PEOPLE THE GOSPEL CREATES · WEEK 5

Put Off the Old Self

October 25, 2026 · Ephesians 4:17–32 · Pastor Bart Denny

THE BIG IDEA

Because we've been made new in Christ, we can put off our old ways and live the holy life His Spirit makes possible.

This guide works two ways. On your own, take one section a day through the week, or use the daily readings near the end. In a group, plan on about an hour: read the passage aloud, talk through the background, then choose the questions that fit your group. Nobody has to answer every one.

Read **Ephesians 4:17–32** at least twice, once quietly and once aloud. If you have time, read Romans 6:1–14, which Paul's argument here depends on. Last week, in Philippians 2, we looked at the mind of Christ, who gave Himself away freely. This week Paul gets very practical about what a new life in Christ looks like at home, at work and in the way we talk to each other.

Where this passage sits

Ephesians 4 began with the call to "live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (4:1): humility, patience and unity. Then Paul described the gifts Christ gives the church so it can grow up into Him (4:7–16). Now, starting in verse 17, he describes the kind of life that fits that growing-up, and the kind that doesn't.

Most of Paul's readers were Gentiles. Before they met Christ, they had lived like the pagan world around them, and that world was still all around them every day. Paul warns them not to drift back into the old patterns.

The passage moves in three steps. Verses 17–19 describe the old life. Verses 20–24 describe what God has done and the change it makes possible: put off the old self, be renewed in your mind, put on the new self. Verses 25–32 put that into practice, and almost every command comes in a pair: stop this, start that, and here's why.

A few words worth a closer look

"Futility" (4:17)
Emptiness, thinking that goes nowhere. It's the same idea as "Meaningless!" in Ecclesiastes.

"Hardening" (4:18)
The word was used for a callus or for stone. A heart that keeps resisting God gets harder to reach.

"Lost all sensitivity" (4:19)
Literally, *having become callous*, no longer feeling the pain that should warn us.

"You learned Christ" (4:20)
The NIV says "the way of life you learned," but the Greek is personal: you learned *Christ*. Discipleship is getting to know a person.

"Old self . . . new self" (4:22, 24)
Literally *old man* and *new man*: who we were under sin's rule and who we are in Christ. Paul says the old self was "crucified with him" (Romans 6:6).

"Be made new" (4:23)
A present, ongoing renewal. God keeps renewing the way we think.

"Foothold" (4:27)
An opportunity, a place to stand. Anger left to settle gives the devil room to work.

"Grieve" (4:30)
Only a person can be grieved. The Holy Spirit isn't a force; He is personally affected by how we treat each other.

1 Recognize the life you've left behind

READ Ephesians 4:17–19, Romans 1:21–25 and Hebrews 3:12–13

Pastor Bart began with something many of us have done: driving home after a long day, tired and distracted, and suddenly realizing we're halfway to a house we don't live in anymore. We know where we live. We've just taken the old route so many times it's automatic. Habits can be remarkably hard to break.

Most wrong turns on the way home are harmless. Other patterns aren't. Maybe you've always had a quick temper. You've apologized for things said in anger more times than you'd like to admit, and after a while you start explaining it away: "I've always had a short fuse. That's just the way I am." We have a way of calling character flaws personality traits. And long-time Christians can love Jesus, attend faithfully and still tolerate attitudes that hurt the people around them, maybe for so long they've stopped expecting anything different.

"You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking." Paul is describing the unbelieving world his readers came out of. Notice where he starts: they're "darkened in their understanding" because of "the hardening of their hearts." Turning from God affects our judgment. When we resist His truth, we make sense of life on our own terms, our desires become the measure of what seems reasonable, and something can feel natural even when it's contrary to God's will. We can see a small version of this when we dismiss a correction before we've considered whether it's right. Over time, defensiveness makes it harder to hear what we need to hear.

Then "having lost all sensitivity." Think of someone who has handled tools and lumber for years. Calluses form, and friction that once raised a blister hardly registers. That's useful for your hands and dangerous for your conscience. When we keep excusing something we know is wrong, it gets easier to excuse the next time, and eventually the fact that it no longer bothers us seems like proof it isn't serious. Familiarity is a poor guide to holiness. We need God's Word to show us what we've learned to tolerate.

Paul is describing people alienated from God. A Christian's struggle with anger or bitterness doesn't mean they've stopped being a Christian. His warning asks believers whether they're still making room for a way of life they've been called to leave. That takes honesty. Understanding how a habit developed can help, but we still need to call it sin when it is sin and take responsibility for the harm it causes.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever caught yourself driving the old route home, or doing something else on autopilot? What does that show about habits?

