

A New Set of Clothes

It's hard for us to imagine what it would have been like to become a Christian in the first century. If you were Jewish, it meant transitioning from a belief that Messiah was coming to a belief that Messiah had come and that the many promises about the Messianic Age were for now. But there was also a strong moral shift, from being dutifully obedient to the law, to being devoted to your brothers and sisters in Christ and to extending the love of God to those outside the family of God.

Now, imagine the shift if you were to come to faith in Christ from a pagan Greek or Roman background. In the very early days of Rome, the male population were sheep and cattle farmers for most of the year and fighters during the part of the year devoted to war and they have been described as a "restrained and austere" group of people. But by the time of the early church, Rome had become an empire and, beginning with Julius Caesar, they had become much more liberal in their outlook on morality. The writer Juvenal, late first or early second century, describes the situation like this:

If you want to be anybody nowadays, you must dare some crime that merits narrow Gyara or jail.

Gyara is an arid island rock, about 9 square miles, off the coast of Greece. It was used as a place of exile for notable Romans that needed to be kept out of the way.

Juvenal continues:

Honesty is praised and left to shiver. It is to their crimes that men owe their pleasure-grounds and palaces, their fine tables and old silver goblets ...

And he goes on from there to describe the loss of virtue, particularly among the young.

Faithfulness to marriage vows was so rare that one tombstone described the man as being faithful to one wife for 40 years. As the Empire grew older, faithfulness was something associated particularly with the Christians who were referred to as the lot who were stupid enough to share everything except their wives.

Christianity ran against the flow of the culture, and not just in such areas as sexual morality. Christians cared for the poor, the outcasts, treated slaves as equals before God, rescued abandoned babies and raised them as their own. They were radically counter-cultural because they were followers of the law of love.

In today's text, Paul asks some of them, the believers in Colossae, to consider their new way of life, this new morality, as being like putting on a new set of clothes:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Colossians 3:12-14)

What happens when we change from one set of clothes into another? We look different - recognizable, but different. And when we look different, we feel different as well. I feel

different when I'm wearing shorts than I do when I'm wearing a suit and tie -- you didn't know that I sometimes wear a suit and tie, but I do!

What this passage tells us is that believers will put on a new suit of clothes, a new outfit, and that it will make us look a whole lot different than we did before we came to faith in Christ. Let's look at the steps involved in this process of changing from one kind of person to another, starting with the person being changed:

Therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved ...

God loves everyone; He loved the world so much that He sent His dearly loved Son so that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life. We know that verse and that truth - God's love extends to all He has made. But there is also an incredible favor and grace for those who respond to His love, not with rejection and rebellion, but with faith and commitment. Those are ones that God considers His children, and He sets them apart from the rest - that's what that word "holy" means; "set apart". They are also referred to in this verse as "chosen" people, which brings to our minds the images of God's protection and blessing over His chosen people from Old Testament times, the people of Israel. Their being chosen didn't always produce obedient hearts or successful outcomes, but it always seemed to lead to a special work of grace down the road. God would extend patience to His people through generations of rebellion, because He had chosen them, and His choice of those descendants of Abraham meant that they would receive blessing and God's favor throughout their history.

So, apply this description to the people who are referred to as God's chosen in the New Testament. Paul says it clearly - Israel consisted of the *physical* descendants of Abraham; the new Israel, the church, consists of the *spiritual* descendants of Abraham, the man of faith. We who believe God at His word, we who trust in the sacrificial gift of His Son and we who take God at His word in the promises He has made to those who believe, are now included in that family that God calls His chosen people. So Paul starts this section by telling us who we are: God's chosen people, holy (or set apart) and dearly loved.

Then Paul tells us what character traits we should be wearing, the kind of clothing that a person who has been chosen by God, set apart to be loved on by Him, should put on:

... compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Just five, for now. When you think of compassion and kindness, of humility, gentleness and patience, who do you immediately think of? I think of Jesus. I can't think of anyone who demonstrated greater compassion to people who were sick, who had suffered loss, who were caught in sin, who were captives of demons. In all those examples, we see Jesus showing a compassionate response, as if He could feel their pain and wanted more than anything to relieve their suffering. Throughout the world today, His followers lead the way in relieving the suffering of those who are beaten down and in pain.

