

Colossians 3:12-17

Be Thankful

November 6, 2022



BE THANKFUL

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

I will be the first person to admit that the world of high fashion is pretty far outside my experience. One of the unexpected fringe benefits of ministry is that I don't really have to think too hard about what to wear to church on Sunday mornings! But you can say a lot with your clothes. My clergy collar instantly conveys my vocation to others; a set of scrubs says health care; a uniform helps us immediately spot someone who can help us, like a police officer, a firefighter or a paramedic; our army, navy and air force all have unique uniforms that speak of a serviceperson's entire career, to the informed eye. We dress in one way to go out to a party or a special event, like a wedding, and another way entirely to work in the garden or clean the bathroom.

Our clothes share our style and sometimes our identity; new people respond to us, for better or worse, based on a first impression and part of that first impression is our clothes. When we feel sick or unhappy, we wear our comfy clothes because they make us feel better; when we are out for an evening, we put on our nicest outfit, because it makes us feel good about ourselves and the way we look; when we are cold, we put on a sweater to warm ourselves up.

Clothes are necessary for us, lacking as we do a nice set of feathers or fur, but they are also a means of self-expression and even our most ordinary, unthinking clothing choices say something about the person we are.

Paul, in his letter to the church in Colossae, offers Christians a new wardrobe option: to clothe ourselves in the new life that the Holy Spirit works in us.

We spend a lot of time, as Christians or as people simply interested in knowing more about the Christian faith, we spend a lot of time thinking about the decisive moment of salvation. Christians probably remember their own moment of turning toward Jesus and believing in him for the first time; prospective believers may give considerable thought to what it might mean to accept Jesus as their Saviour, or they may crash into that moment, full of emotion and newly-emerging faith. There is a whole evangelical apparatus out there in the broader Christian world for moving people towards making that turning-point commitment to Christ and Christ's church. But...then what happens? After we believe, what happens next? Paul tells us.

Before we dive in, let's pause for a brief theological intermission. There's a couple of things we need straight in our minds before we start admiring our new wardrobe.

It is a foundational tenet of our reformed, Presbyterian Christianity that we experience salvation by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. All that "alone-ing" does not mean we are lonely or doing this all on our own. In fact, it means the exact opposite: our being saved, the abundant life now and eternally, all that is work we do not do. Jesus does it, right from that nudge of a seed of faith sprouting in our hearts that helps us get to the point of seeing Jesus at all, to the heavy lifting of making us right with God. All of this is freely-given gift, by way of the painful sacrifice Christ made on the Cross; Jesus' goodness and right relationship with God superimposed over us and our sin.

All of that is done for us, there when we want it, when we discover that we need it. Paul writes a lot about how faith and new life are freely given gifts from Jesus. What Paul is talking about right here is not this. He's writing about a second process, called sanctification in traditional church language: the life-long journeying process of growth in grace and in holiness. And he is giving us some personal spiritual work that we can do.

Clothe yourselves; not stick your arms out and wait to be clothed. Clothe yourselves.

We can participate in our own growth in grace, our own new life that the Holy Spirit is already creating within us. We can help the Spirit – and that is a different enough statement from Paul that it's worth taking some time to consider it.

Paul uses the metaphor of new clothes to teach us about this new, sanctified life we can live. When we enter into this new relationship of "being saved," it's like we take off our old clothes and put on brand new different ones. We don't put our current clothes in the laundry, give them a good wash and put them back on again; we don't keep them in the back of the closet. In the lead up to the bit we read, Paul actually says strip off the old self and get rid of it. You won't need or even want those old clothes soon. Get rid of the old self, the old clothes of anger, greed, malice, abusive talk, lies, hatred, behaviours that harm you and hurt others. Put on these new clothes, this new nature, instead: compassion and kindness, humility and patience, the capacity to forgive others and to love.

But here's the thing: these new clothes don't just emerge naturally as a consequence of faith in Christ. They don't sprout from us, like feathers or fur. Paul called them new clothes, clothes we are to clothe ourselves in, and that means we choose to wear them. Like putting on our gardening clothes to work in the garden or our nicest clothes to go to a party, we choose to live this new life. Certainly, our faith in Christ, the Spirit indwelling us, make us capable of making the choice and equips us to follow through on being this new self. But still, Paul is clear: we choose.

And just like picking out what we wear each morning, it's a choice we make every day. We wear Jesus; we cloth ourselves in the values and behaviours that Christ taught us, that Christ himself lived and died and lived again by.

Clothing ourselves as God's chosen people, dressing ourselves in Christ's own compassion and kindness, humility and patience, forgiveness and love before we head out into the day – it sounds both incredibly simple and sensible, and yet awfully hard, too. I can imagine we might struggle not to lose a piece of clothing or two, over the course of the day; the scarf of patience might fall off when dealing with a difficult family member or situation, or the sweater of forgiving others could get left behind when we're really badly hurt by someone or something.

As straightforward as it sounds to simply clothe ourselves in the character of Jesus, whom we have committed to follow and love to love, stripping off and getting rid of the values and behaviours, the instincts and gut reactions, of our old self, might well be an uphill battle. One we could use a bit of a pep talk for, probably, but we're not going to get it just yet. As poetic as Paul is in this letter, rather than encouraging us further, at this point, he complicates things instead.

