

Sermon given at Service of Worship led by Jay Robinson, at Knox Church Ōtepoti Dunedin New Zealand. Sunday 29 December 2024, Christmas 1 “Clothes That Fit”

Reading: Colossians 3:12-17

Lord God, let the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of our hearts,
be pleasing in your sight,
O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer.
Through Christ we pray, Amen.

Merry Christmas ... and Happy New Year.

As we begin to turn the page on this year's Christmas celebrations, we turn our attention the start of the new year. We have hopes that 2025 will be a good year, one filled with love, well-being, and security, for ourselves and for our loved ones. What's one thing many of us try to do, each New Year's? Well, it's New Year's resolutions – time to list out practical steps we each can take to improve our lives in the new year.

Our text today from Colossians, chapter 3, can help us take a deep dive into a list of *spiritual* resolutions that we can make to show forth our lives in the light of Christ. “As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” (v.12) “Above all, clothe yourselves in love, which binds everything together, in perfect harmony.” (v.14) What is the author of Colossians trying to say, here?

Well first, I'll provide some context. Around 60 AD, the apostle Paul was in prison in Ephesus. He had been preaching, starting churches, and writing letters to churches for years, falling in and out of jail during that time, for his beliefs.

During this prison stay he wrote his letter to Philemon, a church leader in Colossae, a city in Asia Minor (now Türkiye). Bible scholars in recent times, however, question whether he then further wrote the letter to the *church* in Colossae. They based this critique on historical, theological, and stylistic grounds. There are some compelling arguments that rather an *associate* of Paul wrote “Colossians,” at that time or a bit later.

However as New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, has said, “But it is just as possible that Paul, one of the most energetic and flexible writers of his day or any day wrote (it) himself.” Or to put it in the words of John M.G. Barclay, “Does it matter? ... Whether by Paul, by a secretary, by an associate, or by a pupil, Colossians is clearly a ‘Pauline’ letter. Readers must decide for themselves whether they can place it more precisely than that, and if so, where.” For purposes of this conversation today, I am placing the letter in Paul's own hand (and as it has been credited in Col. 1:1).

Paul wrote to the Colossians as a pastoral admonition to encourage and motivate them as followers of Jesus. He exhorted them as a loving community to display ethical behaviour in

front of unbelievers through participation in the life of Christ. He himself had not yet been to Colossae, but he felt attached to them as a vibrant young church, and as he received reports by his friends Epaphras and Philemon, who were leaders there.

What were these ethical virtues again, that he taught them? I'll go down the list:

- "compassion" – literally "heart full of compassion." That which is deeply felt, and is expressed as helping others.
- "kindness" – as God has been kind to them, so shall they be kind to others.
- "humility" – being neither haughty nor self-deprecating.
- "meekness" – having consideration for others, to the point of waiving a right to something, as long as that doesn't offend your principles.
- "patience" (or "longsuffering") – which is a foremost characteristic of God.
- "love" – this is "over all," a completeness that exists whenever Christians live together in community through *agape*, which is love.

These virtues are as clothes to put on, with love being the *crown*, which is "above all." Paul had admonished them earlier in chapter 3 to take off the old clothes of various vices, which he listed. (A list which, by the way, was twice as long as this list of virtues!) He instructed them to strip off the old self, and put on the new self. Clothes are an apt metaphor here. In fact Paul knew this about Colossae: *colossanus*, a fine wool, was made there.

In this past week, I have been to Farmer's to get new clothes for work. I was looking for new pants, but I also found shirts that were on a 2-for-1 sale. So I selected some of those, as well. I've found you have to take your time in the store changing room, to be sure the new clothes fit. You don't want them too tight, as to be too difficult to wear. You don't want them too loose, as to be baggy. They need to fit the size of you. And most of all you want them to "*be you.*" To look on the *outside* as you feel of the *inside*. They need to "fit" your tastes and personality. New clothes make you look good, at work or on New Year's Eve, and thus you represent yourself well.

Similarly, the new spiritual clothes that we put on make us look good to others. Paul is calling us to clothe ourselves in Christ. This means that as believers we represent the divine, so we need to look the part. This is a big responsibility, wearing the ethical garb, in a world that could often care less.

