



Sermon

New Clothes for Old in Christ

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23; Col 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

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Last week, with Peter, we looked at Colossians 2. Today, in Chapter 3 we come to the moral instructions. It is important to keep in mind the overall structure of Paul's letter. Here as in his other letters the indicative mood is followed by the imperative mood. In other words, Paul first sets out theological truth and then he gives the practical outworking.

He started the letter by telling his readers who Christ is and what Christ had done for them. Only then is there an outworking in moral and ethical instruction. That is important because the theological statements empower the behaviour outcomes. It is because Christ is who he is and that he has rescued us and set us free that we will behave differently.

In Chapter 1, we soared with Paul as he told us of the supremacy of Christ: He is the image of the invisible God, all the fulness of God dwells in him, he is the creator of all things, he holds creation together. He is the head of the Church which is his body.

It was laid out before us that we had all been separated from God and were enemies because of our evil behaviour, but he has now reconciled us to himself through the death and resurrection of Christ.¹ We were dead in our sins, but God has forgiven all our sins and made us alive in Christ.

Changed Lives

It is because of these glorious and marvellous truths that Paul echoes the call to a changed life. He uses two metaphors for the change we need. One is dying – we have died with Christ and been given new life in him. Therefore, we are to put to death the old ways. The other is a change of garments.

Dying to Immorality

Paul gives a list in verses 5-8. It is worth reviewing these behaviours because otherwise we assume people know what is immoral. However, with the standards of society drifting further and further away from the Biblical norm, people may be unaware. Twice in the last 13 years, Helen and I have ministered to young women who had thought prostitution was moral because it was legal. I have had young people tell me that

¹ Col 1:15-22

the church does not have a moral position on fornication. Well, it does and more importantly both Old Testament and New Testament have a clear standing.

So here goes with one of those places where it is stated: Paul says we must put to death these sins which are all to do with impurity and covetousness.

Sexual immorality: The Greek word used here is *porneia*. It primarily relates to fornication (sexual intercourse outside marriage) but is used more generally to include adultery (sexual intercourse outside a marriage relationship) as well as incest and any other sexual relationship outside the marriage of a man and a woman.

- Impurity: uncleanness in thought, word and deed.
- Lust: Uncontrolled immoral desire.
- Evil desires: which are more general than lust.
- Greed which is idolatry: This greed is a ruthless desire for more. It is an intense seeking after material things with disregard for the rights of others. It is idolatry because it puts self-interest and earthly things in the place of God.

These are things Paul tells us to put to death. They are part of the old life before we were saved – they don't belong in our new Christ life.

Parable of the Rich Fool

So, with the topic of greed in our minds, it is time to have a look at the other two readings.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus was asked by a man to tell his brother to share the inheritance with him. This episode recorded for us by Luke is not saying money is evil. Remember the Bible says it is the love of money which is the root of all evil.²

Jesus responded, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions."³ And after the parable he says, "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."⁴

The issue is focussing on money in place of a relationship with God. In St Paul's word – idolatry.

When John Bei visited us in 2017 from Tanzania, it was his first trip outside his country. As we drove to the airport, I asked him what his impression of NZ was. He said, "In my country the idols are obvious religious figures. But in your country people wear them, live in them and drive around in them."

Ecclesiastes

The futility of seeking wealth for its own sake is addressed in the reading from Ecclesiastes. In this book, the author sets out to find the meaning of life under the sun. Professor Peter Kreeft says it is the question to which the rest of the Bible is the answer.

The writer explores five ways people try to find meaning and purpose in life: wisdom, pleasure, wealth and power, duty or social service and piety. The reading we heard was from his search for the meaning of life in wealth. But he despairs that all the results of his hard work will be inherited by an heir who did nothing for it.

He writes of these things being "under the sun." That expression occurs 29 times in Ecclesiastes. It means what is perceived with the senses without relationship with God. Even the religion he explores does not include revelation from the Holy Spirit of God, does not include personal relationship with the Father, does not include the God who saves.

² 1 Tim 6:10

³ V14

⁴ V21

His repeated conclusion is that everything under the sun is meaningless. Finally at the ending of the book there is a resolution. Having explored all the main purposeful endeavours and found them empty, the writer says,

“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”⁵

There is an accounting for life, a judgement. It does matter how we live - which means there is life after this mortal life. And because there is life after death, in Jesus’ parable, God calls the man a fool, who amassed wealth for himself without reference to God or the needs of others.

When You Die

Angelica Baumann sent me this piece translated from Spanish, entitled “When You Die!”

