

~Script: Pastor Frank R. Johnson~  
Colossians: Shaped by the Truth of Jesus  
Fullness of Life in Christ, V: "Get Dressed!"  
Colossians 3:12-17

~Take a first look~

I. Our oldest son Michael, as some of you know, is a pastor and also a Chaplain in the United States Army National Guard. His unit is based in Union Gap, Washington. He also served as a member of the Army Band for almost ten years prior to his work as a Chaplain. When he first enlisted, he was immediately issued the proper uniform. At first, it was a set of BDUs—which stands for "Battle Dress Uniform." A few years ago, he was issued ACUs—Army Combat Uniform—which are a newer form of camouflage outfit (though this camo pattern changed over time). I have noticed that everything is made into an acrostic in the Army. Learning what all those acrostics mean—BDU, ACU, TDY, BOQ—is half the training the new soldier undergoes—that and when to keep your head down and how to dress appropriately. Of course, I can't imagine Michael, either by nature or as a Soldier, balking at wearing the uniform of the US Army. He seems to thrive on this. Michael tells me that there are those pretenders out there who practice something like "Stolen Valor"—they wear a semblance of the military uniform but without the genuine experience of the Soldier. That fits with my analogy, too.

Something similar should be in effect for the follower of Christ. *If we're going to serve in the Army of Jesus Christ, we should wear the uniform.* I hasten to add that the uniform of the Christian life is not an outward garment. Surely, as followers of Christ, we should try to be clean and neat and not be complete slobs. It is true that the way we dress, literally, does say something about our inward attitude and about the way we want to be viewed. But the uniform of the Christian has to do with *character and attitude*. It is quite possible to look pretty good on the outside and yet be a tomb for dead bones on the inside. Jesus warned about that. The Apostle Paul makes it very clear that every follower of Christ should *Get Dressed!* with the uniform of *Christ-honoring character*.

He makes this clear in his letter to the ancient Church in Colossae.

**From our last installment, we observed these three principles from Colossians 3:1-11 that express and cultivate the fullness of life we are to have in Christ:**

**I. SIT HIGH!**

*All who have come to receive Christ as Lord and Savior have been raised up with Christ to a new life. So we should keep on seeking the things that have to do with this new life, the higher things.* Colossians 3:1-4.

**II. THINK STRAIGHT!**

*The focus of the Christian Mind should be on the higher things, not "the things that are on the earth." Following Christ has given us a new vantage point from which to see all things, both present and future, visible and invisible.*

**III. TAKE OUT THE TRASH!**

*Some things must die, and others must be taken off like dirty clothes.* Colossians 3:5-11.

**And now we have this final insight into the behavior that is fitting for those in whom God is at work to remake His fallen image:**

#### IV. GET DRESSED!

~Take a closer look at Colossians 3:12-17~

1. *The identity of the follower of Christ is shaped by relationship with Him. We should “clothe ourselves” with the kind of character that is appropriate for the person about whom these three things are true:*

a. The follower of Christ is chosen by God. We have been recruited, if you will allow the military metaphor to linger awhile, by the very Commander in Chief of the entire armed force. Other soldiers doubtless have something to do with this. The witness of every follower of Christ can and must contribute to the recruitment of other soldiers of Christ. But ultimately, every person is drawn in by the work of God Himself. The Holy Spirit inclines and woos the heart of the seeker. He makes Jesus Christ real in the mind of that person. He gives the ability to put faith in Him. God chooses His own. This is a mystery to some degree, because at one and the same time, it is also true to say that we choose to follow Christ as freely as we choose what we will have for breakfast. This is not a contradiction, but it is a paradox.

