

**“Putting on the New Life”**  
Colossians 3:12-14 (NRSV)

Part of **the 2010 Winter Olympics mystique**, soon to be held here in a number of locations within or around Vancouver, are the **specially designed outfits** made for the torch runners, the competing athletes, the medal presenters and the games volunteers. I notice a fair bit of press has been given to the design of each of kind and piece of clothing. You may like some of the things you see our representatives wear, or none of them!

After being encouraged to **discard or lay aside the old life** like some used, dirty and worn-out old clothing, Christians, too, are invited to **put on a new life**, which like some brand-new, delightfully different, exciting and colourful items of clothing will give us a whole new lease on life. So, too, the Colossians were invited by the apostle Paul to **put on certain Christian virtues** which stood in brilliant contrast to **the vices**, which were prevalent in their society, and which they were asked to discard. Thus, in this next section of his letter, we have a description of **the wardrobe of Christians**, and what beautiful garments they can be!

**1. Putting on Christian clothing** (Col. 3:12).

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, **clothe yourselves** with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience” (3:12).

It used to be said, **“clothes make the man [or the woman].”** Moore’s advertises that their clothing is “well-made” and “well-priced,” and that those who wear it will be “well-dressed.” Good for them. But nowadays, I find most people don’t care a whit about how they dress. For many people, jeans, a sweatshirt and runners will do. It’s **the new uniform of those who don’t wish to conform!** So, it’s harder than ever, in fact, to tell what certain people might be doing for their job, say like teachers or nurses, because of how they tend to dress down today. Certainly, people ought to be able to wear what they want and what they think is comfortable, but I also believe **a little respect shown in the clothing we wear** for the job that we do and the people we seek to serve will go a long way towards getting the job done. Likewise, the New Testament advises certain modesty in the cut of one’s hair, and the wearing of one’s clothes and jewelry. Nevertheless, our “hidden,” inner clothing ought to be the best “ornament” of all (1 Pe. 3:3-5, KJV). So Paul suggests **several virtues that will adorn a Christian well.**

The **first article of clothing** he mentions is “**compassion.**” The King James Version rendered this Greek word more literally as “bowels of mercy,” referring to its inner, emotional aspect. One commentator suggests this term forcefully expresses **one’s “personality at its deepest level,** especially how it’s lived out in daily living” (Peter O. Brien, 1982, p. 199). Perhaps one could say that compassion is one of the most important and unique Christian character traits. A good translation might be “tenderness of heart” or “tender mercy.” A compassionate Christian feels other peoples’ pain. A compassionate Christian cares deeply for those who are in any kind of trouble. A compassionate Christian will do something to help.

**The ancient world,** apart from biblical revelation, **was merciless.** The maimed and sickly and aged were discarded; the mentally ill were subjected to inhumanities. But Christianity brought compassion, and it still does. “It is not too much,” says **William Barclay,** “to say that everything that has been done for the aged, the sick, the weak in body and in mind, the animal, the child, the woman has been done under the inspiration of Christianity” (Barclay, p. 188). Even other, world religions, like Hinduism and Islam, have been affected by the social aspect of the Christian faith. The gospel brings with it sympathy, empathy and tenderness of heart. That is one of its great glories!

Paul is telling us that if we are **new creatures in Christ,** we must be, we will naturally be, **compassionate people.** **John Perkins,** in his book, Let Justice Roll Down (1983), tells about a time of dark, extended discouragement in his life when he was ill and seriously thought of giving up the struggle for American black people’s civil rights. Then he met a certain Dr. Roberts. In Perkins’ words, “Dr. Roberts was one of the few white persons I had contact with at that time, and she – well, she met me on the level of my humanity and not just on the theological level preferred by so many church folks” (p. 203). Dr. Roberts saw him through his crisis with merciful compassion. This is something to which we are all called -- every one of us. This is the first pieces of new clothing.

