

# The Divine Wardrobe, Ephesians 4:17-24

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## Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. Today we are carrying on in our sermon series in the letter of Ephesians which we have subtitled, "Into the Fullness of Christ." So I invite you to turn in your Bibles with me to Ephesians 4:17-24.

The title of today's sermon is "The Divine Wardrobe,"<sup>1</sup> and the main idea is "New identity becomes new lifestyle by wearing Christ." I know that "wearing Christ" might sound kinda strange, but Paul is going to break that down into two practical applications:

- I. Take Off the False Self - vv. 17-19
- II. Put On the True Self - vv. 20-24

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Ephesians 4:17-24. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

*<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. <sup>20</sup> But that is not the way you learned Christ!— <sup>21</sup> assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, <sup>22</sup> to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, <sup>23</sup> and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, <sup>24</sup> and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Ephesians 4:17-24*

The Lord has spoken to us. Let's say this together: Thanks be to God! You may be seated.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), Loc 2263

## Exposition

You may not think about it much, but being *clothed* is a significant part of human experience. Just consider the children’s series from C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The whole story begins when a group of children in England enter into the magical world of Narnia through what?—an old wardrobe. Eventually they join forces with a great lion named Aslan, who represents Jesus, and overthrow the white witch who has frozen the kingdom. This all culminates in a great coronation ceremony, where the children are clothed in their royal robes and crowned as kings and queens. Aslan himself then pronounces, “Once a king or queen in Narnia, always a king or queen. Bear it well, Sons of Adam! Bear it well, Daughters of Eve!”<sup>2</sup>

I know we may be finding less and less motivation these days to even get out of our pajamas, but kings and queens don’t just lounge around in the same old clothes until they fail the sniff check. No, their dress reflects their distinction. Clothes have meaning. That’s why there’s obsession over:

- what the royal family wears every day
- what the bride wears on her wedding day
- what kids wear to school’s opening day.

You see, our clothes communicate something about who we are.<sup>3</sup>

Paul understands this. That’s why in today’s passage Paul’s going to explain life in Christ according to the everyday human experience of being clothed. And what he’s going to give us is more than just a helpful analogy. In many ways this particular passage is like a bridge between chapters 1-3 and 4-6. How does all that Paul has said about our identity practically become a lifestyle? What’s the process really look like for us to be conformed more and more to the image of Christ (like we talked about last week)? How are we to “become what we already are”?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 179; Photo credit:

[https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DBqu1vZydbFI&psig=AOVaw1GRzkMtUdI-jL7xgtq-PIG&ust=1589817264602000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCPiNm\\_2gu-kCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD](https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DBqu1vZydbFI&psig=AOVaw1GRzkMtUdI-jL7xgtq-PIG&ust=1589817264602000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCPiNm_2gu-kCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD)

<sup>3</sup> Hughes, Loc 2263-2278

<sup>4</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), Loc 7728-7761

## I. Take Off the False Self - vv. 17-19

Well that brings us to Paul's first answer: take off the false self. We read in verse 17,

*17 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. Ephesians 4:17*

Straightaway this takes us back to Paul's words at the very beginning of the chapter, the way he sums up our response to what God has done for us: that we should walk worthy. Specifically that means we *don't walk* like the Gentiles do. Now these are Gentiles themselves to whom Paul is writing—so how can they not walk like Gentiles? The answer is made clear in Galatians 6:16, which says,

*16 And as for all who walk by this rule* ["this rule" meaning being created spiritually new by faith in Christ], *peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. Galatians 6:16*

These believing Gentiles (and us!) had become part of the new Israel, the new people of God. So throughout this passage Paul is making a distinction between believing Gentiles and non-believing Gentiles.<sup>5</sup>

Non-believing Gentiles walk "in the futility of their minds". That word "futility" should bring up memories of our series in the book of Ecclesiastes. There, over and over the author describes life apart from God as meaningless and vanity, like chasing after the wind.<sup>6</sup> And this doesn't mean it's just futile in their minds, but that it flows from their minds and infects everything. Missiologist Lloyd Kwast says that what we do on the outside actually begins with our worldview on the inside. It's the source of our beliefs and then our values and then ultimately our behaviors.<sup>7</sup>

This is the progression Paul seems to have in mind as he continues in verse 18,

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), 132-133

<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:2, 14; 2:1, 11, 15, 17, 19; Arnold, Loc 7573

