Today Is the Day

Putting on the New Man in Ephesians 4 and 5

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The Best Day You Have

The song we were singing kept circling back to one word: today. Today is the best day you have.

I have a friend who, every time I see him and ask, “How are you doing?” answers the same way: “Blessed. I’m blessed.” When somebody asks how I’m doing, I tend to assume they actually want the inventory. So I start in. “Well, work is hard, people are tough, thanks for noticing.” His answer is shorter, and it has formed him. Today is a day of blessing.

Today is the day on which Jesus, dying on the cross, said to the thief, “Today.” If you look at certain editions, the King James capitalizes that word, and there is a reason. “Today” is a Psalm word, it shows up over and over in Psalm 95, and the writer of Hebrews picks it up and presses it: “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” Even when you find yourself on the cross, today is the day. “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

As children of God, we begin to set our minds in a way that looks every day for the mind of Christ. Paul writes in Colossians 3:1–2, “Set your mind on things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.” He writes the same thing differently in Romans 8: a mind set on

the Spirit. There is a way of *minding*, of orienting the inner life, that is the daily work of the people of God.

One New Man

Let me catch us up. A few weeks ago I spent over an hour walking through Ephesians 2; let me summarize it in a few sentences. Paul says God created in Christ Jesus, through his death, "one new man":

> . . . having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace . . . For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. (Ephesians 2:15–16, 18–19)

This is a new humanity created in the death of Jesus. Through one Spirit, all of us have access to the one Father. We are not strangers anymore. We are fellow citizens with the saints, members of the household of God.

And that household is not just people. It is also a place: built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the chief cornerstone. He is both the elder brother in the household and the cornerstone of the new temple, a holy temple being fitted together and growing. We don't usually think of buildings as growing, but this temple has a built-in capacity to grow.

Every Vessel Will Be Filled

It is by one Spirit that we all have access. Notice the counterpart Paul drew earlier in chapter 2: everybody is filled with something. Every human being is a vessel, and a vessel will be filled. There is no neutral option. If you say, "No, I am my own person; I fill myself; I have

my own thoughts," then you have been deceived. The prince of the power of the air, the spirit at work in the children of disobedience, has talked you into thinking you are the one in control. That is what Paul says:

> And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ. (Ephesians 2:1–5)

"But God." I love that pivot. Salvation begins with a fork in the road. We were going down the path of disobedience, blown by the course of the air. Notice the metaphor: leaves in the fall are blown around because they are no longer connected to anything alive. A dead fish floats downstream. It takes something *alive* to kick against that course. Every one of us has had a "but God" moment because his mercy intervened, and his great love is now dwelling inside us by his Spirit.

The Liturgy of the People of God

That love is the real liturgy of the people of God. People wring their hands about how to do church. Communion every week, or once a month? Incense or no incense? Tongues, no tongues, hands laid on, no hands laid on? We have been arguing about church mechanics for two thousand years and we will go on arguing for another ten thousand. But the liturgy of the people of God is love. It is the fragrance the priests carried into the holy place, the fragrance that prefigured the love God himself was going to put into humanity by his Spirit.

That love is the soil out of which everything Paul says about ethics in Ephesians 4 and 5 grows. He turns the corner at the start of chapter 4:

"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love" (Ephesians 4:1–2).

The love and grace of God is now in us, to love and bear with and show grace to others. That is how we exercise our vocation.

Every Child Has a Calling

Every "but God" moment comes with a job in the kingdom. Everyone who has come and met the Father is a full-grown son or daughter, with a full place in the household. Every one of us has equal value in this kingdom, and every one of us has a calling. There is no junior tier.

In this household, the goal is to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). I'll tell you the truth: if you have children, there is nothing worse than seeing them fight. I would rather have my kids upset with me than upset with each other. When I walk past tension I had nothing to do with, it eats at me, because I cannot do anything about it. I just sit there hoping they'll get over it. I don't want uncomfortable feelings around the family table. The Father feels the same way. "Endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Put off the Old Man

Then Paul gets practical, and this is where I started to fall off the cliff a few weeks ago. Look at chapter 4:21:

> . . . if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you

> put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:21–24)

There is a lot we learned in growing up before we had our "but God who is rich in mercy" moment. We developed a lot of bad habits that come naturally, habits of breathing in the same old air.

