

Putting Off the Old Life

Ephesians 4:17-24

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This past Sunday night, a 17-year-old follower of Christ named Jennifer Jeffries impressed the American Idol judges with her original song called “Change My Ways.” The lyrics speak of her being so independent that she had not been reading her Bible, which led to her “feeding the flesh” and “living in sin.”

I love that this was watched by millions of people.

*I've got a Bible on my desk
With no highlights or creases
Pages still crisp
I had this idea
Miss Independent
That's who I am
Just watch me excel
Well, I am falling fast
Too fast to catch myself
Miss Independent
Didn't age too well
Well, I have been feeding the flesh
I have been living in sin
My mouth's been running wild
And I've been acting like a wild child*

I like how she linked her unopened Bible to her ungodly behavior. Here's what I'm hoping we learn today: *Believers are to behave differently than unbelievers.*

This is the main message of Ephesians 4:17-24: ***“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in***

the spirit of your minds,²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Since we are a community of unity, we're to deploy our gifts while making sure our walk matches our talk. We learned last weekend that *no one can do everything, but everyone can do something*. I'm so grateful to be part of a church community filled with servants who are serving their families, their neighbors, and their co-workers. Many of you are partnering alongside our Go Team partners, preparing for mission trips, and involved in various ministries at Edgewood. God prompts us to serve in different ways in different seasons of life. It's so moving to see so many of you go through your day asking the Lord how you can respond to the needs He brings your way. A good friend reminded me how Titus 3:1 urges us *“to be ready for every good work.”*

Here's our outline for today.

- Be distinctive (17-19).
- Be devoted (20-21).
- Be decisive (22-24).

1. Be distinctive (17-19). Ephesians 4:17 tells us there is to be a distinct difference between Christians and non-Christians: *“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you no longer walk as the Gentiles do...”* The word *“now”* can be translated as *“therefore.”* To *“testify in the Lord”* means Paul is summoning the Lord Himself to give testimony as a witness. This is not just something Paul is suggesting; it's a command from Christ Himself.

We could say it like this: *A new life in Christ demands a new lifestyle*. In sociology, a lifestyle is the way a person or a group lives, which includes social relations, consumption, entertainment, and dress. A lifestyle also typically reflects an individual's attitudes, values, or worldview. One dictionary defines it this way: *“The habits, attitudes, moral standards...that constitute the mode of living of an individual or group.”* Here's one more: *“The distinctive pattern and manner of living that an individual or group uses...that typically reflects their attitudes, beliefs, and values.”*

The lifestyle of one who follows Christ must be distinctively Christian. Sadly, according to George Barna, *“when measured for moral behaviors, born-again believers are not much different from non-born-again adults.”* Other polls indicate

there is no appreciable difference between the way professing Christians live and how the rest of the culture lives.

This carries a sense of importance and urgency because we are to no longer *“walk as the Gentiles do...”* A similar charge is stated positively in Ephesians 4:1: *“Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”* This is fleshed out some more in 1 Thessalonians 2:12: *“We exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.”* Brothers and sisters, never forget that Christians are called to be countercultural and not walk according to the ways of the world.

Paul describes how lost people live in the last part of verse 17 and in verses 18-19: *“...in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”*

Here we see a downward spiral of sin.

- **Futility of mind.** The word *“futility”* means, *“worthless, empty, and not satisfying,”* This is the same word used 36 times in Ecclesiastes. Here’s one example from Ecclesiastes 1:14: *“Behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.”* It’s like children playing with soap bubbles; when they finally catch one, it bursts in their hands, leaving them with nothing. Jeremiah 2:5 states: *“They went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless.”*

One author writes, *“There’s little to admire and less to imitate in the people who are prominent in our culture. We have celebrities, but not saints. Famous entertainers amuse a nation of bored insomniacs...people aimless and bored amuse themselves with trivia and trash. Neither the adventure of goodness nor the pursuit of righteousness gets headlines.”*

Note how this futility takes place in their *“minds.”* Romans 1:28 says the lost have a *“debased mind.”* In contrast, 1 Peter 1:18 says: *“... you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers...”*

- **Darkened understanding.** The word *“darkened”* refers to *“destruction or distress”* and was also used for *“stubbornness.”* Unfortunately, some

individuals refuse to embrace the truth, wanting instead to dwell in darkness. In John 3:19, Jesus said ***“people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.”*** Ephesians 5:8 reminds believers they are to be distinctively different: ***“For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.”***