b. The follower of Christ is holy to God. We are chosen to belong to God, to be like God, to be so closely associated with Him that we begin to take back on the very nature of God in our own souls. *Holy means that which is set apart to God as His very own.*

c. The follower of Christ is loved by God. He does not just “put up with us” like we might put up with a bad knee or with the effects of graying or thinning hair. God doesn’t just tolerate His people, despite their struggles and failings. *He loves His own! We can’t always determine from the ground level what God is trying to accomplish in any one life, even in our own. But we can trust the One Who sent His “only begotten Son” to die in the place of His people—to buy them back from sin and death, to reconcile them to Himself, to rescue them from their deadly peril (see Romans 5:8); we can trust Him to have our very best in mind. He has the wider and the longer view of things. We can’t see too far ahead, and we don’t have a very wide field of view. And so, we affirm His love for us, even when what God is ultimately intending to bring about has not come into focus and when the good He is doing right now is out of our scope at present. He loves His own! They are holy to Him. They were chosen by Him.*

A—With such confidence in our essential relationship to God through Jesus Christ, we have the proper motivation to be clearly identified with Him as God has revealed Himself to the world in Christ.

**I—A story found in Marie Chapiro’s book *Of Whom the World Was Not Worthy* (Bethany House, 1980) can help us here. The book follows the Yugoslavian Christian church’s suffering under a corrupt church hierarchy:**

One day an evangelist by the name of Jakov arrived in a certain village. He commiserated with an elderly man named Cimmerman on the tragedies he had experienced and talked to him of the love of Christ. Cimmerman abruptly interrupted Jakov and told him that he wished to have nothing to do with Christianity. He reminded Jakov of the dreadful history of the church in his town, a history replete with plundering, exploiting, and indeed with killing innocent people.

“My own nephew was killed by them,” he said and angrily rebuffed any effort on Jakov’s part to talk about Christ. “They wear those elaborate coats and crosses,” he said, “signifying a heavenly commission, but their evil designs and lives I cannot ignore.”

Jakov, looking for an occasion to get Cimmerman to change his line of thinking, said, “Cimmerman, can I ask you a question? Suppose I were to steal your coat, put it on, and break into a bank. Suppose further that the police sighted me running in the distance but could not catch up with me. One clue, however, put them onto your track: they recognize your coat. What would you say to them if they came to your house and accused you of breaking into the bank?”

“I would deny it,” said Cimmerman.

“Ah, but we saw your coat,’ they would say,” retorted Jakov. This analogy quite annoyed Cimmerman, who ordered Jakov to leave his home.

Jakov continued to return to the village periodically just to befriend Cimmerman, encourage him, and share the love of Christ with him. Finally, one day Cimmerman asked, “How does one become a Christian?” Jakov taught him the simple steps of repentance for sin and of trust in the work of Jesus Christ and gently pointed him to the Shepherd of his soul. Cimmerman bent his knee on the soil with his head bowed and surrendered his life to Christ. As he rose to his feet, wiping his tears, he embraced Jakov and said, “Thank you for being in my life.” And then he pointed to the heavens and whispered, “You wear His coat very well.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s the whole point, isn’t it? Consider further, ...

2. *The inner character of the follower of Christ is shaped by the presence of Christ.* The term translated “hearts” describes one’s inner parts. These qualities are what should emerge from the inner person of every disciple of Jesus:

a. Compassion—Compassion is sharing the feelings of others, being able to enter into their experience enough to understand what they are facing. It is the ability to “walk a mile in their moccasins” and then appreciate how sore their feet must be.

b. Goodness—This is a relational word, expressing what we would mean when we say, “He has been good to us.” Our expression “showing goodwill” captures the idea. Such character prompts a person to look for a way to do good by others, not to demean them or to bring them harm.

c. Humility—This is another relational word. It combines a couple of words that have to do with lowliness and with thinking. The person with humility is always thinking of ways to build others up, to lift them up. The truly humble person doesn’t think less of himself; he doesn’t think about himself much at all.<sup>2</sup> This is the contrary of self-absorption, in which everything is considered only as it relates to one’s own sense of well-being or pleasure.

d. Gentleness—This is the quality of keeping your power under the control of the Holy Spirit. Paul calls it one of the aspects of the “fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:23. It is, as my Greek lexicon says, “the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Word, 1994); submitted by Van Morris, Mt. Washington, Kentucky.

<sup>2</sup> See the treatment of this in C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan, 1942, 1945, 1952), at the end of the section named “The Great Sin.” The “really humble man” ... “will not be thinking about humility; he will not be thinking about himself at all.”

