

The Church's New Clothes

Colossians 3:1-17

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June 28, 2020

It's a joy to be together again as a church. I've been anticipating this day for a number of reasons. One reason has to do with the fundamental nature of the church. At the most basic level, the church is a gathering of believers. The Greek word for church is *ekklēsia*, which simply means an assembly.

The true church, or the universal church, is a spiritual assembly, gathered around the risen Christ in heaven (Heb. 12:22-24). The local church is a microcosm of the true church. Or as our Statement of Faith says, "The true church is manifest in local churches."

So, when the local church gathers on earth, we reflect something of the true church in heaven. That's the reason I was so grieved when we couldn't meet together. But it's also the reason I now rejoice that many of us are gathered together.

But the true church is not only seen in our gathering. It's also seen in our lives. You see the true church is not only gathered *around* Christ. We're actually united *in* Christ. We're the body of Christ. And he's our head (Col. 1:18). And so, if we're going to reflect the heavenly reality on earth, we have to do much more than simply gather. Our union with Christ needs to be seen in the way we live our lives together. And that's what I want to talk about this morning.

I have a bit of a concern for the church right now. The coronavirus and the racial tensions in our country have produced a number of hot opinions. Opinions about social distancing and masks. Opinions about what's caused racial tensions and how to bring about justice. We see a vast polarity of opinions in the news, but also by Christians on social media.

Let me assure you, I'm not going to set your opinions straight this morning. My concern has to do more with the way we *express* our opinions and *respond* to others with different opinions than us. Do our actions and attitudes in the church reflect Christ? Does our heart and the tone of our voice (especially toward other believers) reflect something of the risen Christ?

I've seen good examples of believers speaking in a Christlike way. And I've seen bad examples. And to be honest, over the last few months, I've not always had a very Christlike attitude toward others myself! I need to grow. What about you?

Our text this morning is Colossians 3. It's a profound picture of what it means for the church to be the church and how to live in this world. And I hope it will help us.

WE HAVE NEW LIFE IN CHRIST (1-4)

The summary of the chapter is given in verses 1-4. Then verses 5-17 expand on the main theme. Let me begin by reading verses 1-4.

Colossians 3:1-4¹

¹If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

This is the Word of the Lord.

The language used in verses 3-4 is radical: “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” It goes on to say “Christ ... is your life.” The church is a new creation, a new humanity. Our old life of sin is dead. We have new life in Christ. We’re united to Christ. We are a part of his body. And he is our head. All that he is and all he’s done are ours.

And not only that. We no longer belong to the kingdom of this earth. We now belong to the kingdom of God. We belong to the risen Christ who is on his throne, seated at the right hand of God. This reality is hidden now, but one day it will be gloriously clear when Christ returns.

If this is true, then we need to “seek the things that are above” (v. 1). We need to seek first the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 6:33). If this is true, then we need to “set our minds on things above” (v. 2). In other words, we need to dwell on Christ. We need to be consumed with Christ in our thoughts and emotions.

What are your thoughts on these days? There’s much to think about. So much to stir our hearts. The economy, the election, the coronavirus, race. It’s not wrong to think about these things. But do the promises of the heavenly kingdom consume you more than the problems on earth? When you think about the struggling economy, do you dwell in worry? Or does that lead you to the wonder of the glorious riches we have in Christ? When you think of the upcoming election, does that only give you concern? Or does it give you increased confidence in Christ’s sovereign rule? Does your awareness of the health crisis leave you with unchecked fear? Or lead you beyond fear to faith in the promise of the eternal kingdom where there will be no death or disease?

What you set your mind on makes a big difference. What you *reflect on* will be *reflected* in your life. What you think about will affect what you look like. And remember, the church is called to look like Christ, because we’re *in* Christ. In Colossians 1:15 we learn that Christ is the “image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” In Colossians 3:10 we see that we are a new humanity in Christ. And we are “being renewed in knowledge after the image of [our] creator.”

So, one reason we need to set our minds on Christ in heaven is because he’s the image of God. And the church on earth is supposed to be increasingly transformed into the image of Christ, so we can reflect him.

Have you ever thought about recreating yourself? Taking on a new image? Some of our pastors did this over quarantine. They grew beards! I looked up the wikiHow steps for creating a new image. And it was no surprise that one of the steps in recreating yourself is to get a new wardrobe.

The clothes we wear say so much about who we are. Your clothing can show you’re male or female. Young or old. Rich or poor. A monarch or a peasant. A civilian or a soldier. An athlete or an

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

intellectual. A judge or a prisoner.² And if you want to create a new image, one of the most fundamental things you can do is to change your wardrobe.

