Putting on Love:
An Interpretation of Ephesians 4:25–32

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Summary of Ephesians 4:25–32

Main Idea of the Text (MIT)

Composing Christian wisdom literature centered in the ways of love, Paul gives six instructions for putting off the old-self and putting on the new-self in order to grow in wisdom, virtue, and unity in Christ.

Outline

A. Speak the truth; avoid all forms of falsehood (4:25 [NAS]).
   25 Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.

B. Overcome anger; avoid all forms of wrath (4:26–27).
   26 Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and do not give the devil an opportunity.

C. Work hard for God, others, and the needy; avoid all forms of stealing (4:28).
   28 He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.

D. Encourage others always; avoid all foul language (4:29).
   29 Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.

E. Do not sadden the Holy Spirit; avoid bad attitudes (4:30).
   30 Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

F. Be(kind) kind to others; avoid all malice (4:31–32).
   31 Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.
Putting on Love

The humorist observes that people are like porcupines: the closer they get to one another, the more they needle their neighbors. Like much in humor, there is more than a grain of truth to the simile. Although Jesus Christ teaches, commands, and empowers his disciples to “love one another” (the mandate of John 13:34), yet Christians, like all people, have a difficult time maintaining love in non-superficial ways in actual relationships. The apostle John emphasizes that “lov[ing] one another” is the sign indicating whether one belongs to Christ (1 Jn 3:10–11). For Christians, a vast divide often exists between knowing about love and knowing how to love in day-to-day practices of real relationships. Given this rift between awareness and practice of love, a question arises: how do Christians grow in loving character? In Ephesians 4:25–32, Paul addresses this perennial problem by writing six commands for how to live together responsibly and lovingly. Paul focuses on two processes that Christians must undergo toward maturity: putting away the former ways and putting on the new ways of love. The figure of putting off and on like a garment may seem a simplistic formula for character change, but Paul rightly assumes that for the Christian community the standard, desire, and power for change come from the resurrected Christ. Moreover, Paul forms his six commands in antithetical pairs (i.e., “do this; avoid that”), a rhetorical heuristic that can cause conflict of conscience, then recognition of a problem, and thence reversal of behavior, outlining the dynamic process of growing in maturity.

MIT: Composing Christian wisdom literature centered in the ways of love, Paul gives six instructions for putting off the old-self and putting on the new-self in order to grow in wisdom, virtue, and unity in Christ.
Context and Situation

As signaled in the salutation, Paul composed the epistle to the churches around Ephesus in Asia Minor. According to John Stott, “The central theme is ‘God’s new society.’” During the mid-50s or early 60s AD, Paul addressed the Ephesian church and its specific struggles, but the letter is the least situational and the most epistolary of Paul’s writings. Moreover, Paul provides general counsel for growing in maturity in Christ, counsel that instructs Christians in all times and places. In the epistle, Paul outlines basic virtuous behavior expected of Christians in their new society centered in the love of Christ.

In structure, Paul progresses from theology (chs. 1–3) to practical morality (chs. 4–6), suggesting a close relationship between Christian faith and life. Within this two-part structure, Paul describes four movements of growth. In the first section of Ephesians, Paul introduces the metaphors of new life, new society, and adoption in Christ (1:3–2:10). Second, after the new life in Christ, Paul transitions to implications for life together in God’s new society (2:11–3:21). Third, Paul introduces moral principles for how Christians should live together in this new life (4:1–5:21). As Ernest Best describes this transition, “[Paul] has explained the theology of unity; now he comes to its practice.” Fourth, Paul concludes his epistle by emphasizing how Christians ought to love one another in mutually supportive relationships in this new society (5:21–6:24).

Overall, Paul emphasizes that spiritual unity should exist in God’s new society by means of


2 Dictionary of Paul and His Letters, s.v. “Letter to the Ephesians.”


5 Stott, Ephesians, 25.
practicing the principles of love that will help Christians “attain the unity” and “grow up in all aspects into him who is the head [or source]” of resurrection life (4:13, 15 [NAS]).

Prefacing the moral imperatives in verses 4:25–32, Paul describes the new way of living in the new society, a way contrasted sharply with previous ways of life: “Walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind . . . because of the hardness of their heart” (4:17–18). Those who do not follow Christ “have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness” (4:19). In contrast, Paul desires that Christians will live in a different way than some segments of society which do not know Jesus. Paul wants Christians to “lay aside the old self” and “put on the new self” for the benefit of their own maturity in Christ and for unity within God’s new society (4:22–24).

