

Spiritual Fashion Coordination

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[0 : 0 0] It won't surprise you to hear that this preacher is no fashion expert, but I do know enough to know that certain things, certain shapes, certain colours don't go together.

That is, unless you're Lady Gaga at a presidential inauguration. And I must confess that I'm very grateful to Kath, my wife, for taking a look at what I'm wearing before I go out of the house, to make sure that I don't offend sensitive eyes by the things I'm wearing.

And at times I've been greeted with that phrase, and there's a number of us listening to this who will have heard it. You couldn't possibly wear that, as she points out one particular clash or another.

Now, I know that speaking like this smacks of sort of Western arrogance and affluence, because we have to face up to the fact that many in our world just don't have enough to eat.

And in all honesty, they wouldn't give a moment's thought to whether their tattered T-shirt went with their ripped jeans. But the idea of uncoordinated clothing is one that Paul alludes to in his letter to the Ephesian church.

[1 : 2 6] And from it, let me say this, we can learn lessons that are far more vital than any lessons that you'll learn from the fashion police. You see, he's writing to young Christians who live in or around Ephesus.

Ephesus was an area that was well known for a cultic religion. It was well known for its sexual immorality. And these young believers, these new Christians, they're not only facing pressure from living in such a setting as that, but they've also got people in their church, we would call them Jewish legalists, who were telling them, look, you've got to follow the rules that we're going to give you if you want to enjoy closeness to God.

But Paul has been clear, magnificently clear in the letter that we've been looking at. Jesus Christ has broken down all these dividing barriers.

Jesus Christ is making for himself one new people who've been saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

And that's the whole theme of this letter. This has come up time and time again, as you will have seen from previous studies.

[2 : 5 0] There are no longer any distinctions between Jewish and Gentile believers. They have become one new people in Christ.

But if there's now no distinction between the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers in that church at Ephesus, Paul goes on to point out, actually there should be massive differences between those who follow Jesus Christ and those who don't.

And the difference between believers and unbelievers. And his shorthand for unbelievers is that word pagans or Gentiles. And at the start of the section we're looking at this morning, he's passionate that the contrast should be seen.

And by the way, could I really encourage you to have your Bible open in front of you, because we're going to be working through this passage. I want you to check out the things that I'm saying. I want you to see how Paul lays them out for us.

Because this new section is introduced there in verse 17, where Paul says this, So I tell you this and insist on it in the Lord that you no longer live as the Gentiles do.

[4 : 06] And Paul then proceeds with a blistering diagnosis of what it is that characterizes pagan behavior. He describes their condition.

He wants believers to be aware that behavior like theirs, pagan behavior, clashes with what we are now in Christ as believers.

So let's have a look at verses 17 to 19. I've called it this, the condition of unbelievers exposed. The condition of unbelievers exposed.

They're in verses 17 to 19. And Paul highlights three areas. First of all, as he is describing how pagans operate, how unbelievers operate, he says they are darkened in understanding.

Darkened in understanding. Do you see how Paul emphasizes this point there in chapter 4, second part of verse 17 through to verse 18?

[5 : 09] He says in the futility of their thinking, they are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them.

Darkened in understanding. You see, however high might be someone's IQ or however many GCSEs or A-levels or hires or degrees or doctorates one has, if one rejects the maker, the sustainer who is at the center of all things, then the Bible describes this as rank foolishness, as the ultimate ignorance, as the greatest blindness possible.

It's as if there's a bug in the CPU of our lives, as if there's a major flaw in how all information is processed. You see, it doesn't matter how powerful the computer is, what speed it runs at, what capacity it has.

If there's a fault at the heart of the system, then everything else is flawed and defective. You see, if you get it wrong about God, if you have false ideas of who he is and what he's done, then you get everything else wrong.

You don't see things clearly. You don't understand life. You don't grasp why you were made and how you should live. There's nothing more important, you see, than we think correctly about God.

[6 : 45] The pagans, they were darkened in their understanding. But secondly, these pagans, these unbelievers, Paul says they are separated from God.

They're separated from God. Now, Paul's already emphasized twice in chapter 2 that the natural state of those in sin is spiritual death.

You'll remember he writes this back in chapter 2, there in verse 1, 3 and verse 5. He says, as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. We were by nature objects of wrath.

We were dead in transgressions. In other words, because of sin, all pagans, however decent and nice and moral they are, they have no relationship with God.

They're separated from him. They're alienated from him. They have no life in him. But the follower of Jesus, the one who's been born again by his spirit, is not like that.

[7 : 52] There is life. There's a fresh understanding, opened eyes, a realization of the wonder of the living God who's adopted us into his family. There is a sense of joy and wonder and delight, for we have come to be joined to him.

The pagans, the unbelievers, they are separated. But we, by God's grace, have been united to him. And then thirdly, Paul describes them in this way.

They are hardened in conscience. They're hardened in conscience. Paul puts it like this in verse 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.

You see, if you have wrong thoughts about God, if you are separated from him, then it will inevitably affect your conscience.

Your understanding of what is right and wrong. You'll have no absolute reference point to understand. You'll ultimately be shaped by what you feel is right, rather than by what you know is right.

