

Victory of the Lamb
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Sermon series: United: In Jesus we trust
Theme: Put on Christ
Pastor Ben Sadler

¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 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. ¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

²⁰ That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹ when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 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.

²⁵ Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ²⁶ “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold. ²⁸ Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. ⁵ ¹ Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

About a month ago, Harper’s Magazine published a letter in their magazine. The letter was entitled “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate”. The letter was signed by over 150 professors, journalist, and writers. Many of them work for prestigious schools like Yale, Harvard, Stanford, and Princeton. Many of the journalists have syndicated columns like David Brooks or are bestselling authors like Malcolm Gladwell or Steve Pinker. Even JK Rowling who wrote the most famous book series in history, Harry Potter, signed it. So there are some real heavy hitters on this letter.

The letter begins acknowledging that there are many issues in our society that need to be dealt with. But then they go on to explain that the social justice movement is not making things better. These social reforms are actually making things worse. The letter says, **(The Social Justice Movement) has intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity.** These well-known secular professors, writers, and journalists are concerned that the new moral attitudes and political commitments are worse than the ones they are trying to reform.

Then they go on to enumerate the ways that this new social justice movement is attacking free speech and making people afraid to do their job. Here is a longer citation from the letter. Stick with me:

Editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics; professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class; a researcher is fired for circulating a peer-reviewed academic study; and the heads of organizations are ousted for what are sometimes just clumsy mistakes. Whatever the arguments around each particular incident, the result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal. We are already paying the price in greater risk aversion among writers, artists, and journalists who fear for their livelihoods if they depart from the consensus, or even lack sufficient zeal in agreement.

These social reforms are not working. And this was predicted by Alexander Solzhenitsyn. A couple weeks ago I quoted Solzhenitsyn. Remember? He was a Russian who was imprisoned by Stalin's Soviet Union and spent decades in the Communist gulags. Well, after his release he was exiled to the West. And in 1978 he gave a speech at Harvard. As he was watching the US, he was very concerned where it was headed.

He said, **"There is a disaster which has already been under way for quite some time. I am referring to the calamity of a despiritualized and irreligious humanistic consciousness."** He predicted that the despiritualizing of our nation was leading to our ruin. Because we have rejected Christianity as a nation, we tried to put social reform in its place. He went said it this way, **"We have placed too much hope in political and social reforms, only to find out that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life."** Solzhenitsyn saw already back in the 1970s that we put too much hope in political and social reforms. And he said what we really need was to regain our most important possession: our spiritual life.

That's why we are continuing this sermon series, **United: In Jesus We Trust**. In this series we have been focusing our attention on Paul's letter from prison to his church in Ephesus. Paul's purpose in this letter was to bring unity to the church under Christ. That's what we need also. We need a path to unity. Our social reforms and secular social justice are making us more divided than ever. So what can we do? How can we find true unity and peace in a divided world?

Paul begins: ¹⁷ **So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.** This seems like a strange thing to say. The church was filled with Gentiles. And Paul preached to the Gentiles. What does this mean? Well, Paul was talking about the people of the world. Today we would say, "Those who have rejected God."

Why not live like the Gentiles? **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.**

Paul says that the people of the world have empty thoughts because of their darkened understanding which has separated them from God. You see, God has made himself known in three ways: Creation, conscience, and through Christ. Creation is clear evidence of God. His design and beauty all for the creation of life and for its flourishing. And he has given us a conscience, the law of God written on our hearts. And most clearly God is revealed through Christ. Christ is God come to live with us. He lived, died, and rose. And his resurrection is the strongest proof of God.

The problem is not that God has not revealed himself. The problem is that the world has hardened their heart towards God. The world has forgotten God.

What happens when the world rejects God? Paul says, **Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.** When the world doesn't have God to live for, then we live for pleasure and power. That is all that's left, beastly desires for pleasure and power.

It reminds me of one other thing that Solzhenitsyn said,

*"Over a half century ago, while I was still a child, I recall hearing a number of old people offer the following explanation for the great disasters that had befallen Russia: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened." Since then I have spent well-nigh 50 years working on the history of our revolution; in the process I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own toward the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: "**Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened.**"*

We have forgotten God. That is why all our reforms aren't working. So Paul leads us remember God and walk with him. He says, ²⁰**That, however, is not the way of life you learned** ²¹**when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.** Paul says that the Gentiles were not taught reject God but to receive him. It was actually Paul himself who taught them. In Acts 19, we hear that Paul spent two years in Ephesus teaching them in a local lecture hall. This was not normal for Paul. Usually Paul came into an area and set up a church and moved on. But in Ephesus he stuck around and taught them the truth of Christ.

