

THE PROPERLY DRESSED CHRISTIAN
COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

I.

I have never had much interest in clothes. That is not quite so obvious now perhaps as it once was. When Suzy and I first began dating, that lack of interest was something of a “turnoff” to her. The things that I wore tended to be out of style. They didn’t always match. They were not always the right length. The good side was that I didn’t mind having somebody else pick out my clothes. In the long run that worked out pretty well, though I still don’t have much interest or taste in clothes. There are few things that I find more boring than shopping for clothes.

It turns out, however, that God is interested in seeing properly dressed Christians. That is a lesson that comes out of the passage before us this morning. In fact, He tells us Christians just what we should wear. We are going to find out what we should wear so that we can be pleasing to Him and so that we can get along with fellow Christians.

We have seen that the Apostle Paul was writing this letter to a small church in a small town in Asia Minor. It was a seemingly insignificant group of people that was the object of Paul’s concern. But size and outward significance are never that important to God. In fact He tends to side with smallness and seeming insignificance. We are told in the Old Testament (PROJECTOR ON--- DEUTERONOMY 7:7) that God chose to bless Israel partly because it was the smallest of the nations. When the Book of Revelation was written a couple of decades after Colossians, Jesus told John to send a letter to seven churches in western Asia Minor. Colossae was not among them. Yet this small letter to this small group of people became a part of the New Testament. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We have seen that in this letter Paul was seeking to confront the false teaching of a group of people at Colossae who were seeking to lead the Christians there astray. In the first two chapters he talks about some of the basics of the Christian life, with a special emphasis on the sovereignty of Christ. Now in the third chapter he begins to deal with the practical application of these important theological truths. The apostle talks about negative behaviors that Christians are to avoid. Last week Pastor Steve described how we are to resist these negative behaviors and put on the new self, which is ours by virtue of faith in Christ. Now he describes positive behaviors which Christians should practice and put on.

II.

In vv. 12 & 13 of #3 he begins by describing THE OUTERWEAR OF VIRTUE. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE OUTERWEAR OF VIRTUE) First, in v. 12, Paul reminds his Christian readers about who they are. In #1 v. 2 he called them saints. Now he calls them “chosen ones,” which points to the fact that God is the initiator of the salvation of individuals. He says that his Christian readers are “holy,” which means that they are set

apart to Him. They are also “beloved.” They are the objects of God’s love. We are part of the family of God because God loved us and chose us and drew us to Himself. We Christians, therefore, have a position of great favor before God. We are royalty. We are children of the king of the universe. So we ought to dress accordingly.

Thus the author tells them, and he tells us, to put on “**compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.**” The first spiritual piece of clothing that we are to put on is a compassionate heart. There was little compassion that the Romans in Paul’s day had for the weak, the sick, the aged, and prisoners. Unwanted babies were left outside to die. In the first century killing people in the Roman coliseums became a spectator sport.

The Roman emperor Claudius, a few years before Paul wrote this letter, built an artificial lake near Rome and put captured prisoners in two teams of boats to fight each other. Thousands of Romans came out to watch the day long battle. In the end 3000 people were killed. The Romans thought that it was great sport. They had little compassion.

Such was the attitude of the Greeks who preceded them. In the Peloponnesian War in the fifth century BC, which pitted Athens against Sparta, the Athenians at one point attacked the neutral island of Melos. Its residents were starved into surrender, men were killed, and the women and children were sold into slavery. The islanders protested that they had done Athens no wrong. The Athenians responded, “**The strong do what they can; the weak suffer what they must.**”

From the earliest days it was Christians who took compassion upon the suffering of the weak and the sick and the aged. It was Christians who took a lead in establishing hospitals and orphanages throughout the world. It was Christians who took a lead in abolishing slavery. It is Christians who continue to have compassion toward hurting people in the world around us, including the most defenseless of all, the unborn.