Kindness, humility, gentleness and patience - we've looked at all these things in recent months. This is the way we should look to the world around us. When people who have no clue about who Jesus is, or who maybe don't even believe He ever existed (let

alone know what He taught or what He did), when they come across a believer, a follower of Christ, they should see at least a little bit of this compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. And the longer we walk with Him, the more we talk with Him, they should see us growing in these five things.

The next two sentences describe the need we have to be able to forgive any grievances we have against another believer.

Verse 13 starts, “Bear with each other,” meaning “put up with each other”, which we looked at a couple of months ago. That “putting up with” leads us into “forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” There’s the standard. Don’t forgive because you feel like it, or because you hope that you will feel like it some day, forgive because Jesus gave His life to forgive you. There is no need for any other motivation and there is no greater motivation to pursue. Jesus, sinless Lamb of God, was sacrificed on Calvary as a substitute for you and for me. He offered His life freely so that all our sins could be forgiven -- all our sins. And so we live in a state of grace, a state of freedom from the law that condemns us and from the death that is the sentence for all rebellion against God. Because of those things, we are told that we must also forgive - “forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

And then we get to the final article of clothing in verse 14: “And over all these virtues (referring to compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience) ... over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” This is the overcoat, the wrapper on the package, the thing that people see when they look at us: “Look how they love one another!” It should be the most obvious thing about us, the one core impression that we leave with people who are with us - “Look how they love one another!”

Now, how can that possibly be true? How can we get to the place where we are able to love, forgive, be patient and kind and gentle and humble and compassionate in the same way that Jesus demonstrated when He walked on earth and shared life with a few devoted followers? Isn’t it impossible? Isn’t the history of the church littered with examples of selfishness and pride and division? Why do we think we can do any better? The truth is, the church through the ages has been made up of people, like us, some of whom have not been too concerned with becoming like Jesus and many of whom have made that their goal. For as much as we hear about the bad things, there are some beautiful stories of people who have loved and given of themselves in sacrificial and moving ways.

For the past 20 years, Christian workers in the mostly Muslim nations of Albania and Kosovo have been beaten, their cars set on fire or stolen, the worship hall in Istog had been burned down, a deacon attacked with a dagger and a pastor sent to hospital needing three operations on his kidney which was injured in a beating he received for teaching about Jesus. Their response is described by Baba Brahimaj, the leader of the Albanian Muslims:

I know Christians. They drill wells so that our Muslim families have enough water. They organize humanitarian aid . . . So we thank the Christians. You give people hope, peace and reconciliation. You teach us how to believe in God and practise forgiveness."

In Prishtina, the capital of Kosovo, the University has decided to print ten thousand copies of 'the Book', the New Testament translated into ordinary Albanian, because they want to distribute them to their students as "study material". Because of the power of love and forgiveness, doors are opening that have remained closed for decades. I remember back in the 1980's when there were still four countries in the world where there were no known Christians - and one of those countries was Albania. Now the university is printing copies of the New Testament for their students.

Pastor Said was an uncle to one of the terrorists who shot and killed 89 people at the Bataclan theatre in Paris last November. On television Said asked the families of victims for forgiveness for his nephew's actions. In an interview since that time, he said, "We must build a relationship with Muslims. If you love Muslims, anything is possible. Last week, a fellow minister was invited into a mosque to preach the Gospel. In the mosque! I'd never thought that would be possible."

North Korea has Gulag-style prison camps where they detain political prisoners, Christians and others they consider enemies of the state. Some time ago, a couple escaped North Korea in order to find food, but while in China, they found Jesus who satisfied a deeper hunger within. Moses, that's not his real name, and his wife were trained by Cornerstone Ministries to be workers in the underground church. After their training, they made the courageous decision to return to their homeland and train workers there to spread the good news.

Unfortunately, they were caught by a border patrol as they attempted to return to North Korea and were sent to a prison camp. Moses was beaten repeatedly, so severely that his face was too swollen to allow him to eat. After four months of torture, he was too weak to stand and his voice was just a whisper. Whenever he was questioned about who he had met with in China, who had trained him, he would take the piece of paper they handed him for his confession and write about the love of God and how God had provided for him while in China.

