

“What Not to Wear”

Colossians 3:5-11

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. (ESV)

Many of you know, if you’ve been going here for a while, that my family is composed of one male (that would be me) and four women (that would be the rest of them). There are a lot of inherent conflicts in that, but one of the ones that seems to pop up most of the time is the fact that there is one male, four females, and one television. When I come home from work, or maybe I’ve been in the woodshop and I just want to take a break, I want to come in and sit down and click on the TV to some 24-hour news network. Isn’t it beautiful that news is on 24 hours a day? Yet, when I come in usually there’s some kind of girl show on. I don’t know how to say it. What else would you call something like “Bridezilla,” “The Duggars,” “Eighteen and Counting,” or “Kate Plus 8” (minus Jon now, I guess). The one that seems to be on more than any when I come in and I want that remote is “What Not to Wear.” Did you ever see “What Not to Wear”? It’s actually a pretty fascinating show. Admittedly I haven’t seen a whole episode. I have not been able to bring myself to do that but I’m working my way up. Basically it’s about fashion. The show stars two, I think my girls call them “Fashionistas,” Clint and Stacy, a male and a female. How the show works, apparently, is that someone will write a letter in and rat out their mother, sister, or friend and say she is a terrible, abomination to fashion. Fortunately for me they don’t take men in the show. So someone will write and say, “My mother is a nightmare when it comes to fashion.” Clint and Stacy will intervene and do a couple of things right off the bat. First of all they will tell her where she has gone wrong up to this point. They’ll show her what is wrong with their basic wardrobe. Then they’ll tell her about what body type she has and what she should be wearing for who she is, and, of course, they discuss the hair, makeup, and all that kind of stuff. Then after they go through her accessories. On one hand they look at all her stuff and tell her what not to wear, which is usually her whole wardrobe. Then they coach her on what she should be wearing – what would actually accessorize her basic outfit.

This is going to surprise some of you (maybe not many of you). The Book of Colossians is like a theological version of “What Not to Wear.” What do I mean by that? The Apostle Paul is doing the exact thing in the Book of Colossians that Clint and Stacy do for these fashion-challenged women. The first thing he does as he starts to roll the video and tells us who we are. He gives a diagnosis where you are right now and what your current wardrobe looks like. What is your current wardrobe before you know Jesus? Let’s just put it this way: ugly, and stained with sin. It’s disgusting. It’s hideous and yet you wear it proudly. In fact, let me read to you what Paul says in chapter one:

^{1:21} And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,

So Paul says that on one hand, the way Jesus found you was wearing these hideous clothes of your own self-righteousness stained with your own sin. What He does is exchange His clothing, His robe, if you will, His perfect righteousness for your disgusting wardrobe. That’s what the whole cross is about. Right? That you and I are stained by sin, sinful, and separated from God, but Jesus comes and dies for our sins. We’re more than just forgiven; He takes all of our badness, all of our wardrobe onto Himself and wears it up to the cross and kills it and gets rid of it, and in the process, He gives us His perfect righteousness for us to wear. The apostle Paul says, “That is what you ought to be wearing, and that’s the only thing you need to wear to be acceptable to God.” That was the problem with the false teachers. The false teachers came in like Clint and Stacy and sort of said, “You know, I really like that Jesus-thing you’ve got going on, but if you added some fasting and maybe some rule-following you’d look even better.” Paul says, “You know, if you are wearing the righteousness of Jesus you can’t look any better.” What you can do, on the other hand, is wear the right accessories with that outfit.

So as we begin to look at chapters 3 and 4, Paul is going to teach us how to accessorize, if you will. This week, all the accessorizing is going to be like the first part of “What Not to Wear.” He’s going to go through our wardrobe and say, “Now, if in fact you are a Christian you shouldn’t wear these kinds of things any more.”

This morning we’re going to look at two fashion problems—or two wardrobe malfunction—and a geography lesson toward the end. Let’s first look at the wardrobe problem that you see here in the Book of Colossians.

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. (ESV)

Paul has just finished a passage in which he's encouraged them, to say, "Don't give the false teachers the time of day. But in fact, realize that Jesus has died, you've died with Jesus, you've been raised with Jesus, and you will be seen in glory with Jesus. If that's the case, live now like you will live then." What that means is put off something. Take it off. Disrobe.