Historian Tom Holland says about the prevailing cultural view prior to the arrival of Christianity: “**It was not just the extremes of callousness that unsettled me, but the complete lack of any sense that the poor or the weak might have the slightest intrinsic value.**” Why is it that this attitude changed in Western civilization? Atheist historian Holland says that it was the Christian belief that people are created in the image of God. (Breakpoint, 7/12/2021; *New Statesman*, 9/14/2016)

Who is it that shows up on the scene of natural disasters today? Besides FEMA and the Red Cross, it is church groups and parachurch groups. Pastor Rick Warren observes, “**You won’t find many atheists feeding the hungry and ministering to the sick in places like Africa or Mother Theresa’s Calcutta. It is precisely because people believe in the divinity of Jesus that they are willing to give up their lives (sometimes literally) in service to those whom Jesus calls ‘His brothers.’**” (Breakpoint, 12/26/2007) In our passage Paul is especially urging Christians to exhibit compassion toward one another.

We are to put on not only compassionate hearts but also kindness. Kindness is not a natural reaction. We tend to respond to cuts and criticisms and snide remarks with cuts and criticisms and snide remarks of our own. The famous playwright George Bernard Shaw once wrote a letter to Winston Churchill, saying, **“Enclosed are two tickets to the opening night of my first play. ...bring a friend (if you have one).”** Churchill sent back a reply: **“Dear Mr. Shaw, unfortunately I’ll be unable to attend the opening night of your play due to a prior engagement. Please send me tickets for a second night (if you have one).”** That is the kind of response which we find appropriate to that kind of snide remark.

Kindness in situations like this is not so normal. Kindness is a supernatural quality. The Book of Galatians describes it as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is evidence of God’s working in our lives. As we become more like Jesus, we will be more kind, especially toward fellow Christians.

The third virtue that Paul describes is humility. The Greeks didn’t regard humility as a virtue. They saw it as a negative quality. They were more inclined to gravitate toward the prize fighter who said about himself, “I am the greatest.” They were more inclined to extol the fans who proclaimed that their team was number one. They honored pride and self-sufficiency.

Jesus came along and honored the virtue of humility. By His own example He taught His followers to wash one another’s feet. He washed their feet shortly before His arrest and crucifixion. (PHILIPPIANS 2:5-6) In Philippians #2 vv. 5-8 we are told, **“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, (PHILIPPIANS 2:7) but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (PHILIPPIANS 2:8) And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”** This is the frame of mind that Paul says we are to have, especially toward one another in the body of Christ. Humility is a kind of death to the old self, to our ego which wants to be the center of the universe.

Meekness is the fourth virtue. It also was not valued by the Greeks. But Paul listed it as another fruit of the Holy Spirit. In Matthew #21 v. 5 the gospel writer (MATTHEW 21:5) used it to describe Jesus. Quoting the Old Testament he said, **“Say to the daughter of Zion,/ ‘Behold, your king is coming to you, humble [It is actually the word ‘meek.’], and mounted on a donkey,/ on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.”** He is a king, but in His first coming He does not use force to bring about His kingdom. We Christians are commanded to put on meekness, to treat fellow believers with meekness.

Fifth on Paul’s list is patience. (PROJECTOR OFF) Literally the Greek word means “long-suffering.” Patience involves self-restraint. It involves bearing injuries and insults and mistreatments and unfairness without giving a hostile response. It means not responding as an offense deserves.

In v. 13 Paul seems to elaborate upon this quality of patience and what is involved with it. For he speaks of **“bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”** The focus here again is upon relations with fellow Christians. Other Scriptures talk about forgiving unbelievers. We Christians expect unbelievers to act in unchristian ways toward us. We have higher expectations of fellow believers. The unfortunate reality is that we Christians do not always act christianly toward each other.

Paul implies that there are two things that may test our patience. One is traits, or ways of being, that irritate us. The second is specific actions that hurt us. Our responsibility is to forgive specific hurts done to us and to overlook ways of being that bug us. We are to put up with them. Jesus, in Matthew #18, did recognize that there are certain wrongs that do need to be confronted, but in a proper way.

If we don't forgive and overlook, we will end up exhibiting the five negative characteristics of v. 8. We will exhibit anger, wrath, malice, slander and obscene talk. Those are the clothes that we are to get rid of. Instead we are to put on patience, which requires forgiveness and forbearance.