<sup>7</sup> Lloyd E. Kwast, "Understanding Culture," *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, Fourth Edition (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013), 397-399; Photo credit: [http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-4cwsZ-X0OsY/UKL9pE5ttwI/AAAAAAAAAA\\_E/90KurhjlMH4/s1600/Layers+Forming+Culture.jpg](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-4cwsZ-X0OsY/UKL9pE5ttwI/AAAAAAAAAA_E/90KurhjlMH4/s1600/Layers+Forming+Culture.jpg); Arnold, Loc 7594

*<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. Ephesians 4:18-19*

What this image seems to describe is the person who plunges into whatever seems immoral and even flaunts it. A popular example that has popped up recently is several characters on the viral documentary titled “Tiger King”<sup>8</sup> and their plunge into hatred and homosexuality and polygamy and drugs and lies and animal cruelty. But Paul is applying this to all non-believing Gentiles. That doesn’t seem fair. Not everybody acts like these people, right? Well, that’s why I think Paul is describing a progression, the downward spiral of all life apart from God. There are four steps to it.<sup>9</sup>

### **1) Hardness**

The first is hardness. The source of all this futility is our “hardness of heart”. Our sensitivity to God literally petrifies when we see the reality of him and yet we refuse to acknowledge it. This is reflected in Romans 1 when Paul says that all people are without excuse because we can clearly see God’s eternal power and divine nature in his creation.<sup>10</sup> He continues,

*<sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, Romans 1:21*

For a sad example of this, just consider the story of the Egyptians chasing the people of Israel. Not only had the Egyptians just experienced the power of God on display in all the plagues, but they literally watched God open up the Red Sea and allow his people to pass by on dry ground. But do they stop and honor him and give thanks to him? No! They barrel straight ahead in their rebellion against God. Why?! *Because of their hardness of heart.*

You say, “If I could see a miracle, then I would believe.” “If God would end all evil, then I would thank him.” What?! People watched Jesus heal a man’s hand on the Sabbath—and it was *that moment* they decided to kill him. And the Bible tells us that

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<sup>8</sup> Tiger King, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11823076/>

<sup>9</sup> John R.W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 175-177; Hughes, Loc 2278-2321

<sup>10</sup> Romans 1:18-20

Jesus was “grieved at their *hardness of heart*”.<sup>11</sup> Beware, my friend, of a petrified heart that leaves you without excuse.

## 2) Darkness

A heart that leads you from hardness to darkness, which is the second step of life apart from God. Paul says, “They are darkened in their understanding”. We don’t start here because we might be tempted to think that the ignorance isn’t our fault. “What about the man on an island who never hears about Jesus?” Well, he is without excuse because his ignorance doesn’t come from a lack of knowledge, but a lack of *acknowledgement*. His darkness of mind flows from his hardness of heart. Returning to Romans 1:21,

*they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, Romans 1:21-22*

No doubt this would’ve been offensive to the people of Ephesus, just as it is to people today. But it’s not saying that people aren’t intelligent or moral or competent, but that they are blind to how all such things are ordered around the one true God.<sup>12</sup> On the outside that may not seem like a very bad thing. You can get along in our world pretty well, even as an esteemed leader, professional, parent, even church member while walking in this kind of darkness. And yet the whole time, a terminal spiritual cancer is spreading in your bones.

## 3) Deadness

That’s why the third step of life apart from God is deadness. Paul says they are “alienated from the life of God,” cut off from the source of life and truth. Three times these horrifying words ring out like a death toll in Romans 1:

*God gave them up, Romans 1:24, 26, 28*

Rather than sovereignly restraining us from running away further, God gives us our heart’s desire and lets go of the leash as we dart into eight-lane traffic. This is where we are so far removed from God’s ordering of things that we do what is described by the prophet Isaiah: we “call evil good and good evil”.<sup>13</sup> We lose all moral bearing and

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<sup>11</sup> Mark 3:1-6

<sup>12</sup> Arnold, Loc 7594

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 5:20; Hughes, Loc 2299

everyone does what is right in their own eyes.<sup>14</sup> This is precisely the kind of cultural decay that we are surrounded by. And sadly, it only gets worse.

#### 4) Recklessness

The fourth step in this progression is recklessness. Paul says, “They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” They are callous, literally beyond feeling; their consciences are no longer pricked.<sup>15</sup> Having lost all God-given sensitivity, they lose all self-control.<sup>16</sup> And in a frantic attempt to make up for what they can’t satisfy, they’re greedy for the next high.<sup>17</sup> Romans 1 describes what exactly this looks like: not only “dishonorable passions”<sup>18</sup> that lead them to every kind of sexual perversion except that which God intended between a married man and woman, but

*<sup>29</sup> They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup> foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Romans 1:29-31*

It’s a devastating description. You know one of the reasons I think the Tiger King documentary is so popular? Because we can all watch it and say, “Now *that’s* a mess.” And we can feel better about ourselves. But the reality is, according to the word of God, we all walk as the Gentiles do. And Christians, we can easily default back to walking that way in an instant.

