

“Mail Call at Colossae: Clothes Make the Christian”

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Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17

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Mark Twain is probably the originator of the phrase: “Clothes make the man.” The fuller quote is “Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence in society.” Perhaps we should say that naked people in public get arrested! I also suppose we might connect Mark Twain’s fuller comment about clothes to Hans Christian Andersen’s fable of “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” In that story, you may recall that two hucksters sell the emperor a new suit of clothes—clothes that they say are invisible to those who are unfit for their positions, those who are stupid or incompetent. And, of course, no one, much less the emperor, wants to consider themselves stupid or incompetent, so the emperor and his court all pretend they see the non-existent clothes. Finally, a child speaks the truth: “He isn’t wearing anything at all!” So, the emperor without clothes is foolish.

So, why this talk of clothes? For one thing, it is a central Biblical theme from the very beginning! In Genesis 3, in that story of the first man and the first woman, their very FIRST action following their new insight from eating the forbidden fruit is to make clothes—those fig leaves. Our first creative act—clothes! And then God’s first act of grace has to do with clothes. In preparation for their life outside the garden, God makes better clothes for this couple. Not those flimsy, scratchy leaves...but furs, durable and warm. God sends them out with clothes fit for their new situation.

And, continuing in the New Testament, there is the Gospel of Matthew’s version of the Messianic wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14). You may recall that Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as a wedding feast for the king’s son—the wedding to which the expected guests decline to come, so the wedding is opened up to all; the king’s servants go “out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests” (22:10). Everyone is invited to attend. This parable of the inclusive feast mirrors a parable in the Gospel of Luke. However, here in the Gospel of Matthew, the parable continues:<sup>11</sup> “*But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe,* <sup>12</sup> *and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless.* <sup>13</sup> *Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’”* (22:11-14).

What a reaction to a poor choice of clothes! But the parable is pointing beyond clothes: It is not enough to “get in” in the kingdom—this guest made it in the door, but there is something here about being called to dress the part! In this wedding parable, the perspective is that we are to live as those who are in the kingdom...symbolically, to dress appropriately! Clothes, or should we say actions, make a difference! And so we come to our text from Colossians today. Listen to the language of clothing (3:12-17):

*<sup>12</sup>As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. <sup>15</sup>And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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.*

A documented, psychological trait has been given the name “enclothed cognition.” The principle of “enclothed cognition” is that our clothes shape our thoughts and our actions. While there are many examples of what I mean, here’s how one psychological experiment verified “enclothed cognition.” Test subjects—volunteers—were separated into two groups. Each were given standard white lab coats to wear. One group (out of sight and hearing of the other group) were told that these coats were surgeon’s scrubs—medical lab coats; the other group were told that these same coats were painter’s smocks, a covering for spills. Individuals were then asked to perform the same task in separate rooms; their work and task completion were observed. Here was the result of the observation: Those wearing the doctor’s gear—the medical lab coat—consistently were more careful and more attentive in their task. Those in the same garb—but thinking they were painter’s smocks—were freer and looser on the details in the same task. The difference between the two groups was simply the perception of what they had on—a medical lab coat or a painter’s smock.

“Enclothed cognition”—what we wear shapes us...says the person wearing a clerical collar, black robe, and a green stole! But you could turn to the military—the emphasis on uniforms or the legal system—judges wear a black robe (and in England, they still wear the wigs!).

So, here in our Scripture, we have a bit of “enclothed cognition.” The Apostle Paul stresses what we put on matters. Paul has previously addressed what we need to put off—slander, promiscuous living, greed, and so forth. “Thou shalt not” is still part of the equation. However, what he addresses here is what we put on.

Now perhaps you know that complaint—“You’re putting me on.” A way of saying that “You are not being real...that you are not being serious...that you are trying to make a fool out of me.” So how authentic can we be in “putting on?” In Colossians 3, Paul names a 5-piece outfit of Christ to put on, a 5-piece outfit of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, with an overcoat of love:

- Put on compassion—we have a world full of enough folks who are “ready to shoot the wounded.” Compassion means that we “feel with” someone else in their pain. I think that is why I was so saddened that our president has suggested several times that John McCain could not be a war hero because he was captured in war—that somehow getting shot down over Hanoi and spending 4 years in rugged POW conditions disqualified him from being a “hero.” Compassion means we surprise people with how we stand with those who are hurting, those who are victims, those who are estranged, and those who are just “strange.”
- Put on kindness—anyone can be mean and grumpy. Kindness means acknowledging a human being as a person, as a brother or sister made in the image of God. How we treat the clerk, the waiter, the homeless person, the foreigner, our adversary—it matters what we have put on.
- Put on humility—the proverb is true—“A lot more gets done well and good when no one is worried about who is going to get the credit.” I, for one, am truly humbled by the credit that I get, when it is because of a wonderful spouse, a talented staff, and a gifted congregation.
- Put on meekness: unfortunately, we have turned the word “meekness” into timidity and lack of confidence. The Biblical scholar William Barclay once noted that the Greek word *praute*, translated here as “meekness,” is one of the most untranslatable words in the New