But Paul didn't just teach them the facts of their faith. He taught them how to put their faith into practice. 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 said that he taught them to put off their old self and put on their new self. Literally, to take off their old man and put on their new man. He is talking about our old nature, the one we inherited from Adam. And put on our new nature, the one we got from Jesus when we were baptized and converted and made part of Jesus' family. We all have a sinful nature that has deceitful desires. We all want to live for pleasure and possessions. We all want to reject God. That is the old man. So Paul says we need to put on the new man by changing the attitude of our minds. We need to fill up our minds with Christ.

Paul is saying that he taught the Ephesians to take off this old man and put on the new man like a person changing clothes. When I was a young boy, I had two different kinds of clothes: play clothes and church clothes. I would put on my play clothes and play all day long with the neighbors. We would run outside and play tackle football. We would get dirty and stinky. When I would come back to the house, I would have to take off the play clothes and get all cleaned up. But after I was clean, I didn't go back and put on my dirty clothes. Paul is saying the same thing here. Once we become believers in Jesus, we daily take off the old way of life and put on this new identity of God that was created to follow Jesus.

That's very practical. But now Paul is going to get specific. He is going to name a bunch of sins. He wants us to ask ourselves, "Are we still wearing our dirty old clothes?"

²⁵ **Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.** Are you still wearing the clothes of lying? We lie to protect ourselves. We lie because we are selfish cowards. Paul says, *Take off those old clothes of falsehood. And put on the new clothes of speaking the truth.* Our whole society is built on lies right now. Some people call it fake news. Solzhenitsyn said that corrupt societies are always built on lies. And so the best thing we can do is speak the truth no matter what.

Paul goes on: ²⁶ **"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,** ²⁷ **and do not give the devil a foothold.** Are you wearing the dirty old clothes of anger? You were washed and cleaned by Jesus. Put on the new clothes of patience. Anger seems to be the acceptable sin today, even among Christians. A Christian radio host, Brant Hansen, wrote a great book with a great title *Unoffendable*. In this book he calls Christians to be the most unoffendable people in the world.

He says, **"We won't admit this, but we like being angry. We don't like what caused the anger, to be sure; we just like thinking we've "got" something on someone. So-and-so did something wrong, sometimes horribly wrong, and anger offers us a sense of moral superiority. That's why we call it "righteous anger," after all...It's righteous because, clearly, I'm right, and they're wrong."**

Hansen's words cut to our hearts because we can thrive on anger. But Paul tells us to take off the dirty clothes of anger or else the devil will get a foothold.

²⁸ **Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.** We might not be the kind of person that goes into a store and swipes something off the shelf. But Paul is confronting us of the sin of greed, selfishness, and laziness. Are you wearing the dirty clothes of selfishness, laziness, and greed? You were washed by Jesus. Take off those dirty clothes and put on the clean clothes of Christ and get to work so that you have no need to take from anyone, and you have something to give to those who are in need so they won't steal either.

²⁹ **Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.** Are you wearing the old clothes of gossip, tearing others down with your words? You were washed by Jesus. Put on the new clothes of speaking words that build people up.

A few years ago we learned the acronym THINK. It stands for

T-truthful

H-helpful

I-interesting

N-necessary

K-kind

Whenever we hear people tearing each other down in our house, we ask each other, “Are you *thinking* before you speak? Is what you are saying truthful, helpful, interesting, necessary and kind?” Paul tells us to be put on the new clothes of building each other up.

³⁰ **And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.** ³¹ **Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.** ³² **Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.** The Holy Spirit lives in us. But if we forget him and suppress his prompting we can put on those old dirty clothes of rage and revenge. So Paul says you were washed by Jesus, so take off those old clothes and put on the clothes of kindness and compassion and forgive each other just as in Christ God forgave you.

We can forgive everyone, which means we let it go and give it over to God. Do you remember when Jesus was being crucified? He said, “Father forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.” Jesus was not going to drink the poison of envy and revenge. He was going to give it over to his Father.

Those are a lot of specific examples of how we can build unity among us. But it might be hard to remember all that we have rattled through, so Paul ends this section with these words:

5 ¹ Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Taking off our old sinful clothes, washing in our baptism, and putting on Christ is all about living in love. Loving people and Jesus loved us and gave himself up as a sacrifice for our sins.

The reason we are so divided as a nation is not just because we have political problems and it is not just because we have social problems. And that’s why the social justice movement is not helping. In fact, according to many people it is making things worse. The reason is because we have a spiritual problem. We have forgotten God, and that’s why all this has happened. We must remember God. We must take off our sinful and secular clothes and put on the love of Christ. Then we will be united