Look at how Paul describes the inversion. Adam was clay, and God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul. On the day of Pentecost, there came a rushing mighty wind. The Greek and Hebrew words for *breath*, *wind*, and *spirit* overlap. God breathes into people again, and they become new-creation life, and they begin to speak in new tongues that glorify God in a way that manifests this new creation. People wanted to know about that.

That is the framework. Put off the old. The old man is corrupt, corrupt because of *deceitful* lusts. Put on the new. The new is being renewed daily in the spirit of the mind.

Ephesians 2:8–10 is the classic statement of how we got here:

> For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8–10)

This new creation we are putting on is Christ. The Spirit we are now filled with empowers us to be who God has called us to be. So we cast off the old man with its deceitful lusts and we put on the new man, who is being renewed every day. The act of God's grace is unilateral; God moves toward us. And once that happens, something begins to work *in* us, in

response. Paul puts it elsewhere this way: the grace of God teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts (Titus 2:11–12). Love is what compels us. So is it here.

Is This Just a List of Dos and Don'ts?

After Paul has just told us we are saved by grace, he is now going to give us a list of behaviors, lying, anger, stealing, corrupt speech, bitterness. Is grace evaporating? Is this just a new list of dos and don'ts? No. What he is doing is showing us how the family of God *must* live. If you are going to be a full partaker in the family, you live by the family's nature. And the family's nature is determined by the Father, whose love and grace is what flows down to us. The behaviors he names are not arbitrary. They are the behaviors that bring separation.

Speak the Truth, to Yourself

"Therefore, putting away lying, 'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,' for we are members of one another" (Ephesians 4:25).

If a spouse lies to a spouse, will that be good for the marriage or bad? If we lie to coworkers, lie to children, lie to one another in the church, how do we have unity? It cannot fly. So speak truth to your neighbor. Why not lie to each other? "For we are members of one another." The central nervous system of the body of Jesus Christ is truth-telling. Lying to a member of the body is lying to yourself.

Be Angry, but Don't Sleep on It

"'Be angry, and do not sin': do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil" (Ephesians 4:26–27).

We are human; we are going to get angry. Anger itself is not the problem. But if we harbor it (if it becomes a quiet, persistent complaint we go to sleep on) sometime during the night a crevice opens up. A crag forms in the rock where the devil can get a foothold. The thing

we are warring against, as Paul will say in chapter 6 (and as he has already said in chapter 2), is precisely the power that works in disobedience and finds purchase in unaddressed grievance. What starts as a small complaint becomes a foothold. So Paul says: don't give place. Persistent anger and grudge-holding decay the whole soul. A momentary moment of anger can lead to a decay of the entire character if it is not let go before the day ends.

Stealing and the Joy of Giving

"Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need" (Ephesians 4:28).

"Don't steal" seems like the obvious application, but think about Paul's first-century context. What if you were living in a society where many people were unemployed and stealing felt like just part of life: quick hands, taking from someone else's labor? In any era, taking is divisive. It works against unity. So what should the redeemed do instead? Labor, and labor not just for self, but so as to have something to give to anyone in need.

There is a law in nature: There is an insatiable hole in us for *more*. You will never have enough. You will never have a nice enough car, a nice enough house, a nice enough vacation. There is always more. The grasping itself is what does the damage. The true joy of new creation, and of original creation, is in *giving*, not taking. "For God so loved the world that He gave" (John 3:16). Love and giving are the pillars of creation. The reason God started this whole family project is that he had an infinite capacity for love and wanted to share it. None of this denies that anyone in need has a place to receive. It says only what Jesus said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Corrupt Communication

"Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers" (Ephesians 4:29).

