



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

7643 Huron River Drive

Dexter, MI 48130

734-426-8480

All Things New: “What Not to Wear”

Ephesians 4:17-22

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By Matt Hook

“The Pastor is airing his dirty laundry!”

Not really. I just wanted to show you my absolute favorite suit coat in the world. I wore it till about a year and a half ago. (It’s too small). The truth is, **The nicest suit in the world is bad if it doesn’t fit you anymore.**

This is my favorite suit jacket I ever owned. I look good in it! Impressive! Cool!

But even the coolest suit in the world is bad if it doesn’t fit you anymore.

Last year, someone anonymously gave me a gift certificate to Men’s Warehouse, and I bought this beautiful black suit. I love it. It actually did make it easier to give up my old favorite suit. Some of you have given a whole lot of your life to Christ, and yet you’re still holding on to something like this suit. Or worse, *you’ve put on your new jacket without taking off your old one.*

Ephesians 4:22 “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Paul is saying the ways of the world don’t fit you anymore.

Some of the stuff you’ve been serving doesn’t fit you anymore.

“But I’ve done so much in this suit! But it’s been with me for 17 ½ years!

Why should I hand it over? I’ve given my life to some of this stuff!

The new suit you wear will look terrible unless you take off the old first. But that’s how most of us are walking around right now: with this great new suit, looking pretty stupid hanging on the old one. Why don’t we take off the old?

I think we don’t take off the old because for some of us, the future seems scary. There’s a growing list of people whose jobs are being cut back. There’s a growing list of people fighting illness. There are a number of problems and issues and war that is affecting us. There are families with fights inside and out. For some of us, it’s like the future that seems so scary is showing up in the present! So we have these thoughts: How can the future be as good as the past? What if it’s not? How can I be sure I’ll get enough? How? Here’s how: because the future has been handed to us. What do you say to that? We’re Christians! We’re supposed to have hope, and faith, and love—permeating our lives! What’s the problem? The problem is that I’m not there. I’m *not* caring for the least and the lost. Jesus said “When you visit the sick, and feed the hungry, and clothe the people, you’re feeding me.” I know that, but I feel like I’m the one in the most need! But I know I’m not... We’re not the first to experience life like this... but how futile it feels. Maybe you’re feeling that way too. Interestingly, we’re not the first to struggle with this. Look at what Paul says in Ephesians 4:17...

Ephesians 4:17 “So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the non-believers do, in the futility of their thinking. Why is it futile? You’ve seen the daring circus performer riding two horses at the same time. He has one foot firmly planted on the back of each horse. He can do this because they are so close together. If the two horses begin to move apart from each other, though, the performer must pick one or the other to ride.

It's the same thing with our spiritual journey. At first these two life views don't seem that far apart. But when we look again, like Paul is forcing us to do, we start to see the contrasts. We see how they are dramatically different – even totally opposite. So let me ask: are *you* living like an unbeliever? Can you name the extra horses you are riding? As we move along in our journey, our two horses move further and further apart, and now may be the day when you have to choose – which horse will you ride?].

It's futile because we think we engineer the future. Scholars call it the modern myth of progress, always looking for the new and improved, as a way for us to engineer our own future. It's the difference between the new and improved, or the ancient journey of faith.

Theologian Dr. Steve Long states that **the journey of the modern myth of progress is a journey motivated by fear.** What will we do? What will we do if the economy collapses even more? What will we do if our stocks continue to fall? What will we do if we lose our jobs? What will we do if our enemies invade? What will we do if Obama doesn't unite us? What will we do if government doesn't come through? The journey of the new and improved is always motivated by fear. It says "Look. Grab what you can now. There might not be enough tomorrow."

Aren't you tired of those commercials that say "Don't miss this week's episode. The greatest episode EVER!" Because you know what? They said that last week?" And they'll say it next week and the week after that and the week after that, because that's all they have! That's all they have! The new and improved! Progress. Change for the sake of change. And many Americans are on the edge of their seats to see what will happen next. Can Obama pull us together? Can he call us to responsibility? Every politician in America has talked about change. Nobody's saying from what to what. We just want change! The modern myth of progress is an empty and vain life. And it is the default mode in North American culture. It will suck you in if you do not resist it.