In the book *The Relational Soul* the authors tell a story of a pastor who was invited on Craigslist to participate in a secret sexual act. After very subtly letting the fantasy linger in his heart for a few weeks, the pastor suddenly found himself having responded to the message and at the home where this was to take place. Thankfully at the last moment he did not go through with it, though it still nearly wrecked his family and ministry. And what he learned in the aftermath was that this downward spiral happened because he had been living according to what the authors’ call “the false self”. That is, an image of himself that he had created—intelligent, moral, competent. And yet it was miles away

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<sup>14</sup> Judges 21:25

<sup>15</sup> Hughes, Loc 2300

<sup>16</sup> Stott, 176

<sup>17</sup> Foulkes, 134-135

<sup>18</sup> Romans 1:24-28

from his true self; yes, created new in the image of Christ, but still vulnerable and desperately dependent on relationship with God and others.<sup>19</sup>

Brothers and sisters, I don't know what your fantasy of choice is, the crooked desire that if you feed it just a little, the downward spiral will begin. I don't know what you are letting linger in your heart in order to help you cope with the disappointment of these days: porn, revenge, escape, food, overwork, underwork, competency, platform, control. But this is not who you were created or saved to be. Don't walk like the Gentiles. Church, take off the false self.

## II. Put On the True Self - vv. 20-24

And if we are to take off the false self, then let us put on the true self. This is the second application of how we wear Christ. After describing the futile thinking of unbelieving Gentiles, Paul writes in verse 20,

***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, Ephesians 4:21-22***

What I love about these verses is how clearly they point us to not just learning information, but learning a Person—Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup> You may be listening to *me* teach, but Jesus says that his sheep hear *his* voice.<sup>21</sup> The Ephesian church hadn't just been taught in Christian values; they had been taught "*in him, as the truth is in Jesus*".

Remember Pilate's question to Jesus before his execution: "What is truth?" Ever wonder why Jesus remained silent? *Because the substance of truth is not in words but in a Person!* And that Person was standing right there!<sup>22</sup>

- Truth took on flesh and dwelt among us.<sup>23</sup>
- Truth taught the only way back to God.<sup>24</sup>
- Truth died on a cross to prove God's love.<sup>25</sup>
- Truth rose again so we could rise too.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Plass and James Cofield, *The Relational Soul: Moving From False Self to Deep Connection* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 55-61

<sup>20</sup> Arnold, Loc 7678

<sup>21</sup> John 10:16; Hughes, Loc 2321

<sup>22</sup> Calvin Miller, *Once Upon a Tree* (West Monroe: Howard, 2002), 7-8

<sup>23</sup> John 1:14

<sup>24</sup> John 14:6

<sup>25</sup> John 3:16

<sup>26</sup> John 5:24

- Truth sent his Spirit to lead us into all truth.<sup>27</sup>
- Truth will return to make all things new.<sup>28</sup>

Anybody need some truth today? Anybody struggling to trust what anybody says in the media about anything? Here's some truth: Jesus is the truth! It's the first thing the Gentiles shed when they rebelled against God; and it's the first God clothes us in when we come back home—we wear Christ.<sup>29</sup> And that's precisely the image Paul is going to use for the rest of the passage, beginning in verse 22: when you entered into Christ you began learning

*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.*  
Ephesians 4:22-24

### **1) Put Off the Old (Ongoing Repentance)**

This is how we practically go from identity to lifestyle. Two clear steps to wearing Christ. The first is to put off the old; that is, a lifestyle of ongoing repentance. The old self is anything that's disconnected from Jesus; it's all that we described in the first point: hardness, darkness, deadness, recklessness. It's corrupt, putrid, because it's cloaked in lies, it dresses with desires that disappoint.

During the Holocaust, part of how Nazis dehumanized prisoners in the concentration camps was by stripping them of their civilian clothes and forcing them to wear ugly, shabby uniforms. Over time these uniforms would become saturated with every kind of filth: dirt, sweat, body odor, lice, urine, feces, and rotting human flesh. Let me ask you, when those survivors were finally liberated, and were able to take off those putrid uniforms, do you think any of them ever wanted to put one back on?

No way! *That's how we are supposed to feel about returning to our old way of life.*<sup>30</sup> “That isn't who I am anymore! I have been set free! I don't have to wear those anymore!”

