

Putting on New Clothes

Ephesians 4:17-5:2,

Rev. Jim Zazzera, Faith Presbyterian Church, 23 August 2015

Dear Miss Manners:

I would like to know if it's necessary to write a thank you note for presents my son receives at his birthday party. He will be four. It seems ridiculous to me, but some of my friends do this.

Gentle Reader:

Miss Manners presumes you have taught this child to thank each guest with enthusiasm as the present is given. If so, you must be exhausted, and you may skip your written thanks and save any strength left for teaching the child to write thank you letters when he becomes literate.¹

So advises Judith Martin in her book, *Miss Manners Guide to Rearing Perfect Children: A Primer for Everyone Worried About the Future of Civilization*.

We all have ideas about what is appropriate, what is correct behavior, what constitutes good manners. Even children have specific thoughts about this. Some of my favorites come from a book called *Children's Rules For Parents*. Third grader Bruce Milligan of Darien Connecticut reminds us, "Parents should not interfere in children's pillow fights, if they don't want to be hit by a flying pillow." Marc Fioravanti says, "Parents should not pressure kids into playing a dumb instrument like a bassoon." John David Vaughn of Spartanburg, South Carolina offers this bit of wisdom, "Fathers: Never wear navy blue socks with shorts." And Quincy Manning of Greensboro, North Carolina sums it all up, "Manners make a good parent."

Many people look to the Bible as a manual for life, a guide to correct behavior, for how we live our everyday lives. There is some truth to that. Yet as a pastor, I am so concerned about the big themes of scripture—salvation, peace, unity, love—that I sometimes forget that God cares about the little things in life. I neglect that reality as described by one thoughtful person: "God is in the details."

On the other hand—I do believe that some of us get a little too caught up in the Bible as a rulebook. So I spend a great deal of time as a pastor trying to convince people that the Bible is so much more than that.

To be fair, the Bible does offer guidance in the nitty gritty details of life. In fact, that is exactly what the writer of Ephesians is telling us today. Few places in scripture offer more down-to-earth, more concrete advice than this passage from Ephesians. Although this is not really a complete catalog of some "Christian dos and don'ts," it is quite specific in its description of certain aspects of Christian behavior.

It is important to know that in this book, the list of everyday, ordinary behaviors recommended to a disciple of Christ is *preceded* by a verse after verse of grandiose description of "God's gracious

¹*Miss Manners Guide to Rearing Perfect Children: A Primer for Everyone Worried About the Future of Civilization, Judith Martin, p. 139.*

purpose in establishing a new humanity.” Before the author gets to the details of life he celebrates God’s amazing love and grace.

The author doesn’t start the book of Ephesians by saying, “Christians do this...Christians don’t do this,” but begins with words like this:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...²

and this:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...³

It is only out of this context—out of this brilliant reality—that the writer begins to suggest what God’s love and grace might mean for Christian behavior. The author is not trying to compete with Miss Manners or Dear Abby or some 21st century advice blogger in composing a book of Christian manners. Rather, he is asking the question, “What does the love of God mean for how we act in the world?”

In fact, the language of this passage was probably taken from the instruction for newly baptized believers. It was likely part of the catechesis, the teaching, that new Christ-followers received. In early centuries, those being baptized were stripped of their clothes, immersed naked into the water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, liberally anointed with fragrant oil, and then given a new garment.⁴ It must have been quite a moving and dramatic process.

These new believers would understand well the admonition in verses 22-24:

put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.⁵

“Clothe yourself with the new self” - throw off the old! Even today a similar theme comes through in the questions we ask at baptism:

Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?⁶

² Ephesians 1:3, *NRSV*.

³Ephesians 2:4-6, *NRSV*.

⁴ <http://www.christchurchgp.org/sermons/sermon-2007-easter-vigil-bw.pdf>

⁵ Ephesians 4:22-24, *NRSV*.

⁶ *Book of Common Worship*, p. 407.

We are letting go of one way of life and taking on another.

Now that you are baptized—put on some new clothes. Put on a new self. Now that you follow Christ—everything is different. When we come up out of those waters—the old self has died—and everything has changed. Another place in the New Testament, the book of Romans, says it even better:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.⁷

This transformation is less of a command and more of a statement of a new reality. You've got some new clothes—and they make you look totally different! You have some new habits in your life—and they stand out. But they are more than something external—they symbolize a change deep within.

There is, of course, lots of advice for us in this passage—and it is relevant even in our day and age. Though it may sound simple, even common sense, the author assumes nothing about his first hearers. He seems to think that these new Christians need to know the very basics. Perhaps that's true for us as well.

Tempted to take a little something extra on your employer's expense account? *There is something for you here!* Lied to your folks about where you went with your friends last night? *There is something for you here!* Wanted to bash someone's head after their stupid behavior angered you? *There is something for you here!* Find yourself talking trash about certain people? *There is something for you here!*

I could go on with some amateur psychological theories about anger. I could offer insights from law enforcement about stealing. I could easily tell you how many times my own words have gotten me into trouble. I could encourage you to remember how many times you have been lied to by one you trusted. *But you know all of this. It is old hat.*

The critical thing about this advice from Ephesians is not that it is new to us. Lying. Stealing. Malicious words. Lashing out in anger. These experiences and this advice are not particularly new to the Christian church. In fact, many of these directions have their roots in Jewish thought (remember the Ten Commandments?), and even in ancient Middle Eastern wisdom before that. *These ideas apply directly to our lives today.*

What is unique here is how the writer frames these issues. What is unique is the explanation of WHY it is we might seek to set aside lies, express anger in healthy ways, speak words of encouragement and love, and not take what does not belong to us. According to Ephesians our behavior is not tailored to gain God's favor, to get God to like us, but our behavior is an expression of a relationship that already exists between us and God and God's people. *Our actions in the world demonstrate to all people that the Christian faith really is life changing good news!*

⁷ Romans 12:2, NRSV.