Jesus is again our example. On the cross He asked for forgiveness for those who were crucifying Him. In the Lord's Prayer He indicated that our unforgiveness is a barrier to our reception and experience of God's forgiveness. Our responsibility is to forgive. The Greek word here means “to give it away freely.” The most common word used for “forgive” in the New Testament means “to let it go.”

Psychologist Robert Enright says, **“It's not excusing or forgetting--- it's giving up resentment that you're entitled to. ...by giving this gift to the other, it is the gift giver who becomes psychologically healed.”** (*Psychology Today*, July/August, 1996) Forgiveness does accomplish that. In our passage Paul's primary interest is in establishing good relations among Christians. He wants to preserve the unity of the church. Patience with forgiveness and forbearance is essential to that.

II.

Besides the outerwear of virtue there is also THE BELT OF LOVE (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE BELT OF LOVE), which is described in v.14. The properly dressed Christian doesn't use suspenders. He wears a belt, a good belt, a belt that stands out, a belt that draws attention from other people. This belt is love. It should be an eye catcher. For Paul says that it **“binds everything together in perfect harmony.”** It draws and holds Christians together.

In 1 Corinthians #13 love is described as the most important of the virtues. (JOHN 13:35) In John 13:35 Jesus said, **“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** The love that we Christians show

toward each other is very effective in communicating to the world around us that we are followers of Jesus.

The current pandemic has been an opportunity to display that love. This has historically been the case with other epidemics down through church history. Around 250 AD there was a plague that spread throughout the Roman Empire. At its height 5000 people a day were dying in the city of Rome. In 260 AD a bishop by the name of Dionysius wrote an Easter letter in which he pointed to the love that Christians showed for one another. He wrote, **“Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead...”** (Starks, *The Rise of Christianity*) Followers of pagan religions could not match that kind of love. So there were many who were drawn to the gospel because of the witness of these early Christians.

The belt of love stood out to them. The belt of love that we share should also stand out to unbelievers around us. We need to be characterized by our genuine love for one another. It means bearing with each other and forgiving each other. It means exhibiting compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.

III.A.

In vv. 15-17 we come to THE INNER WEAR OF GODLINESS. (III. THE INNER WEAR OF GODLINESS) The qualities that Paul talks about here are the foundation garments of the Christian life. The first of these is THE PEACE OF CHRIST. (III. THE INNER... A. THE PEACE OF CHRIST) In v. 15 Paul writes, **“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.”**

The original Greek word for “rule” is used nowhere else in the New Testament. In classical Greek the noun form of the word was used of an umpire who presided over athletic games and gave out the prizes. So some have translated the verb here in v. 15 as, **“And let the peace of Christ act as an umpire in your hearts...”** Some Christians have used this verse as a basis for believing that having an inner peace is a good criterion for making decisions.

A medical doctor by the name of Dwight Carlson writes in his book on the will of God (*Living God’s Will*), **“The Scriptures speak of His peace as an umpire or arbitrator in our hearts. Colossians 3:15 puts it this way:”**--- and he quotes from the Amplified Version--- **“And let the peace (soul harmony which comes) from Christ rule (act as an umpire continually) in your hearts--- deciding and settling with finality all questions that arise in your minds.”** Carlson continues, **“When we are living in God’s will the peace of God will rule as an umpire that we are, in fact, in God’s**

will. When we prayerfully contemplate a course of action or a new step in our Christian life--- God's peace will permeate our lives if the decision is of Him."

There are three problems that I see with this interpretation. The first is that having peace about a particular course of action is a very subjective thing. In my experience I have seen many Christians justify unwise decisions and behaviors specifically contrary to Scripture by saying that they have a peace about them. Second, the verb in question here came to have meanings in the first century other than strictly "to act as an umpire." In Greek writings of this era the word came to be used in the sense of "administer, preside, govern, or rule." Thus our English Standard translation uses the verb "rule."