The **second item of clothing** is simply “**kindness.**” In spite of what you might think, kindness doesn’t happen naturally in human relationships. **George Bernard Shaw** once wrote a letter to **Winston Churchill:** “Enclosed are two tickets to the opening night of my first play.... Bring a friend (if you have one).” Churchill replied: “Dear Mr. Shaw, unfortunately

I'll be unable to attend the opening night of your play due to a prior engagement. Please send me tickets for a second night (if you have one).” We should probably understand that there is a considerable playfulness in these words. But the human personality naturally descends to harshness in words and deed. Consider only the supposedly cultivated, educated British boys, in **William Golding**'s classic, Lord of the Flies, who found themselves unexpectedly cast upon an island in the middle of nowhere and turn out to be viciously unkind.

The great **Archbishop Trench**, a prime mover behind the Oxford English Dictionary, says the Greek word here translated “**kindness**” is “a lovely word for a lovely quality.” It was used to describe a **fine smooth wine**, which has grown mellow with age and has lost its harshness (Barclay, p. 189). I like that. It was also used by Jesus to describe his yoke: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:30). His yoke is kindness. It is listed in Galatians as one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). It is a quality of God himself, for Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that it is “God’s kindness” that leads us to repentance (2:4). Kindness is an altogether lovely article of clothing.

The **third article of clothing** we are to don is that of “**humility**,” a word that, in spite of all their philosophy and learning, the Greeks could never have applied to themselves. **William Gladstone**, the learned and Christian prime minister of Victorian Britain, once remarked to his scholarly peer, **John Morely**: “It is a pathetic reflection that while humility is the sovereign grace of Christianity, the Greeks had no symbol in their language to denote it. Every word akin to it has some element of meanness, feebleness, or contempt” (F. W. Boreham, The Heavenly Octave, 1978, p. 12). But, following its Author, the gospel took this word of contempt and made it into one of its chief graces. Jesus himself invited his followers to learn from him as he was “gentle and humble in heart.” Further, it was used to describe Christ’s humbling of himself by becoming obedient even to death (Php. 2:8). It is also the spirit in which Christians are to serve God (Acts 20:19) and one another (Eph. 4:2).

Jesus Christ wasn’t suggesting a cringing, groveling servility; nor was he teaching his followers to think poorly of themselves. Rather, he was teaching the necessity of the absence of self-exaltation.

He wanted us to have nothing of the arrogant pride that **Churchill** evidently saw in his antagonist, **Sir Stafford Cripps**, when he remarked as Cripps walked by: “There but for the grace of God, goes God.” The person who wears the garment of humility knows who God is, what humanity is like, and who he or she is. Those who walk with such awareness through a wheat field will notice that it is the drooping ears that are heavy with fruitful grain. Humility is a proper garment for every believer.

The **fourth item** with which we are to **clothe ourselves** is “**meekness**” or as some other translations have it, “**gentleness**.” A while ago, a humourist, **Upton Dickson**, said he was writing a book entitled Cower Power, and that he had also founded a group for submissive people called “Doormats” – which stands for “Dependent Organization Of Really Meek And Timid Souls – if there are no objections.” Their motto is, “The meek shall inherit the earth – if that’s okay with everybody.” Their symbol is the orange traffic light! Mr. Dickson has a clever sense of humour, but the misconception he exploits is no laughing matter, for most people feel that meekness/gentleness implies **weakness**. Nothing could be further from the truth.

There is self-effacement in this word, but behind “meekness/gentleness” is a **steel-like strength**, for the supreme characteristic of a meek and gentle person is that he/she is under his/her “self-control.” “Meekness/gentleness” is **strength under control**. We are told in the Bible how **Moses** was “the most meek” man on earth (Nu. 12:3), but at the same time he could act decisively, be hard as nails, and rise in anger at the proper time (Barclay, p. 103-104). Our Lord was no different. Those wearing the clothing of meekness/gentleness are immensely **powerful, as well as sweet people**; for they are controlled by God.

