

# Be Renewed

Ephesians 4:21-24 | Bryce Beale | Feb. 4, 2018

Beauty is a concept so familiar to your experience that you may, in irony, never have considered it closely.

We know that to some degree the saying is trustworthy, that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” There are paintings in existence which would make some of you breathless and the rest bored. We might therefore conclude that beauty is nothing at all; that, at most, beauty is an unsubstantial opinion which holds no weight beyond your own mind.

And yet, beauty is one of the strongest and most decisive currents that runs within the human consciousness. People go to war for ideas they consider beautiful, like patriotism or sacrifice or freedom.

The Trojan War is purported to have begun because of the beauty of one Helen, a queen who eloped with the prince of Troy—it was said therefore that she had “the face that launched a thousand ships.” Romantic love is built on beauty—not only physical, but the beauty of personality as well.

If beauty is nothing, it is the most powerful nothing there is.

Therefore, although we cannot pin down the universal principles that make up beauty, I do not think it follows that no such principles exist. In this case what close analysis cannot discover, common sense can; what baffles the scientist is understood by the farmer.

Consider a landscape of green trees on the backdrop of a blue sky.

Almost everyone who has ever lived—not everyone, but almost everyone—would ascribe beauty to such a scene. And, as God would have it, this is a scene repeated in most parts of the world.

But consider another scene. Deer Cave in Malaysia is one of our world’s largest caves. The dark interior teems with bats. Before you, at the base of the cave, is what appears to be a small mountain. This massive mound is a hill of bat droppings; but it is hard to see this hill, because covering over it is a swarming layer of cockroaches.

Almost everyone who has ever lived—not everyone, but almost everyone—would ascribe non-beauty to such a scene. And, as God would have it, this is a scene hidden away from most eyes.

What are the principles that make the sky beautiful and the cockroach pile ugly? It is hard to say with precision, but it is also hard to miss.

Behind the beauty of our world there is some unsighted standard, some set of principles.

Now consider how we live our lives—what some might call morality or ethics. Do you not know some persons whose conduct may be called beautiful? There are individuals I know who by their lives move me to great emotion and to action. These are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.

If you were to take these people whose manner of life is beautiful and set them side by side, you would note a million differences among them—and yet, insofar as they reflect some invisible standard of goodness common to them all, they are beautiful! There is a strain of beauty that passes through every one of them.

And it is this—this underlying and universal standard of moral beauty—that I assert is found in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the invisible standard made visible, for he is the image of the invisible God. He is God—the ultimate standard of all beauty—in the form of a human—hence the ultimate standard of all human, moral beauty.

When you observe an element of heart truly beautiful in a person, behind that element is Christ, always Christ. Does someone love others in an appealing way? It is appealing because their love is a shadow of Christ's love. Is someone unswerving in justice; so is Christ, and they reflect him. In Christ all the principles of moral beauty among mankind are condensed into one person.

And so, to learn Christ is to learn his ethic, it is to assume upon oneself more of the flawless moral beauty contained within Christ's person.

How this occurs is the topic of our text today. After describing the ugly moral lives of unbelieving Gentiles, Paul says,

#### **EPHESIANS 4:20-24**

Last week we considered the ugliness of the unconverted mind, and all the ugly consequences of that mind on the unbelieving life.

But we concluded with Paul's appeal in verse 20: "But that is not the way you learned Christ!"

If we were to restate that verse, we might hear Paul saying, "The Gentiles live in blinded ignorance and ugliness—but you are not ignorant, for you have learned Christ! And Christ is not blinded ignorance, so in learning Christ you have not learned the blinded ignorance of the Gentiles—you have not learned Christ in that way, for Christ is not that way."

“Well,” we can reply, “in what way *have* we learned Christ?” This week, Paul answers that question. What does it mean to learn Christ—what does it mean to take upon oneself the moral beauty found in Jesus Christ himself. What would your life look like if it were filled with the moral beauty of the Son of God? What kind of a person would you become?

