

Wearing Christ in and out of Church

Colossians 3:12-17

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~ As the prestigious elect we must clothe ourselves in our new identity and practice Christ centered church and daily life ~

I told you a few weeks back that my middle school years were a bit rough. And I backed this up with a blurry picture of my grade 6 class where if your vision is impeccable you may have been able to pick out a particularly short and scrawny kid sporting incredible buck teeth and a mullet.

Today I'd like to add just one more mental image to that picture – a Red-Tag special wardrobe.

I grew up in a frugal family and my mom shopped for us at thrift stores and on the clearance rack at Zellers all the time. So I wore corduroy pants two years before the brief period they were cool and then for 2 years afterward. I had Vans shoes well before anyone knew they were popular, and I sported jogging pant jeggings two decades before they were even invented. Luckily I was so fashion unconscious I had no idea how bad I actually looked.

That's the backdrop. Then one day at the end of grade six something amazing happened – one of the cooler kids in class – and there were a lot of them from my perspective – was throwing out the gym shoes he had worn all year. Very well used... but they were Air Jordan Pumps! The kind that had an air pocket on the tongue that you could use to pump up the soles to give you extra lift.

And as the owner of these pumps headed off to the garbage to my incredible fortune he noticed my lustful gaze and asked if I would like them – would I ever!! And so I wore this cool kids hand-me-down Air Jordan Pumps. And it was the best summer ever!

Now today I have some amazing hand-me-downs for you as well. But lucky for you they aren't from me; they are from your big brother – Jesus. He wore the clothes we are going to talk about today, and He left them for us to put on.

Would you pray with me?

[Pray]

Please open your Bibles to Colossians chapter 3. That's on page 834 if you are using a pew Bible – and please do follow along. If you were with us before Easter you know that we are right in the middle of a series through the Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Now just to remind you where we are in the letter, chapter 3 starts the practical outworking of everything Paul already established. So in chapter 1 Paul's main point was that Christ is supreme over everything in creation and over all religious truth. He is the fullness of YHWH in human form. And because He was and is God His name is the one we can hope in for salvation.

But then Paul added a mystery to this – something he calls the mystery of God. And the mystery is that God has moved. Remember that for the Jews YHWH lived behind the curtain in the Holy of Holies, but at the cross that curtain was torn top to bottom¹ and now the mystery was that God had left the building to inhabit His followers – we became His temple!

And so now because Christ lives in us we are enabled, in spite of our deep sinful weakness, to become who He wants us to be. Friends, you aren't strong enough to become who God calls you to be, but that's ok – Christ is strong enough. And that's good news.

And really those two ideas make up the backbone of what Paul wanted the Colossians, and us, to grapple with.

In chapter 2 Paul took on some enemies that the church faces – and these enemies haven't changed. And the enemy Paul spent the most time with was the unintentional one from within our own ranks.

Paul says good, church attending people who believe they love God and are living good lives can lose connection with Christ. Our eyes can shift to our own preferences and we can leave the path of discipleship which leads to the cross, and become the unintentional enemies of Jesus and His church.

And so Paul warned the Colossians and us, watch out for these people, and watch out that you don't become these people. And the medicine to kill this infection is eyes that are fixed on Christ and the growth of His kingdom, not on ourselves and what we want.

And so that brings us to chapter 3. And chapter 3 is all about living this out. And the paradox here is that while Christ lives in us, we have to practice Christ likeness, setting our hearts on the things above, in order to be His disciples.

The picture is one we've talked about a lot. Grace starts with God and comes to us totally unmerited – we do nothing to deserve His forgiveness – it's a free gift.

¹ Mark 15:38

But then when that grace enters us it transforms us. And the evidence it has transformed us is that it bubbles over into the relationships around us. But this bubbling over doesn't happen on its own, it requires effort and intentionality, and this is what is often misunderstood about grace.

Friends, we must work our salvation out for it to exist. And that's because it is what happens on this horizontal level between us and our neighbours and our brothers and sisters that proves, or disproves that we received grace in the first place. Grace comes first, but the evidence for it is always seen on the horizontal.