- **Alienated from God.** To be ***“alienated”*** means, ***“to be estranged or separated.”*** Isaiah 59:2 describes what our sins have done to us: ***“But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God.”*** James 4:4 asks the question: ***“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?”*** Colossians 1:21 says believers are now different: ***“we once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.”***
- **Hardness of heart.** The word ***“hardness”*** was used to describe a stone harder than marble and means, ***“to petrify and render insensitive.”*** When someone is hard, they have set up an impenetrable barrier. Listen to how Jesus responded when He saw hard hearts in Mark 3:5: ***“And He looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart.”*** Friends, that’s why Proverbs 4:23 tells us to guard our hearts: ***“Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.”*** Don’t allow unbridled sin to harden your heart.
- **Callous.** This word was used to describe someone who is ***“void of feeling and insensible to shame”*** and referred to those who ***“have lost their sense of pain.”*** The NIV renders it, ***“lost all sensitivity.”*** 1 Timothy 4:2 pictures a callous person this way: ***“whose consciences are seared.”*** Sin has a way of desensitizing us, which leads us into deepening levels of depravity. Just as a person develops callouses from repetition, so too repeated disobedience can deaden a person’s heart.
- **Given up to sensuality.** Having lost all sensitivity to shame or guilt, some have ***“given themselves up to sensuality.”*** This person lives without any moral restraint, having given themselves over to every sexual urge and desire. The word ***“sensuality”*** is variously defined as, ***“insatiable lustfulness, sexual excess, and self-indulgence.”***

This is very dangerous because it can also lead to God giving people up to these dark desires. This phrase is used three times in Romans 1. Verse 24 states: ***“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts, to impurity...”*** Verse 26 says, ***“For this reason God gave them up to***

dishonorable passions...” Verse 28 adds, “*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.*”

Recently I came across a stunning statistic published by Vox.com, which found 51% of adults under the age of 30 now believe that open marriages are acceptable. The article ended with a troubling quote: “*There’s been this deconstruction wave for the last few decades. Straightness was deconstructed, and then gender’s been deconstructed. And now it’s monogamy’s turn.*” Romans 13:13 calls believers to live differently: “*Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.*”

- **Greedy.** To be “*greedy*” means to covet or crave with “*an increasing desire for more and more, even though these desires are never satisfied.*” This makes me think of Proverbs 27:20: “*Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied, and never satisfied are the eyes of man.*”
- **Impurity.** The last part of verse 19 reads, “*...to practice every kind of impurity.*” The word “*practice*” means, “*to perform deliberately, to work at it.*” This means some lost people work hard at sinning with “*every kind*” of sin. “*Impurity*” refers to “*lewdness, filth, and uncleanness.*” In contrast, Ephesians 5:3 calls Christians to live in purity: “*But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.*”

Let’s notice how this slide into sin begins in our heads (verse 23) and then settles in our hearts (verse 24), and finally gets expressed in our habits (verse 25). It all starts with what we allow into our minds and hearts. I like how the KJV renders Proverbs 23:7: “*For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.*”

Christians are called to be distinctively different. If you’ve slipped into some sinful behavior, it’s time to repent and return to Christ. If you need help, I highly recommend Celebrate Recovery, which meets on Friday nights. It’s also important to be in community and to be in a Growth Group.

Check out this quote from John Newton, the man who wrote “Amazing Grace”: “*I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God, I*

am what I am.” I wonder if this is where Brandon Heath got the idea for his lyrics: *“I wish you could see me now, I wish I could show you how, I’m not who I was.”*

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2. Be devoted (20-21). After being challenged to live differently, we’re called to be devoted to the Lord. Actually, the only way to be distinctive is to be devoted because our past will keep trying to pull us back into its grip. We see this in verse 20: ***“But that is not the way you learned Christ!”*** In contrast to living ungodly lives, we’re reminded that this is not how we ***“learned Christ.”*** Notice it doesn’t say, learned *“about”* Christ, but rather *“learned Christ.”* The Christians life is all about learning Christ, or as Paul said in Philippians 3:10: ***“That I may know Him...”*** Instead of being motivated by our lusts, we’re to be motivated by the Lord.

Verse 21 reminds us that since truth is only found in Christ, we must do all we can to be taught and trained by Him: ***“Assuming that you have heard about Him and were taught in Him, as the truth is in Jesus.”*** The phrase ***“heard about Him”*** is emphatic, meaning we must take every opportunity to hear preaching and teaching and heed what we learn because He is truth.

One of the best ways to learn Christ and be taught in Him is by reading the gospels. I did something this week that I have never done before by speed reading all four gospels, reading a different gospel each day. I only slowed down when I came to something Peter said or did because we’ll be focusing on how Jesus restored Peter during our four Easter services in a message we’re calling “Moving Past our Past.” Because Jesus is alive, you can be made new. No matter what you’ve done in the past, with Jesus, your failures are not final. We’ll also be showing a very moving testimony.

The bottom line is that when we come face-to-face with the reality of Jesus, we’ll be motivated to repent so we can be restored. Recently, I was struck by how a focus on the return of Christ should have a purifying effect on His people. Since Jesus is coming soon, we must fully surrender to Him so we don’t shrink back in shame at His coming as we read in 1 John 2:28: ***“And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears we may have confidence and not shrink from Him in shame at His coming.”***

We want to make you aware of a free resource that will help believers be ready for His return and will also serve as an outreach tool for our unsaved friends and family members.