Paul does something interesting here. He gives us two lists of sins, two lists that sort of build up to each other. The first list starts very specifically and works its way to a general principle. The second lists starts very generally and works its way to a specific principle. I think Paul does that for a reason. If you've been a Christian and in church for very long at all, you learn that certain sins are acceptable and certain sins aren't. Certain sins you can sort of wink at, you say, "She's just like that." Other sins are frankly unacceptable, mostly sexual sins. That's why if someone struggles with their sexuality you almost never hear about it because it's treated as so unacceptable. Paul starts there. He says, "Here's what you ought to put off. You ought to put off sexual immorality."

I want to do something though. Instead of going the way he does, I want to work it backwards to show you something. Starting with covetousness. How does sexual immorality happen? Basically it starts with covetousness. What is covetousness? Covetousness is actually looking and trying to possess something that does not belong to you. If you're a man, maybe it's another woman or another man's wife, or vice-versa. Covetousness leads to greed, which is basically a desire to have your physical appetites satisfied no matter what. What does greed lead to? Greed leads in this case to evil desires or passions. You're willing to make your sexual desires be satisfied. That leads to the impurity, which is the impure thoughts [that lead you to] cross a line. Maybe you're watching the wrong kind of movies or going to the wrong place on a computer, and at some point you step over a line and do the real thing, like many politicians we've seen these days. Paul says that starts with covetousness and works its way up. But Paul doesn't go through it in that order. He starts with the sin and works his way back, and actually covetousness is not where it begins.

Sexual immorality is a sin, it's something that should be put off, but Paul says really it's only a symptom of a greater sin. In fact all sins are symptoms of one great sin. What is that? If you work your way back from sexual immorality, Paul goes all the way back and says, "covetousness, which is idolatry." It's having something else for a god than the actual true God, it's seeking anything else to meet your need. Say maybe you have a need for affection or you have a need for acceptance and the way you meet that need is you eat, or you shop, or you watch too much television, or you smoke. You're constantly trying to feed that need every place but the only place where it can be satisfied: with Jesus.

Paul sort of sets us up. If he just said, "sexual immorality" and he stopped there a lot of people in church would probably go, "Nah. That doesn't apply to me. I don't have a problem there." Yet by continuing, Paul takes us all the way back to the only sin that forms every other sin, and that's the first commandment. "You shall have no other gods but me." Martin Luther said, "You can't break one of the commandments two through ten without first breaking the first commandment." How would you know that you are obeying the first commandment, which is, "You shall have no other gods"? The way you can know is to look how you're doing on two through ten. So the question is, "Why is that so important here?" Paul is trying to build community here and it's like in basic training where they take you down in order to build you up. In a way he's doing that. The self-righteous tend to look at specific sins like sexual immorality and things, and think they're doing okay. Paul moves from sexual immorality to everything. If you're out there you think, "Well, my sin isn't that bad. It's really not that big a deal."

If you think your sin isn't that big a deal, if you think you're relatively good, let me ask you a question. Let's do a hypothetical. Let's say you're in a restaurant and you order a bowl of soup. The waiter brings you the bowl of soup and there's a big hair in it. What do you do? You say, "Well relatively speaking that hair is only .00001% of the volume of the soup. It can't do that much." Do you just go ahead and eat it? Most people I know send it back. Why? Because that one little hair makes the whole thing nasty. It's the same thing with sin. Paul says, "Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. Every sin deserves the utter and complete wrath of God." The question is, "Are you going to bear the wrath of God or is someone else going to bear the wrath of God?" Paul assumes that you have trusted someone else to bear that wrath, someone named Jesus. Paul moves from sexual immorality all the way to idolatry, to the sin that actually is the most dangerous sin in the whole church. I call it "The Church-Killing Sin" or "The Pastor Destroying Sin." Let me read to you.

⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. (ESV)

Most biblical scholars are stymied because Paul has done something interesting here. He gives one list of sins and then he says, "Because of these the wrath of God is coming" and then he gives another list of sins. So you're not sure if he's talking about the first list or the second list. I tend to think he's talking about both, because by the time you finish with the first list,

he's got your attention. He said, "The wrath of God is coming but you don't live under the wrath of God anymore if you've trusted Jesus." The he adds, "Because of that, that's the wrong accessory for the righteousness you wear. Put it off."