Third, and most importantly, the context of this verse is not dealing with principles of personal decision making. Paul in these verses is talking about how Christians should relate to one another. He is talking about virtuous behavior that should be displayed toward fellow believers. In v. 16 he has just stressed the importance of unity. Beginning in v. 17 he is describing the heart attitudes and motivations that are necessary to produce this unity and these outward behaviors. One of the essential things is having a peaceful heart, a heart that is governed and ruled by peace. Christians without a peaceful heart are likely to become angry and to produce disruptive behavior. Hence there is a need to exhibit forgiveness.

So we need peace to rule, or govern, our hearts. How do we get that peace? Ultimately, of course, it comes from God's work in our lives. He develops that peace in our lives as we love people by faith. It comes as we forgive people by faith. And it comes as a result of working at being thankful, as Paul points out at the end of v. 15. We will return to that subject in a moment.

Thus we need to seek the peace of Jesus in our hearts, not just for our own good, but for the sake of the local church and for the sake of fellow Christians outside of the local church.

B.

The second kind of inner wear that Paul describes is THE WORD OF CHRIST. (III. A. B. THE WORD OF CHRIST) In v. 16 he writes, "**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.**" Usually the New Testament speaks of the Word of God. But here Paul talks about the Word of Christ, perhaps because this epistle has a special emphasis on the sovereignty of Christ.

This Word of Christ is supposed to dwell within Christians both as individuals and as groups. We are to have a focus on the Bible and the New Testament in the meetings of the church and in our individual lives. Again the Bible is establishing a basis for the importance of personal devotions. The Bible ought to richly dwell in each one of us. It ought to permeate our minds and our hearts and our bodies. It should be reflected in our thinking and in our words and in our behavior.

An evidence of this rich indwelling will be teaching and admonishing each other with songs. What is the apostle talking about here? The third century church leader Tertullian described what happened in his church at communion services. He wrote, **“...after water for the hands and lights have been brought in, each is invited to sing to God in the presence of the others from what he knows of the holy scriptures or from his own heart.”** (*Apology*, #34)

(1 CORINTHIANS 14:26) In 1 Corinthians #14 v. 26 Paul wrote, **“What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.”** So in our verse Paul seems to envision an opportunity where members of the congregation can edify one another through singing and teaching and testimony. We have had that this morning with a baptism. We have had singing. We have other opportunities for this in our Bible studies and prayer meetings.

In the early 1950s three pastors in the Soviet Union organized a weeklong congress in Moscow for young unmarried Christians from various house churches. The pastors ended up being sentenced to prison for three years each. But the congress did happen and almost 700 Christians showed up. During the week the young people were challenged to recreate the New Testament gospels from memory. None of them owned their own Bible.

“At the end of the conference, when they compared and combined the efforts of all the different small groups, the young people had recreated all of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John with only a half-dozen mistakes. They had also recreated the lyrics of more than twelve hundred songs, choruses, and hymns of the faith from memory.” (Ripken, *The Insanity of God*, p. 165) The word of Christ had come to dwell in them richly. This was how Christianity was able to survive in the midst of persecution. Perhaps we would do well to spend some time in Scripture memory.

C.

God's inner wear of godliness includes the peace of Christ, the word of Christ, and finally THANKFULNESS. (III. A. B. C. THANKFULNESS) Verse 17 says, **“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”** The Bible doesn't give us Christians a detailed code of conduct that describes how we should respond in every conceivable situation. It does provide us with basic principles by which we can live. Here Paul gives us a basic principle. Whatever we Christians do or say, we should do it in the name of Jesus. We should speak and act in a way that is consistent with the character of Jesus.

Also Paul is undermining the idea that there is a distinction between secular life and sacred life. Christians are to apply their faith in every aspect of life. There is increasing pressure in our culture for Christians to leave their faith at home or in our church buildings. Whether it is baking cakes or arranging flowers, government is too often pressuring us to not apply Christian principles at work, at school, and in the community.