Testament. For example, Aristotle defined *praüté*, this meekness, as standing in the middle between rage and indifference, the middle between ranting and not caring. Meekness is the willingness to “get your hands dirty.” Meekness is that openness to others and their problems—letting them into our lives without rancor or grumbling or resentfulness.

- Put on patience: putting on patience in a church community or in a family is not always easy when we major in “small and petty.” In fact, many of us get downright impatient with the church, our family, and, at times, with ourselves. As one pastor once said, if you have not gotten impatient with this congregation, then you likely have not been around very long! Community living tries our patience!

And the “overcoat”—the covering is love. The Apostle Paul has a very clear understanding of love. Perhaps you noted where I stopped reading today, at Colossians 3:17, and did not continue on to Colossians 3:18-19. If you happened to look beyond the passage that I read, you would have noted that I avoided reading perhaps one of the least favorite passages of Scripture for women, particularly the married women. Yes, here is where Paul says “Wives, be subject to your husbands.” I have always been struck by the treatment of this text by Dr. Beverly Gaventa, New Testament professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. She noted that the corresponding instruction to husbands is the following: “Husband, love your wives.” Love, she then notes, is well defined by Paul. Paul says this about love: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Cor. 13:4-7) So, says Dr. Gaventa, I would much rather be “subject” to my spouse—a much easier calling than being patient and kind, while not being rude or irritable! With a twinkle in her eye and voice, she says: “I can be subject to a husband whose love means that he does not insist on his own way!”

So, we have the overcoat of love with the completion of the outfit with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. “Putting on”—it does not happen naturally or accidentally or by chance. Like clothes in the closet or stored away in the attic, we pick them out and we put them on. And we live into our outfit—that’s “enclodhed cognition.” In many ways, it is similar to one of my favorite short stories, entitled “The Happy Hypocrite,” by Max Beerbohm (it has been 3 years since I told this story in worship, though I have used it at many a wedding). The title of the short story seems contradictory—how can a hypocrite really be happy? How can acting in a fake or phony way bring true contentment?

The basic plot is this: There is a rogue, a rather no-count sort of fellow, who falls madly in love with a virtuous young girl. The rogue knows that she will not have anything to do with him as he is, so he goes to the finest crafter of masks to get a new face. And wearing the mask, the rogue lives a new life and courts the girl. He succeeds and they become engaged. On the day of the wedding, just before the service is to begin, a cast-off girl friend from the past sees through the disguise and recognizes the rogue with his mask. And so she challenges him to take off his mask...to show his beloved what he really looks like and who he really is. And with fear and disappointment, he removes the mask. And underneath the mask...underneath the mask his face had taken the shape and features of the mask. The face under the mask now was the SAME as the mask. He had become the act that he put on. He was, says the story writer, the “happy hypocrite.”

The happy hypocrite became what he put on. As I mentioned, I often use this story as part of a wedding homily. Marital bliss or contentment will often depend on what you “put on.” More broadly speaking, what we do matters. Ethics matter; morality matters; responsible living matters...not because we are disobeying God’s laws, not because we are bad people that need to be forced to “toe the line,” but rather because we become what we put on.

We become what we put on. That’s the ethics of the Apostle Paul. Take, for example the regular and expected tendency to get even or take revenge on someone that hurts us. The anonymous proverb about revenge is applicable here: “Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.” Why dig two graves? One for the other—you’ll get your revenge...but one for yourself, because you become what you do.

C.S. Lewis captured this so well in *The Great Divorce*, an imaginative reflection on the difference between heaven and hell. The author portrays himself as getting a visionary tour of hell and heaven (a repeated plot line from John in the book of Revelation to Dante’s epic poetry). In meeting the residents of hell, the author wonders how a crabby woman who grumbles constantly could be condemned to hell—surely that’s not so bad in the grand scheme of things. The author’s heavenly guide (a regular role in these sorts of plot lines) asked: Is she a grumbler or a grumble? In other words, is she a person that grumbles—a human being with a soul? Or, has she become the grumble? Is she now like a wind-up toy that does the same thing over and over again? Hell is where we become what we put on.

And what is heaven? Heaven is where we become what we put on! We are to keep putting on the clothes that make us like Christ. So, heaven begins today: put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, with that overcoat of love.