For believers, we don't need to recreate ourselves. We've already been made new. And we don't need a new wardrobe. We've already been given a new wardrobe. A heavenly one! But here's the problem. Most of us still have all our old earthly clothes. And we're not too keen on throwing them away.

How many of you still have that pit-stained sweatshirt from college with a worn-out neck and holes shot through it? You know what I'm talking about. The one your wife has tried to throw away a dozen times, but you keep retrieving from the trashcan.

If we want to reflect our heavenly status in Christ, if the church wants to be a manifestation on earth of what's true in heaven, then we need to take off our earthly clothes and put them in the waste bin. And we need to put on our heavenly clothes.

That's what Colossians 3 is calling us to do.

Verses 5-17 give us a number of clothing items we need to take off and others we need to put on if we're going to reflect our union with Christ. These verses form a four-part sandwich of two main themes.³ The first theme has to do with our worship of God. This is seen at the top and the bottom of the sandwich. We're called to put off false worship and put on true worship. The second theme has to do with our relationships with other believers. This is in the middle of the passage. We're called to put off division and put on love.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH BELIEVERS (8-11, 12-14)

Let's begin with our relationships with other believers in the middle of the sandwich. Verses 8-11 tell us what to put off. Verses 12-14 tell us what to put on. Let's read those verses.

Colossians 3:8-14

⁸But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

¹²Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

There are a lot of details in these verses and we could spend a lot of time here. But thankfully Paul summarizes what he wants us to take away at the end of each set of commands. At the end of the list of things to put off, Paul summarizes by telling the church to not lie. Then at the end of the list of things to put on, Paul summarizes by telling the church to love one another.

² Tim Jeal in David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

³ Pao

So, we could summarize this whole section by saying we're called to **put off lying and to put on love**.

Lying

When Paul calls the church to not lie, this is a loaded command. It's not only talking about *telling* the truth. It's talking about *living* according to the truth. It's a call to not lie with our lips or our lives.

In verse 8, Paul deals first with the heart. He says we need to put away anger, wrath, and malice. Then he goes on to deal with our mouths. We need to put away slander and obscenity. He's basically saying what Jesus said. Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

And in verse 9, he summarizes all of this by saying do not lie to one another. Why does he call hateful speech lying? It's because when we speak hateful and divisive words to one another in the body, we are not representing the truth about the body.⁴ We're living a lie! And what is the truth about the body? He tells us in verse 11.

The body of Christ is very diverse. It's made up of people from different ethnicities and different religious backgrounds. And it's made up of people from different social backgrounds. These differences could easily cause division. But in Christ this diverse group has been united in Christ. So, "here there is not Greek and Jew," speaking of ethnic backgrounds; there isn't "circumcised or uncircumcised," speaking of religious backgrounds; and there isn't "barbarian, Scythian, slave, free," speaking of social backgrounds and different moral backgrounds. No, "but Christ is all, and in all."

It doesn't matter where a person comes from. If they came from the hood or the suburbs. If they have black skin or brown skin or white skin. If they have tattoos on their skin or piercings through their skin. We're all one in Christ. That's the truth!

And if the church on earth is going to be a manifestation of the heavenly assembly around Christ, then we have to put off ugly attitudes that lead to ugly speech that cause nasty divisions so that we can reflect the beauty of Christ.

I'm afraid many Christians today live a lie in the way they feel about other believers and the way they talk to other believers. We say we're one in Christ, which is the truth. But do we live contrary to that?

I wish it weren't the case, but there *are* racists in the church. And racism in the church is a living lie against the truth, because the ground is level at the foot of the cross. I don't suspect many of you would consider yourself a racist, but all of us need to check our hearts and our actions regarding racism.

But even if we're not racist, this passage still calls us to check ourselves. How do you feel about people who hold a different opinion than you? About people who vote differently? People who were raised differently? Do your attitudes and actions and words show the true unity we have in Christ? Or do they speak a lie?

⁴ Pao

We need to put off lies with our lips and our lives when it comes to one another in the body. But we don't stop there. If we stop with taking off our old clothes, we'll be naked! We also need to put on our new clothes. We need to put on love.

Loving

Like the call to put off lying, the call to put on love starts with the heart. Verse 12 says, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." Then it moves to our actions in verse 13. If our heart is marked by the things in verse 12, then we will bear with one another and we will forgive each other. When people have different perspectives from us or bother us, we'll bear with them. And when they sin against us, we'll forgive them. This is what it looks like to love one another practically.