What's ironic about the modern myth of progress is it's neither modern, nor new, nor improved. It's been around for about 300 years. Perhaps you could trace its beginnings to Immanuel Kant in the 18th Century, who at the very same time when Mr. Wesley was trying to form a people called Methodist, he was trying to form a people called "Enlightenment people." Kant wrote an essay "What is Enlightenment?" And this is what he said: "Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is the inability to think for oneself, but to always think with others." Think for yourself. Seize the day. Be an individual. Be unique! And the majority of persons in Western culture said "Yeah, let's do that! Let's all think for ourselves. Okay. How 'bout you? Yeah, me too!" **Each group thinking they're being unique and individual, new and improved, on the myth of progress, ushering in the new future, repeating the same old story again and again and again.**

Paul says don't serve that journey. Resist that journey. There is another journey. An ancient journey of faith that says "We're not just looking for the new and improved that never arrives." This ancient journey lives out of word and sacrament that says "We have beheld the future and it is good and it cannot be taken away from us." Now it's a weird journey to our ears. As Deitrich Bonhoeffer said "When Christ bids a person to come and follow, Christ bids that person to come and die."

Jesus lived, and taught, and preached "the Kingdom of God is at hand." And then Jesus died...but that's not the end of the story! The violence was undone—have you ever heard of such a thing in your entire life?! The violence was undone—it didn't have the last word—it didn't silence people? The violence was undone in the resurrection! And now Jesus...glorified body, comes back and gathers those disciples, all of whom who had betrayed him, and gathered them into a new community—we call the church. And he gave them the Holy Spirit. And he said "Remember these things. Pass them on." And so it's happened, down through the centuries, and you have heard and I have heard! And just hearing that already means we've been called out to pass that message on.

You help people learn how to die, so we can go forth knowing how to live. It's not the modern journey of progress which is always looking for the new and improved, constantly trying to create a future that doesn't

come. It's a journey of substance, of charity and faith and hope that lives out of a memory that we cannot let die. Listen to what Paul goes on to say about how we get there. It's an amazing description for us today:

18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

[Like a callous, harder than the original.] You're going to have a problem, because your hanging on to that "suit" has caused this callous—Paul calls it "hardening of your heart—a calloused heart.

19 Having lost all sensitivity, [Because of this callous around your heart], they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. [When your heart has been hardened, or calloused, you lose your ability to "feel". You become aloof. Nothing grieves you anymore.

20 You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. 21 Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.

[Paul's talking about Jesus life, death, and rising again.] This is the ancient story.

22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires;

[Like laying aside your old clothes that are disintegrating.] LEIGH ASKING ME TO THROW AWAY ALL MY OLD T-SHIRTS with the stains. (Come to think of it; my tank-tops all disappeared the first couple years we were first married!)

23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; restoring God's original image. The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude to me is more important than facts. It's more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or do. It's more important than appearance, giftedness, or skill. It will make or break a company, a church, a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me, and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you...

24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

This new coat, this new garment of praise, it really does fit. Righteousness isn't "self" righteousness. It's a love of what is right. And holiness is the aversion to sin that is reproduced in the believers. Dorothy Day said "The task of the Christian life is to live in such a way that your life would not make sense unless the Gospel you proclaim is true."

Look at the Amish people. To us it means an occasional horse and buggy north of Clair, or Shippshewana. But to those who live locally it means difficult culture to interact with. And long lines of traffic. Before the West Nickel Mines School shooting 2 years ago, in one community, a couple high school boys were boozing it up, threw a rock in the back of a buggy. They didn't know that it was a young couple who had just had a baby. The boys killed the baby. The Amish acknowledged the pain, but the community came together and said "We must come together, love our enemies, and forgive." If Jesus Christ is not Lord, their life makes no sense. But if Jesus Christ IS Lord, their life makes perfect sense.

May *your* life make perfect sense, that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, is *your* future, and may you wear His garments of praise even now. Amen