

“A Well- Dressed Congregation”

Psalms 148

Colossians 3:12-17

Among Paul’s letters to the various churches he encountered, this letter to the Colossians is one of my favorites. This letter as a whole is inspiring, hopeful, persistent, imperative, and powerful, and as we would hope for as Christians, is rooted in three main things: certainty of our salvation by grace through faith, the power of Christ above all other powers, and the ultimate call to love one another. In the end, Paul’s main goal throughout this letter is to strengthen the faith of wavering and wandering Christians.

Paul’s main approach in addressing the ways of this church is by teaching that **belief** (specifically the belief in Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior and all that encompasses) and **love** (how someone feels toward, interacts and treats others) **are intertwined**. For Paul, belief and love are a necessary pair. One compliments the other in a way that says without belief in God (Christ), there cannot be true love, and without the appropriate expression of love, one would be hard pressed to find true belief. To get at this a little more, we can look directly at chapter 3 verses 12-17; although these themes are consistent throughout Paul’s writings.

Colossians 3:12-17

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with 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 the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs 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.

The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Chapter 3 of this letter is considered the heart of Paul’s message to the Colossians. The literal translation from the Greek paints a clear picture of “putting off the old being and putting on the new.” Reversing course and turning someone in a new direction would certainly be one way to affect the path and pattern of wavering and wandering Christians. Kind of like taking off one hat that was dirty and worn and putting on a new hat.

Just 7 verses before our pick up for today, beginning in verse 5, Paul boldly challenges the Colossians to put to death, or put off, whatever is earthly, “for on account of these (that which is earthly) the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.” Paul argues for the Colossians that they don’t want the wrath of God; so, in order to avoid the wrath, on any level, Paul tells them it is time to put “that” life to death. What is “that” that must be put off? Paul tells them to put off anger, malice, slander, and abusive language, just to name a few. These things don’t resemble the belief they were called to by God, and because they don’t resemble the belief and reflect or imitate that of Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, they were to stop doing them.

Here is the thing about Paul’s writing I really appreciate. He doesn’t simply tell you emphatically what must be put off. He goes on to share with you what must be put on. “Put off the old and put on the new.” It has almost become too easy to identify things that need to go without also identifying what needs to be added, and maybe even more so, it has become too easy to simply add more in hopes it will simply overshadow or push out in due time. But those processes aren’t enough. The pruning of old and dead things must take place to allow for new blooms to have enough energy to flourish.

The language Paul uses to describe the transition and renewal process is language we have heard before as a part of our confession and assurance. We are all called to confess and repent to God those things we want God to cleanse us and forgive us for, and by turning to God for that help, we proclaim our faith and hope that by God through the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the old life will surely be gone, and a new life will begin. We could also look to John’s gospel here and refer to the spiritual enlightenment he refers to of being “born again.” This reference is similar in that it calls for the earthly life we have been given by God to be replaced by the spiritual life we are ultimately called to; a new life defined as a life in Christ.

So, what might this “putting to death the old and putting on the new” look like?

The big picture reveals the unmistakable identity that Christ is all and in all. Paul mentions that with the putting to death the old and putting on the new, there will be no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free. In other words, where Christ is and what Christ is in, Christ becomes the “new” identity most important in all.

The closer picture reveals more of one of Pauls’ favorite illustrations when talking about the functionality of the church; the body. Here, as we look to what “putting on the new” looks like, Paul provides imperatives (not suggestions) for what can be referred to as “A Well-Dressed Congregation.”

Anyone ask for or get a new wardrobe for Christmas? I am what I refer to as a clothes horse (anyone else- no shame) but since children, Christmas has become the main

opportunity to update needed pieces in my closet: shoes, shirts, ties, suits, golf and tennis apparel. I really enjoy getting a new wardrobe. I have always believed that you should at least look the part even if it is difficult to practice the part: wear the right golf apparel whether you can hit a golf ball in the right direction or not; dress like you wish to be treated. But before we get too far off track, the apostle Paul here, is not concerned as we so often are with whether our suits and ties, dresses, blue jeans, or shoes are in the latest fashion or up to date.

What Paul calls forth is a “well-dressed congregation” from the perspective of our soul and character. Make no mistake, what we wear matters, but the virtues listed throughout this passage are ultimately a matter of how we relate to one another knowing we are all connected through our belief in Christ. Remember, belief and love are a necessary pair.

The key elements Paul highlights are:

Call of God: We are called, chosen to be God’s people

This call gives us identity, purpose, and a foundation. Because God calls, we recognize that it is about God and not about us. God is our fashion designer.

Christian Love:

I think here of the hymn “They will Know we are Christian by our Love.” Christ’s love is evident in the harmony of the whole congregation. It is love that binds everything together, like the stitches and seams holding the fabric in place.

Christ’s Peace:

Christ’s peace serves as a binding agent along with love. The peace that can only be the gift of God is what binds the “body of Christ” together.

Forgiveness:

We are to forgive as Christ has forgiven. We must remember, never to forget, that we are all sinful and in need of forgiveness. God is our tailor.

Thankfulness:

Thanksgiving is both the gift of God to the church in Jesus Christ and the response that we, the church, bring to God. Like love and forgiveness, thanksgiving, an attitude of gratitude, is first a gift from God that must be opened and shared. Our willingness to wear what God designs is a tribute to our acceptance and gratitude.

