

Sunday, July 17, 2016

Put on the new clothes of Christ

Colossians 3: 1-17; Mark 9:2-13

Living Faith: Section 3.2.3

Hymns: (1) All things Bright and Beautiful (2) We love your kingdom, Lord (3)
Fairest Lord Jesus

1. Introduction

Good morning. This is our third and final sermon in our Colossians series. This morning, we'll be taking a look at scriptures from Colossians chapter 3 and Colossians chapter 4. Today our sermon is called "Put on the new clothes of Christ."

2. First two weeks, sermon recap

Over the last two weeks, we have taken a look at the book of Colossians where we have seen Paul write to the Early Church in Colossae. In writing to the Colossians Church, we see that Paul reveals his heart to the reader. And, we see that his heart is one that is the Pastor's heart. We discovered that Paul has never visited the Church in Colossae and that when he writes this letter, he is in fact in prison. We've also discovered that Paul, being one of the leaders of the Gentile Mission, meaning that he is one of those telling the good news of Jesus Christ to the non-Jewish converts of the day, that he indeed has a vested interest in HOW these Early Christians understood who Jesus Christ was, so that they could live out their faith and engage the world around them.

In the first week then, we saw how Paul unpacked who Jesus Christ is, in particular, we saw Paul work out for us the SUPREMACY of Christ. In the supremacy of Christ,

we learned how even though the Church in Colossae lived in a society that believed and worshipped many gods, that ultimately the world was created in Christ and for Christ. And because of that, the Early church was reminded that the life that they had in Christ, was one that was filled with hope and victory.

As well, when we read Colossians, we find that Paul is writing against some of the teachings and philosophies that were creeping into that church. In particular, Paul was writing against the teaching of Gnosticism, where there was emphasis placed on knowledge over Jesus Christ. The teaching was extrapolated to include that if you wanted to gain salvation, you had to earn it through a “secret knowledge” instead of putting your faith in Jesus Christ. This is what is now known as the Colossian heresy and Paul was writing against these claims.

Last week, we saw that Paul was writing to the Church in Colossae to remind them that they.. and US needed to remember that we are called to mature in Christ. We need to grow in our faith. And, the best way to do that was within the church. This was not to say that the church is a closed group, but Paul was reminding his readers that the best place to be encouraged, grow and mature in our faith is within the community of believers. We are to grow together, like how iron sharpens iron. And we do all of this with the help of the Holy Spirit, which was promised to the disciples when Jesus was about to leave this Earth. The Holy Spirit is a gift from God and maturing and growing in our faith is not by our own efforts. We grow and mature as the Holy Spirit prompts and teaches all of us.

We are reminded that we are created in the image of God, and so as we mature in our faith, our character should reflect our creator. And through all of this, God gave us Jesus Christ as our role model. Jesus is the NEW Adam. With his death and resurrection of the cross, we are taught how we ought to live. And through Jesus Christ then, as we grow and mature in our Christian Character, the new world, the new humanity begins in him.

This week then, we'll take a look at what Paul means when he writes that we ought to put our old self "to death" and how we are to put on our "new self". All of these are concepts that Paul writes about and they are vitally important to us as we discover how we ought to live out our Christian faith, both individually and together as the Body of Christ.

1. Hook: putting on Clothes

Last week, after the service, I asked one of our members if he would take a photo for my family and I. And the reason that I gave him was that since moving to Prince George, I rarely have the opportunity to wear suits any more. Because of filling in for pulpit supply for the Rev. Herb Hilder, I got to wear a suit and tie and of course, my mother wanted a photo of our family. I suppose wearing suits is a momentous occasion for us and so we had a chance to take a photo since I was wearing my Sunday Best.

But this experience got me to reflect a bit more about this idea of Sunday Best and in particular about wearing clothes. Clothes are an important part of our daily life, isn't it? We try and wear certain types of clothes in order to reflect the different occasions that we are attending. So, for example, if we are attending a wedding, we would wear "wedding clothes" or banquet clothes. Of course if you are the one getting married, the bride would wear a wedding dress and the groom would wear their best suit or tuxedo. When going to a wedding, there is no doubt who the bride and the bridegroom are.