And this is what Colossians 3 is about. Paul has been telling us what we have to put off and put to death in order to be, what he calls, "heavenly minded." And today this theme continues in the positive. And so instead of taking off the negative, the big idea of verses 12 to 17 is: **As the prestigious elect we must clothe ourselves in our new identity and practice Christ centered church and daily life.** So look with me at verse 12:

[Read Colossians 3:12]

As the prestigious elect we must clothe themselves in our new identity...

Now really the transition to this positive picture happened back in verses 9-11 where we saw two things.

First there is the introduction of taking off the old self and putting on the new self. Imagine a caterpillar shedding its long, multi-legged, body, and taking on its new identity as a butterfly. The old life is forever left behind.

This transformation is one that happens at conversion. That's when our new self is born. Verse 10 says Christians are now renewed in knowledge in the image of our Creator. This is the mystery of God we spoke of earlier – God in us. And it happens when we become Christians.

But in verse 12 Paul notes this isn't something we choose ourselves. God calls us. We have become God's chosen people. Christians are the prestigious elect. We are the ones God has made into His holy and dearly loved ones.

But just like Israel, God's chosen Old Covenant people, we as God's chosen New Covenant people haven't been chosen because we are great.

In verse 11 Paul shows us the second point that's essential today saying anything earthly that might have set us apart as special is totally done away with in our new identity. Our ethnicity doesn't matter, our social status doesn't matter, our financial wellbeing doesn't matter, our cultural background or our age or our preferences or styles certainly don't matter. The only thing that matters to our new identity is that Christ is everything and in everything.

And now verse 12 builds something on top these two foundations. Paul says because this is your new identity, clothe yourselves in your new identity. So the transformation has both happened already, and it's not yet complete.

While we have taken off our old identity we still have to practice putting on our new identity. And what we are called to put on are the clothes of Christ. These are Jesus' hand-me-downs. And there are five of them to match the five old things we took off in verse 5 and again in verse 8.

In verse 5 we put to death sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed. And in verse 8 we rid ourselves of anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language. And now in contrast we are putting on the attributes of Christ: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Paul calls us to dress ourselves in Christ's clothing. And He tells us to do this because we can. Christ enables those filled by His Spirit to bear His image.

So the first Jesus hand-me-down we are to clothe ourselves in is compassion. Now "compassion" is biblically defined as this gut-felt emotional love that wants to help those around you. And this is very much an attribute of Jesus.

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Now our culture is a busy culture. We value busyness because it means we are important. And so we tell people we are too busy to help or too busy to commit. But that just means we aren't wearing Jesus' compassion. Jesus was a busy guy. He was literally on a mission to save the world in three years. Compare that to what you're up to.

But when Jesus saw people in need the Greek tells us love and mercy welled up and twisted His guts – He just wanted to help. He had compassion. And so for example one time two blind men were sitting in the ditch crying out for Him to help while being shushed by the crowd of important people. But Matthew tells us:

Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed Him. (Matthew 20:34)

So how about you? Are you largely indifferent to the needs around you, or do your guts twist with love and mercy? Now don't beat yourself up if you aren't what you think you should be here. This list of attributes is not what proves we are Christians, it is a list of things we must, as Christians, put on and practice.

So choose to put on Jesus' compassion. Make a choice this week to open your eyes to the needs that He might be calling you to meet, and ask for His gut to feel them.

Second, Paul says clothe yourself in Jesus Kindness. This word directly refers to God's own goodness expressed in gracious acts. So for example in the Psalms David prays:

How abundant are the good things that You have stored up for those who fear You... those who take refuge in You. (Psalm 31:19)

That's God's kindness. And Paul says we are to put on the same attribute. We are to become abundantly kind. Now we aren't going to start out like this, we have to become this by clothing ourselves in Jesus' kindness.

Third, we are to put on humility. Now humility was viewed as a negative thing in the first century. Slaves were humble and cowards were seen as humble since they wouldn't stand up for themselves.

