

Clothed with Christ (Part 1) (Col 3:12-13)**Matthew Williams****August 21, 2022**

I'm not a clothing expert by any measure. I know people who are. They have an intuitive sense for coming up with outfits that look good. Stylish but not flashy. Classy but not backward. In contrast, I am rather dependent on online catalogues and my wife for advice. However, once someone else does the hard work of proposing an outfit, I think I am somewhat skilled at telling you if it looks good or not.

For example, I can say with confidence it would not be good for Queen Elizabeth to parade through the streets of London in rags. Or for President Zelenskyy of Ukraine to do a news conference in a Hawaiian shirt and flip flops. Why is the queen always attired in the finest dresses and jewelry? Because of her identity. She's royalty. It would be unfitting for her to dress otherwise. Why is Zelenskyy attired in battle fatigues? Because of his identity. He's a wartime leader. It would be unfitting for him to sport a Rolex while his countrymen are starving in trenches.

Rags on the queen or Hawaiian shirts on Zelenskyy wouldn't change who they are. Elizabeth would still be the queen. Zelenskyy would still be the president. What they wear doesn't determine their identity. But it does express or deny their identity. Given who they are, certain attire is fitting. Certain attire is not. And when they put on the right clothing, what happens? It reinforces, honors, and displays the glory and dignity of their identity.

Being a Christian, a wholehearted follower of Jesus, is no different. The moment you turn away from doing life your way and turn toward trusting and obeying Jesus, what happens? You receive a new identity as a child of God. It's not make-believe or a shell game. It's not an addition to the old you or a mask that covers the old you. The old you dies. The old you no longer exists. Through the power of the Spirit, you receive a new spiritual nature – a heart that wants to please the Lord and is able to please the Lord! The miracle is so drastic, so identity transforming, Jesus says it's like being born again!

The members of the church in Colossae had experienced the miracle. Col 2:13, "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God

made alive together with [Christ], having forgiven us all our trespasses.” Col 3:3 is even more succinct. “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” I love how Peter puts it in 1 Pe 2:10, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.” Turning to Jesus in repentance and faith does not improve us or fix us. It implants a new principle of spiritual life within us such that who we are fundamentally changes.

Now here’s the critical implication and the whole point of Col 3. **The gospel that establishes our new identity in Christ both requires and enables a new kind of life in Christ.** Certain attire, certain attitudes and actions, are no longer fitting. They deny who we are in Christ. And a new kind of attire, a new set of attitudes and actions, is entirely fitting. They confirm and express the glory of who we are in Christ! Their presence affirms (no less than their absence denies) the reality of Jesus in our lives as the one (v. 11) who “is all and in all.”

I use the illustration of clothing because it’s the same illustration Paul uses in v. 12. Given who you are, Christian, there’s something you must “put on.” It’s not a suggestion. It’s not a recommendation. It’s not a long-term goal. It’s a present command. “Put something on,” he says. Or more literally, “Clothe yourselves.” Because the pastor says so? Because your parents want you to? Because it’s what the white patriarchy of old in all their cultural narrow-mindedness thinks is good? No. Because of who you are, Christian – chosen, holy, and beloved.

Stop and consider each of those adjectives for a moment. **First, you are a chosen one.** From eternity past, before you were even born or had done anything good or bad, God Almighty determined to break into your hopeless life and draw you to himself.

Did you deserve it? No. Because of our sin and rebellion, we all deserve the exact opposite! And yet, in the greatness of his mercy, if you are a follower of Jesus, you have received the greatest honor a man or woman on earth can ever know. You have been numbered among the redeemed people of God! You are immeasurably important to God, not because something within you is intrinsically lovely but because he sovereignly determined to make you lovely for the sake of your eternal joy and his eternal glory.

Second, you are “holy.” Paul isn’t describing the progressive work of becoming more like Jesus over the course of the Christian life. He’s talking about a radical change that happens at the very beginning of the Christian life. We become holy, brothers and sisters, set apart from the world as members of God’s kingdom for his priorities and purposes.

Deut 7:6, “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” The finest china in Buckingham palace isn’t used as a chamber pot. Nor did Israel use the golden vessels in the temple for weekend BBQs. They were created, set apart, and reserved for a particular aim. They were holy. So are we, brothers and sisters.

Finally, we are beloved. Your Father in heaven delights in you, Christian, with an exceedingly great delight! He is eternally for you, with you, and watching over you. He doesn’t tolerate you or put up with you. He rejoices in you. You are a trophy of grace. He has united you with his very own Son such that the love he has for Jesus is the love he has for you. And his love for you can more waiver than his love for his own Son can waiver.