Or, if we're going swimming at the pool or if we're hanging out at the lake, we'd wear something comfortable like short sleeves and a pair of shorts for example. We want to be dressed so that we are able to enjoy swimming in the water or for lying in the sun.

Another example would be the weather we've been getting in Prince George the last few weeks. It's been raining cats and dogs, hasn't it? And truth be told, it reminds me a little bit of Vancouver! But we want to know what the weather is like, so that we can dress appropriately. If there is a thunderstorm warning on any given day, we'd want to bring an umbrella, have a windbreaker or rain jacket on hand, or having lived in Vancouver for almost seven years, you'll see Vancouverites wear bright coloured rain boots!

All this to say, that dressing appropriately for the occasion or the weather is part of our daily experience.

This idea or concept of wearing clothes is something that Paul addresses in our passage this morning from the third and fourth chapter in Colossians. And this morning, we'll be discovering what this means for us as we try and figure out how to live out our faith in this world.

2. Take off you old clothes (put the old self to death) Colossians 3: 5-11

When we read the third chapter of Colossians, it's interesting to discover that Paul is quite clever when he addresses the Early Church. Paul writes to the Church in Colossae, reminding them that as they mature in their faith in Jesus Christ, that the Christ follower needs to move forward and forget about their previous sinful life. This kind of teaching can be cumbersome for some of his readers to digest, but Paul couches his teaching within an example that everyone can relate to. Paul admonishes the reader by putting his teaching into the context of putting on and taking off clothes.

In Colossians 3: 5-12, Paul writes,

"5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. 7 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you

once lived.⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”

The language that Paul uses here is very strong. He says to put to death “whatever belongs to your earthly nature”. The concept of “putting to death” points back to what Paul had written earlier in chapter 2 when he writes about the baptism of the Christ follower. Do you remember from last week when Paul describes this to his readers? Paul writes that the first step in baptism is that the Christ follower has been buried with Christ. Being buried with Christ means that a person’s old self has been buried. And as Christ is risen, Christians too are raised with him. In Christ the new life has begun. But the old self, the old life has not yet wrapped up. That’s why Paul writes this list out for the Early Church so that he can identify the things they need to be aware of.

Paul writes about the old self. And what does burying the old self mean? Here Paul extrapolates for us his understanding on the matter.

Paul writes, put to death

sexual immorality,
impurity,
lust, evil desires
and greed, which is idolatry

These are the things that are of the old life and we're told that we need to get rid of them, put them away, that we need to, as Paul says, "put them to death."

It's interesting that at first glance that this might read like a list of do's and don'ts, a list of rules that we need to follow. But if that's the case, if it's just a list of rules, shouldn't the list be longer? What about jealousy? What about killing? What about coveting? What about lying? If this was just a list that Paul was compiling, then the list could go on and on.

The key here is to take a look at the last criteria on Paul's seemingly short list. Paul includes "greed, which is idolatry".

The list that Paul writes about goes from specific to general, meaning that he writes about specific things that are easily identifiable. So for example, Paul writes about sexual immorality. This sin is easily identifiable in any person's life. Sexual immorality is defined as any sexual intercourse outside of marriage. Impurity points to the character of a person that is corrupted by immoral behaviour. Paul

writes about evil desires and evil desires logically comes before lust. NT Wright says and I quote,

“Sin begins when the idea of illicit gratification, presented to the mind in temptation, is not at one put to death, but is instead fondled and cherished.” -

NT Wright

We need to be aware of any evil desire that enters our mind and immediately put it to death, so that we are not tempted to go down the path towards sin.

All of these things that were previously listed, at the core of it is greed. Greed or coveting things that are not ours points to idolatry. And this is at the heart of what Paul is warning his readers about. In our North American, modern context, we rarely observe the literal worship of idols. However, idolatry can be much more than just falling prostrate in front a statue made of metal, wood or stone.