What does he tell us to do? "Put off anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk." Did you notice here he goes from very general to very specific? Where does he work his way toward? First he says, "Put off anger." Anger is basically the feeling that you didn't get something you thought you deserved or you did get something that you didn't deserve, but you're upset about it. Wrath builds upon anger. Wrath is basically when you're angry and you decide, "I'm going to do something about that now." Malice is when you actually come up with the plan of what you are going to do. Slander is how that plan is almost inevitably carried out in the context of the church. Blasphemy is what he says, but it's not blasphemy against God, it's blasphemy against other people.

The interesting thing to me that is I've heard Christian after Christian apply this passage. Maybe they'll hear someone cussing and they say, "Well, they just don't understand Colossians chapter 3. It says put off obscene talk, put off foul language." Paul is not talking about that. You'd think he's building up to some specific church-killing sin as he goes from anger to wrath to malice to slander. It just does not make sense that he would say, "And if you really want to kill the church, cuss." That's not what he's talking about here. Now, I don't imagine Paul would advocate for cussing. But, the point here is when the culmination of all of these sins is obscene talk or foul language, the foul language there is not cussing, it's not curse words, it's not four-letter words. I love messing with Judy before I come to church and today I said, "You know, I think I'm going to cuss in church today." She's like, "Tommy, please don't." It would be to make a point because you can see what would happen if I did. I wouldn't, but if I did use a four-letter word right now, if some people if walk out right away, they would walk out after the service, and as they were walking out they would gossip and slander and criticize the whole way out. Who's guilty of the worse sin? The sins that the church deals with over and over again, not just our church, but every church deals with, are sins of the tongue. As we move forward in the Book of Colossians, Paul is going to start talking about the fact that we need to be this great, unified body that is a witness to the world and the thing that always kills that is the tongue or foul language. If you ever gossip about anyone else, if you ever say bad things about your pastor or your leaders or anyone, you are guilty of abominable sin! I say that in that way because Paul says that that is worse than the person you hear on the street on the way to a Mariner's game who lobs a cuss word. Someone's random cuss word does not necessarily harm someone. But when you use your tongue to harm, you've become a murderer. Paul says that is bad. The question is, "What should you do to stop that?" To be honest with you, statistically speaking in a church our size, we have a lot of people who struggle with that. The way you stop it is what I call the Auntie Em principle.

If you've ever seen "The Wizard of Oz" you know what I'm talking about. It's one of my favorite parts. In the beginning Elmira Gulch (a.k.a. the Wicked Witch) comes to Dorothy's house to take Toto because she says that Toto bit her. The difference between the way Dorothy deals with Elmira and the way Auntie Em deals with Elmira is night and day. She takes Toto and Dorothy says, "You wicked witch!" and runs off and cries. Auntie Em stares at Elmira. She says, "Elmira Gulch, for twenty-three years I've wanted to tell you what I thought about you but I'm too much of a Christian woman to say anything." She walks away. You can't help that thoughts that come to your head. You can't help thinking that someone did something wrong or form an opinion. You can't help what comes into your head, but you can certainly control what goes out of your head. You can control what comes out of your mouth but you need help with that. How do you control what comes out of your mouth? The only way is the Gospel. Let's see how Jesus did it. Jesus had an opportunity to slander and be upset. Instead He chose a different way. I Peter 2:21, Peter is talking about suffering.

²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. (ESV)

The question you have to ask yourself if you struggle with gossip, if you struggle with slander, if you struggle with frankly just trash talking other people is, "Do I really trust Jesus? Do I really trust the Gospel? Do I really trust that God is going to judge justly in this situation?" Whether you think it's your pastor, whether you think it's your boss, whether you think it's someone else, the question is, "Do you trust that in the context of your issues that God is going to judge justly, that He is going to do right by you?" Do you believe that? If you don't believe that you can't do the Auntie Em principle. You don't have the power. Only Jesus does.

Paul continues. He goes from trash talking to an even bigger community killer. That of course is lying. Notice what he says next.

⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. (ESV)

Why is Paul so concerned with lying? Because again, lying is a community killer. Without the truth, you actually have no community. When I read that passage this week my ADD brain went straight to “Rogers’ Standing Orders.” Many of you know I spent four years in a Ranger Battalion and among others things we had to memorize “Rogers’ Standing Orders.” Robert Rogers was a major who basically founded the United States Army Rangers during the French and Indian war, and we still had to memorize his standing orders. The first three are obvious, at least if you’re a Ranger. The fourth one is what’s interesting, but it makes my point. The first one is just “Don’t forget nothing.” Pretty simple. The second one is “Always have your musket clean and ready.” The third one is, “Always be stealthy. Walk up on the enemy like you’re sneaking up on a deer.” The first three are common sense, and then the fourth one is when he starts to meddle, if you will. He says, “Always tell the truth to other Rangers.” He says, “You can say anything you want to other folks about the Rangers.” He adds, “When you talk to another Ranger you must tell the truth. There is an army counting on us.” Here you have a unit of men whose lives and deaths are completely and utterly dependent upon each other. If they can’t trust one another it’s not going to work. The church is the same way. You just don’t know it. Your life is completely dependent upon the people around you, the community that God has placed around you because God works through these means. Do you get sick, do you need food, do you need something? It’s the community around you. If there is not trust in that community it just cannot happen. It can’t exist. That’s where Paul transitions to geography in my mind.

He’s showing the goal of being renewed in the image of Christ. What is the goal of being renewed in the image of Christ as he said, “which is already happening to us”? Let me read it to you.

¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. (ESV)

What’s the goal of the Gospel? What’s the goal of putting off these things, the goal of putting off idolatry, the goal of putting off the sins of the tongue? It’s to have this new community.

It’s interesting that Paul says, “Here there is neither Greek nor Jew.” The Greeks back then would have been very cosmopolitan as a general rule. They would have looked down on anyone who wasn’t Greek, the way someone from Florida State might look down upon people who have gone to any other university, for example. (That was a joke.) Jews, on the other hand, were very exclusive. If you weren’t circumcised and a Jew, if you didn’t obey the law, you were outside as well. Who are barbarians? Barbarians were basically, to the Greeks, anyone who didn’t speak Greek. Now, who are the Scythians? Scythians would have been the ones who the barbarians actually thought were the barbarians. Scythians were to barbarians what Al-Qaeda is to moderate Muslims. They were bad. They were rough. They were dirty and ugly and nasty. Paul says, “All of you are here in the same place.” And that’s the point. That’s why it’s a geography lesson. Did you notice the first word in that sentence? Other places he says, “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek.” In this particular passage he says, “Here there is neither Greek and Jew.” Here. Right here. The letter would have been read to a church and in a sense he’s asking them to look around them. “Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave or free. Look around you.” Is Paul saying there aren’t cultural differences between people? Of course not. What he’s saying is that, “In Christ in this place they are irrelevant. They have been made irrelevant by the work and person of Jesus.

I want you to think about this. You know what all these different groups of people have in common? What all the groups of people that Paul listed have in common is that they’re all outsiders to the other groups. The Greeks are outsiders to the Jews. The Jews are outsiders to the Greeks. The circumcised are outsiders to the uncircumcised. The uncircumcised are outsiders to the circumcised. The slaves are outsiders to the free and vice-versa. They’re all outsiders. What they have in common is not only that they’re all outsiders but the fact that Jesus, the ultimate insider (you don’t get very much more inside than being part of the Trinity) left His throne above as the hymn says, and became the ultimate outsider. Jesus, the very son of God, the very person of God in the flesh, left all that He had and all of His glory in heaven, and came down and became the ultimate outsider, being crucified by Romans, and that outside the city. They wouldn’t even let Him be in the city. Jesus became the ultimate outsider so that all these people who are now outsiders could become insiders. The question is, “Is that who this church is?” Paul says that’s what it should be. Can someone walk into this church wearing a tie or not wearing tie and feel okay? Can someone walk into our church from any socio-economic background and feel okay? Can they walk into our church from any racial background and feel okay? Paul says, “They should be able to.” If they can’t, we need to do some heart searching. What is it we need to put off? What self-righteousness do we need to get rid of, because if you really understand the Gospel, whether you’re white, black, Asian, round or skinny, whoever you are, if you really understand the Gospel, what you understand is that you are an outsider who has been brought in. Because of that you have nothing on anyone else. The question is, “Do you believe that? Do you really believe that you were an outsider and Jesus brought you in?” Because if you did it will make you very humble, which is exactly what Paul is going to talk about next week. Think about that.