We will come to the answer of that question, but Paul does not go there directly, so neither will we. After saying in verse 20 that his readers had “learned Christ,” he adds a caveat at the start of verse 21: “assuming that” or “if indeed.”

So let us look at how this caveat begins, first, and then we will see more specifically, later in the caveat, what it means to learn Christ, to put on his moral beauty.

First then, how the caveat begins.

## Truth is in Jesus

Verse 21: you have learned Christ “assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus.”

I hope you have come ready to think. I would like to show you Paul’s logic as a syllogism—it does not matter if you have never heard that word, and you do not need to memorize it. It won’t be on the test. But it will help us see what Paul is saying.

In a syllogism there are two premises, and on the basis of those two premises we make a conclusion.

Here are Paul’s premises: first, the truth is in Jesus. This is an easy premise; it is always and universally true, and so Paul can just say it. The truth is in Jesus.

But here is the second premise: you (Paul’s audience, the Ephesians, but in this case the same can be applied to you here)—you have been taught Jesus. In Paul’s words, “assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him.” So, you have been taught Jesus.

But here Paul does not outright state the fact. He prefaces his proposition with, “assuming.” Or in another translation, “if indeed.”

This means that the second premise we are working with is not always and universally true. We will return to this in a moment.

The conclusion is what started this sentence, in verse 20: “that is not the way you learned Christ.” Meaning, in learning Christ, you learned, not the futility of mind that is among the Gentiles, not that life of

ignorance in falsehood, but in learning Christ you learned the truth. You learned moral beauty, according to an accurate standard of moral beauty. You learned how to live according to the true, moral standard that is in Jesus.

Premise 1: Truth (or here, moral beauty, how to live rightly) is in Jesus.

Premise 2: You have been taught Jesus.

Conclusion: You have been taught truth (moral beauty, how to live rightly).

Now, Paul assumes the first thing—that truth is in Jesus. And Paul assumes the final thing, that they have been taught that truth of how to live. But he says all of this in order to draw attention to the second premise: You have been taught Jesus.

Paul does not really doubt that they have been taught Jesus—rather, he is pointing to that second premise with an “if indeed,” he is making it seem questionable, to draw them out into agreement with him.

It is as if Paul were saying to the Ephesians, “Do you agree, premise 1, that truth is in Jesus? Do you agree that when you learn Christ, you are learning the true way to live, the way to conduct yourself beautifully?” And they would say, “Of course!”

And so here the apostle could say, “Then you agree with me that you must not live like the Gentiles, but rather that you must live according to the truth that is in Jesus. That is the conclusion of our syllogism, and you must agree with it!”

If they tried to object and say something like, “Well, yes, the true way to live is found in Jesus. He is the standard of moral beauty. But, we are still free to live like the Gentiles. We are forgiven by the blood of Christ, but our lives do not have to look different.”

If they objected with this argument, Paul could say, “If you agree with our first premise that the truth is in Jesus, but you disagree with our conclusion that you know that truth in your life, then the only explanation is that you never really learned Jesus; you never fulfilled the second premise. How can you learn Jesus, and not learn the truth that is in him? If the truth is in Jesus and you do not live a life that shows you know that truth, then you simply do not know Jesus. It must be that the second premise is false: you must never have heard about Jesus, you must never have been taught about him.”

If the logic confuses you, think of it in these simpler terms.

Imagine I have here a box with a ball in it. If I give you the box, who has the ball now? You do! Because the ball is in the box, if you have the box, you have the ball. So then, if you don't have the ball, what else can we assume? That you don't have the box the ball is in! Because if you have the box, you have the ball, for the ball is in the box.

The same is true with Christ. There is moral beauty in Christ, there is a pleasant way to live in him—he is the very standard of it. So if you are given Christ, you cannot say, “No, I don't have this moral beauty in myself.” Impossible! If you have the box, you have the ball; if you have Christ, you have a new life, you have a moral beauty in your conduct to some degree. If you have Jesus you cannot live a lie, for the simple reason that truth is in Jesus.