At one point, a man in the adjoining cell who was in severe pain from malnutrition complained to Moses about his condition and Moses responded by praying for the man to be healed -- he was immediately well. It wasn't long before Moses was being taken from cell to cell in order to pray for healing as there were no medical facilities in the prison camp and God did so many healings that the prison officials decided that Moses should be released early, before everyone in the prison became a follower of Jesus. An officer re-wrote Moses' confession himself, stating that he and his wife had gone to China to find food and did not bring any shame to North Korea. Moses signed the confession and he and his wife were released. As they were leaving, an officer made this statement:

I know you will escape to China, but return to North Korea when North Korea becomes a better country, since North Korea needs true and genuine Christians like yourselves.

The couple went home and planted an underground church. The simple act of loving their people enough to return to share Christ with them, led to incredible pain and suffering, but also to victory in an inhumane environment ... and an open door to faith for many who were imprisoned there, including the guards.

One more story of an act of love that made a difference:

A week before Christmas a Somali refugee family in the Netherlands was attacked by racists who threw heavy fireworks at their rental house. The attackers left a nasty note with a threat: "White is better! Foreigners need to move out! This is only the beginning!" A young Christian pastor who heard about the attack put out a message on social media asking people to show this family their love and support by sending them flowers. Within days the refugee family received so many flowers from all over the nation that their whole house was surrounded. One came with a note: "We hope that you and your children will always stay with us! We need you!" The family was deeply moved and very encouraged by the support they had been given.

Over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Once again, we see the Lord's concern for unity among His people. We see in a fresh way how vulnerable the church is to division -- simply from a lack of love.

Last Sunday evening I had the great pleasure, once again, of attending a Steve Bell concert. He is a deeply committed Christian, an outstanding musician and song-writer and a great guy. I've played some of his music in sermons I've done over the past year or so. One of the songs he performed last Sunday is called "This is Love", a song based on Jesus' prayer in John 17 and he introduced it by describing how clueless the disciples were about Jesus' true motivation and true purpose in what He was about to undergo at Calvary. Here are some lyrics from the song - remember, Jesus is praying:

*They argue who will sit next to the throne
And I cringe to hear them say, Thy Kingdom come
They think they know what they're getting into
We both know that they haven't got a clue
But this is not the same - it's a different thing, altogether
This is not the same, it's a better thing altogether -
This is love, this is love*

I think I've been beating on this same drum for four months now and Steve says it beautifully in a few lines. We have the daily choice to live for pride, for selfishness, out of fear or anger or judgment ... but God offers us a different thing, a better thing, altogether. It's a world in which His Spirit lives and moves and makes His presence known. It's a world in which forgiveness and mercy are demonstrated in powerful ways. It's a world in which we don't have to defend ourselves or exalt ourselves above others, but can use the gifts we've been given to serve and bless others. It's a world where it

makes perfect sense to pick up our cross daily in order to follow Jesus, to go where He goes, to copy what we see Him doing, to love because He first loved us.

The cross reminds us, as often as we think of it, that we have received the ultimate love. We are precious to our Creator; so much so that He gave Himself for us. In that context, in the security of such amazing love, we are called to live a life of love for others.

This is not the same - it's a different thing altogether

This is not the same - it's a better thing, altogether

This is love, this is love

The love of God is the foundation for our new life in Christ and it's the foundation for the character that He wants to produce in us. Let's be a people who listen to the voice of the Spirit, understand what it is He wants to perfect in us, and then pursue it with all our heart.

Prayer

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus celebrated the Passover with His twelve disciples, including the one who was about to betray Him to His death. Knowing all of this, Jesus took the bread and broke it and told His disciples, "This is My body, given for you ... do this in remembrance of Me." Later, He took the cup and passed it to His band of followers, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

While we reflect on the extent of Jesus' love for us and on the grace in which we live and move and have our being ... let's remember Him. To help, we'll play the Steve Bell song I mentioned and a couple of others as well. When you've had communion and if you want to talk with others who are done, please do so out in the hallway with the doors closed behind you.