

# Clothed and Bonded in the Love of Christ

## Readings

Ecclesiastes 1.12-2.11

Psalms 49.1-12

Colossians 3.1-17

Luke 12.13-21

## Opening

Late February 1993, my freshman year in high school. After a few rounds of tryouts, surviving a few cuts, I walked to the gym office, my heart beating out of my chest, to learn if I would be a member of the Central Bobcat baseball team. This is all I ever wanted in high school. I prepared myself for disappointment, telling myself that I'd have my sophomore season if I got cut. After all, Coach Bales had cut his own son his freshman year, and his son eventually played college ball. I weighed 140 lbs. sopping wet and couldn't hit a curveball.

To my great shock, I saw my name on the final cut list. I made the team. Not varsity, for sure. But I was in the fold—junior varsity felt like the big leagues for me. And within five minutes of digesting this new reality, that I would be a Central baseball Bobcat for the next four years, I thought, 'I'm going to get a jacket.' Not a letterman jacket that all the other sports had, but a custom-made Tennessee Sporting Goods Central High *baseball* jacket. Red sleeves, black vest, gothic 'C' with the crossed bats, my name on the back, all in nylon that defined cool in the 90s.

It took forever for those jackets to come in. March turned to April and I think they arrived like the first week of May, an unseasonably warm first week of May. Did that change anything? Nope! Walking around school that day, I see all my freshman teammates wearing their jackets and it's 80 degrees outside. We're sweating and we don't care. We've waited months for this.

We may have looked like fools, sweating in jackets, but it gave us both pride and purpose. These jackets and the uniforms we received, put us in a mindset to hit the weights, take dozens of ground balls, spend hours in the batting cage, get better everyday so that one day we'd be on the varsity roster. Putting on the clothes meant putting on habits to pursue a deeply desired goal.

## The New Self

“You have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self,” Paul writes to the Colossian church, “which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” We’ve come to the heart of Paul’s letter, Colossians 3, and he wants the Colossian Christians to envision both their vices *and* their virtues as the clothes they wear.

But this isn’t a moral pep-talk, a parent speaking to a child to ‘do what’s right.’ The metaphor of clothing doesn’t appear from nowhere. It comes from a common experience—baptism. Baptism was the beginning for *each one, everyone* (remember Paul’s emphasis on every believer in chapter 1?), but baptism is a beginning with a goal. Not an individual goal, but a family goal—that *we* would grow to full maturity *together* in Christ Jesus.

We need a little background about baptism in the early church to hear the gravity of Paul’s words here. In the early church, the sacrament of baptism meant changing clothes—literally. When you came to the water on Easter Sunday, you came in the clothes you owned. The old clothes represented the old habits of rebellion and the works of darkness. When you came for baptism, you’d take those clothes off and you would be baptized either in very little clothing or in your birthday suit. Somehow early churches worked this out by having separate baptismal spaces for men and women, and this is one of the roles female deaconesses had in the early church, to administer baptism to women.

Then coming out of the water, the symbol of the grave and resurrection, you would receive a white, linen robe—your new clothes symbolizing your new birth. The first Adam was clothed with shame. But now the second Adam, our Lord Jesus, clothes us with wisdom and freedom. Newly baptized believers wore their new robe for the fifty days of Easter, to remind them of the new body and new habits they ‘put on.’ Baptism is a beginning *and* a call to grow into full maturity, both personally and together as a church.

## Paul’s Central Idea in Colossians 3

When we began this miniseries on Colossians, I spoke about Paul’s burning desire for this church while he was imprisoned. Paul toiled, struggling with all his energy that he may present everyone mature in Christ, which meant teaching *everyone* in wisdom. He opened his heart in chapter 1 that *everyone* would mature in wisdom and chapter 3 describes *how* they grow in wisdom.

Return with me to Colossians 3.1-17 on page ### of your pew Bible as we look more closely at Paul’s call to holiness. This is a fairly long selection; you could actually study this passage for six weeks and still need more time. So instead of covering the whole, I want to take us to the most

significant verses, both for the Colossians and for us, which unlock the meaning of the whole passage.

Verses 14-15: “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.”

This is the summit of wisdom. This is why Paul toils with all his energy: that this church would acquire the summit of wisdom, which is love: the bond of all other virtues in community. He sees *each one, everyone* clothed with Christ, the new self. We were created, redeemed, and sanctified to grow into *one family, clothed in love*.

## Clearing Ground for Holiness

Let’s shift the clothing metaphor to a different space—gardens. Jesus spoke about God clothing the fields with grass, so plants are a form of clothing, too.

For the past few years I’ve been in the dirt, trying to bring a unified vision to the lawn, garden beds, and pathways on our property. I’m no experienced gardener, but I can see the *potential* for vibrant colors, vegetables bursting out, and pathways connecting them all. But to get there, I have to address what *should not* be there.