I know there are some of you who crave moral beauty in your lives. You long to be holy and to be free from besetting sins; you are tired of your habitual failures and lapses. You have had enough of pornography; you are sickened by your angry outbursts.

Learn the lesson of this logic well—there is no direct route to moral beauty. If you want the ball, you must get the box. If you would have holiness, you must have Christ, or more of Christ. He is the standard and all that you seek is hidden in him. Miners who crave gold must go to caverns for them, for gold is in caverns; and fishermen who crave fish must go to lakes for them, for fish are in lakes. And if you crave moral beauty in your life, you must go to Jesus, for true, moral beauty is found in Jesus.

## The renewal

Paul's caveat continues, which he began with “assuming” in verse 21—but now we reach a description of what it means, specifically, to put on this moral beauty—or, in the words of verse 20, to learn Christ.

That description has three parts, and each comprise a verse from 22-24. Verse 22, we put off the old self; verse 23, we are renewed in our minds; verse 24, we put on the new self. Here is the secret to receiving the moral beauty that is in Jesus.

See verse 22: “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires.”

Commentators are divided on the timing of these verses.

Some, for example, consider verses 22-24 to be commands for believers right now. You, if you are in Christ, must do what you have learned to do in Christ—namely, you must right now put off the old self, be renewed, and put on the new self.

But others object. They say the timing cannot be now, because these are things already true of a believer. In Romans 6 and Colossians 3, we are told that the believer's old self is dead and has already been put off. That old self died at the moment of rebirth. "If anyone is in Christ," Paul writes to Corinth, "he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."<sup>1</sup>

If the old self has already passed away, died, been put off, then how can Paul command the Ephesian believers here to put that old self off again?

These commentators would contend that Paul is saying this is what the Ephesians heard when they heard the gospel at first—they learned early on that if they were to be Christians, they would need to experience this great change of conversion. They would need to put off the old man once and for all, and put on the new.

In fact, the tense of "put off" in verse 22 and "put on" in verse 24 are identical, and may suggest a once-for-all action, while "be renewed" in verse 23 is a different tense that may suggest ongoing activity.

So, they learned that coming to Christ meant putting off the old man and putting on the new, along with a continual renewing of the mind that does not end after you come to Christ, but continues until you see Christ face to face and are perfected.

This meaning seems to make the most sense to me.

However, this second interpretation is not far off from the first. In both cases, it is equally true that believers must presently put off at least the remnants of the old self. The verses that immediately follow our text are commands that follow the pattern of putting off sinful behavior and putting on righteous behavior. Put off falsehood, and put on truth. Put off theft, and put on generosity. And so forth.

In Colossians 3, just before Paul says that we believers have in fact already put off the old self, he tells us to put to death what is earthly in ourselves. In Romans 6 although he says our old self is dead, he adds that we must reckon it to be so.

So here, whether Paul means "put off the old self now" or merely, "you have put off the old self, so now put off the remnants of the old self," our obligation does not change. We who are in Christ are new creations in Christ, but we must continue to be renewed—that is why this passage is present in Holy Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. 5:21 (ESV).

See then the process by which a person absorbs the moral beauty that is found in Jesus.

### Put off and put on

First, there is a putting off of the old self and a putting on of the new.

As I have said, these commands of putting off and putting on may refer to the initial experience of salvation. But even if they do, they are given by Paul to encourage believers, in the present, to persist in holiness. Paul offers them not just because they are interesting points of history, but because they offer the key to sanctification in the present.

So in each of the commands, put off the old self and put on the new, there is also implied, “Put off what remains of the old self, and put on what remains to be put on of the new.”

We have also seen that at the heart of these commands is Christ himself—to get the ball, we must get the box.

How do these now come together?

See again verse 22: you have learned “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires”—and then verse 24, “to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

I speak to you who are in Christ—consider yourself for a minute.

You are not Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde in one person, two equal natures conflicting within yourself, a sort of self-contained yin and yang. When you first exercised true faith in Christ, the old you was definitively crucified beside the Savior, and died. The old you, “which belongs to your former manner of life” and which is “corrupt through deceitful desires”—that you is dead.