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<sup>27</sup> John 16:13

<sup>28</sup> Revelation 19:11

<sup>29</sup> Arnold, Loc 7720

<sup>30</sup> Foulkes, 136



But if you've been in Christ for longer than a minute, you know how easily sin entangles,<sup>31</sup> and how quickly we return like a dog to its vomit.<sup>32</sup> That's why "putting off the old" is more than an inspiring image or a one-time transaction at conversion—it's a lifestyle of ongoing repentance; of constantly recognizing ways we have slipped back into that putrid old uniform, and then grieving it, and taking it off with God's help.<sup>33</sup>

## 2) Put On the New (Ongoing Renewal)

But we can't just put off the old, Paul says. We've also got to put on the new; that is, a lifestyle of ongoing renewal. This is the second step in wearing Christ. So often because we've learned more Christian values than we have learned Christ, our "repentance and renewal" looks like this: "Gasp—I can't believe I did that. I didn't think I was that bad. Jesus, I promise to do better. I'll never look at porn again. I'll never yell at my husband again." But a few days later we're right back in the same place. That's because basically what we're thinking is "My righteousness fell short there—I need to make up for it." But that's not putting on anything new!

That's like a well being dug in a village that had only putrid water. But instead of the villagers going to the clean water from the well, they continue to sip from diseased mud puddles.

Brothers and sisters, when we enter into Christ, his standing before God is "imputed" to us—we are *clothed* in his righteousness. It's just like what we learned in our Genesis series last summer, where God created by bringing order out of chaos. Out of the chaos of our lives before Christ, God has ordered a new creation. So, returning to Galatians,

***15 For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision [not the clothes of our self-effort or the clothes of self-indulgence]], but a new creation. Galatians 6:15***

Renewal is going to the new well instead of the old puddle. It's saying, "Jesus, here I am drinking this nasty water again; here I am wrapped up in these rotten clothes again. But this is the false self. I have been made new. I have been given your righteousness. So help me to put on my true self. Clothe me again with you. Renew the spirit of my mind so that my identity becomes my lifestyle."

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<sup>31</sup> Romans 12:1

<sup>32</sup> Proverbs 26:11

<sup>33</sup> Arnold, Loc 7720

Church, our job is not to weave it, but to wear it.<sup>34</sup> So put on the true self.

## Conclusion

Later in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in the story titled *Prince Caspian*, the children have returned to England and been unable to visit Narnia for a year. That may not seem like a very long time, but for a child, as this crisis has shown us, even a few months can feel like an eternity. In many ways, they have forgotten that they are kings and queens of a magical land. They have begun to doubt if what happened to them was even real.

That's when suddenly they are transported back to Narnia, to their old castle. And the story goes like this: "There was something sad and a little frightening about the place, because it all seemed so forsaken and long ago...Then they began walking about and picking things up to look at. It was like meeting very old friends. If you had been there you would have heard them saying things like 'Oh look! Our coronation rings—do you remember first wearing this?...isn't this the little brooch we all thought was lost...isn't that the armour you wore in the great tournament...do you remember, do you remember?'"<sup>35</sup> It was in the reunion with their royal robes that they remembered Aslan's words: "Once a king or queen...always a king or queen." They could once again become who they already were.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, you live in a world that causes you to forget that you are kings and queens who are already seated with Christ in heavenly places.<sup>36</sup> You dwell in flesh that leads you to doubt that what happened to you through Christ is even real. The world's answer is to put on the right clothes, to project the preferred image, to adorn the flesh with whatever it wants, whenever it wants, however it wants. But that is not your answer.

*do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, <sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> And such were some of you. But you were*

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<sup>34</sup> Hughes, Loc 2372

<sup>35</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 22-23; Photo credit: [https://narniafans.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/caspian\\_04555\\_1.jpg](https://narniafans.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/03/caspian_04555_1.jpg)

<sup>36</sup> Ephesians 2:6

*washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11*

Do you remember, do you remember? You have been clothed with a divine wardrobe, with Jesus Christ himself. Why are you living as though the old you, the false you, is who you are? Put on your new self, your true self. And bear it well, sons of God! Bear it well, daughters of God!

And my friends who are not in Christ, what are you wearing? What are you wanting your clothes to communicate about you? That your life is successful and impressive, and you've already taken care of things yourself? That you've found freedom in just letting yourself go? That you're hiding, hoping not to be noticed? That you're desperate for attention? Here's what I'm holding out to you today: not some kind of talk-show or TikTok makeover, but being clothed forever with Jesus Christ himself. He died and rose so that you could be wrapped in his royal robes. Would you believe? Would you receive this divine wardrobe? Let's pray.

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