Our home changed hands about four different times over a ten year period. Every owner thought of their one favorite plant, tree, or feature, but no one brought *all* the elements together. We have this wonderful local website in Knoxville called KGIS which shows me aerial shots of my lot from 2008 to present day. Every landscaping transgression is a matter of public record. Where our swing set rests, there once was a koi pond. A magnolia obstructed our front entry and downspouts extended across footpaths and became trip hazards.

So beginning last year even to last weekend, I’ve had a clearing project. I’ve started over. And clearing out the old growth means weeding.

“For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Paul tells us what has happened by the power of the cross—Christ erased our sins and gave us a new heart. And then Paul says that we have work to do: ‘Put to death the old ways.’

And here Paul focuses on two categories of sins: lustful desires and sins of speech. These two temptations have the greatest potency to divide our hearts and divide a community. Words are powerful, so we must cultivate good words, good conversations as sons and daughters of God. We must guard the door of our mouths *and* the silent words spoken within the heart. The church

that preserves good words, true words, lives in the light will know freedom and maturity in Christ.

Back to the garden...Here are two definitions of weeding that work for me. A weed is:

A) a plant out of place and not intentionally sown, or

B) a plant growing where it is not wanted.

Reading about preparing and clearing garden beds, I learned about an interesting technique regarding weeds. Once you've cleared a garden bed, it's best to leave the garden bare as is for a few weeks, so that you learn the location of the next generation of weeds when they begin sprouting again. Dig em out once more, then repeat. Do this twice and you're ready to plant.

And this wisdom of gardening and weeding seems a good image for the cultivation of the heart. Just like I want good flowers and vegetables to grow in my garden spaces; just like I want good pathways to connect each space and a holistic vision, I want to acquire the virtues Paul lists here: compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness. But I first need to know the locations, the conditions, and the growth patterns of old weeds shooting up in the garden of my heart. I have weeds growing there, they're out of place, not intentionally sown, growing where they aren't wanted, but present there nonetheless. So what do I do? I get in the dirt and begin uprooting plants that don't belong there—anger, impatience, arrogance. Just as a gardener clears a bed and then watches new sprouts of weeds, I watch my thoughts, my emotions, and ask for the mind and heart of Christ. I ask the Lord to soften my stony heart, especially toward my brother or sister. This garden was meant to be clothed in beauty, but it needs some tilling and weeding. Prepare this ground to be clothed with beauty, Lord.

## The Bond and Harmony of Love

Well, the work of weeding never ends. We will always be putting to death those habits that calcify our hearts. But no gardener prepares a bed for the sake of endless weeding. A gardener plants flowers to clothe the ground with wonderful color and aromas; he plants vegetables and fruits to bring food to the table for family and friends.

It has been said that the foundation of the worlds greatest gardens is established by seven plants. I heard that from the British gardener Monty Don so it must be true. That's the open secret of master gardeners.

That's interesting when I think about these Paul's list of virtues here. Paul likes lists like these. Think of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians. But these lists aren't just random virtues he picks off

the top of his head. This isn't a Hallmark card. These are the seedlings of beauty, planted in each soul to grow up into full maturity.

Take the virtue of "compassionate hearts" in verse 12. It sounds nice and good, but we don't realize depth here. The Greek word here also means "intestines." What's going on there? Well, to the ancient mind, compassion is an eruption from the gut, the depth of our soul. Where we have grown weary of doing good, we weed out hardheartedness and ask God to renew us within.

The virtue of patience in Greek can be read as "a long movement" in its original language. It suggests a powerful movement within, meaning that tremendous spiritual force is involved. Ask a vocalist which takes more strength—to sing loudly or softly—and you will learn that it takes much more strength to sing softly. So also with patience. And when I receive patience and forbearance in Christ (how I need it), my goodness it is a beautiful gift.

All these virtues we cultivate in our own hearts, to clothe ourselves with these habits as *one body*. Paul said in Colossians 2 his great struggle, his toil, was that this church would be knit together in love. Love is the summit, the crown, and the glue of all the virtues. It is love that unites an individual heart; it is love that knits a community together. We become wise by taking on these virtues, but infusing each one of them with love.

A final thought...I don't like our translation of v. 14 because we don't feel the weight of what Paul means by 'perfect harmony.' We hear perfection and we think no mistakes. But Paul has something more in mind. This Greek word is better translated as 'completeness.' It means the highest stage of maturity a human being can reach. Love is the summit, the greatest possible **fullness**. It means we've become what we were created to be. When Paul prays in chapter 1 that he could present everyone mature, this is what he has in mind. Each one, everyone united by love, growing in all the other virtues of Christ.

## Apostles' Telos

Next Sunday we will celebrate our 13th anniversary as a church. He has clothed us with his Spirit and we are growing in virtues, held together by love. Thanks be to God. Let us tend to the garden of our hearts, do the sweat work of weeding what doesn't belong there, and trust that together we are growing in love as God created us to be like his Son, our Lord Jesus; who with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns forever. Amen.