

Colossians: On Things Above Part 5

Colossians 3:12-14

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on August 13, 2023

Try This On

I hate clothes shopping. My daughter and wife like it. My son tolerates it because he is easily bribed and bought. I loathe it. Going into some shop and wandering around racks staring at sizes and sales racks. Trying to just get my wife to tell me what to buy rather than the constant quizzing of what I want. What I want is to not be there! So just tell me what color of shirt to get and let's get out of there.

The worst is when you have to wander into those little cubicle changing rooms to try something else on. Every time I do that, I always assume that someone with some awful odor has just tried on the exact same garment before me. It is akin to hugging a bunch of sweaty strangers. And trying on pants...I would rather have oral surgery. I try them on, they never fit, and then I have to struggle with the further indignity of never being able to get the stupid pants to fold right and fit into those weird clampy hangers.

But my daughter loves the entire experience. They go shopping and then come home and she gets to show me what all she came home with. And I am supposed to be excited and interested because she wants to share that great moment. It is not enough that I was involved in financing the expedition. Now I need to see what great trophies the conquering heroes have brought upon their return.

I am a simple person. I have a limited amount of things I like to wear, and they are in the closet. If they are in there, it means that they have been placed there by people far more interested and qualified in that than me, so I am obedient to put them on when directed.

Thankfully, Paul also has some spiritual garments that we need to put on this morning. I invite you to a little spiritual fashion show this morning in Colossians 3:12-14. (read text)

Dearly Loved, Chosen, Holy

Paul begins this section with an encouraging description of the believers in Colossae. "God's chosen ones, holy and dearly loved."

It is a remarkable title and recalls three titles used in the Old Testament to also describe the people of Israel. They were also described as “God’s chosen ones.” This is a unique expansion of that teaching, applying it to a mostly Gentile church in Asia Minor, modern Turkey. In the Old Testament, we see that Israel were designated to be “God’s chosen ones” not because they were more numerous than any other people, in fact they were the fewest of all peoples, but it was because the Lord loved them (Deut. 7:7, 8a). This title brings security. The Colossians are among the people chosen by God.

Israel had also been designated “holy” – this was a title that was set apart for God himself. These Colossian believers were given that profound description as well.

And, perhaps most beautifully, they were considered “dearly loved.” That is a significant title to carry, and along with it came remarkable privilege and gracious rights.

These titles would help to prepare believers for the great putting on that was immediately commanded of them following those titles. In contrast to the vices that we considered last week, Paul exhorts believers to put them on, to wear these virtues that stand in dramatic contrast to those previous problematic issues. Essentially, we see the wardrobe of what a believer is to look like.

The New Sainly Line to Put On

Paul introduces us to five virtuous “garments” that we are to wear as believers. This is possible to follow the great putting off from the previous verses in chapter three.

The first garment is “compassion.” The old King James Version translated this more literally as “bowels of mercies.” The word used by Paul literally refers to the stomach or intestines. It refers to where most of our emotions are felt, deep down within us. This term forcefully expressed personality at the deepest level, especially in the matter of living.¹ Another good way to think of this is “tenderness of heart” or “tender mercies.”

Consider how countercultural this would have been to the ancient world. Apart of biblical revelation, the world was merciless.

¹ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary vol. 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), p. 199.

If you were maimed, ill, sickly, you were discarded. Mental illness meant a person was subjected to horrific inhumanities. But Christianity brought compassion, and we are expected to do that today. So much that has been done in the name of the sick, the weak in body and in mind, for women and for children has been done through the inspiration of Christianity. Because the gospel is supposed to bring a tenderness of heart with it. That is one of the great transformational glories of the gospel. It takes a hard and selfish heart, a heart only focused on what a person wants or prefers and places within it a desire to suffer with another person, to show and share tender mercies with others.