When you die, don't worry about your body. Your relatives will do what they can for you. They'll take your clothes off; they will wash you; they will dress you. They will take you out of your house and take you to your new address. Many will come to your funeral to say goodbye. Some will cancel engagements and even miss work to attend your funeral.

Your belongings, even what you did not like to lend, will be sold, given away or burned: Your keys, your tools, your books, your CD's, your shoes, your clothes...

The economy will continue. In your job, you will be replaced. Someone with the same or better capabilities will take your place.

Your assets will go to your heirs. And do not doubt that you will continue to be quoted, judged, questioned and criticized for the small and great things you did in life.

The people who knew you only by your countenance will say, “Poor man! He had a great time!”

Your sincere friends will cry for a few hours or a few days, but then they will return to laughter. The “friends” who dragged you to parties will forget about you faster.

Your animals will get used to the new owner.

Your photos will hang on the wall for some time or remain on a piece of furniture, but then they will be stored in the bottom of a drawer. Someone else will sit on your couch and eat at your table.

The deep pain in your house will last a week or two, a month or two, a year or two. Then you will be added to the memories and then your story is over. It ended among the people, it ended here, it ended in this world.

But your story in your new reality begins ... in your life after death.

Your life to which you can't take things from here – when you left, they lost their value: body, beauty, appearance, surname, comfort, credit, condition, position, bank account, house, car, profession, titles, diplomas, medals, trophies, friends, places, spouse, family...

In your new life you will only need your spirit. And the heavenly treasures that you have accumulated from here, will be the only fortune that you will have there. That fortune is the only one you will take with you, and it is amassed during the time you are here. When you live a life of obedience to the Bible, of surrender, resignation and fear of God, love towards others and peace with your neighbour, you are gathering your spiritual fortune.

⁵ Eccles 12:13-14

Therefore, seek to please God by accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and sufficient Saviour, learn from him, strive to live fully and be happy imitating his faith and conduct.

From here you will not take what you have; you will only take what you gave.

Colossians

That agrees with Jesus and Paul – that we need to be looking forward to the life to come which is eternal. Colossians 3:1-4 reads:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Behaviours to strip off

After the previous list of sins to kill off, there is a second list of behaviours which need to change. This is where Paul uses the metaphor of a change of garments in verses 9 & 10. You have “stripped off the old self with its practices” and “put on the new self which is renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator.”⁶

It reminds me of a story I was told by a man in Carlisle. He had worked on a pig farm when they had to clean out the muck sump which drained the pig stys. To finish the job, he had to get right into it. When he got back to the farm cottage, he stood on the grass and his wife had hosed him down in his overalls before he stripped them off and came in for a bath. He said there was a patch of grass which grew stronger, longer and greener for years afterwards!

The point is that he stripped off the dirty overalls. He would not want to put them on again – he would put on clean clothes. Paul tells us that because we have been rescued from being enemies of God, we need to strip of the actions of the old way of life and put on the good nature of Christ.

Then he gives a list of sins we should put off like dirty clothes. Take these off and put them in rubbish – you are not going to wear them again.

Anger, rage and malice are sins of attitude.

- Anger is the settled feeling of anger. The Greek dictionary suggests it has a punishing quality.
- Rage – the sudden, passionate outburst of anger.
- Malice – a viciousness which aims to injure one’s neighbour.

Then follow sins of speech: slander, filthy language and lying.

- Slander is insulting, negative and untrue talk about someone else.
- Filthy language is obscene, dirty or abusive speech.

This is not intended to be a list of “can’t dos.” We have been declared holy and righteous in Christ. This is the call to become in daily experience what we are already declared to be in Christ. It is likely that you will think, “But I can’t change.” I happened on an appropriate quotation from Mere Christianity by C.S. Lewis.

“And now we begin to see what it is that the New Testament is always talking about. It talks about Christians ‘being born again’; it talks about them ‘putting on Christ’; about Christ ‘being formed in us’; about our coming to ‘have the mind of Christ’.

Put right out of your head the idea that these are only fancy ways of saying that Christians are to read what Christ said and try to carry it out – as a man may read what Plato or Marx said and try to carry it out. They mean something much more than that.

⁶ Col 3:9-10

They mean that a real Person, Christ, here and now, in that very room where you are saying your prayers, is doing things to you. It is not a question of a good man who died two thousand years ago. It is a living Man, still as much a man as you, and still as much God as He was when He created the world, really coming and interfering with your very self; killing the old natural self in you and replacing it with the kind of self He has. At first, only for moments. Then for longer periods. Finally, if all goes well, turning you permanently into a different sort of thing; into a new little Christ, a being which, in its own small way, has the same kind of life as God; which shares in His power, joy, knowledge and eternity."