The word *corrupt* made me think about the law of entropy. Nothing in this world stays put. There is a constant drag toward decay. Words can serve that drag, or they can resist it.

Think of the friend I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the one who answers "how are you?" with "Blessed." My instinct, by contrast, is to answer with the inventory: well, where do I start? That is corrupt communication. It is bringing the hearer down. Sorry I asked. Nobody wants to walk away from a conversation thinking, "Man, that was a drag. You're an anchor." That is the law of entropy at work in human speech. It is a corrupting influence.

Notice the contrast: "what is good for necessary *edification*." Go back to the metaphor of the temple that is growing. The Spirit of God dwelling in us is a force that causes growth, not decay. Words of truth grow. Corrupt words tear down. And the standard is whether grace is being imparted to the hearer. The grace and truth and love we received from God when we were dead in our sins is now what we receive *and* impart.

The Seal That Authenticates

"And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30).

The Holy Spirit is our identifying mark. "Seal" here is not just a wax impression: It is the certifying mark, the verification, the authentication of who we are. The Spirit authenticates us as children of God. The Father's name is pressed onto our foreheads. Revelation picks this up:

"To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it" (Revelation 2:17).

And to Philadelphia:

"I will write on him My new name" (Revelation 3:12).

Fast-forward to Revelation 13, and there is another power (the dragon, the beast) that wants to put *its* name on you. They want to write their character on your forehead so that every word out of your mouth is their corrupt communication. But God has called us to live. The living children of God have the Father's name written on their foreheads, and they become part of an authentic people, sealed by the Spirit. So don't grieve the Spirit by behaving in a way that contradicts the seal. If we say, "child of God," but every action says "child of the devil," we only cause the unbeliever to blaspheme. The darkness stays dark because no true light has been carried into it.

Bitterness, Wrath, and the Even-As Moment

"Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:31–32).

Notice the exponential build in the list. Bitterness is silent anger. Silent anger, undealt with, leads to corruption in the bones. It will have physical effects. Your body will hurt. Your health will suffer. Bitterness, unaddressed, escalates: from quiet resentment, to wrath, to anger, to clamor, to shouting matches, to evil speaking. The devil wins the day.

Then it is as if Paul, in mercy, knows we cannot take any more of the heavy stuff. He gives us four words that change everything: "Be kind to one another." Tenderhearted. Forgiving.

And then the two most important words in the whole book: “even as.” *Even as God in Christ forgave you.* When we find ourselves with all of those other things stirring in our hearts, the even-as moment is what breaks the spell. We look at God’s actions toward us, and that becomes the leverage by which we let go. We don’t have to be the bitter person anymore.

Imitators of God

“Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (Ephesians 5:1–2).

Notice he hasn’t left the topic. We are children of God, and as children we are imitators. We are mimetic creatures; we learn by imitation. You don’t have to be around someone long before you start saying, “Now I see whose kid you are.” Have you ever run into the grown child of an old friend and thought, “That’s a chip off the old block: same mannerisms, same way of holding the mouth, same walk”? One day I heard a voicemail my son had left me, and if I hadn’t known I wasn’t calling myself, I’d have sworn it was my own voice. He doesn’t sound like me when I hear him in person. But on that voicemail, he did. That’s how it works.

As children of the Father, there is a tone about us. Mannerisms of grace and truth, of love and giving, our Father’s mannerisms continually coming through. “Walk in love.” That is not a posture; it is a way of life. *Even as* Christ loved us and gave himself for us. There is the second “even as.” John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave.” Christ so loved us that he gave himself. We so love one another that we give ourselves. The pattern trickles down: Father to King, King to citizens, citizens to one another.

The First Command

"But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks" (Ephesians 5:3–4).

It doesn't fit. That's not the clothing of Christ. "You're no longer shaped like that. You're shaped like your Father; you're shaped like Christ. The unfitting clothes of the old man don't go on anymore."

And here we have to address the indictment people will hand you in college, in school, at work: "Christians are against everything. Against sex, against money, against having a good time. All those laws. And Paul was the worst of them."