<sup>3</sup> BDAG, *ad loc.*

e. Forbearance—There are two expressions that overlap here, which I combined into one idea. The single word at the end of verse 12 is translated “patience” by most of the translations. This is a good word, as far as it goes, but the original goes a bit farther. It suggests “suffering over the long haul,” and so I favor a bit stronger English word, like *endurance* or *perseverance*. Again, my Greek dictionary suggests that this means, the “state of being able to bear up under provocation.”<sup>4</sup> As such, it, too, is a relational word. The next sentence helps explain and apply this idea further: “bearing with each other *and forgiving each other*, if anyone should have a complaint against anyone.” Forbearance is aimed at the weaknesses of other people’s personalities and their need for growth in character. It is a companion piece with forgiveness.

f. Forgiveness—This means that we “let the other person go” from our impulse to “get even” with them for how they have hurt us or hurt others (whether real or imagined). As I mentioned to you recently in a different context, this word is related to the word “grace.” Its root meaning is to “graciously give” to someone. It can also mean to “cancel the debt” of another. And then, by extension, it means to “cancel the debt of behavior” against another—in other words, to “forgive.” We forgive, “just as the Lord forgave” us. Grace, if it is truly experienced from God, cannot help but be expressed to others. This is why Jesus taught His followers to pray, “forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.” He uses a different word for *forgive*, but the impact of the saying is quite clear and very similar. In essence, He teaches us to say, “Let us go, just as we have let others go . . .” We will no longer hold on to our hurts and seek to undermine or harm others in return. We will *let them go*. And then, Paul gives a summary word that ties all these together.

g. Love—He says that love is the “bond of perfection/maturity.” It is the glue that keeps us together, that empowers our forgiveness and forbearance, that moves us to put others first before ourselves, to seek the good and not the harm of others—even others who are still struggling with their own faults—and that enables us to get into someone else’s shoes and feel the road under their feet and not just under our own.

A—We must love each other relentlessly, just as God does in Christ.

I—**Singer Johnny Cash’s wife, June Carter Cash, died May 15, 2003.** As a follower of Jesus, she displayed many Christlike qualities. In particular, she never quit loving her husband and never quit challenging him, despite his failings.

“In his 1998 autobiography, Johnny Cash describes how his wife stuck with him through his years of amphetamine abuse:

“June said she knew me—knew the kernel of me, deep inside, beneath the drugs and deceit and despair and anger and selfishness, and knew my loneliness. She said she could help me. If she found my pills, she flushed them down the toilet. And find them she did; she searched for them, relentlessly.”<sup>5</sup>

Do you hear that, my friends? June’s search was *not the search of a mere complainer*, someone always looking for something for which to find fault, *but rather the search of a lover*, who so values the person trapped by the self-destructive tendencies of a fallen man, she would do anything to free him from them. The fault-finder looks for a way to write people off. The person expressing the love of Christ looks for a way to build people up.

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<sup>4</sup> BDAG, *ad loc.*

<sup>5</sup> Johnny Cash, *Cash: The Autobiography* (Harper, 1998); submitted by Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, Illinois.

3. The interpersonal relationships of Christ's followers are shaped by the peace of Christ.

a. His peace brings unity in the Body of Christ. He calls us to allow the peace of Christ to “rule in [out] hearts.” This means that it *acts as umpire*. It calls “foul!” when our hearts are out of line with God’s peace. We “were called in one body” (the body of Christ), and therefore, anything that is contrary to peace and unity is not of Him. False teaching, bad attitudes, selfish purposes—all are ruled “out of bounds” by the Umpire, the peace of Christ. They don’t bring unity to the body and so they have no place in the body. We need each other, even as and especially as fellow fallen-but-being-redeemed people.

c. His peace brings a thankful heart, not a heart of complaint. A thankful heart is a companion to the rule of the peace of Christ in our hearts, both individually and corporately.

A—When we cultivate thankfulness as an aspect of our character and relationships, we are choosing to focus on the good in our circumstances and in other people.