[9 : 07] You'll be shaped more by the prevailing views of the time. What do others think? What's going over on Twitter? What is the woke culture telling us, rather than being shaped by the unchanging character of the creator?

And this hardening means stubbornness. It means being obstinate. It means willfully rejecting what you know is right.

It means you try to reprogram your conscience to fit in with what you want, rather than with what God himself reveals.

And in verse 19, Paul goes on to make the connection between a hardened conscience and shameless behavior. He says this, having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality, so to indulge in every kind of impurity with a continual lust for more.

In fact, doesn't this make frightening reading? It's such an accurate description of today's society. It's precisely what we come across daily on the news or on Twitter or on our social media feeds.

[10 : 22] We live in an age of no shame. We live in an age where anything goes. But go on to notice what Paul then says in verse 20.

That massive contrast between the pagans and the believers. Between how they think and what their lifestyle is. He says, you, however, did not come to know Christ that way.

You see, just as the pagans' problem was their ignorance, was their futile thinking. So the answer for the believers was the fact that they were well taught concerning Christ.

And Paul here underlines how their minds, how their mindsets had been radically changed through encountering Christ.

But let's move on to the second paragraph that we have before us. Verses 20 through to verse 24. I've called this the contrast with believers explained.

[11 : 24] The contrast with believers explained. As Paul says in verse 20, You, that, however, is not the way of life you learned.

And Paul is probably referring here to the time when they first heard the wonderful news about God's grace. When they first heard that invitation to all sinners to find forgiveness through the finished work of Jesus.

You see, they were taught about Jesus. They learned the truths embodied in the life of Jesus. Actually, I think that's why Paul uses the name Jesus here on its own rather than the more usual title he would use of Christ.

You see, he wants to emphasize that the human Jesus was the perfect embodiment of all they were taught. And in applying these truths, Paul uses that fashion imagery to help them.

They were to put off the old self and to put on the new self. Let's look at those verses. Let me read them to you again. Verses 22 to 24.

[12 : 33] 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, to be made new in the attitude of your minds and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Do you see how this fashion imagery is kicking in? Paul is saying that they need to coordinate. Paul is saying that their new clothes, as it were, shouldn't clash with who they are.

You can't wear the old clothes of sinful indulgence alongside the new clothes of Christ's righteousness. They just don't go. They're completely out of place.

So what the Ephesian believers were taught was that at the time of their salvation, they were made new in Jesus. That old nature that had been dominated by sin and ignorance, that old nature had been done away with.

And there was given to them a new nature of righteousness and holiness. And how did they know? How were they to know if there was a clash?

[13 : 48] How could they tell? Well, the answer is given in verse 23. Be made new in the attitude of your minds. In fact, the translation again doesn't quite capture the sense of the Greek that's being used here.

Better, though clumsier translation would be, go on being made new in the attitude of your minds. Now, maybe there may be some of you who are listening to this online and you enjoy reading fashion magazines or you enjoy following online fashion influencers.

You know, you want to keep in touch with the fashion scene. You want to know what colors are in. You want to know what styles are emerging. So month by month, you keep reading these articles to keep you up to date with what you should wear.

Now, I make no comments about that. Except to say, you know, I do have one niece who works for a fashion and lifestyle magazine and I have another niece who works for Prada.

So I have to be careful in what I say. Except to say this is a useful illustration of how the Christian should operate. You see, we need to keep in touch.

[15 : 04] We need to be aware of what's appropriate to Christ-like character. And we need to be aware of what might clash with it.

Like the horrible old rags of the old nature. And to keep in touch, we need to keep reading. Not fashion magazines, but God's Word.

We keep studying what it says. We keep working out what's appropriate as believers and what isn't. What clashes and what fits.

And actually, that's precisely what Paul goes on to do in considerable detail in the coming verses. So we'll come to the final section of this chapter in verses 25 to 32.

And I've called it this, the conduct God expects. The conduct God expects. Now, we don't have time to go into each area of conduct or time to examine each, as it were, spiritual fashion accessory that's being taught about here.

[16 : 10] But we can quickly flick through the pages of this biblical fashion magazine. What it is? What should we be wearing? What's it going to look like to be a follower of Jesus?

Well, we're given a number of guides. Verse 25, plain communication. Plain communication. He writes, therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor.

For we are all members of one body. Plain communication. You see, we don't manipulate. We don't falsify. We honor one another by telling the truth in love.

We don't con. No fake news here. Plain communication. Verse 25. Secondly, pure emotion.

We find that in verses 26 to 27. Pure emotion. Paul writes, in your anger, do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.

[17 : 10] And do not give the devil a foothold. You see, our emotional responses shouldn't be out of a sense of injured personal pride.

But they should be driven by the honor and glory of God. That's why at times righteous anger is entirely appropriate.

You see, it's not about us. It's about him. There should be pure emotion. Emotion driven, prompted by our longing for the glory and the honor of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Thirdly, then, in verse 28, I notice that Paul talks about purposeful activity. Purposeful activity. He writes, 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.

You see, what we do should be with an eye on others. How can we bless others? How can we dignify the time and the gifts that God gives us?