The idolatry of greed places one attention and desires on something other than God. Instead of turning our faith towards Jesus who is the author of life, the idolatry of greed turns a person’s faith towards other things, hoping that the “thing” would give them life instead. In fact, when this happen, we are no longer pursuing the author of life, instead, we are pursuing things that will lead to death.

3. Made in the Image of God – Genesis

Paul continues on with his teaching to the Early church and he then gives them another list of sins to be aware of.

anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

This list is important to reflect on because it connects to the next sentence which says:

⁹Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

The image of the Creator is a concept that we find all the way back to the book of Genesis in the creation story. The scriptures tell us that when God created human beings,

***²⁷So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. Genesis 1: 27***

This concept that human beings are made in the image of God has been hotly debated. Over the years theologians haven't been able to agree on what this means.

That being said however, what CAN be said about this idea that human beings are made in the image of God is that human beings ARE NOT God or gods. Instead the scriptures tell us that human beings are created in the IMAGE of God. This is important for us to remember because it has theological consequences for us as we try and figure out how God intended us to live our lives.

A. First off because human beings are NOT gods, meaning that the world doesn't revolve around US. The created world has been brought into existence by a CREATOR and WE are not it. And if we are not its creator, then our worship, or in our terms, our attention should not be focused on ourselves alone.

B. Secondly, because human beings are NOT gods, this means that our created existence has been formed for someone else. God, being the creator of everything on Earth and on Heaven has a purpose for you and I. Our understanding of this is summed up very succinctly in the Westminster Catechism. The Westminster Catechism is a set of teachings that was written in 1646 and 1647 that was used to teach new Christ followers about the teachings of the Church. In the shorter Catechism, Question 1 asks,

What is the Chief End of man? (mankind)

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

We have been created to glorify God AND we have been created to be in relationship forever. That is the understanding and our purpose as human beings.

C. The third thing then when we reflect on what it means to be created in the image of God is to ask ourselves what does it mean when it says we are created in “his image”? A good way to think about “being created in God’s image” is to think of taking a polaroid, or I guess for this generation it would be taking a photo on an Instax Mini 8. If you were to take this snapshot of God and his character, then the original intention would be that the human beings ought to look like this snapshot. Unfortunately because of sin, this image has been distorted.

That’s why when Paul says to put away things like

anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

This list contains characteristics of things that are NOT of God. If we are created in God’s image, these things cannot be a part of our lives.

But Paul understands the human condition and so he writes in verses 9 and ten that we need to put off the old self and that we need to put on the new self. The

new self cannot be done on human strength alone. And that's why Paul says that the new self is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Once again Paul writes about the concept of renewal. And this renewal is constant as it is being refined to become more and more like the image of God.

It's like a photo that has been distorted and photoshop is being used to restore it to it's beauty.

After Alyx was born, I find myself taking WAY more photos than ever before. But as I begin to review the photos I've taken, I realize that in the photos there are imperfections in them. The lighting isn't quite right or the focus of the picture isn't as sharp as I'd like it. And so I'll spend some time editing the photo to make it look the way that I want it.

In the same way, our image of God has been distorted because of sin. And so we need to take off the old self and put on the new self. Through Christ we are being slowly refined or "photo shopped" so that our character can be more and more like God. Remember we are not becoming God himself, but through Christ, our character is becoming more and more like God's.

4. The New Self Colossians 3:1-4; Colossians 12 -17

So what does the “Photoshopped” image look like? Paul doesn’t forget and he writes about it in verses 12 – 14. He writes

¹² Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” Colossians 3: 12-14

Here Paul reminds the Early Church and us that as God’s people, if we are part of his family, that we need to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. All of these virtues, as Paul calls them, are a reflection of who Christ is. Christ is compassionate. Christ is kind. Christ is humble. Christ is gentle, Christ is patient. Jesus modelled for us all of these things during his time on Earth. And, because of that, we can see God’s image reflected in that. Here, Paul is writing to the Early Church that we need to strive for these characteristics by seeing how Christ modelled them for us! And in that way, our distorted image is restored to reflect the image of God.