There's a switch in verse 15, mid-way through. Instead of talking about the new self as being like new clothes we can put on ourselves, suddenly Paul begins to write about the person inside the clothes, our inner life instead of our outer self. The peace of Christ is to rule in our hearts, and the word of Christ is to dwell in us richly. It's not as clear this time what our role is supposed to be in this, not like clothing ourselves.

What do we do to bring the peace and word of Christ into ourselves? Our instinct is to say that this part must be entirely the Spirit's work, well beyond our capacity to contribute; but Paul is still clearly exhorting his readers, telling us to act, that this, too, is something we can participate in – but how?

I think the clothing metaphor can still help here; let me try to explain it this way. If you're cold, and you put on a sweater, something happens, doesn't it, to you, the person inside the sweater: you warm up. The outside change – the new Christ clothes – become the condition for inside change; just like putting on a sweater warms us up.

What we wear – compassion and kindness, humility and patience, forgiving and loving others – changes the body– the person – we are. Our whole life becomes the means of our growth in grace, our sanctification, even as, at the same time, our whole life is how we express our faith. It's like we'll grow to fit our new clothes, just by wearing them; and the stuff that makes us grow, that fills us out, is the peace of Christ ruling our hearts and the word of Christ, dwelling in us.

Let me give you an example, of how we can participate in this inner Christ-ness. The Bible, the written-down word of God, is full of stories and poems, history and letters, dating back thousands of years. It's full of teachings and wisdom, events that reveal God's power at work, foundational stories that describe reality and then how Jesus changes and will change that reality. Learning about the Bible, as a literary object to be discussed and picked apart and understood, is not really the point of it, though. If that was the point, then we could each of us buy a couple of reference books and dedicate a year or two of concentrated effort until we understand the history, know all the names, can recite chronologies of events...and be done with it. Set the Bible aside, and move on.

But, of course, we don't do that, do we, we read the Bible over and over again, even after we know it pretty well. We have ministers to preach it, reflect on the Bible and proclaim it back to us, every week. Bible words and ideas crop up in our worship service elsewhere, too, in our prayers and hymns and calls to worship and words of sending. We read devotionals or watch videos or read books or do Bible studies. We immerse ourselves in the Bible, this written word of God. Why do we do that?

We do it so that the Bible's words and ideas, God's words and ideas, become our own. We soak it in, absorb it like sponges, so that when you give us a squeeze, what comes out is Christ.

An outer change in behaviour and values becomes the very means by which we are changed permanently on the inside, too. Until the conscious effort of speaking with humility or acting with compassion mostly fades, and our instinct, our gut reaction, is exactly the same thing that Jesus would do or say. And that's when Christ's peace really will be ruling in our hearts and his word dwelling in us richly, no longer simply new and beautiful clothes we choose to wear, but woven into our very selves.

The point of this part of Paul's letter so many centuries ago is still deeply relevant to us today: we believe in Jesus, but there's got to be more to it than waiting around for heaven after we die. During his life, Jesus unpacked a clear and hopeful picture of what life will be like in the coming age, when Jesus comes back and the kingdom of heaven finally comes. Just and generous, loving and free, welcoming and wholesome, without any of the pain or inequities or anxieties of now. That's what is coming, what life will be like. Paul tells us to develop, in the present, the personal character that will fit us in, that anticipates our new life in that coming age. Character is simply a catch-all word to describe our actions, our values, our beliefs, our words, the sum total of who we are and how we live, day by day. And the essential piece of Paul's call for Christian character is the moral effort, the work on our part alongside the Spirit, that is needed.

Christian character doesn't come naturally, but it may – we are promised – that it can become natural. The steps it takes to get there involve challenging decisions and difficult actions, choices made that may well run counter to our very human inclinations shaped by society, our upbringing, even our personalities. But at the same time, this Christian character isn't meant to be a costume we wear out in public, or our “Sunday best,” worn rarely and only in some situations. Paul was not encouraging Christians to try to make themselves good enough for God, or to fake it as best we're able. It's more like developing muscle memory: actions and thoughts practiced and repeated intentionally and so often that it just sort of happens without much effort or consideration. As though we've taken in so much of Christ's peace and Christ's word, worn our new Christ clothes for so long, that our life becomes as good as indistinguishable from Christ's own.

Each Christian, beloved by God, can make the choice to clothe themselves in Christ's compassion and kindness, his humility and patience, his capacity to forgive others and to love. What an extraordinary gift; what a meaningful and impactful way to live.

Can you imagine how people might respond to someone clothed in Christ, if they met them on an ordinary day, in an ordinary place? Perhaps you don't need to imagine: perhaps you've been that glimpse of Christ's new life for someone else, or had someone be that for you, or seen small parts of this world transformed by people clothed in Christ's compassion, kindness, humility and forgiveness. No wonder Paul breaks off in the middle of this beautiful passage to exclaim: be thankful! And I think to finish today, I will borrow Paul's final lines, his great hope for Christians everywhere and every-when as they don their new clothes, their new life and step out into the world: whatever we do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him. Thanks be to God. Amen.