A couple of years ago the Planned Parenthood Action Fund complained, **“So-called ‘religious refusal’ laws--- or ‘conscience protections’--- allow most any health care worker, including pharmacists and volunteers, to deny patients access to services the health care worker deems contrary to their personal beliefs. Under the Trump-Pence administration’s refusal policies, health care workers in the U.S. and around the globe can deny patients services like birth control, abortion, sterilization, hormone therapy, and HPV vaccines.”**

(plannedparenthoodaction.org)

Many secular critics want religious people to compartmentalize their lives and keep religion in one place and the rest of their lives in another place. That is totally contrary to Biblical thinking. Godliness ought to permeate our entire lives. Everything that we do with our time can be sacred if it is done in Jesus’ name, if it is done according to His will and His character. We can be just as much in the will of God when we are digging a ditch as when we are preparing a Bible study.

The main thing that I would like you to notice about v. 17, however, is the mention again of giving thanks. In v. 15 Paul said that Christians are to be thankful. In v. 16 he said that Christians are to sing with thankfulness in their hearts. Now he says that believers are to give thanks through Jesus to God the Father.

When we Christians find that we are becoming angry or critical or negative or cynical or depressed, we need to work on being thankful. We need to focus on the things in our lives for which we can be thankful. We may not feel thankful. But we need to give thanks anyway. We need to discipline ourselves to thank God for the good things that we have in our lives. As we do that, we will develop a more peaceful heart. That in turn will promote virtuous behavior and unity among fellow Christians. We will become properly dressed Christians.

A few of you may recognize the name Bernard Nathanson. (BERNARD NATHANSON) He was the cofounder of the National Abortion Rights Action League. He was a pioneer in what would become known as the “Pro-choice Movement.” In 1970 he began operating a clinic in New York City that became the nation’s largest abortion clinic. Three years later he shifted gears and became chief of obstetrical service at St. Luke’s Hospital in New York. He began to give more time to caring for babies, although he still did some abortions.

When the ultrasound machine came out, and Dr. Nathanson first was exposed to it, he was startled to watch the development of these little lives. He soon found himself referring to them as babies rather than fetuses. Soon he became convinced that human life existed within the womb from the onset of pregnancy. In an article he wrote for the *New England Journal of Medicine* he confessed that he had presided over 60,000 deaths. He went on to argue that in abortions doctors are taking human life. Nathanson began to speak at pro-life gatherings. In 1985 he caused a stir when he produced the

film of the abortion of a twelve-week fetus. That film was *The Silent Scream*. (SILENT SCREAM)

But inside Bernard Nathanson was experiencing a silent scream of his own. He had gone to Hebrew school as a child, but his father had ridiculed the spiritual lessons that he was taught there. Nathanson had never become especially religious himself. But the 60,000 abortions that he had performed weighed upon his conscience. Two of those abortions involved babies in the womb which he had fathered. During the 1980s he considered suicide several times.

Then in 1989 Nathanson attended a pro-life rally in New York City where he observed some properly dressed Christians. He later wrote, **“With pro-choicers hurling the most fulsome epithets at them, the police surrounding them, the media openly unsympathetic to their cause, the federal judiciary fining and jailing them, and municipal officials threatening them--- all through it they sat smiling, quietly praying, singing, confident. They exhibited an intensity of love and prayer that astonished me.”** These were properly dressed Christians.

For the first time in his life Nathanson began to seriously consider the notion of God. He read St. Augustine and Dostoevsky. He read the autobiography of a Jewish medical school teacher he once had who became a devout Christian. In 1996 he was baptized as a Christian. He told Charles Colson, who was present for it, **“All I could think about while I was kneeling at the altar was my bar mitzvah,”** he said. **“That day I was so afraid.** He hesitated, then looked up. **“Today I felt all that fear fall away. I experienced sheer grace.”** (Colson, *How Now Shall We Live*)

A key factor in Nathanson’s spiritual journey was his encounter with properly dressed Christians. They were people who had the outerwear of virtue, the belt of love, and the inner wear of godliness. Does your spiritual wardrobe need some work? Let’s go to work on it. We need these qualities of life for the sake of God, for the sake of unbelievers around us, for the sake of each other, and for the sake of ourselves.