It’s a love that pursues you and delights to transform you in the very areas of life where you feel most unlovely. It’s a faithful love, a sacrificial love, a laying-down-his-life-while-we-were-still-his-enemies kind of love. A love that draws us out of the prison of our self-infatuation to see Jesus as spectacularly glorious, reordering all our other loves in the process.

If you’re a member of the body of Christ, who are you? What does the Word of God say about our new identity, our new self? We are chosen. We are holy. We are beloved. That doesn’t erase other aspects of your identity like your race, your gender, or your personality. But those other distinctions are secondary to this. You are chosen, holy, and beloved because you are in Christ. Who you are, your fundamental identity, comes from him and what he says about you, not what the world sees or says about you.

Unlike the world, a Christian knows our identity is not something we forge for ourselves through climbing a ladder of achievement. That only leads to self-righteousness or depression. It’s not something we discover by exploring the

morass of feelings and desires within us. That only leads to self-centeredness and instability. It's a sturdy, objective gift we receive from outside of ourselves that perfectly aligns with who God created us to be – chosen, holy, beloved.

So what does this “new self” look like in action? What sort of clothing, what sort of attitudes and actions are fitting? **Remember the same gospel that establishes our new identity in Christ both requires and enables a new kind of life in Christ.** Well Paul immediately launches into a list of virtues in vv. 12-17.

We're going to focus on vv. 12-13 this Sunday and vv. 14-17 next Sunday. But let's establish a couple things up front that apply to the entire list. **First, every one of these virtues is rooted in the character of God.** They are what God requires of us because they capture how God relates to us. He created us to image his glory and he redeems us to restore the image his glory.

Second, the weight of God's revealed glory, the pinnacle of these virtues, is most clearly seen in the gospel of Jesus Christ. If you want to see the greatest display of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, or forgiveness don't look to Mother Teresa. Look to Christ and him crucified. Jesus is the perfect man. He is the true and better Adam. He lived the virtuous life we were supposed to live, not so we could throw the pursuit of virtue to the wind, but so we might be free to follow his example with the strength that comes from enjoying a growing relationship with God through what he has done for us.

Third, trying to practice these virtues is an exercise in futility until you receive a new spiritual identity through the gospel. You might be able to control your behavior for a while. But the fruit won't last. It won't run deep. And it will not please the Lord because it's an arrogant work of self-improvement instead of a humble exercise in dependence on the Lord.

If you consistently find putting on these virtues feels next to impossible, start there, friend. Soberly consider, have you received a new spiritual identity or are you still dead on the inside? The good news is that Jesus stands ready and willing to change you from the inside out!

Even after we are born again and receive a new spiritual identity through the gospel, we must continue to keep our gaze fixed on the goodness of God in the

gospel. Without fail, the degree to which you perceive and experience these virtues in vv. 12-17 in the way God relates to you in the person and work of Christ is the degree to which we will discover power to practice them in your relationships with other people.

So let's work through the first part of the list together, that we might be convicted and compelled to clothe ourselves with Christ, to put on attitudes and actions that display our true identity as the people of God.

1) PUT ON COMPASSION AND KINDNESS

Paul isn't talking about being nice or friendly. The literal expression is "bowels or guts of compassion." It's an inward attitude, a posture of heart, that sympathizes with others' troubles and sorrows. A compassionate heart is not emotionally distant. It's emotionally engaged. A compassionate heart wells up in tender concern for the spiritual and physical wellbeing of others, reflecting the emotional life of Christ himself.

Jesus wasn't a mushy guy. He didn't trudge through the brokenness of our world in a state of constant weeping. But nor was he cold or numb or stoic. He learned obedience through what he suffered. He sympathizes with us because he was tempted like us.

And when he encountered suffering in the lives of people around him, his go-to wasn't "serves you right" or "just trust God." He listened. He touched. He stopped. He knew better than anyone all the ways the person in front of him fell short. But his message wasn't "shape up." Moved with compassion, he pointed them to the God who saves and carried their sorrows. In so doing, he shows us what it means to be truly human.

Kindness is the overflow of a compassionate heart. It means speaking and acting in ways that build up the people around you, especially those who are closest to you. Kindness means the question you ask in every conversation is not, "What would I like to say?" Or, "What do I want to get off my chest?" But rather, "What does God want me to say? How can I breathe grace to the person in front of me?"

That may mean speaking biblical truth that isn't easy for them to hear. The test of kindness is not in the eye of the beholder. It's whether our words line up with the truth of God's Word. But if you're not speaking with kindness, if your words are not the overflow of a compassionate heart, then you're not speaking the truth.

