

Are you familiar with the phrase “Dress for success?” It probably originated as an advertising slogan for the fashion industry. But even in an age and a society that’s become very casual, there’s something to be said for that encouragement. There are still occasions – job interviews, for example, or special social events – where most people will make an effort to give a positive impression by the way they dress.

In both the Old and New Testaments the Bible uses pictures of what we could call spiritually dressing for success. The prophet Isaiah describes the Lord’s justifying of sinners as “clothing them with garments of salvation and robes of righteousness.” The Apostle Paul in the New Testament declares that in baptism believers are “clothed with Christ.” That same apostle encourages believers to clothe themselves with Christian virtues. And the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, describes the church in glory as the bride of Christ, beautifully dressed in the Savior’s righteousness. Our text for today also uses the picture of spiritual dress as it describes our Christian life. We consider that picture today as we continue this summer’s sermon series on the Epistle to the Ephesians with today’s key concept, MODELING. We model our Christian life, the apostle teaches us, by taking off our old self and putting on our new self.

In the first three chapters of his Epistle to the Ephesians St. Paul celebrates, and urges his readers to celebrate God’s grace, and all that grace has done for them and in them. In grace God devised his salvation plan for the sinful world. In grace he sent his Son into the world to carry out that plan. And in grace he sends his Holy Spirit into human hearts through the gospel to create the faith by which individual sinners embrace his gracious blessings as their own. The Spirit also unites all those he brings to faith into the one spiritual body that is the Holy Christian Church. Now, beginning with chapter 4, from which today’s text is taken, the apostle urges believers to show their gratitude for what God’s grace has done for them and in them by the way they live their lives. He begins the chapter with an appeal to believers to live lives “worthy of the calling you have received.” Such lives reflect that Savior’s love which fills their hearts outward in the world. And they are characterized by a constant putting off and putting on, a spiritual “dressing for success.”

“You were taught,” St. Paul writes in a key verse in our text, “to take off the old self, which is corrupted by its sinful desires.” Christians’ lives are completely different from the lives of those whose hearts have not been touched and changed by the gospel.” “Don’t walk any longer as the Gentiles walk,” Paul says. He uses the word “Gentiles” here, not in the ethnic sense of non-Jews, but in a spiritual sense, referring to unbelievers. And he goes on to describe and condemn the kind of lives that unbelievers live. The lives of those without God and his forgiving love in Christ, Paul declares, are empty lives, governed and directed by a futile mindset and way of thinking. That mindset is the result of a darkened, corrupted understanding that can be traced back to Adam and Eve’s fall into sin. After the fall, every human being is conceived and born with a nature that is alienated from God and spiritually and morally ignorant. In that state,

which St. Paul elsewhere describes as being spiritually dead, human beings lack a moral compass and a sense of right and wrong. Yes, they're still born with a conscience. But they ignore, and continue to ignore its warning voice until their conscience becomes hardened and useless.

A futile mindset can only result in an empty and futile lifestyle. The unbelieving lifestyle, our text tells us, is characterized by selfishness and the desire for instant gratification that results in unrestrained living and sins of every kind. Like addicts, those who live that lifestyle bounce from one sinful activity to another to try and satisfy their selfish cravings, no matter what the cost to themselves and to others. But though that kind of living promises happiness, looks attractive and may even bring a measure of earthly fame and success, it's empty. It can't bring real peace or lasting happiness. And it begins, continues and ends in separation from God and the enduring life that only he can give. So, with all the apostolic authority the Lord had conferred on him, Paul commands his readers, "Don't live like that. Don't live like the Gentiles live."

Paul's Ephesian readers needed that reminder. The futile thinking and empty lifestyle the apostle describes in our text was a lifestyle in which the Ephesian Christian had lived before the gospel had entered their hearts and changed their lives. The Lord had rescued them from that empty lifestyle. But the lure of that lifestyle was still there. The 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman world in which they lived promoted it. Things that the Ephesian Christians now understood were sin were promoted and glorified. It's said that in that 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman world sins like marital unfaithfulness and adultery weren't even considered a breach of etiquette. Just as he had done with Adam and Eve, the devil used the tactic of trying to make sin look attractive and enjoyable to tempt those 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians to just "go along to get along." And, like every believer who has ever lived and will ever live, every one of the Ephesian believers still had a sinful nature lurking inside of them, fighting desperately to overcome the new, God-fearing nature that the Holy Spirit had created in their hearts. Be watchful, Paul warns. Be aware. Say no to the Gentile thinking and the lifestyle that results from that empty kind of thinking. Take it off and throw it away, like a worn, soiled piece of clothing, every day.

With few exceptions, none of us have lived an openly heathen lifestyle, like those Ephesian believers did before they came to faith. Most of us here are life-long Christians, a blessing we can't cherish enough. But Paul's admonition, "Don't live the futile, empty lives the Gentiles live," are certainly also meant for us. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century American society in which we live and which surrounds us is no different than the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Roman society in which the Ephesian Christians lived. Sin is not only minimized, it is glorified. The lifestyle that demands instant gratification constantly invites us to join in. Friends, neighbors, co-workers seem to be succeeding in life as they live outside the boundary lines of God's law. And our sinful nature says, "Why not join in? Or why can't we at least try and push the envelope a little? The Bible's moral standards can certainly be bent to suit modern tastes. Everybody is doing it." St. Paul's words in our text, written

over 2000 years ago, are timeless and unchanging, because the Lord who inspired them is timeless and unchanging.

"Don't live like the Gentiles live. You don't belong to their world. You belong to the Lord."

The Lord who graciously called them to be his own wants believers to say no to the empty lifestyle the Gentiles live and to the futile thinking that prompts it. And he wants them to say no in an evident way. That evident way is to model to each other and to the society in which they live an entirely different lifestyle prompted by an entirely different mindset. "Take off the old self," our text urges. And "Put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." When the Holy Spirit brings people to faith and makes them spiritually alive in Christ, he creates a new self, a new nature in their hearts. Like faith itself, that new nature is not a human creation; nor is it something believers produce in themselves. It's a gift of God's grace. Together with that new nature comes a new mindset. As the Holy Spirit pours the love of Christ into believers' hearts through the gospel, he motivates and empowers them to live with the new self controlling their thoughts and actions. They now strive to love and serve the God whose grace has saved them.

Living this new life, however, is not without struggles. Though the new nature now dominates believers' thinking and acting, the old nature doesn't disappear. Until they die and are completely renewed in God's image in heavenly glory, believers are both saints and sinners. The sinful nature, encouraged by the devil and the society in which believers live, constantly tries to regain control of believers' lives. And, all too often, it wins break-through victories. Every day Christians are engaged in spiritual warfare as the old self fights against the new. To be successful in that warfare, Christians must "dress for spiritual success" every day by consciously putting off the old self and putting on the new.

Spiritual dressing for success takes place, our text concludes, as believers "are renewed continually in the spirit of your mind." Daily renewal and strength for the struggle that is the Christian life come by the power of the Spirit through the Means of Grace. As they use God's word each day; as they regularly receive the Lord's Supper with its personal assurance of forgiveness; as they remember their baptism each day, Christians are renewed in spirit and empowered for the conflict. And every day they grow in their ability to model the Christian life that is theirs to each other and to everyone around them. God help us all, each day, to faithfully model our Christianity as we "dress for spiritual success." Amen.

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