Paul doesn't just tell us *what* new clothes to wear. He goes further to give us some practical applications, on *how* to responsibly wear them:

- First there is "*forgiveness*" – "just as the Lord has forgiven you, you must also forgive" (v.13). In Christian community we bear with one another, and we seek earnestly to resolve conflicts when they occur.
- Then there is the "*peace of Christ*" – this peace is to *rule* in your hearts; literally in the Greek, *brabeuō*, this means "to umpire." This peace, this *shalom*, is within yourself and it is shared within the "one body," the church. It will help you to discern the right thing to do, to make the right call for any given situation.
- Finally there is "*worship*" – which includes:
 - The Word of Christ (or *logos*), to dwell in you,
 - To teach and admonish in wisdom, and

■ To sing spiritual songs, from a grateful heart.

We are to *live* in that spirit of worship, *every day*, doing everything in the name of Jesus, giving thanks to God.

What we believe and what we do are all cut of the same cloth. Biblical scholar Michael Bird puts it this way, “For Paul, one’s thought life and practical life are necessarily entwined.” Or as Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said, “As you have lived so you have believed.” The virtues we practice constitute the ethics of a new covenant community, representing the emerging of a new creation in Christ. We in Christ’s church are a redeemed people, and we need to live up to that redemption and play the part.

Paul called out the Colossians “as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved” (v.12). This call was to a *new* community in Christ, but yet with a common spiritual *heritage* connecting followers of Jesus, who were drawn from amongst both Jews and Gentiles. He urged the Colossians to hold fast to Christ and not to fall under the sway of false teachings that were going about in Colossae at that time.

Echoing Jesus, Paul reiterated the primacy of love in the Christian ethic. As in Galatians 5:6, where he asserted that “the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” Again from Michael Bird, “Love means seeking to live in wholesome community within a family of faith, and that is why love is the bond of perfect unity.” Love supplies the *motivation* to live a *coherent* life in Christ, which includes all of the other virtues. The love of God grounds us so that we can share that love with others.

How can we be a church community that shares God’s love with others? Come along with me now to explore this scenario: A church is lamenting that they are not gaining new members from the broader community, especially not from amongst young families. They call in an outside expert from another church:

This respected elder asks the church leaders: “What is it about your church that young families find attractive, now?” He gets no answer so he asks, “What attracted you to this church, when you first started to come here?”

“It’s the fellowship,” one woman replies. “This is where I can catchup with my friends and have a sense of belonging.”

The elder ponders this for a moment and says, “Yes, and these days people under 35 with children can get that same sense of belonging at their kids’ rugby games, and at other sports events. They build friendships with other parents whose kids are involved in the same thing that theirs are. They don’t need church for ‘fellowship’.”

One man says, “Well, church is where I get involved in helping other people. We work at the food pantry or take a meal to the homeless shelter. I get a lot of satisfaction out of that.”

“Yes, and people under 35 do those things too, without needing the church to do them. Look at all the secular organisations these days that are involved in social justice, where those people can go to scratch that itch,” replies the elder.

After a pregnant pause, the elder finally asks, “What’s the one thing that church has to offer than rugby teams and social agencies often don’t?”

“Anyone?” There’s no answer.

“Okay, look at it this way. What difference has being part of this church made to your *faith*? How has following Jesus, as a member of this congregation, changed your life?” he asks.

“Oh no, you don’t want to go *there*,” pipes up one man. “That’s getting too personal.”

“Well,” the elder answered, “it’s the one thing you have going for you that other social groups and service groups don’t. The one thing the church can claim on its own is Jesus, and if you can’t identify how Jesus has changed your life, what makes you think anyone else would be attracted to your church?”

Sometimes we need to be reminded of why we are here. We need to revisit and revise our spiritual resolutions, for the new year.

Paul reminded the church in Colossae of the *centrality* of Jesus to their new covenantal community. Moreover, he offered *practical advice* of how to “put on” Christ through various means of thought and action, so that their neighbours would see and note the difference, from life as they were leading it.

When we put on Christ, we look different, we act differently, we speak differently, because we not only wear Christ on the *outside*; we are filled with Christ on the *inside*.

And it shows. People notice. They become curious, and want to know, “Why the difference?”

They might even show up in church someday, to find out for themselves.

Looking for clothes that fit.

Let us pray:

Dear God,

Help us to shine forth in your Love,

that we may be a beacon to each other and to those around us.

In Jesus’s name we pray,

Amen.

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN
Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace

Knox Church, 449 George Street, Dunedin, New Zealand

Ph. (03) 477 0229

www.knoxchurch.org.nz

minister@knoxchurch.org.nz