Both compassion and kindness reflect the very sort of care we experience from Jesus and what all who would follow him must embrace. It's not a personality thing. It's a new life in Jesus thing. They are the choice fruit of experiencing the compassion and kindness of God through the gospel.

2) PUT ON HUMILITY AND MEEKNESS

A humble person is a man or women who agrees with God's assessment of themselves. We are not great, mighty, or worthy of praise. We are weak, dependent, recipients of God's mercy! In that respect, the most powerful politician is ultimately no different than the poorest day laborer.

1 Cor 4:7, "For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive?" A proud man or woman surveys the landscape of their life and pats themselves on the back, "thanking" God they are better than other men. A humble man or woman surveys the landscape of their life and trembles before the God from whom all blessings flow with grateful awe.

Jesus is the ultimate example of humility. Consider, Christian, that the whole reason you have new life in Christ is because the God who had every right refused to insist on his own rights. He made himself nothing. He took on human flesh. He assumed the role of a servant so you could be healed. He put your needs above his own to the point of death. He didn't defend his reputation at all costs. He trusted the Father to vindicate him in the right way at the right time.

Have the same mind, brothers and sisters. Phil 2:3-4, "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." That kind of humility grows from two roots. First, a heart that perceives the glory of the Creator as infinitely greater than the glory of the creature. Second, a heart that never gets over or moves past the wonder of the Creator laying down his life for rebels like us.

In similar fashion, “meekness” describes an attitude of gentleness and consideration toward other people. A meek man or woman carefully avoids relating to others in ways that are harsh, brash, or insensitive. When a meek person is attacked or unjustly criticized, they don’t bristle because they’re not overly impressed with their own self-importance.

That doesn’t mean a meek person is a timid pushover. They simply know true strength isn’t found in getting angry over injustice but in remembering the people who trample you are ultimately contending with the Lord. They don’t take everything personally because God is at the center of their view of things as the One who is truly important.

Meekness looks like Moses in Num 12 who responded to Israel’s grumbling about him by praying for the nation because he feared the Lord, not men. Meekness looks like Jesus praying for those who persecuted him. Both humility and meekness are the choice fruit of coming face to face with the humility and meekness of God in the gospel.

3) PUT ON PATIENCE AND FORBEARANCE

To be patient, “bearing with one another,” as Paul says in v. 13, is to cheerfully persevere in relationship even in the face of weakness and sin. It means not being quickly offended or distancing ourselves from people who hurt us. There are situations where forms of distance are wise and necessary. But our default response to disliking or feeling hurt by something someone did or said should never be a self-protection that pulls away. It should be a patience that leans in and is quick to overlook faults.

Bearing with one another means we are slow to bring correction. We don’t assume that just because we see something that we should say something. The Lord could bury us under a tidal wave of conviction over all the ways we are not yet like Jesus. But he doesn’t. Why not? Because he’s exceedingly patient! He’s slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. He doesn’t blow a gasket or run away when we struggle with sin. He stays engaged. He’s in it for the long haul, faithful to complete the good work he began, content to transform us from one degree of glory to

another. God always wins his battles, but he doesn't fight every battle at the same time.

Isa 65:2-3, "I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; a people who provoke me to my face continually..." Or as Nehemiah observed looking back on Israel's history, "Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets" (Neh 9:30). The Lord requires us to practice the same patience, the same forbearance. Prov 19:11, "Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense."

I love how Ken Sande defines overlooking in his book, [The Peacemaker](#).

"Overlooking is not a *passive* process in which you simply remain silent for the moment but file away the offense for later use against someone. That is actually a form of denial that can easily lead to bitterness and resentment that will eventually explode in anger. Instead, overlooking is an *active* process that is inspired by God's mercy through the gospel. To truly overlook an offense means to deliberately decide to not talk about it, dwell on it, or let it grow into pent-up-bitterness."

Friends, the world around us is losing ground fast when it comes to this virtue. Victimhood is the new morality. If I feel hurt, I'm in the right. Someone must pay, and we will do whatever it takes online to make sure they pay. What a far cry from the spirit of Rom 12:19, "Vengeance is mine, and I will repay, says the Lord."

Our first response in conflict when we feel hurt or offended should always be, "Lord, is this something you want me to overlook?" That's not a sign of weakness. It's an expression of Christlike maturity. It's the fruit of a man or woman who knows it's God's kindness, forbearance and patience that leads us to repentance (Rom 2:4), both at the start of the Christian life and every day since.