Paul is clear. If we are indeed new creations in Christ, we must be compassionate creations. This means actually meeting and caring for people on the level of their humanity and in their needs, and not just some higher, distant, disconnected theological level that so many church people prefer. We are called to put on this first garment and be tenderly merciful.

So, quick self-inspection. How tenderly merciful are you? When pushed out of your comfort zone, is your response to be compassionate or is it to revert to selfish self-preservation? When you see others, especially those in need, what is your response?

The second garment Paul compels us to put on is “kindness.” This is not “niceness.” Nice is doing something that is pleasing or agreeable. Kindness comes from a place of benevolence, and it is doing something that is helpful to others. It is putting others first and it does not happen naturally within a person. Our natural instinct is to descend to harshness in words and in action.

The Greek word translated “kindness” is unique. Archbishop Trench, the prime mover behind the *Oxford English Dictionary* wrote that the word used here is a lovely word for a lovely quality. It was used most often to describe wine that had grown mellow with age and has lost its harshness.² It was also used by the Lord Jesus to describe his yoke: “my yoke is easy” (Matthew 11:30). The same word is listed in Galatians 5:22 as a fruit of the Spirit. This is a result of the fullness of God in a human life.

² William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), p. 188-189.

It is a quality of God himself, because Romans 2:4 tells us that God's "kindness" leads us to repentance. Kindness, this sacrificial act of benevolence that comes from a believer maturing over time and being less harsh with others.

How would you describe your heart these days? Are you mellowing with age through the ongoing fullness of God in your life manifested as a fruit of the Spirit of God? Or are you harsh, bitter, upset, mad? Perhaps it is time to reassess and put on kindness.

The third garment we are to put on is "humility." This would have been a largely Christian garment, as Greek culture never applied that word to individuals. In fact, the Greeks had no symbol in their language to denote it. Every word akin to it has within it some element of meanness, weakness, feebleness, or contempt.³

The gospel took this word of contempt in popular culture and transformed humility into one of the gospel's chief graces. It was used to describe Jesus's humbling of himself by becoming obedient to death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). Paul also uses this word to describe how Christians are to serve both God (Acts 20:19) and one another (Ephesians 4:2). We are to serve the Lord and others with all humility and lowliness. Jesus himself invited his followers to learn from him, using the same word to describe himself as "lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:29).

Jesus was not calling Christians to some cowardly, cringing, groveling life of servitude. Neither is the Lord calling Christians to think poorly of themselves. Jesus taught believers of the necessity of the absence of self-exaltation. Jesus wanted believers to be free from the pride and arrogance that so often infects a person's heart. Back in the middle of the 20th century, English Prime Minister Winston Churchill saw pride in the antagonistic Sir Stafford Cripps when he remarked about Cripps as he walked by: "There, but for the grace of God, goes God."

When a Christian wears the garment of humility, it means that they have some understanding of who God is, what man is, and who he or she truly is deep down in their hearts. And there is fruitfulness for the Christian who understands humility.

³ F.W. Boreham, *The Heavenly Octave*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), p.12

Walk through any Oklahoma wheat field and you will soon realize that the drooping stalks are actually heavy with grain. Humility blesses others and it is a beautiful garment for every believer.

Is this a garment that you wear well, humility? Are you worshipping yourself or Jesus? Is He the most important aspect of your life or do you put yourself there in front of Him?

The fourth item Christians are to put on is “gentleness.” A long time ago, J. Upton Dickson said he was writing a book called *Cower Power* and that he also had founded a group for submissive people called “Dependent Organization Of Really Meek And Timid Souls – if there are no objections.” Or DOORMATS. “Their motto is, ‘the meek shall inherit the earth – if that’s okay with everybody.’ Their symbol is the yellow traffic light.⁴”

While that is a clever sense of humor, the misconception he exploits for humor’s sake is no laughing matter. Too many people think that meekness means weakness. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

There is a gentleness to this word but behind that gentleness is a steel-like strength. Because the supreme characteristic for the meek man or woman means that he or she is under perfect control. Gentleness is strength under control. Numbers 12:3 tells us that Moses was the “meekest” man on earth⁵, but that does not mean Moses was weak. He was a man who acted decisively, could be as tough as boot leather and hard as nails, and when the timing was appropriate, rise in anger. Those who wear the garment of gentleness are immensely powerful people because they are controlled by God.