Now you are in fact a new you. It is not simply that you have a new lease on life, a fresh sense of purpose; your inward self has undergone an alteration as extreme as transplanting the brain of one body into another body—only in this case it is the reverse, your body staying the same but your inward self being changed.

You have put on the new self, “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

In Eden we lost the pristine image of God which before the fall we bore; but now you have put on Christ, who is the image of the invisible God, and so your new self is restored to that pristine likeness. That is why you must get at moral beauty not directly, but through Christ. In Christ, you are new.

But someone may say, “If this is really me, then why do I still find sin in myself? If I am remade in the image of Christ, and Christ is sinless, why am I still beset by sin?”

I think we find the answer in the only verse we have yet to consider, verse 23: you have learned “to be renewed in the spirit of your minds.”

Here is the very heart of holiness for us as the people of God in this world. This verb, “to be renewed,” as I have said is in a tense that makes it seem an ongoing requirement for all believers. You truly are new, yes, but you must still be renewed in your new, inward being. And particularly, in the way your new self thinks.

You become more like Jesus Christ, you more share in his moral beauty, as your mind changes.

See how your old self in the twenty-second verse was corrupt “through desires [literally] of *deceit*,” and how your new self in the twenty-fourth is created “in righteousness and holiness [literally] of the *truth*.”

Whatever corruption remains in you, remains in you not because you are still the old you that is corrupt, but because the new you is not yet entirely new in its thinking. It really is a matter of the mind. You are free from sin’s slavery; you do not have to sin anymore. Every lapse is first a lapse in your thought life.

Here then is the process provided by the apostle for your progress in the faith: Change your thinking!

The difference between an immature believer and a mature one is that the latter has learned to think true things about himself, about God, about life, while the former is still accustomed to thinking in unrealistic terms.

When it is late and you are tired, and the temptation to open up pornography on your phone appears, the battle for the mind begins: “I will find a cure for my anxieties if I only...” Stop! That is not you, that is out of character. That is the kind of unrealistic nonsense you swam in when you did not know Christ; but now you are new, so put that thought away.

Here is a true one to replace it with: “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Phil. 4:6-7.

You may reply, “I know that already, but it isn’t helping.” Then you don’t know it yet as you ought! If you merely lick a cough drop and it does not stop your cough, don’t blame the medicine—blame your method. You need to let the cough drop sit within your mouth until it melts and coats your throat.

You will know the thought has sunk into your mind when your hand turns from your phone and folds for prayer.

Or maybe tomorrow you will feel heat rising at the base of your neck, up into your face in the threat of fury at some perceived wrong. Already you have been thinking something, that is why your body responds this way: “I work like a dog and my ungrateful boss just gives me more to do,” or “I ask for five uninterrupted minutes in a day, and my kids selfishly refuse to give me even these.”

But that’s not you. That isn’t the way our Savior thinks, and your new self is crafted in his likeness. Put that off, get it far from you.

Instead put on the thought, “[be] slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”<sup>3</sup> Put on the peace and gentleness of Jesus, and be slow to compare your frustration to Jesus flipping tables in the temple. Let the kindness of Christ sink into your inner self.

“It isn’t helping!” But it will, give it time. Give your mind the time it needs to take the nutrient from that truth.

And whatever you do, never take your eyes from the leading character of the Scriptures—Jesus Christ. Look to him, the author and finisher of your faith, the sacrifice whose blood justified you in the sight of God, and the Shepherd who leads you onward in the renewal of your mind.

Take him as the object of your thought—foretold by the prophets and presented by the apostles.

Observe him in the Scriptures until you see his moral beauty; observe him further until that beauty takes your breath away and makes you hunger and thirst for such righteousness; and then, observe him still more, until the moral beauty of Christ has overcome your mind and pressed itself into your own manner of life.

Put your eyes on him and say, like Jacob, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” I will not let you go until your beautiful way of life is also mine.

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<sup>3</sup> Jas. 1:19-20.