This is so basic to our union with Christ. If we're in Christ, *we* are loved. God has been so compassionate toward us, so kind to us, so patient with us. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. Instead, he sent his one and only Son to pay the price for our sins. Christ humbled himself to the point of death on a cross. If we have received forgiveness, it only makes sense that we would extend forgiveness toward others.

And if you can't extend forgiveness toward others, then maybe you don't yet grasp how much you've been forgiven. If you can't love one another in the body, maybe you don't yet understand that you are God's beloved! And so, let me encourage you to set your minds on the things above. To set your minds on Christ's death and resurrection. As you dwell on God's love for you, it will help you to put on love toward others in the body. Especially in a time when there's so much division.

So, we've dealt with our relationships with others in the church. We've seen that we need to put off lying and put on love. Let's now deal with worship of God.

WORSHIP OF GOD (5-7, 15-17)

Remember the worship section comes at the beginning and the end of verses 5-17. The language here doesn't explicitly call us to put off and on clothing. But the concept is there. Verses 5-7 tell us what to put off. Verses 15-17 what to put on.

Colossians 3:5-7, 15-17

⁵*Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.* ⁶*On account of these the wrath of God is coming.* ⁷*In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.*

¹⁵*And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.* ¹⁶*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.* ¹⁷*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.*

Again, there are a lot of details in these verses and I don't have time to deal with all of them. But again, there's a summary command for both the things to put off and the things to put on. Notice at the end of verse 5, the church is called to put to death covetousness, which is idolatry. And at the end of verse 15, the church is called to be thankful.

So, we can summarize the theme of worship this way: **Put off covetousness and put on thankfulness.**

Covetousness

The command to not covet is the conclusion of the things to put off, in a similar way that it's the conclusion to the Ten Commandments.⁵ It's really dealing with the heart behind all sin and false worship of God.

All the sins listed here have to do with wanting things we don't have or wanting things we shouldn't want as believers. The main sins listed here are sexual sins. Wanting a man or a woman who's not your husband or wife. Or having sex or sexual desires for someone who's not your spouse. This is an evil desire. This is idolatry.

Idolatry is putting some other "god" in the place of the true God.⁶ When we're not satisfied by what we have in Christ, we'll look to idols. Sex is certainly a perennial idol. But you could fill in with all kinds of idols.

The point is that all sin springs from a heart that wants more than Christ. But this makes no sense for those who are in Christ, because Christ is all, and in all. He's supreme! We have all we need and all we could ever want in him.

Thankfulness

And that leads me to things that we are called to put on. Verses 15-17 are all about putting on true worship in place of idolatry or false worship. But what will fuel true worship? If false worship is discontent with what we have in Christ, true worship is heartfelt thankfulness for all we have in Christ. That's what's repeated in every verse of the final section of our passage this morning. Verse 15, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. And be thankful." Verse 16, our singing needs to be "with thankfulness in [our] hearts to God." Verse 17, in whatever we do, we need to do it by "giving thanks to God."

Do you have a thankful heart? Or a heart that's unsatisfied with Christ?

If we want to worship God in our hearts, we have to be thankful for what we have in Christ. And if we're going to be thankful, we have to set our minds on the things that are above. We have to dwell on Christ.

One of the main ways we set our minds on things that are above is through our corporate worship gathering. So, it's no surprise Paul says our singing is a way for the word of Christ to dwell richly in us. Our singing needs to be saturated in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel needs to grow deep within us. Singing is a way the gospel works itself into our hearts and minds.

But this passage is not only about corporate worship.⁷ Worship isn't just what we do on Sunday morning. It should also be seen on Monday morning.

⁵ Pao

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary

⁷ Moo

Verse 17 makes that clear. “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.”

We’re called to do everything in Jesus’ name. That is, we’re to do everything for the glory of Christ, everything in worship of Christ. Our lips and our lives should show that we think Christ is worthy of first place.

What we believe about Christ (word) and how we live (deed) need to line up. Everything we say (word) and do (deed) should be fueled by thankfulness to God for what *he’s done* for us in Christ.

So, as you think through your life over the last few months, what do your words and deeds reflect about you? Do they show your union with Christ? Do they reflect his death and resurrection? Do they show on earth what is true in heaven? Does what we say on Sunday and what we do on Monday show Christ? Do they reflect thankful hearts for all we have in him?

If not, may I encourage you. Here’s the truth: You have died. And you have been raised with Christ. He *is* your life!

So, set your minds on things that are above, so that your life on earth may increasingly reflect him.