In particular, what seems to interest Paul the most are the specific practical ways that Christians should “put off the old-self” and “put on the new-self,” enumerated and illustrated at the end of the chapter (4:25–32). Given this emphasis, Harold W. Hoehner outlines the structure of this paragraph:

This new section has five exhortations with regard to the believers’ conduct. Each of these exhortations has three parts: (1) a negative command, (2) a positive command, and (3) the reason for the positive command. All the exhortations have the three parts in the same order except the second one which reverses the first two parts.⁶ These three-part exhortations follow the pattern of the command in verses 22–24 to put off and put on, illustrating practical ways for Christians to act out this transformation from old-self to new-self. These commands apply the implications of the prior paragraph, giving concrete ways to “no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking” (4:17 [NIV]).⁷

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After the practical imperatives in 4:25–32, Paul concludes his paragraph emphasizing the practice of love: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us” (5:1–2 [NAS]). This conclusion mentions love three times: in the form of adjective (agapēta), noun (agapē), and verb (ēgapēsen), showing the source and ends of love. This threefold love alludes to the Trinity in the Father’s adopting love, the Spirit’s helping love, and the Son’s sacrificial love, respectively. Given so much love, Paul pleads that Christians should likewise be imitators of what they have experienced in the ways of divine, dynamic love. Thus, to put on the new-self, “created in the likeness of God,” is to put on love (4:24). Klyne Snodgrass recognizes how much Paul emphasizes the practice of love: “Living in love sums up 4:25–5:1.”

The rest of the chapter illustrates what love does, what love avoids, and what benefits accrue by practicing the love of Christ in community.

**Passage**

A. Speak the truth; avoid all forms of falsehood (4:25).

A first practice of love is to cultivate the virtue of truthfulness. In the command “speak truth,” Paul emphasizes the primary way that Christians put on the love so as to characterize the Christian life as a truthful life. A Christian is to put on honesty and truth while casting off falsehood, an act patterned after the overall change to new-self from old-self that happens in Christ. The negative command comes in the form of a past participle: “after having put off falsehood,” suggesting that one must forsake lies before accepting truth. The word falsehood has an article for emphasis: “the false” (to pseudos). Also, “all forms” means doing away with all kinds of falsehoods, including self-deceptions and ruses directed toward others in one’s personal and public relationships. Paul uses this word with article elsewhere for the act of lying; a similar...
passage has the command, “Do not lie to one another” (Col 3:8–9). For the command to speak the truth, Paul quotes Zechariah in the Septuagint for emphasis and context, in which the Hebrew prophet emphasizes, “speak the truth to one another; judge with truth and judgment for peace in your gates” (Zec 8:16). In legal terms, Paul connects truth to legal procedure toward establishing a peaceful community, affirming the value and benefit for the Christian church.

Similar to Zechariah, Paul specifies the reason for the command in the final clause: “for we are members of one another” (4:25b). The word “member” (melos) refers to a body limb, and the phrase “members of one another” (also employed at Rom 12:5) is a metaphor that personifies the church and compares individual Christians and churches to limbs of Christ’s body, thus emphasizing the perspective of one whole in Christ and the value of harmonious coordination. The imperative to speak truth is established in the character of Christ and for the sake of the body of Christ. When truth is a high priority in a Christian’s life, the benefit is that trust builds between members of the body. The truth-trust connection is vital for fellowship and unity. “For fellowship,” Stott explains, “is built on trust, and trust is built on truth. So falsehood undermines fellowship, while truth strengthens it.”

Paul wants the Ephesian Christians to reject their old way of living by becoming committed to truth and telling the truth to one another. Thus, putting on truth is intimately related to putting on the new-self that emulates the love of Christ.

B. Overcome anger; avoid all forms of wrath (4:26–27).

A second practice of love is to respond wisely and virtuously when angry. Paul writes, “Be angry, and yet do not sin” (4:26a), suggesting a common, human conflict and that Christians

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9 O’Brien, Ephesians, 337.


11 Stott, Ephesians, 185.
should overcome anger rather than being overcome by it. A second injunction follows and modifies it: “do not let the sun go down on your anger” (4:26b). Commentators differ slightly on how to interpret the imperative mood “Be angry,” but Daniel B. Wallace explains that the command must either be understood as conditional (if you are angry) or a simple imperative (be angry). For either view, anger itself, as an emotional response, is not necessarily sinful, for even God and Christ have felt anger. For this command, Paul has quoted from Hebrew wisdom literature, specifically a Psalm of David, so that “Be angry” is a translation of “tremble” with anger and fear, presumably “sons of men” in view of the Lord (Ps 4:4). Framing this verse, David emphasizes the Lord’s mercy toward the godly person and the requirement to act with justice and equity and with trust in the Lord (Ps 4:3–5). In the context of Psalm 4, it can be seen that Paul counsels how to respond to anger with theological wisdom and virtue, which also give benefits of sleeping in peace and dwelling in safety (Ps 4:7–8).

