 4:24). But what does it actually mean to put on the new self? While we didn't read this part today, Paul explains it in Ephesians 4:25-32. Here's the gist of it:

"Don't lie to each other; instead, speak the truth to your neighbor. If you get angry, don't let that anger lead you to sin, and don't go to bed angry. If you used to steal, stop stealing—work hard and earn your living. Watch your words—say things that are helpful and uplifting to others. Be kind, compassionate, and forgive each other, just as God forgave you in Christ."

This isn't too difficult, right? It's something we can do. Being born again—putting on the new self—doesn't mean you have to eat one meal a day, share everything with the poor, spend every waking moment in prayer, or live like a saint like Mother Theresa. It's about following the principles of love that Jesus taught us and, in our everyday lives, growing to look more like Christ.

When we hear terms like "putting on the new self," "sanctification," or "becoming holy," they can feel overwhelming—like something too big to grasp. But if we break it down, it's really about developing "good habits." Faith, at its core, is about forming good and holy habits. Sanctification is the process of practicing the means of grace, training ourselves so that holy habits naturally take root in our lives.

Did anyone here wake up this Sunday morning and come to church almost out of habit? If so, you've got a good habit! Now, there's a saying that we shouldn't live out our faith mindlessly or on autopilot, but the truth is, Christian perfection happens when our faith and our daily lives are fully aligned—when living out our faith becomes second nature.

There's a saying from Confucius: "*At seventy, I could follow my heart's desires without overstepping the bounds of what is right.*" In Christian terms, that means we can follow our heart's desires and never stray from God's will. Isn't that amazing? That's what we call "Christian perfection" or "entire sanctification." We are called to grow each day toward Christian maturity, where Christ's will becomes our will, and our desires align with what Christ desires for us.

If You Want to Change Your Habits, You First Need to Change Your Identity

So, how can we truly "put on the new self"? The answer is simple: experience the grace of Christ more deeply and remain in Him. But how do we experience God's grace more deeply? Through the practice of both inner and outward devotion. Now, I know some of you might be thinking, "This sounds like the same thing we've heard before." It can feel like the old "chicken or the egg" dilemma.

When I was serving in Boston, one young adult shared their frustration: "If I could just experience God's grace more, I'd be more excited about worship, Bible study, and prayer. And then I'd experience even more grace, and my faith life would really come alive! But it feels so hard because I'm just not there yet." So, what comes first: experiencing grace or practicing spiritual disciplines? The truth is, they go hand in hand. Sometimes we feel God's grace first, and it motivates us to dive deeper into spiritual practices. Other times, it's in the midst of those practices—like prayer, Bible study, and worship—that we experience God's grace. These are the "means of grace" that help us encounter God's presence. But here's the important thing to remember: experiencing God's grace is in God's hands. It comes in God's timing. So, instead of waiting for that perfect moment to just "feel it," our responsibility is to take action—to engage in the means of grace and develop healthy spiritual habits.

In the book *Atomic Habits*, the author gives great advice on forming healthy habits. He says if you want to change a habit, you have to start by changing your identity. For example, instead of saying, "I'm going to read a book every week," which focuses on the result, you say, "I'm a reader." Then you start doing what readers do—reading regularly. Over time, the habit changes because it aligns with your identity.

The word "identity" is derived from the Latin words *essentitas*, meaning "to exist," and *identidem*, meaning "repeatedly." So, your identity is shaped by what you repeatedly do. The more you practice certain habits, the more they reinforce who you are. The key is to decide who you want to be and take small, consistent steps that align with that identity. So, ask yourself: "What kind of Christian do I want to be? And am I taking the steps to become that person?"

As far as I know, none of you here want to be "Sunday Christians."

I believe all of you desire to grow more like Christ and to let the fragrance and life of Christ flow through you to those around you. So, take a moment to reflect deeply on this question: "*What kind of Christian do I want to become?*" Then, start with small, practical steps that you can take. Maybe it's as simple as offering a prayer of thanks when you wake up each morning, saying, "Thank you for giving me a new day," or reading one chapter of Scripture each day. Begin with these small, tangible actions as you strive to become the Christian you dream of being. In doing so, let us follow God's word and "*put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness*" (Ephesians 4:24).