Are you gentle? Are you controlled by the Lord? Or do you tend to be harsh toward others? Do you say untrue things, make comments about another’s character in negative ways? Do you gossip? Do you perpetuate lies, mistruths, half-truths? Or does your life of controlled gentleness remind others of those biblical qualities that marked lives such as Moses?

⁴ From an article from Pioneer Press published in St. Paul Minnesota by Bill Farmer in January 2009.

⁵ This must’ve been added by an amanuensis such as Joshua after Moses had written what we know as Numbers, because it is not the humblest claim to make about oneself, as we attribute the first five books as being written by Moses.

The final garment a believer is to put on is patience. This concept of patience is not merely waiting for something. Waiting for something is, well, waiting for something. Don't confuse delays and waiting for patience. Patience is long-suffering in the face of insult or injury. It is also among the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. Patience is more than merely enduring difficulties. Patience is not passive resignation to the circumstances of life. It is based on active, outgoing faith in God and Christians are to exercise patience toward everyone, according to what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

Well, how are you doing, Christian, with patience? Are you actively trusting in the Lord and allowing that faith to carry you through your life and expressing that toward others? Or do you, in your selfishness, find yourself snapping at others, rushing to vent your frustrations on social media or in some impulse-driven text? Are you wearing patience in a way that reveals the fullness of God?

Paul details this heavenly wardrobe, designed by the Divine and Ultimate Tailor. All of these garments were perfectly modeled for us by the Lord Jesus. When Christians choose to wear these five graces, they are sharing a resemblance to Christ.

Two more things to consider about these five gracious garments that Christians are to put on and wear. The first is these garments can *only* be worn in community with others. They are only worn in relationships. It is certainly tempting to isolate oneself away, to hide out in small, holy little huddles, away from people and still wear these garments.

If you are not among people, you are not wearing these things. Sure, it is much easier to *think* that you are kind, gentle, humble, patient or compassionate rather than to actually *do* them. It is easy to think you are kind when you avoid mean people. If you are not being bumped around by the proud and arrogant, it is certainly easy to think you are being humble and gentle. But that is not the case. Patience is not something worn alone.

Christians become better Christians in community. And praise is a vital component of community. You need to be among others, places where there is sweat and breath. Places where you are forced to be uncomfortable, places where you are forced to hear things you may not want to hear.

Because in those places, you have the opportunity to put these gracious garments on and wear them among others. For many people who think they are better Christians by avoiding being around people, that act actually makes you a lesser version of a Christian.

The second thing to consider is the verb tense that Paul used here. “Put on” is a present imperative. This means that a Christian is to “put them on and keep putting them on.” Compassion is not a tuxedo you only wear once. Gentleness is not a fancy prom dress. Christians are to continually wear these things. This means continually being connected to the Lord and listening to the Holy Spirit. This means continually putting off the horrible vices from the first part of Colossians 3. This means continually engaging in community and relationships with others.

What Happens If I Do?

Paul shares a beautiful promise that comes from wearing such gracious, divine clothing. “...bearing with one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a grievance against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you forgive another.” Wearing these saintly garments expands a Christian’s capacity to bear with one another in biblical ways. And as difficult as others can be, that is not a small feat! These things help us to relate and engage with even the most difficult people.

Back in the days before smoking was not allowed on airplanes – can you even imagine a less-safe place to smoke – a man lit up a cigar. The stewardess informed the man that smoking was not allowed unless the person sitting next to him agreed to it. “Do you object to his smoking?” the stewardess asked the woman seated next to the man. “I absolutely detest cigars,” was the stony reply. A young man was found in the front of the plane who didn’t mind being around cigar smoke, so he exchanged seats with the woman. As she made her way to the new seat, she confided to the stewardess, “I’ve been married to that man for thirty years and I still cannot stand his awful cigars!” Even closely-related people – family – struggle to relate to other people. And it is a sad parable what happens much too often in God’s family.

