

New Clothes

Text:

Colossians 3:12-17

“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 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. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 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. 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.”

Introduction:

Last time we talked about what to do with sin. We saw that we needed to recognize it for what it is, the disrupter of God's *shalom*; to recognize that, in Christ, it no longer has power over us, and then to repudiate it. In that text Paul uses two images for the repudiation of sin. The first is putting it to death, and the second is putting or taking it off as one would take off a worn out or soiled garment. Now the second image, that of taking off a garment is the first half of a double image, and it is the second half of that image, putting on a new garment, that provides the basic image of today's text. We must take off the old, but the old must be replaced by the new. Our old clothes, we saw last time, are the sinful behavior patterns of a life without Christ. The new, we will see, are righteous behavior patterns that flow from our new relationship with Christ. This is not the only time Paul uses this image. In Ephesians 4:17-24 he says:

“Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!-- assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be

renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

In this text there is a slight difference. He says what we are putting off is the old self, and what we are putting on is the new self, while in Colossians he visualizes it as putting off individual sins and putting off individual virtues. However if we read on in the Ephesians text it is obvious that he is talking about the same thing as he continues by giving us a series of examples of putting off a specific sin and replacing it with a specific virtue. We can quote the first as an example: “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another” (Ephesians 4:24).

So the subject of this paragraph is the believer’s new clothes. We know that our old clothes are our sinful behavior patterns that are no longer appropriate to our new position in Christ, but what are our new clothes? First of all we should point out that they are not our final clothes. We have already talked about our final glory that is presently “hid with God in Christ”, that is so glorious that we cannot even imagine it, and that we will not know it until “Christ who is our glory shall appear”. The new clothes of which we are speaking are, at least in part, temporary. A part of them will be present in our final glory, but in our perfected state, another part of them will no longer be necessary. Notice that Paul includes in the passage, longsuffering, forbearance, and forgiveness. None of these things will be necessary when the bride of Christ has been given her wedding clothes because no one will any longer have “a complaint” against another”. We will no longer get on one another’s nerves, or offend one another, or sin against one another. So what we are talking about are our waiting clothes. We have been espoused to one husband that we might be presented to him as a chaste bride (II Corinthians 11:12), but the bridegroom has not yet come to claim his bride. In the intermediate time we must clothe ourselves in a way that is appropriate to our new standing and position in Christ. We have already seen that all that is sinful must be put off because it is inappropriate, now we are going to look at what is appropriate clothing to those who have been espoused to the King of kings and Lord of lords.

The first trip I made to Quebec was in the month of January. Knowing that it would be colder there than in Kansas I wore my heaviest coat and took what I thought would be appropriate clothing. When I arrived at the airport in Quebec City my friend Paul Leslie, with whom I would be staying, met me. His first words after greeting me were: “we’re going to have to get you some appropriate clothes.” He graciously loaned me a parka and some warm snow boots which made my stay much more pleasant as I would see the lowest temperatures and the deepest snow that I had ever seen in my life before I left. The clothes I left in were appropriate to winter in Kansas, but I was in a new place and the new place required new clothes. This is what Paul is telling us in this text. You old sinful habits might have been appropriate to a life in the world without Christ; you might even have considered them necessary to your survival, but you are in a new place; you are now “seated with Christ in heavenly places” (Ephesians 1:3), and such practices and habits are entirely inappropriate to the position you hold, so dress yourselves in a way that befits your position.

Notice one last general observation about the text before we look at some of the details of the text. All of the qualities that we are told to clothe ourselves with have to do with the way we treat one another. I remind you once more of the summary that we have already made of Paul's understanding of the Christian life:

- To know Christ is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and to have new life
- This new life is the basis of the Christian life, but it must be cultivated
- Although we have new life in Christ we have not yet been completely delivered from the old life so we must consciously put off all that is sinful and pertains to the old life
- We must at the same time consciously put on the virtues that pertain to the new life, the life of Christ
- The new life especially manifests itself in the way we relate to others because ultimately it is a life of love since God is love, Christ came to manifest God's love, and it is the life of Christ that is being formed in us

It is the last two of the five points of the summary that we are talking about today: we must consciously clothe ourselves with the virtues that pertain to our new life in Christ, and these virtues all have to do with the way we treat one another, and as we will see in a moment at their center is love.

Let us now try to respond to two questions:

- What are our new clothes?
- How do we put them on?

I. What are our New Clothes?

Just as in the previous passage Paul lists an assortment of sins that must be put off; in this passage he lists eight qualities that must be put on. Depending on the translation you are reading they may vary somewhat, but I will try to give them to you in terms we are most likely to understand. The eight are: compassion, kindness, meekness, humility, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and love. We could spend a lot of time describing each of them, but that probably isn't necessary. What we do need to do is think about them in the context of our own lives. Experience has taught me that we are too easy on ourselves. We often see ourselves as more compassionate, or humble or loving than we really are. The reason for this is that we are functioning on our own set of definitions and images when we need biblical definitions and images. This is the reason that we only really begin to make progress in this

area when we lay aside our own ideas for awhile and begin to think about what God understands by these things.