→ Play Video from Pastor Ray

These booklets called “Ready or Not” are available on tables in both lobbies. I’m grateful to Edgewood members Seth Kabala and Marie Guyton for their editing help and to the deacons for funding the project so we can offer them free of charge. We also put out some Anchor for the Soul books, along with invites for our Easter Outreach, Children’s Easter programs, and our Easter services.

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3. Be decisive (22-24). If we want to live distinctively Christian lives, we must be devoted, and finally, we must be decisive. There are three ways we’re to be intentional.

- **Put off.** Like taking off and discarding old clothes, we must get rid of old things that belong to our old life. This is portrayed in verse 22: ***“To put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.”*** To ***“put off”*** has the idea of definitely and deliberately *“laying aside or renouncing.”* Romans 13:12 says, ***“The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”*** James 1:21: ***“Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness.”***

Some of you are still wearing stuff that reeks of death and decay. It’s time to make a break with your past. After Lazarus was raised from the dead and given new life, he had to get rid of his grave clothes: ***“Unbind him, and let him go.”*** Are you still wearing the things of the world?

- **Put in.** After renouncing, according to verse 23, we challenged to be renewed: ***“And to be renewed in the spirit of your minds.”*** The word ***“renewed”*** refers to something entirely new and has the idea of being continual and progressive. It could be said like this, *“keep being continually renewed in your mind.”* The greatest battles we fight are in our minds. This is spelled out in Romans 12:2: ***“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*** We

need to practice what 2 Corinthians 10:5 says: ***“Take every thought captive to obey Christ.”***

Someone put it like this: *“Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.”* Since it all starts in the mind, we must set up guard over what we allow ourselves to think about it. Galatians 6:7 says, ***“Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.”***

- **Put on.** After putting off and putting in, we must put on a brand-new wardrobe as we see in verse 24: ***“And to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”*** The phrase ***“put on”*** was used of clothing oneself in Job 29:14: ***“I put on righteousness and it clothed me.”*** It’s time to put off the grave clothes of the old life and put on the grace clothes of the new life.

This week, I stopped by Zimmermann Honda to get something looked at on our car. When I drove up, I noticed all the parking spots were full and cars were also parked on the road. After I met with a service consultant, I went out in the showroom and saw parents and young girls wearing Iowa Hawkeye jerseys standing in a long line. Some of them were carrying basketballs. I went up to a family and asked what was going on and was told that “Captain Kate” was signing autographs and posing for pictures. As I looked around again, I saw that many of the young girls were wearing Kate Martin jerseys. I thought better of putting on my Wisconsin Badgers jersey.

These young girls were identifying themselves with Captain Kate. Brothers and sisters, we need to make sure we are wearing “Jesus Jerseys,” as we publicly identify our allegiance to Him. Romans 13:14: ***“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”***

Let’s return to the song, “Change My Ways” by Jennifer Jeffries. I love the way the lyrics begin with the Bible on her desk and how they end with the Bible in her hands.

*I’ll sing your praise
For all my days
I finally changed,
Lord, make your ways my ways*

*I've got a Bible in my hands
with faded pages
And highlighted paragraphs.*

Katy Perry, one of the judges on *American Idol*, was raised in a Christian home, and has since gone south spiritually. Maybe God will use this song in her life...and maybe He'll use it in your life.

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I want to wrap up by reading the ending of the booklet, *Ready or Not*.

Friend, I won't beat around the bush. The consequences are too staggering, and the stakes are way too high. Let me say it as clearly as I can. If you have never repented and received Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins, *you will be in deep trouble when Jesus comes back*. If you don't know Jesus, you have an appointment with judgment, and it will be *certain, swift, and severe*.

Do you want to face ruin, or do you want to be rescued? Do you want to go to Heaven or to Hell? Do you want deliverance or destruction?

Don't be left behind. Right now, Jesus is seeking a relationship with you. Respond to Him before it's too late.

If you're ready to repent and receive Christ right now, you could pray this prayer.

Lord, I confess I'm a sinner and I fall way short of Your standards. Thank You for paying the price for my sins and for dying on the cross as my substitute. I believe You rose again on the third day, and I affirm that You will return one day. I want to be ready for that, so now I repent from the way that I've been living and receive You into my life. Please forgive me for all my sins and make me into the person You want me to be. As best as I know how, I surrender all I am and all I have to You. If there's anything in my life You don't like, please get rid of it, and help me to live for You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Interview with Craig and Lindsey Stevenson

1. Craig, you served as youth pastor here about 15 years ago. Tell us how God has been using you since you left.
2. What is God calling you to do now?
3. Lindsey, can you give us an update about your family?
4. How can we pray for you guys?