Memorably illustrating these principles, Paul paints the stunning imagery of sunset, a time indicator, to impart a lesson in wisdom: one should be quick to forgive and to resolve damages, injuries, or complaints, lest anger grow toward wrath or lest one neglect to seek positive reconciliation. To be angry without sin is a real possibility, as Paul and King David propose, but it would involve responding to a situation with wisdom and without selfish motives, rash actions, or neglect in pursuing needed reconciliation. Paul counsels responding to offense virtuously and seeking to reconcile differences quickly and even lovingly.

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13 See, e.g., Ps 7:11; Nm 22:22; Dt 4:21; Mk 3:4 and 10:14.

14 Macleod notes that the clause (“do not let the sun down on your anger”) means “nothing should be carried over to the next day,” but his gloss seems overly literal; the idiom is better understood as “let nothing fester” or, in the words of Jesus, “reconcile quickly” (Mt 5:25). See David J. Macleod, “Frustration or Fulfillment, or: What the Well-Dressed Couple Should Wear This Year,” Emmaus Journal 17 (2008): 121.
Continuing the same counsel, Paul gives a second reason for checking anger quickly, so as “not [to] give the devil an opportunity” (4:27). The term “the devil” (to diabolos) means adversary and could be translated as an opponent or adversary to whom one’s anger is directed. Also, the word “opportunity” (topos) is literally “place” or “topic” indicating a range of interpretations, such as a legal place for the charge of blame or accusation, or a mental place in the thoughts or heart that some devil could exploit to sow deceit, discord, and destruction. Paul implies that anger, when grown into wrath, can become destructive in many ways with public and private consequences. The wise and virtuous alternative is to check one’s anger and to seek to become reconciled quickly so that one’s neighbor might not become an adversary. Accordingly, wisdom and virtue are part of the practices of love and are necessary for the Christian community to grow in unity and peace.

C. Work hard for God, others, and the needy; avoid all forms of stealing (4:28).

A third practice of love is to view work as a service to others. Paul encourages Christians to adopt a new perspective of work and to welcome its benefits as specifically theological and relational blessings. Paul enjoins people to abandon old perspectives and practices, requiring that “he who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor.” Before Christ, workers might have viewed work as drudgery and practiced selfish, grasping behavior without thinking about God or others, or executives might have viewed people as “human resources.” After Christ, Christians ought to adopt new perspectives and lifestyle including high-quality service to others. Paul’s counsel implies that Christians can experience a great transformation of mind and pursue “what is good.” In illustration, “the thief is to become a philanthropist.”¹⁵ In Christ, former grapers become cheerful givers, former “have-nots,” those blessed become

¹⁵ Snodgrass, Ephesians, 250.
blessings. Paul accentuates this cause-effect relationship in the economy of the new society: when a Christian puts on and acts out of the new-self, he or she becomes a blessing to others and helps develop truth, unity, and joy in the community. When the Christian practices a life of love, the whole community benefits and is more encouraged to do the same.

D. Encourage others always; avoid all foul language (4:29).

A fourth practice of love is to watch one’s language. The Christian develops maturity and encourages others in God’s new society by means of language. Paul exhorts Christians, “Let no unwholesome word” be mouthed. The word “unwholesome” is sapros, referring to something spoiled and stinking in the state of decay or rot, most likely rotten fruit or foul flesh and metaphorically indicating the moral sphere and the human heart: “unwholesome to the extent of being harmful.”16 Some interpreters like Ernest Best claim that sapros must mean “evil” generally,17 but Paul does not use poneros, which denotes evil generally; rather, Paul employs a metaphor conveying the image and smell of some stinking thing that proceeds from the mouth. The best gloss is “avoid all foul language” because such language infects with decay rather than with life and strength. By contrast, the positive command is to speak in a wholesome way that builds up others “for edification.” Similar to the prior verse, Paul emphasizes sharing something “good” (agathos) “according to the need” (khreias) or what the situation calls for—a direct application of the rhetorical rule of kairos: choosing the right words for the right time.18 The duty of love requires sharing what is good (things, time, and words) at the right time according to the long-term interest of the person and for the benefit of the community.