But when Jesus showed up He wore a humility the Roman world knew nothing of. For Jesus humility was power, harnessed and used not for Himself. So in Philippians we read:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!
(Philippians 2:5-8)

Humility values others above ourselves. So when you find yourself in positions of power or leadership choose to use your position to serve. Stop trying to advance your own agenda. Paul says wear Jesus' hand-me-down humility.

Fourth, clothe yourself in gentleness or meekness. This means not being overly impressed with your own importance but again putting those around you in front of yourself.

And finally Paul says the prestigious elect clothe themselves in Christ's attitude of patience. This refers to long-suffering and being slow to anger when those around us act in ways we don't appreciate.

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Once someone told me "never pray for patience because God will give you the opportunity to develop it", but here Paul says this is what Jesus wore. So if you are a Christian this is exactly what you want to pray for regardless of what it costs to obtain.

So brothers and sisters, if you are one of the prestigious elect choose to do the work of clothing yourself in Jesus' hand-me-downs. Put on His compassion and kindness and humility and gentleness and patience. Practice looking like Jesus.

Then in verse 13 Paul gives us a belt and an overcoat to bind the previous 5 together. He writes:

[Read Colossians 3:13-14]

First what I've called the belt of forgiveness.

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Perhaps you noticed already that everything Paul has said has to do with relating to one another. And that's because being a Jesus follower isn't something we do by ourselves, it is done in community.

And so here Paul says "bear with one another". Now this is a really interesting concept. To "bear with" literally means to put up with something you don't like, and is often used to describe enduring persecution – we are to bear persecution. But here Paul says bear with one another and the idea is clear, looking like Jesus happens when you choose to get along with those you don't like or agree with.

And Paul says the way we are able to wear the hand-me-down attributes of Christ is by forgiving each other as the Lord forgave us. That means as Christians we must prepare ourselves in advance so that when we are wronged, by the world or by each other, we are ready to immediately forgive because when we wronged Jesus He forgave us.

And this isn't an optional thing. Our forgiveness of each other, particularly our Christian brothers and sisters, is the proof that we have been forgiven by Jesus. This is why in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said:

If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.
(Matthew 6:14-15)

Jesus' forgiveness comes first, but if our forgiveness of each other doesn't follow it's the evidence that we haven't been forgiven.

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Finally Paul points us to what I'll call the overcoat of love. He says over all these virtues put on love which binds them all together.

Elsewhere the Scriptures tell us that if we have everything else but don't have love we are just noise.² That means if the motivation behind our kind or humble actions is something other than love our actions aren't worth anything.

So Paul says brothers and sisters, choose to put on Christ's clothes. And choose to bear with one another in an attitude of forgiveness, and over all this foster an attitude of love one towards the other.

² 1 Corinthians 13:1

Now why all this emphasis on getting along with one another? Why is this so important?

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This leads to the two spheres we are called to intentionally wear Christ's clothing into. First: **As the prestigious elect we must clothe ourselves in our new identity and practice Christ centered church...**

This comes up in verse 15 and 16.

[Read Colossians 3:15-16]

Paul says the first sphere we are to practice putting on Christ's clothing is in church. Now why? Why would we need to be intentional about looking like Jesus here? I mean isn't it easy to look like Jesus at church?

Paul says "no, not at all!" Why?

Remember that the church is the one place on earth where people of all different backgrounds find themselves together. Paul already established in verse 11 that God's new chosen people is a group distinctly not defined as being Jew or Gentiles, slave or free, barbarian, Scythian or any other "ian". Being part of the new holy and dearly loved ones is about being in Christ.

But people who are different don't normally associate. A McDonald's till employee doesn't fit in a room full of CEO's. Generally ethnic groups stick together – that's not surprising. People of the same age enjoy each other's company. That's natural. But that's not church. Church is where all these barriers come down and we become brothers and sisters because of Christ.

And so Paul says in this kind of atmosphere you have to put on Christ's hand-me-downs in order to survive! Looking like Christ here is hard because our natural differences don't disappear. We don't see eye to eye here. There are disagreements and arguments. And so Paul challenges us to bear with one another, forgive each other and bind ourselves together in Christ's love.