Paul writes all of this in the context of the Christ follower, NOT as individuals that is independent of others. Instead, Paul is writing that these virtues are practiced

within the Christian community. Paul writes that we need to put on the new self and in verse 11, he writes

“11 Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” Colossians 3:11

Remember in the ancient days, there was a division of classes that was practiced in the Roman Empire. There was the highest class that was the Roman Citizen. There were non Roman Citizens, there were women that were free, and there were slaves. The division of classes was a prominent thing in the Roman Empire.

But what Paul is saying is that in Christ, as part of the family of God, these classes do not exist any more. Paul writes there is

No gentile

No Jew

Circumcision doesn't matter

Being uncircumcised doesn't matter

There is no Barbarian

There is no Sythian – or people that were from far away lands

Being a slave doesn't matter any more

Being free doesn't matter any more

In Christ, we are all part of the body of Christ. And so when we practice our faith, we need to remember that we are all part of God's family. And so Paul writes that as we begin to practice compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, don't just practice it on the people that we like or on people that we are comfortable with. We need to practice all of these things without boundaries and without borders.

5. Rules for Christian living

The next section of Colossians 3 has been a bit controversial for many modern readers. It is controversial because Paul seems to be drawing lines of division now in the household. However, when we read this passage in its fuller context, in that Paul is writing to the Early Church and how they should live with one another, the point that Paul is trying to make becomes crystal clear.

Often times we read Colossians 3:18 – 25 in little bits and when we do this, we miss the Paul's intention. When we read this passage in conjunction with chapter 3: 1 – 17, we can see that Paul is arguing that we need to put on the clothes of Christ and live out the New Self in the community of believers. Because of that in Colossians 3: 18-25 when Paul writes instructions for the Christian household, what he's actually saying is that IF we are to live out the New Self in the Family of God, we need to first live out this New Self in our own families first. Remember, practice makes perfect. And where do we live our most authentic lives? Not in public where everyone can see, but instead, our most authentic self – the place where I can truly “be me”, I live it out in at home.

Often times we don't realize it, but the IMAGE that we project outside of the home is quite different than the IMAGE we project say, at the supermarket, or at work at even at Church.

What Paul is saying is that since we are created in the Image of God, then we need to be practicing it in all aspects of our lives!

So, when we look at Colossians 3: 18 – 25, these instructions for Christian Household should be taken seriously. Practicing our faith begins in the four walls of our homes. If we think back to our analogy of putting on clothes, where do we change our clothes the most? At the very least, we get changed in the morning AT HOME and then we go out. In same way, we need to take off our OLD SELF and put on the New Clothes of Christ. And where does it all begin? Of course, AT HOME!

When we look at this last section in Colossians chapter 3 then, what is so controversial about it? We read this scripture what is the first thing that Paul seemingly writes? Paul says – “wives submit to your husbands?”

I know this seems jarring IF it is read on it's own. But we need to read this passage in conjunction with the human relationships Paul describes.

(1) In the case of wives, her relationship is with her husband.

(2) In the case of children, their relationship is with their parents, in particular, Paul writes specifically to their fathers

(3) In the case of slaves, their relationship is with their masters.

A side bar here – when Paul writes about slaves and masters, does it mean that he condones slavery? Or if we take it further, does it mean that Christianity condones slavery? The answer is, of course it doesn't! But remember the context that Paul is writing in. In his day, slavery was a part of life. Paul understands this AND he understands that there is a slave / master human dynamic. And so in this case – he addresses it in his writing to the Church.

In defining all of these relationships, we need to learn HOW Paul teaches the Early Church how to live in the Clothes of Christ within these parameters.

Paul writes to the Christian wife AND the Christian husband and he says to the Christian wife – submit to your husband. NT Wright points out that Paul “offers a careful balance”. Neither husband or wife is to be “an arrogant or domineering”. The equality of women and men before the Lord, of which Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28 is not retracted: but neither does it mean identity of role or function.