16 BDAG, s.v. “sapros.”
17 Best, Ephesians, 456.
18 BDAG, s.v. “kairos.”
Drawing a simile, Paul equates right words with right deeds: “shar[ing] with the needy” with “giv[ing] grace” to the listening or reading (4:28–29). Good works of all kinds, at the right time, meet a community’s needs. Encouraging words can be as necessity as food while vicious words can be just as troubling as physical need. Therefore, a good word timely communicated is a practice of love and fulfills an important need in God’s new society.

E. Do not sadden the Holy Spirit; avoid bad attitudes (4:30).

A fifth practice of love is to watch one’s attitude and relationship with the Holy Spirit. Although some Bible transitions like the NAS omit the coordinating conjunction, verse 30 begins with “and” (kai) that shows how the various commands are connected: for instance, edifying words are (or should be) motivated by the Holy Spirit, who works in Christians to change their former ways into the Spirit’s ways. Yet it is possible to grieve the Spirit and so minimize his inward promptings, testimony, and joy. The word “grieve” (lypeo) suggests to cause distress or pain. This language is similar to Isaiah 63:9–10 where the Holy Spirit is also said to be grieved. Thus, an essential activity of putting on the new self is avoiding anything that would sadden the Holy Spirit—avoiding all sin.

In the second part of verse 30, “eschatology is brought to bear on ethics, and once again the double focus on present (now) and future (not yet) is expressed.” The sealing by the Holy Spirit is a reference to the beginning of a Christian’s belief in Christ and his earthly relationship with Him. The reference to the “day of redemption” speaks of the day when a believer’s body

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19 Hoehner, Ephesians, 631.
20 BDAG, s.v. “lypeo.”
21 Thielman, Ephesians, 317.
22 Snodgrass, Ephesians, 251.
will be redeemed and Jesus will fill all in all.\textsuperscript{23} It is the Holy Spirit that is present and active throughout the duration of a Christian’s relationship; He is God, and Christians have a relationship with him. Therefore, Christians should be concerned about how their actions affect the Spirit. Here the emphasis of putting on the new being a benefit to the community, not only on earth but also in heaven, finds its clearest expression.

F. Be(come) kind to others; avoid all malice (4:31–32).

A sixth practice of love is to act kindly to others. In the last sentence of the passage, Paul again expresses putting-off and putting-on actions with specific reference to personal relations. In the single command “put away,” he forbids six attitudes as inappropriate in God’s new society: “bitterness” (pikria), “wrath” (thumos) or angry outburst, “anger” (orge), “clamor” (krauge) or shouting, “slander” (blasphemia), and “malice,” a vicious attitude toward another.\textsuperscript{24} This vitriolic list of vices could be a ladder figure climaxing in the extreme vice of malice; however, wrath and anger are often juxtaposed in similar contexts, suggesting an expression not of climax but intensity.\textsuperscript{25} Summarizing “with all malice” suggests a stacking of synonyms for emphasis. Paul’s instructions, then, are to put away any shred of ill will toward others. Christians should remove all attitudes and actions that cause disunity and develop kindness and forgiveness.

Moving from bitterness to forgiveness is an important part of the new-self in Christ, patterned after God’s actions toward Christian people (as commanded in 5:1). Paul points out

\textsuperscript{23} Stott, \textit{Ephesians}, 189.

\textsuperscript{24} Thielman, \textit{Ephesians}, 319; also BDAG, s.vv.

that loving relationships should reflect the great love that Christians have experienced from God in Christ, who is the ultimate example for the Christian to follow. A Christian is to relate to others with love and grace in light of how the Son of God showed love and grace on the cross.

**Conclusion**

As Christian wisdom literature, Ephesians 4:25–32 advises six practical ways to put off the old-self and put on the new-self in order to grow more and more in wisdom, virtue, and unity in Christ. In each practice, Paul commends not only behaviors but also attitudes of love toward growing in maturity and unity in God’s new society in Christ. At least three applications follow. First, the passage advises not impersonal rules but counsels wisdom and virtues for interpersonal relationships concerning what it means to be a follower of Christ: including telling the truth, not letting anger fester, seeking the good of others, building each other up, and forgiving each other, and acting kindly. These actions derive by implication from Ephesians 1–3 regarding who Christ is and his followers’ place in God’s new society. Second, Christ’s disciples can grow in the practices of love when they self-consciously focus on loving and encouraging others, even when feeling angry by working to put away bitterness or retaliatory thoughts in view of what Christ has done for them. Finally, Christians should forgive one another because “God in Christ has forgiven you [plural]” (4:32). Ultimately Paul echoes the very words of Jesus: “‘By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’” (Jn 13:35 [ESV]).
Works Cited