Hold on. Pause that record. What was God's *very first* command? "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). Does that sound like a God who is down on sex? I'm just asking the question. We are part of the new creation, and the new creation goes back to the original creation. Listen to Jesus on this in Mark 10. The Pharisees come to him and say, "Moses said it's permissible to give a writing of divorce. What do you say?"

> Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' . . . Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate. (Mark 10:5–9)

As original-creation and new-creation people, we are people of faithfulness. Fornication, in this frame, is a *lie of the body*. We're not telling the truth with our bodies. We're pretending this is forever when we know it isn't.

This is not condemnation. It is a question about how to live the most vibrant life you possibly can. Give yourself to one person. Love and serve that person for the rest of your life. That is what Paul is going to spell out in the rest of chapter 5 and into chapter 6, husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church; wives honor your husbands; children honor your parents; parents don't provoke your children; bosses treat your employees with grace; employees work hard. He is talking about how the Spirit manifests through all of the relationships we have.

And don't be a *taker*. "Fornication and covetousness," taking and grasping, never satisfy. Coarse jesting, foolish talking: they don't fit. "But rather giving of thanks." Here is a practical word: if you are married and tempted toward unfaithfulness, remind yourself of the great things about your spouse. Begin to be thankful for that person. It won't take long, and the thoughts of unfaithfulness will depart. Thanksgiving is the antidote to coveting.

Paul calls covetousness "idolatry," which means he has just connected horizontal faithfulness to vertical faithfulness. Greed and fornication and all the *taking* sins betray a God who *gives*, a God who loves, a God of truth.

Empty Words and Victorian Morality

> Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.
>
> (Ephesians 5:6–8)

"Let no one deceive you with empty words": That is the culture of every age, including ours. Whoever wants to write *their* name on your forehead will hand you ideas that make what we are talking about sound like Victorian morality. But this isn't Victorian morality. Any generation can come up with its own list of dos and don'ts, and the list will change. What is

wrong today won't be wrong tomorrow; what is currently forbidden will be permitted; what is currently permitted will be forbidden. Paul is not playing that game. Paul is asking a more durable question: how does the family stay together? How does the family of God stay together? The behaviors he forbids are the ones that bring separation.

"You were once darkness, but now you are light." Stop on that. Not "in the dark" and "now in the light": *darkness* and *light*. Can you imagine God saying that about you and me? *You are light.* Walk, then, as children of light:

". . . for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth, finding out what is acceptable to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:9–10).

"Finding out"; that is active. Children of light are not driven; they discern. We don't live the unexamined life. The problem with most people is exactly that, no self-examination. They go through life convinced they're right and never ask the question. Paul says: actively find out what is acceptable to the Lord.

Exposure by Light, Not by Bullhorn

"And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them" (Ephesians 5:11).

How do we expose them? A lot of people love to expose people. Some people think exposure means climbing a tree at the local university and shouting "Repent, you cigarette-sucking sinner!" at passing professors. Is that how we expose people?

Or is the exposure simply the light of our life? "For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret" (Ephesians 5:12). It's not about *speaking* the dark things. It's about *living* the light. Be children of God; do what fits; throw on the clothes of Christ;

live the life of Christ. That is what it means to be light in the world. And that light is all the world needs.

Listen to Jesus in the verse right after John 3:16:

"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:17).

We don't need to condemn one another. The world is already condemned. Just live the life God has called you to live. That is the light. People will start saying, "I want that." Your life will become the testimony.

Awake, You Who Sleep

And how does Paul end this whole stretch?

"Therefore He says: 'Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light'" (Ephesians 5:14).

That is the whole movement of the passage in a single line. We were dead. We were asleep. The light wakes the sleeper. The Lord gives life. The light we bring is meant to do for others what was done for us.

Have you been called to the family? It's not about dos and don'ts. It's about living family life, not finding ways to be separated, but finding ways to bear with one another in grace and mercy. And when people see that (when they see your families, your churches, the way you work with people at the office) they will say, "I want to be part of that light."

If we're sleeping, let's wake up.