God sends Christ into the world for us to know how to live as God’s people; therefore, to be “a well-dressed congregation” is to imitate the nature of Christ. We are to wear Christ as our clothing, taking him as our model- his trends, his fashion, his character, his service, his

leadership, his teaching. God sends Christ into the world, so we know who to be and how to act. Christ comes so we know what clothes of character are to be worn throughout our lives.

Paul says, “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” What are the things above? Gifts of the Spirit: Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, love, forgiveness, thanksgiving. Each of these are relational virtues; they mark how we think and behave toward one another in the community.

How we treat one another and care for others is within our control. This is a change we can enact. When things are not natural to us, we must initially be willing to embark and make the initial effort. The change begins in the values and behaviors we choose to envelop us. It is the outside shift then that in turn elevates the inside shift. The inside shift doesn't just happen on our own accord, but with the help and through the work of the Spirit. In other words, the outside variables help foster and nurture the condition, or at least extends an invitation, for the inside variables to establish.

We can also think of it this way: There are two events, but really only the first event is an action on our part.

If you are to put on a coat, you not only feel warmer on the outside, you feel warm on the inside as well...

If someone is to move to the deep south and stay there long enough, they will begin taking on the nature of the deep south... in speech, actions, and beliefs...

If we want to learn to do something well... we put on the right clothing and get the right equipment and surround ourselves with the right people to learn from... in return, we begin to believe that we not only look the part, but that we belong... we pick up new things that make us better along the way...

Yes, Paul believes the Colossians have work to do on the outside, but Paul isn't just placing emphasis on the outside. Paul shifts from “outside” to “inside” in verse 14. No more is it about what we “put on” around us but rather what is “inside” us- “the peace of Christ is to rule in our hearts” and “the word of Christ is to dwell in us richly.” These two are built on the conviction that Christ came to reconcile all things to God. Christ reconciles Christians, us, to God, but this must be extended into interrelationships among us so that we may fulfill our calling to be “one body.” It is not enough to just know one another, we must be willing to wish one another well regardless of how hard that is. Maybe you recall a story I shared of “passing the peace” to another student I had an encounter with during a lock-in the night before worship. As it came time to pass the peace in worship, I was faced with extending him peace. The truth is, I didn't want ill will for him. Yes, I was frustrated, but our call to be peaceful is bigger than just my emotions. With the help of the spirit, we were able to get passed our

frustration and misunderstanding. All members of the body of Christ must be united through the reconciling peace that Christ brought to the world and we, as Christians, must permit to “rule” in our minds, words, and deeds.

We could stop here with this passage and the message is clear: put off “that” life (the bad and ugly) and put on your “new” life (good); be a well-dressed congregation from the perspective of your soul and character (show compassion, kindness, etc.); be the church God intended; and set your mind on spiritual things rather than earthly things. All of that is a piece of cake, right?

But we can’t stop here. Better yet, it wouldn’t be responsible for us to stop here because there is one element that hides behind the beautifully crafted quilt; another part that holds the seams together but leaves loose strands and knots no one wants to see. I am referencing verse 13 most directly: “bear with one another, and if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other.” In line with all the rest as visible pieces of character revealing our nature, is our ability to bear with one another and forgive, especially acknowledging our tendency to disagree on things.

One commentator writes that it would be a mistake to read Paul’s words here as a first century call to civility- much less a modern day “righting of the ship by playing nice. Paul is not insinuating here that ‘you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.’”
(FOTW- 158) Rather, Paul’s challenging words entail a disciplined pattern of a redemptive life together. It is not just about a functional purpose. The work to be done in this passage, the character to be embodied, is not for the faint of heart. Bearing with one another and forgiveness aren’t a stroll in the park or nap in a rocking chair on the front porch.

One author goes as far to say that these words from Paul to the Colossians are about what to do when bare-knuckled emotional brawls break out. We know what this author might be referencing; in our lives, in our homes, in our work places, and yes, I dare say it, in the church. We have been there, done that, and gotten the t-shirt (multiple times). Have you ever stopped to wonder why our most heated debates though are among our closest family and friends- with people we know, or at least we think we know, well? When they involve those we love, it is like the disputes can’t help but become personal.

“Years ago and late one night, while packing for an early-morning trip, a husband and wife got into a disagreement that escalated beyond a difference of opinion. It got personal. Too tired to carry on, they simply ditched the conversation and cut the lights. The quarrel was still rumbling in the husbands gut the next morning as he sat in the airport lounge waiting for a predawn flight. He finally worked up the resolve to call his wife and mumble “I’m sorry about last night.” “Me too” replied the wife. They did not attempt in that moment to resolve the difference- they really didn’t even remember what it was about. Upon reflection,

what was remembered was that simple exchange “I’m sorry- me too” drained the poison out of the moment and that the initiative took more resolve than any of their trips into further and certainly bigger zones of conflict.”

What is going on in our lives that needs the poison drained out? What is something that requires a high level of resolve on your part, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to set you free and exemplify Paul’s call here to bear with one another and forgive?

Throughout the rest of today; tonight, when we get ready for bed; tomorrow morning, when we wake up to a new day; Tuesday, as we begin a new calendar year; How will we get dressed? What will we wear?

For God’s sake, and ours as well, let’s be a well-dressed congregation trending with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, love, forgiveness, thanksgiving, words that uplift, and actions toward peace.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, “whatever we do, in word or deed, let us do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Let all God’s people say... Amen.