**I—We are resisting the ungodly temptation always to have hurt feelings about someone else’s faults or failings (as we see them).** We are resisting the ungodly focus on what we don’t have. Rather, we are cultivating in our own hearts, and as far as it depends on each of us, in our relationships in Christ’s Church, a chosen focus on the good that God is already accomplishing. The glass is, after all, half *full*, and not just half *empty*. One’s character is demonstrated in which half of the glass he/she chooses to focus on and talk about.

If we are constantly thinking about how many faults other people have, how many faults the Church has, then we are out of step with the Holy Spirit and are walking merely in the flesh. The Holy Spirit inspires a thankful attitude, not a critical one, despite the need for every person to grow in their faith and practice of the character of Christ—including each one of us!

**I—Carmen Renee Berry’s book, *The Unauthorized Guide to Choosing a Church*, was ‘inspired by her odyssey from the deeply conservative church of her childhood into the world of seekers and cynics, and back again.’** She eventually found that the very reason she withdrew from the church—her disappointment in church members who often failed to act as Christians—was what drew her back. She writes:

“I had overlooked one essential factor—that I am as finite and flawed as everyone else.... When a friend committed suicide, I realized I could become too cynical, too lost, and too alone. I needed a church, a community of believers. I needed to live in my faith and visit my doubts. Something happens there that simply doesn’t when you are alone in prayer or on the Internet. As much as I hate to admit it, my faith is enhanced and enlarged when in relationship to other less-than-perfect human beings.”<sup>6</sup>

Welcome to the Body of Christ, my fellow less-than-perfect travelers!

4. The mind of the Christian community is shaped by the word of Christ. This should dwell in the Christian community *richly*, and should yield a spirit of *wisdom*, not just knowledge.

a. The word of Christ is the basis of the Church’s teaching. We affirm this with the Apostle Paul: <sup>FJV</sup> **2 Timothy 3:16-17:** <sup>16</sup> *All Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training that is in righteousness,* <sup>17</sup> *so that the person of God shall be capable, having been equipped for every good deed.*

And we also affirm that the key to understanding the Scriptures, both of our Old and New Testaments, is the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. It is the “word of Christ,” the message by

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<sup>6</sup> *USA Today* (6-2-03); submitted by Barry Merritt, Monclova, Ohio.

and about Him contained in the Scriptures and brought home to the heart by the Holy Spirit, that shapes the Christian mind.

b. The word of Christ is the basis of the Church's warning. "Admonishing" is simply warning of what will happen if the truth that is being taught is not taken to heart.

c. The word of Christ is the basis of the Church's worship in singing: "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." It is interesting that Paul chooses three words to describe the music of the Church, and not just one. As A. T. Robertson aptly points out, "The same song can have all three words applied to it." The first seems to suggest our Old Testament hymnbook, the book of Psalms—which word carries with it the idea of musical accompaniment. The "hymn" (Greek, ἕμνος, *humnos*) has nothing to do with how old the song is, but rather that it is a song with specifically religious content. And a "spiritual song" is one that has to do with the realm of the spiritual life in Christ. The three words taken together suggest songs of praise for worship that are addressed to God and/or that are about the spiritual life in Christ, usually aided by musical accompaniment.

It is clear that these are connected to "the word of Christ." They don't just represent "spirituality" in some vague and open sense. They express the content of Christian truth and experience that centers on Jesus Christ.

A—The teaching, the warning, and the worship with singing of the Christian community must express the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ, or it is not truly Christian.

5. The authority of the Christian community is the very name of Christ, through whom the Church gives thanks "in everything." "The name of Christ" suggests His very character.

A—If we are to act in His name, we must be completely in sync with His character and will and under His full authority.

**I—This is the power of the statement from Cimmerman to his Christian friend Jakov: "You wear his coat well." [see above] This is the goal of each of us and for all of us combined as the Body of Christ, the Church. We must wear His coat well.**

~Take it home (applications)~

*We should allow ourselves to be fully clothed in the new person, in Christ.*

I. How do we need to allow Him to adjust our lives so that His clothing fits better?

II. How do we need to express such character to each other and to those who still need His grace in Christ?