[18 : 23] We do it by purposeful activity, with an eye to others. And then, fourthly, verse 29, Paul talks about profitable speech.

He says, 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.

See, just as what we do must be beneficial to others, so must our speech in the same way build others up.

We're not going to be people who are full of criticism. And gossip. Neither will our talk be impure or suggestive.

No, rather, whatever comes out of our mouths will bless, will help, will encourage our hearers. Profitable speech. Fifthly, in verse 30, we notice that there are perceptive responses.

[19 : 26] Perceptive responses. Perceptive responses. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God with whom you are sealed for the day of redemption. You see, we're going to be sensitive to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and we're going to respond appropriately.

We're not going to willfully go against what God has said through his word and by his spirit. Or how that is required in our lives.

That prompting, that leading that God gives us through the word and by the spirit. And we want to be responsive to that. We don't want to be those who grieve the Holy Spirit, but rather those who do what he is saying and encouraging us to do.

Perceptive responses. And then finally, verses 31 to 32, Paul talks about peaceable behavior. Peaceable behavior. He writes, get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. I think one of the emerging tragedies in the church today is the level of hostility and criticism that's arisen between church members who hold different viewpoints on the application of COVID regulations.

[20 : 54] I've seen the most awful things posted on Twitter and Facebook by so-called believers. Suddenly this becomes so much more important to them than the gospel itself.

So much more important than reflecting the love and the grace of Jesus Christ. And words are used to address other people who hold different views in ways which are so ungracious and ungodly.

It clashes. Look, my friends, at this key time in our nation's life, that's not what we need. That won't commend Jesus to a watching world.

Look, we may have legitimate differences or opinions over many issues. But the wonder of saving grace is the way Christians show that grace to others.

Especially those who are within the family of faith. So what does this all mean for us here and now?

[22 : 01] Let me just give you three very brief applications. We've been trying to apply this. We've been working our way through this passage. But let me give you three broad brushstroke applications.

Number one, being a Christian is not a lifestyle choice. It is a radical recreation. You see, as Paul is speaking here, he's saying there's a difference.

There's a massive difference. Once you were dead in your sins, now you're alive. Once you were blind in your sins, now you can see. My friends, being a Christian is not a lifestyle choice. Maybe you're here and you're listening and saying, yeah, I'm a Christian.

And why you say that is because you sort of do Christian things. That's not what makes you a Christian. Being a Christian is someone who's been born again by the Spirit of God. Your life has been radically made new.

And my friends, listening to this, I want you to understand this is a radical work of God. And I want you to have known that work of God in your own life.

[23 : 00] This isn't just about, oh, I like religion. It's helpful. No, it's about loving Jesus with everything that you've got as the song that we were listening to before we came to this message.

Speaking about the fact that when you're a follower of Jesus Christ, you just want to give him everything. It controls. It consumes. It's your passion. This isn't lifestyle that we preach. This is Christ as Lord.

Christ as King. The second general area here is how and what you think about God is of the greatest importance.

It affects every area of life. That's what we've seen. Paul keeps coming back to the way that you think. And when God is at the center of our lives and when we were using our minds to understand what God has said, what God has revealed through his word, then it will change us.

It will alter us. It's not just enough to be lazy and go along with bland cliches that the world pumps out, so many of which are well past their sell-by dates.

[24 : 07] No, it is as we engage our minds. It's how we think about God. And if you're listening to this and you're a follower of God, you're a follower of Jesus Christ, then please use your mind with everything you have so that you may prove what his will is, prove as it were, understand that the clothing that is right and appropriate and commending him in every way.

There is no excuse for mental laziness in the Christian walk. And the third thing I want to say is this. If you are a believer, the difference must be seen.

That's Paul's point here. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ that unites us as a church family. All the barriers that the world would erect, they've been broken down, but in Jesus we've been made one.

And my brothers and sisters, the difference must be seen between you as a follower of Jesus Christ and the one who isn't. That is what Paul is saying.

There is this strange clash between the way that we live and act and think and behave. My brother, my sister, is it seen in you?

[25 : 18] Or if I was to go along to your workplace or to your college or to where you interact with others in your social groups and I said, you know, that person's a Christian.

And what if the answer would be we saw no difference in that? No, Paul, if we're to take God's word seriously, Paul is saying there is a difference. When we've been captured by his spirit and we've been captured by his truth, then we're going to walk in such a way that commends him.

There is going to be something which is deliciously, positively, gloriously different. And we pray that God by his spirit will then have people asking you, what makes you tick?

And maybe it's at that point you say, hey, our church is running a life explored course. Why don't you sign up with us? Let's have a look. Let's be able to explain more the wonders of the gospel.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that it's such a relevant word. Thank you for its wisdom. Thank you for its power. And would you please apply it to our hearts?

[26 : 22] Would you please make us to be those who passionately long to be more and more like Jesus Christ, united to one another but different from those who do not follow him?

And Lord, may our behavior commend Christ. Lord, we realize this is not a way that we can get to heaven by doing these things. It's only by faith in you. But it's a way that we show that we're on the journey.

So have mercy, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.