And so the book of Colossians, like everything else in the New Testament, is written into a local church context. And in verse 15 here Paul uses a familiar word picture to describe this – he says you are all members of one body, and then he says, so let the message of Christ dwell among you richly.

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Now you might think that every time a church gathers the message of Christ dwells richly, but in fact this isn't the case. Paul presents this as something we have to be intentional about. He says "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts", and "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly."

Church, let's make sure Christ is our focus and the empowering presence that rules our gatherings. Let's Make Christ exaltation what we are about because this won't happen by accident.

So how do we make sure this happens?

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In verse 16, in one of the few passages in the New Testament that actually talks about what should happen at church, Paul tells us. He gives us three details about what an ideal service should look like. He says it will include teaching, admonishing and singing to God with gratitude. And when these three are done together clothed in Christ's hand-me-down attitudes, Jesus' message will dwell among us richly.

So teaching is positive instruction about what to do as Christians and what the Bible says. Admonition on the other hand is warnings of things to avoid. And Paul says these things need to be handled carefully with all wisdom. And notice he says they should be done by all of us. This isn't my job, Paul says (vs 16) teach and admonish one another. If you are a Christian this is your job as you gather here today. You haven't come to hear me preach, you haven't come to sing your favorite music. God has called you here to build the people beside you up by teaching and admonishing them. Jesus has given you something to give.

Now that's a very different focus from what normally happens in North American church. But this is what the Bible says being a body is about. So when you come to church check your attitude. Have you come to consume because you like the preaching or the music? Neither of those are good reasons to come. Instead when you come to church pray, "God give me Your word to speak to a brother or sister that I can build them up." That's what being a body is about.

Third Paul talks about singing which is a powerful component of church life, and he mentions three different kinds of songs to use. First he says sing Psalms – this refers to music based on the book of Psalms – these would have been songs that Christians adopted from their Jewish roots. Then he mentions hymns – this is Jesus worshipping music, and refers to songs not taken from the Old Testament but composed for church singing. Included in this category would be most of the hymns and contemporary music we sing today. And finally Paul says "and songs from the Spirit" or "spiritual songs" which commentator Douglass Moo states refer to spontaneous compositions prompted by the Spirit.³ So allow the Spirit to lead in song.

But whether it is spontaneous or planned Paul urges that our singing be done with gratitude. It doesn't matter so much the words we sing as the attitude we have. When our hearts are right we are focused on Christ. We are worshipping and bringing glory to His name. And we are ministering to each other.

³ Moo, Douglas "The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub co), 2008. pg 290

And that's why it is common to have your heart lifted while singing worship music. And perhaps you came today depressed and discouraged, but as we sang your heart was lifted. Your mind was drawn from the cares of the world and focused on the greatness of God. This is the way it was designed to be and evidence that you are putting on Christ's hand-me-downs.

The church is the first place we do this. The second sphere we are to intentionally wear Christ's clothing comes in verse 17 (and we will close with this)

[Read Colossians 3:17]

As the prestigious elect we must clothe ourselves in our new identity and practice Christ centered church and daily life.

Here Paul calls the elect to intentionally put on Christ's clothing in our daily lives. Paul says in word or in deed – do what ever you do for Christ.

And when we put on Christ's clothing like this every aspect of life becomes an act of worship. Everything. That means you can clean your house, or do your dishes or pay your taxes, or do your homework, or talk with your boss or lead your employees in a worshipful way.

When our intentions are to bring God glory and expand His kingdom then everything we do is being done in the name of the Lord because that is what Jesus was passionate about.

Friends, if you are someone who has received God's grace and taken off the old garments Christ enables you to put on His attributes. They may not fit perfectly at first, but as you keep at them, intentionally putting on His compassion and kindness and humility and gentleness and patience you will find yourself growing into them. Eventually they'll fit like a glove. And when this begins to happen you actually find yourself unable to take them off. In fact you won't want to, because Jesus' attributes will have actually become part of you. And that's what being part of Christ's body is about.

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Friends, some hand-me-downs are awesome – like Air Jordan Pumps – but Jesus' hand-me-downs will change your life. So make the decision to put them on here at church and out in the world. And as you put them on expect to look like your Master.