

Colossians: How to Avoid A Spiritual Wardrobe Malfunction

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, give us humble, teachable, and obedient hearts, that we may receive what you have revealed, and do what you have commanded by following your Son in the strength of the Spirit. Amen.

Background

I'd like to provide four pieces of background information on Colossians before we go into our Scripture reading this morning.

First, Colossians is a book of contrasts—describing how our life before Christ—BC—is radically different than our new life in Christ—AD. Some contrasts found in Colossians are:

- Darkness/light
- Death/life
- Old/new
- Past/present
- Slavery/freedom
- Hidden/revealed
- Above/below
- Heaven/earth
- Shadow/substance
- Take off/put on

Second, Paul's letter has been very theological up until now. Our morning's reading shifts from abstract theology to concrete practice. Paul has previously shared what we believe, now he says—OK THEN, LIVE IT OUT in your daily lives by the strength of the Holy Spirit!

Third, numbers are important in Colossians chapter three. There are three catalogues or lists of vice and virtue in this chapter. We're to avoid or "take off" the vices and we're to "put on" or practice the virtues. These listings of virtues and vices were common in the teachings of Stoicism, Judaism, and Christianity.

Fourth, notice that three times thanksgiving or gratitude is mentioned in chapter three. As theologian Karl Barth said so well, gratitude is the distinguishing mark of the Christian.

...

Let's hear now the Word of the Lord from:

Scripture: Colossians 3:10-17 (NLT)

Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.

Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Colossians: How to Avoid A Spiritual Wardrobe Malfunction

What kind of clothes-buyer are you?

Do you like to:

- Look for deals? Name brands? Quality? Fashion?
- Do you hate shopping for clothes?
- Or do you regularly turn to “retail therapy” to not only spice up your wardrobe selection, but to deal with stress?

Is it hard for you to part with your clothes? Maybe you just hate to get rid of that old comfortable t-shirt with holes in it and sweat stains around the armpits, or do you regularly take clothes to Goodwill and get new ones in their place?

You've heard it said, "you are what you eat."

Paul changes that around a bit in our passage and says,
"you are what you wear."

Paul's a bit of a fashionisto here—giving us advice on what clothes to get rid of, ways to avoid spiritual wardrobe malfunctions, and what clothes to start wearing.

In other words, you've got to spiritually disrobe from your old way of life and get dressed up in the new clothes that are well-suited and fitting for those who are chosen by God and beloved by Christ.

The Christian is to be clothed in love—more specifically we're to clothe ourselves in Christ. This heavenly wardrobe provided for us doesn't ever go out of season or out of style. We can wear these clothes every day of the year. We won't ever have to worry about being pulled over by the fashion police if we're clothed in love.

Paul is borrowing this clothing metaphor from ancient baptismal rites, where new Christians would come to public worship in their old clothes. They would then be given new, white baptismal clothes after coming up from the water to symbolize their new life in Christ.

So earlier in the chapter, Paul speaks of what I'll call two wardrobe malfunctions for us to avoid—and they involve bad taste in certain kinds of sex and speech. There are good ways to engage in these two areas of behavior and there are bad ways.

Strip off, put to death, mortify the sinful, earthly things lurking within you: casual sex, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed. This is for not only your spiritual health, but for the community's well-being—resist this misbehavior.

The ancient Greeks likened greed to trying to fill up a bowl with water that has a hole in it. It can't be done. Greed is an insatiable desire for what you have no right to have. Greed is idolatry because it puts a thing or a desire in God's rightful place.

- Greed is opposite of the desire to give.
- Greed for money leads to theft and hoarding.
- Greed for power leads to tyranny and abuse.
- Greed for prestige leads to evil ambition that hurts others.

Paul then addresses our speech—avoid bitterness, blow ups, slander, lying, and abusive and coarse language. The gospel is about truth—so we need to avoid untruth. Lying corrodes trust. Trust is the oil that keeps our relationships functioning.

I like how N.T. Wright puts it—imagine a town or a church where everyone lived like the catalogue of vices Paul listed. Then picture another town or church a few miles down the road that practices regularly the catalogue of virtues mentioned.