2. What are some flaws people commonly excuse as "just the way I am"?

3. How does resisting God affect the way we think, according to verses 17–18? Where have you seen that?

4. What's an example of dismissing a correction before considering whether it's right?

5. How does a conscience become callused? What helps keep it sensitive?

6. What's the difference between understanding why you struggle with something and excusing it?

2 Live as someone made new in Christ

READ Ephesians 4:20–24, Romans 6:6–14, Ezekiel 36:25–27 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24

"That, however, is not the way of life you learned." Literally, *you did not learn Christ that way.* These believers had come to know Jesus through the gospel. It's possible to learn Christian teaching and still resist its influence. Someone can explain what the Bible says about forgiveness while nursing a grudge. Paul brings us back to the Person we've come to know. The Jesus who welcomes us also teaches us how to live, so discipleship includes letting His truth question us, especially when it exposes something we'd rather leave alone.

We were taught to "put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires." The old self is who we were under sin's rule. Romans 6 explains what Christ has done about it: "our old self was crucified with him so that . . . we should no longer be slaves to sin" (6:6), so "count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God" and offer yourselves to Him, because "sin shall no longer be your master" (6:11–14). The command to put off the old self rests on the freedom Christ has won. We can obey because we're under the gracious rule of a new Lord.

We still have to respond. An old habit may feel almost automatic, but its history doesn't give it the right to keep ruling us. Someone who grew up around shouting may have learned to handle every disagreement that way. Recognizing that history helps. Coming to Christ gives that person a reason to learn a different response and to trust God for the inward change it requires. And our desires are *deceitful*: they promise what they can't deliver. Anger promises to restore our dignity after we've been embarrassed. Resentment promises to protect us from being hurt again.

So the change reaches into how we think: "be made new in the attitude of your minds." We begin to see an offense differently, question a desire we've always trusted and notice another person's needs. As we put off a sinful response, we learn the response that belongs to the new life. Someone who's stopped speaking cruelly can learn to encourage. Someone who's admitted dishonesty can practice telling the truth when it costs something.

God promised this long ago: He would cleanse His people, give them a new heart and put His Spirit in them so they could actually obey Him (Ezekiel 36:25–27). So we can ask Him to deal with what's beneath our conduct. A person can learn not to shout and still nurse resentment, and God cares about the resentment too. Paul prayed for believers, "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through," and added, "The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24). He prayed that for people who already believed. That's why Wesleyans speak of seeking a fuller work of grace: God can cleanse our hearts from deeply rooted sin and fill us with love for Him and for others. That doesn't mean temptation disappears or that we have nothing left to learn. It does give us reason to surrender even the attitudes we've started to think are permanent.

Then "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." *Created* reminds us this is God's work, His handiwork (2:10). His character becomes the standard. We start asking whether a choice honors Him and serves the people He's put in our lives.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What's the difference between learning *about* Christ and learning *Christ*?
2. How does Romans 6 explain why we're able to put off the old self?
3. Think of a habit with a long history in your life. How can you honor that history without letting it rule you?
4. What do anger and resentment promise us? Why are those promises deceitful?
5. Why does Paul pair "put off" with "put on"? What happens if we only do the first?
6. What does it mean to you that God is faithful and "will do it"? Is there an attitude you've assumed was permanent?

3 Put the new life into practice

READ Ephesians 4:25–32 and Matthew 18:21–35

Now Paul gets specific, and almost every command comes in a pair.

Truth. "Put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body." Other people make decisions based on what we tell them. When we mislead them to protect our reputation, they bear the consequences. Speaking truthfully may mean admitting a mistake or a failure we've hidden.

Anger. "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." Paul assumes anger will happen, and some anger is right, especially when people are being mistreated. What we do with it matters. Some conflicts take time, and sometimes people need to cool off before talking further. Paul gives no permission to punish each other while we wait. Resentment left to settle becomes a foothold for more sin and division.

Work. The thief should stop stealing and do honest work, "that they may have something to share with those in need." A person who once took from others becomes someone who contributes to their good. Ordinary work becomes part of discipleship, and generosity makes the change in our hearts visible.

Words. "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs." We sometimes excuse hurtful words as honesty: "I'm just saying it like it is." Paul already required truth in verse 25. Here he asks what our words do to the person who hears them. An accurate criticism can still be needlessly cruel. True information can become gossip when we pass it along for no good reason. A struggling person may need encouragement before they can receive correction. Correction is sometimes necessary, and we should be able to say how it serves the other person. Our irritation alone is an unreliable guide to what needs to be said.