The submission that Paul writes about does not mean that the Christian wife is someone that gives in all the time and is walked all over by her husband. What

submission does mean is that she needs to let go of the temptation of ruling her husband's life. On the flip side, when Paul writes to husbands – he writes love your wives and do not be harsh to them. The love that Paul is referring to is not the superficial love that we are used to hearing about. Do you remember in our first week together, we talked about Taco Bell and how growing up I loved going there? It's much more than just LOVE for the burrito supreme, or LOVE for the nacho supreme, or the LOVE of the fries supreme. The love that Paul is referring to is the HIGHEST FORM of love, the kind of LOVE that Jesus himself had for all of us! As Paul writes to Christian husbands, he's saying love your wife like how Christ loves the church. Put HER interests FIRST! And love her SO MUCH that you will lay down your life for her! That kind of love is costly. That kind of love is modelled to us through Jesus Christ.

The second relationship that Paul writes about is for the Christian Child and Christian Parent relationship. Paul writes to the Christian Child – and here, Paul is including children in the body of Christ. As children are part of the Earthly family, they are as well part of God's family as well. Paul writes to Christian children that need to obey their parents. The reason for this is because Paul recognizes that children need discipline. And although this verse has been stressed over and over again by parents over the years, there is a balance here as well! Paul writes to the Christian Father and reminds them not “embitter them”. The word “embitter” means to aggravate or tear down a child. There is a balance to be had in the disciplining our kids. We want to do everything out of love. We want our children

to explore and discover and become human beings in their own right. But sometimes as parents we forget that and we may discipline our children too harshly or too unfairly. And this is the balance that Paul is writing about to the Early Church.

The final relationship that Paul writes about is between Christian Slaves and Masters. And it's interesting that Paul writes about this relationship in greater length than the relationship between wives and husbands as well as the relationship between children and husbands. Scholars believe the reason for this is that Paul is writing to a specific situation that has happened in the Early Church.

In the Christian household in ancient days, the relationship between Earthly masters and slaves were present. But what happens if the slave was a Christian? Does the slave forgo the Earthly Master because Jesus is Lord? Here Paul addresses this by saying that the slave's work is important but even though they are a slave, they are no less human.

Paul writes in verse 22 – 24

"22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for

the Lord, not for human masters,²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”

In this last passage, although Paul is addressing the slaves in the ancient day, there is one lesson that we can take away as the modern reader. We too know what it feels like to work. And work is given to us by God. Paul says to the slave and to us that whatever we do, we should do it with all of our heart. We place our entire person into it, no matter how trivial the work may seem. Sometimes we might go to work and we feel like not being there. Sometimes we'll want to do the bare minimum so that we won't "get in trouble". But Paul says, don't give into that temptation! We can turn that work into an act of worship and Paul reminds his readers that we ought to do whatever we do as work as for the Lord and not human masters. In the modern context then, our attitude should be not about pleasing our bosses, but remember, that we ought to be doing our work as for the Lord. In that way we are able to turn our work into an act of worship. As Paul writes as he ends this section, it is Christ that we are serving.

Paul recognizes that in this last section, there is a relationship that happens between the Christian slave and the Christian master. And so he addresses by writing in Chapter 4 verse 1 –

“Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.” Colossians 4:1

This is a great reminder for all of us. Even though we no longer believe in the slave – master relationship, we too must remember that say in our work, we are in charge and oversee some sort of manager’s position, that we are not above anyone else! We are all human beings and AS human beings, we have a Master in heaven. We serve the Lord Jesus Christ and Paul reminds us that we in turn must answer for all of the decisions that we make in our work. We too must be right and fair as Paul teaches the Colossian Church to do.

6. Living out the New Self together.

Friends, we have spent 3 weeks together studying the book of Colossians. We have gone through a lot of this book of the Bible together. That being said, there is so much more that we can learn from it, but that has to be saved for another time.

At the end of the day, as we close our time together, let us remember that ultimately that we are called to be a community of believers, like the church in Colossae, to put to death our old ways and put on the new clothes of Christ. I pray that we would remember these words that were written to Paul and grow and mature in our faith together.

And all of God’s people said – Amen.