This leads to a second observation. All of these qualities can be found in God, and they are exemplified to perfection in Jesus Christ. In Christian theology we usually divide God's attributes into two categories. Different names are used. The most helpful for what we are saying here are his communicable and incommunicable attributes. The communicable attributes are also called his moral attributes. The idea is that God has made us in his image; that means among other things his moral image. This implies that the moral qualities that God possesses perfectly, we can possess at least partially. This is what Jesus meant when he told us to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5: 48). This means that when we clothe ourselves with such qualities we are putting on the very character of God. This makes sense in light of what we said about clothing ourselves in a way that is appropriate to our position as "God's chosen people, holy and beloved."

There is at least one more thing to notice here before we move to the second question. As Paul presents the qualities that we are to put on he gives the preeminent place to love. This is not surprising to someone who is familiar with his writings, or for that matter, to someone who is familiar with the Bible. God is love. This is one of the great reassuring truths of the Bible. All of our hope of salvation flow from the fact that "God so loved the world." God loves us, and his love for us set the pattern for our love for one another. If I can change images for a moment, think of the graces that we are told to put on here, not as clothing but as stones set in a piece of jewelry, the great centerpiece jewel is the diamond of love. The rest surround it and complement it, but love that is always at the center—not love as it is cheapened and distorted by culture, but divine love as it is demonstrated to us in the Gospel.

II. How do we put them on?

The most important question we can ask as we study this text is: "How do we put them on"? To make this clear I want to summarize Paul's teaching from several different passages. The first thing he would tell us is that we cannot manufacture these clothes ourselves. They are provided to us as divine gifts. Just as fig leaf garments would not do for Adam and Eve, self-manufactured virtue will not do for us. This is the reason why in another passage he calls them the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22 ff.). They are not something we produce, but something the Holy Spirit produces in us. They are the fruit of conversion. This brings us back to the first point of our five point summary: to know Christ is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, to have new life. Without that new life, without the action of God in us by the Holy Spirit it would be impossible to clothe ourselves with such things.

The second part of the answer is that this “putting on” requires deliberate action on our part. Just as the repudiation of sin requires a deliberate decision, so the putting on of Christ-like character is the result of intention on the part of the believer. The tense of the imperatives in this paragraph indicate a definite decision, a moment when we take definite action to change a pattern of behavior. This is always preceded by divine insight granted by the Holy Spirit in which we see our lack on the one hand, and God’s provision on the other. In these moments of spiritual enlightenment we come to realize that the old way is wrong and we must be rid of it, but we also see the new way and we are enabled to spiritually resolve to walk in the new way.

A third element in this process of putting off and putting on is what Paul calls in verse 10 “renewal”. This whole process is the ultimate make over. In this process, which biblically is called sanctification or renewal, God is redoing us from the inside out. In the same way that we might take a derelict house and rebuild it, God takes our sinful life and remakes us; he transforms our character so that what we are in the end bears no more resemblance to what we were at the beginning than a completely restored and remodeled house does to the wreck that it was when the workmen began their labor.

Now Paul says that this transformation is specifically a transformation of our mind or our thought patterns. In Romans 12:1-2 He says: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, *which is* your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what *is* that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” In Ephesians 4:22-24, a passage we already referred to he says: “That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.” Notice how in the passage “be renewed in the spirit of your mind” comes between “put off the old man” and “put on the new man”. This transformation which involves putting off sinful behavior patterns and adopting Christ like behavior patterns is a result of the remaking of our minds. If our behavior is to change, our thinking must change. We will never act right until we think right.

Let me conclude by adding a couple of more passages from Paul’s letters. Remember when we take off our old inappropriate clothes and put on our new clothes that are appropriate to our new standing in Christ we are allowing God to transform sinful behavior patterns into righteous behavior patterns. This transformation begins as a transformation of our minds; we learn to think in a new way, and this new way of thinking produces new response patterns. This being true, it is essential that we open our minds to the work of the Holy Spirit; that we allow him to do his transforming work. This is the reason, for instance, that Paul says to the Philippians: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). We must first admit that by nature we do not have the mind of Christ. Our habitual behavior patterns are not Christ-like, and our habits are not godly. This explains why Paul exhorts the Philippians at the end of the letter to be intentional about what they think about; to take control of their thought life; to, as

the Psalmist says: “let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight” (Psalm 19:14). This is what he says:

“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things *are* honest, whatsoever things *are* just, whatsoever things *are* pure, whatsoever things *are* lovely, whatsoever things *are* of good report; if *there be* any virtue, and if *there be* any praise, think on these things. Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you” (Philippians 4:8-9).

The putting on of virtue, the dressing of ourselves with clothes appropriate to our calling, begins with us taking control of the thoughts and meditations of our hearts and minds, of focusing on that which is honest and good and pure so that we might do that which is compassionate and humble and loving. A cluttered, confused, and disorientated mind will never produce a holy life. We cannot feed our minds on spiritual junk food and the poison of the world and expect the Spirit to clothe us with love, joy, and peace.