The final garment from the celestial closet is “**patience**,” or “**longsuffering**” in the face of insult or injury. This is another one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22), and it means more than merely enduring difficulties or passive resignation to unjust circumstances. It is based on a lively, outgoing faith in God and is to be exercised toward “everyone,” as Paul instructs in his letter to the Thessalonians (5:14).

So we have heaven’s wardrobe, a “**bespoke suit**,” to be worn here on earth, straight from the hand of **the Ultimate Tailor**. It’s worth noting, as well, that each of these pieces of clothing were worn by our Lord, Jesus Christ. Thus when we’re putting on these clothes we are putting on his likeness.

A couple of other facts to note about this wardrobe: **all of these garments need to be “washed ... in the blood of the Lamb”** (Rev. 7:14b); that is, none of our works have any perfection in and of themselves. It is only through Christ’s atonement and sanctifying work in our lives (cf. Jn. 13:14; 1 Cor. 6:11; Heb. 10:22), that any of these characteristics can shine out of our lives with light and love for all. And, although Christ died “once” for us (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 28; 10:10; 1 Pe. 3:18), it will not hurt for us to **take our dirty clothes to the laundry frequently**. Maybe that’s also a part of what coming to church is all about!

And, further, **all these garments can only be worn in community**, with others, in relationships. That is when they show off their best. How tempting to think that these clothes would be so much easier to wear if we didn’t have to wear them in public! How much easier to think about “compassion” than to do it! How much easier it is to be “kind” when we are away from mean people. It would also be easier to put on “humility” and “gentleness” if we weren’t being jostled by the proud and assertive. How much easier, too, “patience” is in isolation. I can see it now: how noble! But that is not the way it works. Christians become better Christians in community, in their families, among their associates, in their dorms, in their churches, where we rub up against one another, where it takes all the sweat and breath and work we can exert.

The truth is this: the very things we may think are keeping us from putting on these garments are the things that give us further imperative to wear them: **“clothe yourselves”** is a present imperative tense of the verb. “Put them on and **keep putting these garments – these characteristics -- on!**”

## 2. Wearing Christian clothing (Col. 3:13).

What will happen when we put on this marvelous attire? We will “Bear with one another and, if anyone of you has a complaint against another, [we will] forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven [us], so [we] must also forgive” (3:13). Wearing these kind of Christian clothes promote our capacity to “bear with one another.” **“Putting on” a costume or some actor’s or actress’s makeup** will make us **“play” the person** we are trying to portray. The church is the place where people must bear with one another in love. Paul tells us that we are Christ’s “workmanship” – literally his “masterwork” (Eph. 2:10, NIV).

**Just like Olympic athletes we are works in process**, and ultimately we may become masterpieces, victors on the podium of life, although it may be difficult to perceive it now. We are not yet what we are going to be (Php. 12:12-14), but we will continually need to “bear with one another” – rubbing off our rough edges – and to “forgive one another” – smoothing out the bumps and exposing the blind spots that others can see in our personalities -- if we are ever going to get there.

### 3. **The ultimate Christian garment** (Col. 3:14).

**“Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony”** (3:14). The apostle envisages a person dressing himself/herself with the flowing garments of the day – probably including several sheet-like items, and then it occurs to him that as beautiful and fine as these clothes are, they can never be worn with comfort or grace until they’re held in place by a belt or cord around one’s middle. So he adds it, and he calls it “love.” **Love ties everything together.** It’s possible to have each of the five pieces of clothing that he has already mentioned -- compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience -- somewhere covering and adorning one’s body and not have love, but it is impossible to have love and not have all of the other five bits of clothing. Love is “the grace that binds all these other graces together” (F. F. Bruce, 1957, p. 281).

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or rude.  
 [Love] does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. [Love] bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.  
 (1 Cor. 13:4-8a)

I can’t say it any better than that.

Love “covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pe. 4:8).

As **Dante Alligheri** once implied in his Divine Comedy, “Love makes the world go around.”

Amen

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