

“From Heaven to Earth”
27 December 2015: 1st Sunday after Christmas

Preaching Text: Colossians 3:12-17

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“Love is not blind—it sees more, not less. But because it sees more, it is willing to see less”

-- (Rabbi Julius Gordon).

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In what is now Southwestern Turkey, Colossae was a city that had a thriving textile industry. Colossae also had substantial Jewish population. Yet when written the Colossians’ church was mostly Gentile. While long thought to be Pauline, there are many scholars who consider Colossians non-Pauline and for a several reasons. One is that Colossians stresses what God has already achieved for God’s people. Generally in other epistles Paul wrote he writes about what God is going to do . . . in the future. The counter-argument is that Paul altered his standpoint later in his writings. Also the addressing of false teachings indicates later authorship. In the ancient world, writing in the name of a respected author was accepted and regarded as an honor. I call this reverse plagiarism. Hear the lesson:

1 So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. 5 Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. 7 These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.

8 But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices 10 and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. 11 In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all (Colossians 3:1-11)!

12 As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs 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 (Colossians 3:12-17).

Today's Colossians' lesson is a clarification on two preceding verses which set the theological tone. We read in verses 9-10: **“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.”** “New clothing” is the metaphor for us today from Colossians. Remembering what Reese—a character from the television show *Person of Interest*—says: “What can I say? New suit, new man.” As shallow as it sounds, there is some truth to it—a truth that goes back at least 2000 years, and perhaps I suspect way farther back than that!

In a devotional by Frederick Buechner he writes:

Last Christmas, the following items appeared beneath my tree: a pair of argyle socks from Sears, a button-down shirt from Land's End, slacks from L.L. Bean, fresh BVDs, and a green striped tie. With presents like that, it was easy to construct a brand new outfit for the Sunday following Christmas. Upon arriving in the sanctuary, it was obvious that others had done likewise. Christmas had so gifted us that almost everyone in that church had taken on a totally new appearance. “Now that Christ has come, says the writer of Colossians, “clothe yourself anew.” More than a moral imperative (requirement, rule), it is a new possibility.

The metaphor for that new/sanctified life is clothing: we put away one coat, as it were, and begin to wear another. The old coat we discard is the “old self,” described as “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language.” Our “new self” consists of “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” This is a way to focus on a modification in our human condition. Yet the change happens not so much within us or because of our volition. Rather the change connects the values/behaviors we embrace—by God's grace seen in Christ. The writer finds this clothing affinity useful because it is easy to understand. This putting on of new clothing is a bit like Job putting on sackcloth. In putting on new clothes, we signify we are new people.

A closely related image of clothing is the imitation of Christ. It becomes explicit at verse 13. The writer directs the Colossians to forgive one another “just as the Lord has forgiven you.” With later allusions to Christ in verses 15-17, our new clothes—are also qualities of Christ. Then, the

image of putting on new clothes becomes a way of talking of imitation: we wear Christ as our clothing, taking him as our model. In turn, the train of thought here is not far from Paul's main appeal to the Philippians to assume the "mind" of Christ (Philippians 2:5).

Here in Colossians our author describes the authentic Christian life. My guess—and perhaps backed up by people who actually know what they are talking about—this text is plausibly an early piece of baptismal training. The author calls on his readers to "Set your minds on things that are above." When Christ comes again, they will be seen as being with him in power, but those who chase the false and the wicked will endure God's wrath. Colossians has articulated: "you have stripped off the old self with its practices" and "have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator." Thus dangled in front of the people is a choice—and isn't it always?

The choice for them and for us is what moral virtues and ethical qualities will we adopt and embrace? When not under duress—such as sitting in a pew—the decision between either "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language" or "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" does not seem too demanding. But when driving D/FW freeways or standing in line at the grocery store or having your neighborhood kids refusing to vacate your house—the decision is not so clear cut.

The spiritual clothing we lay out the night before we go to work or school will govern the course our life takes on that next particular day.

I want to close with a story about a headhunter—companies often hire a headhunter to help them fill positions, often for jobs that require high skills levels, or offer high pay. Headhunters often search international organizations for top personnel. Josh McDowell tells a story about one such headhunter.

One prominent headhunter said, "When I get an executive that I am trying to hire for someone else, I like to disarm him. I offer him a little drink, take my coat off, then my vest, undo

my tie, throw up my feet, and then talk about baseball or football or family or whatever . . . until he is all relaxed. And then, when I think I've got him relaxed, I lean over and look him directly in the eye and say, 'Now, my friend, tell me what's your purpose in life?' And you ought to see them squirm!"

"Well" said this famous headhunter, "one day I was interviewing this fellow and I had him all relaxed and disarmed, and then, I popped my question to him—'Now, my friend, tell me what's your purpose in life?'—and he did not bat an eye. He looked right back at me and said, 'to go to heaven and take as many people with me as I possibly can.' And you know, for the first time in my whole career, I was the one who was speechless."

The secret of a happy life is one very simple thing—not living your life for yourself or not even living your life for others, but rather living your life for the Lord and doing whatever you do as a special offering to God. To dress for success is to put on Christ or as Ephesians puts it:

13 Take up the whole armor of God . . . and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:13-17).