Listen to what the writer says about the “why” of our behavior: Don’t lie...”because we are members together of the body of Christ.”⁸ Don’t steal...”so that may earn an honest living and help the poor,”⁹ Don’t use harmful words...”so that what you say will do good to those that hear you.”¹⁰ We act in these ways because we have are part of a new community. These loving actions are like the native attire of the church. *We have put on new clothes.*

So we put on new clothes as part of a new community. Yet something even deeper is happening within us. Chapter 4, verse 30 says “do not grieve the Holy Spirit within you.” Chapter 5, verse 1 tells us to be “imitators of God.” Chapter 5, verse 2 reminds us “you must be controlled by love just as Christ loved us.” *Don't miss this: The Holy Spirit is within us, the power of God guides us, the love of Christ controls us.*

It is this Trinity that leads our lives. It is the Triune God that gives us new clothes. It is the Almighty of the universe than changes our hearts. Verse 20 talks about “learning Christ” —not learning about Christ, but “learning Christ.” (I love that phrase.) As Christ followers—we are taking on his very way of being in the world. We are “little Christs.” Or as verse 24 tells us, we “clothe [ourselves] with the new self, created according to the likeness of God...”¹¹

We act in new ways because we experience a new power within. This new power transforms us so dramatically that everything begins to look different. This power is so effective that we begin to look different. We have put on new clothes.

My friends, in Christ something dramatic has happened and continues to happen in us. We are not simply rule followers - that is not what our faith is about. That is not what brings us welcome and acceptance from God. Yet still, we are “made for good works.” It is as if we can’t help but do what God calls out of us. Maybe it is less like getting new clothes—and more like growing new skin—or (even better) like being given new hearts.

In his recent book, *The Road to Character*, columnist David Brooks writes about Christians and good works with significant insight. He talks about this process of transformation that he observed as he learned about a 5th century bishop named Saint Augustine. See if this applies to your life of faith:

...it starts with the dive inside to see the vastness of the inner cosmos. The inward dive leads outward, toward an awareness of external truth and God. That leads to humility as one feels small in contrast to the Almighty. That leads to a posture of surrender, or self-emptying, as one makes space for God. That opens the way for you to receive God’s grace. That gift arouses an immense feeling of gratitude, a desire to love back, to give back, and to delight. That in turn awakens vast energies.¹²

⁸ Ephesians 4:25

⁹ Ephesians 4:28

¹⁰ Ephesians 4:29

¹¹ Ephesians 4:24, *NRSV*.

¹² *The Road to Character*, David Brooks, p. 208.

God's grace awakens vast energies! That is what we are talking about here. God's grace gives us new clothes.

Every year on the morning before the first day of school, Lena and I always "punished" our children by making them pose for pictures. Needless to say each year our children reacted with various degrees of reluctance, delight, or boredom. Almost always they were wearing some new clothes, or maybe new shoes, or at least a new backpack. It was fun this week to go through these old pictures to see what they were wearing on a particular day during a particular year. But it is more interesting to see how each of our children changed from year to year. The clothing was different, but the physical changes were even more dramatic. Yet what I find most significant is how they had each changed as people. Their intelligence, their insights, their emotions, their compassion, their worries, their hopes—I can remember and still see all of that behind the faces of my children in these pictures.

As Christian people, we change too—from month to month, from year to year. The world outside the church looks for that in those of us who say we follow Jesus. We can and should expect to look more like the one whom we worship and serve. You see, it is true: Christ clothes us with his very being, God calls us to new ways of living, the Spirit awakens vast energies within us.

So let us give thanks to God who loves us and transforms us all!

Amen.

Next Step Questions

1. When you were growing up, was there a certain behavior or an aspect of manners that your parents or other adults expected of you? Are these behaviors still important in your life?
2. Read Ephesians 4:17-5:2 again. What do you notice here? What feels strange to you? What feels familiar to you?
3. What behaviors do you expect of Christian people (including yourself)?
4. Did you expect that in your baptism you would become a different person? Why or why not? If you were to give advice to a newly baptized person, what would you say?
5. Do you think of the Bible as a rulebook? Why or why not? What word do you like best to describe the Bible?
6. There are many positive and negative behaviors listed in this passage. (Also more in 5:2—5:10) Which ones touch a nerve for you? Has your relationship with Christ transformed you in any of these areas?
7. Do you ever feel that there are certain things you must do for God to love and accept you? How do you view this in light of this verse from Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...”?
8. Jim read a quote from David Brooks that implies that God’s grace “awakens vast energies” in us. Has that been true for you? In what way has your relationship with Christ given you “energies” to do good?