I'll give you an example. Early in our marriage, I thought it was my solemn duty as a husband to call my wife out for anything in her life that I didn't think was pleasing to the Lord. You can imagine how well that went. She was gracious and the Lord used a faithful pastor friend to humble my proud heart. And guess what's happened? Over the years, I've noticed most of the ways she has grown are not the result of my intervention. They are the result of the Lord faithfully completing the good work he

began. I used to think my wife needed the most from me was quick correction. I'm learning what the Lord wants from me more often is patient prayer.

But what if an offense cannot be overlooked? What if someone else's actions have created a wall between you and them in your heart? What are we to do then? We practice forgiveness.

4) PUT ON FORGIVENESS

Practicing forgiveness toward people who offend us is perhaps the most distinctive mark of a genuine Christian. It's how we demonstrate whether we have really come face to face with the reality of our own need for God's forgiveness and his provision in Jesus. V. 13, "And, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

To forgive someone is to bear the cost of their harmful actions ourselves instead of exacting a penalty or inflicting suffering on them in response. We release the relational debt instead of holding onto it and making them pay. It gets to the heart of the gospel. Through his death on the cross, God himself bore the cost of our sin instead of making us pay for our sin. 1 Jn 1:9, "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins..." Ps 103:12, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

If you are willing to turn and ask, friend, God will forgive you immediately, completely, and permanently. And the foundation of his forgiveness isn't the perfection of your apology or whether you remembered to include every last detail of the wrong you have done. The foundation of his forgiveness is the death Jesus died in your place for your sins. Praise God it's not a work of merit we earn! It's a gracious gift we receive!

And just as there is no limit to the Lord's forgiveness, so there must be no limit to ours. Matt 18:21-22, "Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.'" But what if they never ask for it? What do we do then? We remember the distinction between an attitude of forgiveness and a transaction of forgiveness.

An attitude of forgiveness follows Jesus' example in Lk 23 when he responded to those who crucified him by praying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." An attitude of forgiveness is a posture of a heart that's eager and ready to forgive, full of mercy. A heart that rejects bitterness, refuses to hold their sin against them, and genuinely longs for the relationship to be restored, even if it means waiting for the day Jesus returns to make all things new. It's the opposite of a pay-what-you-owe spirit.

An attitude of forgiveness necessarily precedes a transaction of forgiveness. So what's the transaction? It's what happens in Acts 2 when Jesus' prayer is answered. Those who crucified the Lord are convicted of their sin, repent, and receive the gift of God's forgiveness. Until that point, the Lord was ready, he was willing, he was eager. But they had to ask and so they had yet to receive.

Maintaining an attitude even while we are waiting for the transaction is what keeps another person's unrepentance from robbing you of the joy of forgiveness. The transaction may have to wait. But we can embrace the attitude today, brothers and sisters, and indeed we must. You must refuse to retaliate against them or punish them even as we are waiting for them to recognize how they have sinned against you.

But what if what they have done to you really hurts? What if you don't think they deserve an attitude of forgiveness let alone the actual transaction? Friend, do you deserve it? Is that why God forgave you? Because you deserved it? Praise God he does not treat us according to our sins or repay us according to our iniquities! The cross of Christ declares no other human being will ever be more indebted to you than you are to God. Their sin against you, no matter how great, always pales in comparison to your sin against God, for the greatness of the sin is determined by the greatness of the one who is sinned against.

Think of it this way. The forgiveness Jesus lavishes upon us will forever exceed the forgiveness he requires from us. And here's the good news, where forgiving someone feels nearly impossible, the Lord is eager and faithful to empower you by showing you just how much you have been forgiven. To whatever degree you struggle to forgive as you have been forgiven, follow the disciples' example in Lk 17:15 who cried out, "Lord, increase our faith!" He is willing and able, friends. May we put on forgiveness as a people forgiven by Christ.

CONCLUSION

If you grew up thinking Christianity is nothing more than a joy-killing list of don'ts – don't drink, dance, smoke, or associate with those who do – then you do not understand Christianity at all. Here's what Christianity is all about. It's about receiving a new identity in Christ through the work he accomplished on the cross. And our gospel-shaped identity both requires and enables a new kind of life in Christ.

Yes, there are vices to put to death. But there is so much more to following Jesus than avoiding the sins in vv. 5-11. Living out your identity in Christ is bigger than a list of don'ts. It means running hard after the virtues in vv. 12-17 – not so people look at you and think, "Man, what a good person!" But so when they look at your life, and the transformation the Spirit has wrought in you, they cannot help but conclude, "What a Savior!" Clothe yourselves with Christ, brothers and sisters, that you might know the joy of being who you are – chosen, holy, and beloved – and the world might come to see Jesus truly is all and in all. Let's pray and ask for his help.