The church is a place where Christians are to bear with one another in love. Christians are God’s “masterworks” (Eph. 2:10). That means that every Christian should be in the process of being refined by the Lord and ultimately every believer will be masterpieces.

However it is hard to understand that now because Christians are not yet what they are going to be one day. As that process of refinement continues, Christians are to bear with one another.

This mutual bearing with one another also requires mutual forgiving. And forgiveness, like jams shorts from the 80's, has never been in style. Like Lamech from Genesis 4, too many so-called Christians refuse to forgive and in fact decide to thump their chests and take actions that should be left to God into their own hands. It is reminiscent of what colonial General Oglethorpe once told John Wesley back in the 18th century: "I never forgive!" Hatred is a poison. Selfishness is toxic. Forgiveness is the only cure, and it is commanded by and only possible through Christ.

If you find that your heart is just unable to forgive and bear with another, that the differences between you and another are just too much, it may just mean that your heart has not truly been transformed by Christ. Stubborn unforgiveness is not a gracious garment granted by God.

Back in 2006, a firefighter in Georgia was driving home after being awake for 24 hours straight on a shift. Less than four miles from his home, he dozed off behind the wheel and woke up to a horrible sound and sight. He had crashed into another car, killing both the pregnant young mother and the unborn baby, while the 19-month-old daughter lived. The woman's husband, a pastor and now a widower, grieved the loss but determined to forgive because you are to forgive much because you have been forgiven much. The pastor pleaded for a lesser sentence and began to meet with the man and led the firefighter to the Lord. "Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive."

Forgiveness is not "putting up with someone." Forgiveness is not refusing to retaliate. True forgiveness is modeled by the Lord Jesus and is the goal. Christians are to remember that immense and amazing forgiveness extended to them by Jesus and channel that to others.

The Ultimate Garment

Paul reveals next one final garment, one that acts as a belt would, holding all of the other garments in place: "Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity." Paul envisions Christians wearing these beautiful gracious garments and realizes that they simply cannot be worn without love holding them all in place.

Now, while there may be moments when it might be possible to have one of those five garments on without love, it is impossible to have love and then NOT have all of the other five garments. Love is the grace that binds all these other graces together. This continues the imperative push through the verse as well: continue to put on love over and over and over.

If the other five garments are difficult to wear, it may just be because of the lack of love in a person's heart.

If you are here this morning and find it difficult to put on those other garments, it is time to check and see if love binds them together for you. Have you surrendered your heart to Jesus? Does His love motivate you to extend those gracious blessings of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience? Does his love motivate your bearing with and forgiving others? If not, perhaps it is time to receive the love of God in Christ.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Wednesday Bible Study returns on Wednesday, August 16th, at 10:30AM.

We will resume our study in the book of Mark.

Childrens Ministry Trip to Sky Zone in Hagerstown: TODAY. 3-5PM. Cost is \$10. We will meet AT Sky Zone at 2:30.

MOVE-UP SUNDAY: August 20th. Students will be rotating up next Sunday to the appropriate classes. Questions? See Pastor Jason!

Women's Biblical Community Group, Sunday mornings beginning August 20th!

Women's Ministry Bible Study: Launches Tuesday evening September 5th. 6-7:30PM. Led by Cindy Gresham at the church building. The study is *Abide* by Jen Wilkin.

BAPTISM SUNDAY: August 27th. If you are interested in baptism, contact Pastor Craig.

FBC Kids Resumes Wednesday Night Sept. 6! See Pastor Jason for details!

MESSY KIDOLYMPICS! Saturday September 9th. 10AM-Noon at Ridge Road.