Which town or church would you want to live in?

Where do you think relationships would flourish?

Enough of what we're to do away with. Let's focus on the good things, things that build up our relationships. Let's get gussied up in our church clothes, Immanuel!

Since we've been raised up to new life in Christ, we're to set our sights—the very center of our being—on the realities of heaven. Don't look down on others. In a Christian mindset, there's no room for racial, ethnic, cultural, educational, or class contempt for others.

Take the word "barbarian" Paul mentions in our passage. It has an interesting history. The ancient Greeks made up the name Barbarian—which literally means people who didn't learn Greek, whose speech sounded like "bar bar."

Christ transforms those we consider barbaric... into our brother. The old barriers and barricades that formerly divided us are done away with.

The point is this--keep looking up! Don't view things or people from a merely human perspective.

When our family went hiking to Havasu Falls with friends a few years ago, it was easy to only look down at the path we were following. I had to remind myself many times—look up!

See the beautiful canyon surrounding you!!! Don't miss it!

I don't want to look back on this special hiking trip and say that I only saw the "beautiful" gravel on the ground and not the gorgeous canyons!

Look up—fix your thoughts on the higher realm. Take in the sights of our rich faith—take a step back and enjoy the big picture. Maintain a heavenly and eternal perspective. Don't just do what everyone else is doing. Bring a little bit of heaven here on earth. Let Christ be your hidden resource to nourish you.

In no way is Paul saying to be so heavenly-minded that we're no earthly good. Christianity isn't pie in the sky, bye and bye.

He's reminding us to draw our strength from God, from above in our daily living here below. When we do this:

- Serving will be more important than ruling.
- Forgiving more important than holding grudges.
- Giving more important than getting.
- Gratitude more important than griping
- Respect more important than taking advantage of others.

The Great Christian virtues are those that better ourselves and our relationships. When we become more godly, we become more human, more humane.

So Immanuel, let's put on **compassion** and wear it on our sleeve. Literally it means that we're to be large-hearted. That we care for others whole-heartedly.

Wearing kindness and goodness is dressing for success. Let's follow the guidance of ZZ Top and be spiritually "sharp dressed men and women!"

Kindness views the good of our neighbor just as important as our own good.

Gentleness protects our relationships from the cold fronts of irritability and resentment.

The next article of clothing Paul tells us to wear is humility. When we allow a servant's heart to get sewn into our way of life, we don't have to prove ourselves right every time.

Humility helps us walk in the other person's Converse All-Stars for a mile.

The shoes of humility also keep our feet protected from the thorns and pebbles of criticism and contempt that fall along the path of life together.

Let Christ's peace mediate your life together. Literally let Christ be the "umpire" of your heart. Not you—but Christ. Let go of power plays and allow Christ to determine what direction to go—he calls the shots. He says whether it's a ball or strike. Then we'll experience God's **peace**.

Finally, Paul tells us our most important clothing is **love**.

Christ lovingly tailors all of the other qualities into a perfect clothing design for us. Rely upon Christ Jesus to be your heavenly wardrobe consultant.

Thank God this clothing supply can't come from our own resources. The Scriptures teach that our righteousness is like filthy rags in God's sight. But Christ outfits us with the heavenly wardrobe of

compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and love.

There will be times we all mess up and wear clashing outfits and commit fashion faux pas. We'll have spiritual bad hair days. Confess it to God and he'll give you a total make-over. The good news is this: no matter our past, with Christ it's always rags to spiritual riches.

Don't "let yourself go" in those times. Instead, get up and daily put on a thanksgiving, singing, praying, and forgiving way of life. Not just Sundays—but in your daily living and working 24/7.

I like how the great Presbyterian New Testament scholar William Barclay put it, "If a person brings every word and deed to the test of the presence of Jesus Christ, he or she will not go wrong."

And so: "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Amen.

Holy Bible, New Living Translation copyright 1996, 2004, 2007, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois, 60188. All rights reserved.