In the middle of all this: "do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." The Spirit who marks us as God's own is personally concerned with how we treat each other. And the people we're tempted to dismiss or wound are people God is preparing for life with Him.

Bitterness and forgiveness. "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." Bitterness can become so familiar that we hardly notice it. We're pleasant to most people while rehearsing what one person did. The hurt may be real, and the apology may never have come. Paul still calls us to let the resentment go, and his reason is the mercy we've received. In Jesus' parable in Matthew 18, a servant forgiven an enormous debt has a fellow servant thrown in prison over a small one. The smaller debt was real. The mercy he'd received was his reason to forgive it.

Forgiveness doesn't mean pretending an offense was small. There may be serious consequences, and trust may not be restored right away. Some relationships need boundaries, and serious wrongs call for accountability. If someone is harming you, forgiveness doesn't mean staying in harm's way; please talk with Pastor Bart or someone you trust. Deep wounds may take a long time to work through, with help from trusted people, and a painful memory coming back doesn't by itself mean you've refused to forgive. We can seek accountability while asking God to free us from the desire for revenge. Sometimes forgiveness begins with an honest prayer admitting how much resentment is still there.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Which pair in verses 25–32 speaks most directly to your life right now?

2. Why does Paul ground truth-telling in "we are all members of one body"?

3. How can you deal with anger "before the sun goes down" when a conflict can't be resolved in one day?

4. What's the difference between being honest and "just saying it like it is"? Think of an example.

5. What does it mean to you that the Holy Spirit can be grieved by how we treat one another?

6. Read Matthew 18:21–35. How does remembering what you've been forgiven change the way you see someone who owes you?

That's just the way I am?

READ Ephesians 4:22–24 and Ephesians 4:32

Some of us know what it's like to keep driving toward the old house. Paul calls us to recognize those old routes, bring them before God and learn to live as people who belong to Jesus. The Lord who made us His own can change us, even where we've failed over and over. We don't have to protect an old habit by treating it as an unchangeable part of who we are.

The sermon closed with this question: **What are you still holding on to that belongs to the life Christ has called you to leave behind?** Be specific. Maybe it's the way you speak to someone at home or at work that you've been defending, or a resentment you haven't wanted to surrender. If the Holy Spirit brings something to mind, respond. Acknowledge it before God. If you've hurt someone, take responsibility and begin making it right. If you've been holding on to bitterness, ask Him to begin changing your heart toward that person. Some patterns took decades to form, and dealing with them may take hard conversations, new habits and the help of other believers. God is faithful, and He has given us His Spirit.

So the next time you hear yourself say, "That's just the way I am," stop and ask whether that's really the end of the story. In Christ you've been made new.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Without having to share details, what came to mind when you heard the closing question?

2. Who could help you, pray for you or hold you accountable as you work on an old pattern?

3. What's one step you could take this week, an apology, a conversation, a new response?

Through the week

☐	**Monday**	Ephesians 4:17–19 and Hebrews 3:12–13. Ask God to show you anything you've grown callused to.
☐	**Tuesday**	Ephesians 4:20–24 and Romans 6:1–14. Thank God that sin is no longer your master.
☐	**Wednesday**	Ephesians 4:25–28. Look for one chance to tell the truth when it costs you something, and one chance to share with someone in need.
☐	**Thursday**	Ephesians 4:29–30 and James 3:3–12. Before you speak in a tense moment today, ask, "Will this help?"
☐	**Friday**	Ephesians 4:31–32 and Matthew 18:21–35. Name before God a resentment you're carrying, and ask Him to begin changing your heart.

Try this

Pick the one "old route" you most often find yourself driving: a temper, a way of speaking, a grudge. Write down what you'll put off and what you'll put on in its place (for example, "put off sarcasm, put on encouragement"). Ask one trusted person to pray for you about it this week, and pray Ephesians 4:32 for yourself every morning.

Close in prayer

Father, thank You for forgiving us through Jesus and making us Your own. We confess that we've sometimes defended the very things You're calling us to surrender. We've hurt people with our words and grown comfortable with attitudes that grieve You. Forgive us, and help us respond honestly to what You've shown us. Holy Spirit, we yield ourselves to You. Cleanse our hearts and renew the way we think. Help us trust You to change what we've assumed could never change. Give us courage to admit when we've been wrong and to begin making things right. As we remember the mercy we've received, help us extend mercy to others, and be near to those carrying deep wounds. We belong to You, Lord. In Jesus' name, amen.

Notes



Watch the sermon online

Scan the code or visit **pathwaywes.com/sermons/put-off-the-old-self** for the video, this guide and Pastor Bart's blog post on this week's message.

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