

Revealed in Christ

Colossians 3:1-11
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As Christians, we have been clothed with the new self, says Paul, a new self that is being renewed according to the image of our creator. Rabbi Eliyahu Yaakov explains it this way, saying, “Just as the essence of clothes is to move with the movements of the wearer – thereby acting as an expression of the wearer – so too I tap into my inner essence by moving in (stride with) God..., thereby acting as an expression of (God).”¹

That’s one way to understand how God, who is so vast as to be unknowable, bridges the gap between himself and us as limited, finite mortals, human beings. Bridging the gap between God and us is exactly what Paul is talking about in his letter to the Colossians. He’s telling them and us how the gap is bridged, the gap between who we are and who God is creating us to become, in the fullness of God’s glory.

God is always at work in us, drawing us to himself, raising us up as fuller and truer expressions of God’s character, God’s being. The way that God reveals himself to us and expresses himself here on earth is through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul says that we, as Christians, “have been raised with Christ,” and as such, we must “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” In verse 12 – just one verse after today’s scripture lesson – Paul gives examples of the things that are above, saying, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”

Notice that Paul says we should clothe *ourselves* with these things. This means we have the *power* to put these things on and to move around in them, like we put on a shirt. And just like you choose which shirt or blouse to wear in the morning, you can choose which characteristics to wear around each day.

And there-in lies the danger. The Colossians like us had a choice to make when it came to their spiritual growth and their faith lives. They could continue saying they believe in Christ while still doing what they’ve always done, or they could actually live into their identity as Christians, striving to be more and more like Christ, like Jesus.

¹ Rabbi Eliyahu Yaakov, “A little give-and-take with God,” Patheos, March 30, 2011. patheos.com. Retrieved January 29, 2019.

We all have areas in our lives where we could be more Christian, more Christ-like. For the Colossians, it was things like “fornication (or sleeping around), impurity (or living like anything goes), passion (or anger), evil desire (that’s self-explanatory), and greed (which Paul calls idolatry, which really means loving things more than we love the Lord).”

Of course, none of this gets you anywhere in the end. Take greed and evil desires, for example. There was once a barber who loved to joke around with his customers. One day, a guy is getting his haircut when the barber leans in and whispers, “See that kid who just came in? He’s so stupid. Just watch,” and he holds out a \$10 bill in one hand and a \$5 bill in the other and tells the kid to take whichever one he wants. The boy reaches out, takes the \$5 and leaves. The customer follows the boy outside and says, “Kid, you know that \$10 is more than \$5, right?” “Yup I know that,” says the boy. “Then why would you take the \$5? Were you just trying to be nice and not be greedy?”

With that the boy smiles and says, “Well, if I take the \$10, he’s going to stop giving me free money.”

Yes, nothing good comes from trying to slide through in life when you know what you’re doing is wrong. And yet, sometimes we think those areas of spiritual and moral weakness are just part of who we are. They’re not!

They are choices, choices we get to make, just like choosing the clothes we wear. And if the clothes do indeed make the man or woman, so to speak, then Paul doesn’t want us to be seen as fast, cheap and easy when it comes to our spiritual clothing, the characteristics we embody.

Instead, Paul wants us to take on Christ as our spiritual clothing, as if our life depends on it, which of course, it does. The quality of your life is directly related to how well you follow the Lord in living a good and decent life, loving God above all else and loving neighbor as yourself.

In fact, Paul is so sure that we can’t fool around with this teaching – that we can’t be OK being a little this and a little that – that he actually says you must “put to death ... whatever in you is earthly.” For Paul, becoming a Christian is a death-to-life event, dying to your old self in order to be raised to new life in Christ (Romans 6:6). This is why he draws such a strong contrast between having faith in the ways of this world versus having faith in Christ, faith that living life as a Christian is more important than anything in all the world, and more real, more certain.

Paul learned this himself when he was converted from persecutor-of-Christians to Apostle-to-the-Gentiles. Paul knows personally what it’s like for us when he says we must “get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language....”

“These,” Paul says, “are the ways you ... once followed, when you were living that life. But now ... 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.”

Paul is challenging us to consider how life is different now that we have taken on new life in Christ. He wants us to focus on the joy it is for us and others when we live a life of compassion, kindness, love, peace and gratitude.

If having an idyllic life such as that sounds unattainable to you, foreign to you, something you can't even imagine being possible, that's because there's other stuff in your life and in this world we live in that's covering it up, shielding from you the life in Christ that's available to us all. Those who “have been raised with Christ,” as Paul puts it, have this feeling that their true life is elsewhere, that our true self is something other than what too often shows up in this world. And that's exactly right.

When you became a Christian, the life you led before died, and “your (true) life, says Paul, is (now) hidden, with Christ, in God.” “When Christ who is your life is revealed,” says Paul, “then you also will be revealed with him in glory.”

And until then, we just have to live as faithfully as we can, focusing on Christ and not on earthly stuff, what one commentator called “earthly entanglements.” If we focus on Christ and who we are in Christ, then our dismay over all the devastating and disheartening things in the world will begin to slip away, as we come to trust in God and God alone.

So let us all keep in mind that the more we focus on Jesus and trusts in God the more that old and misguided life quietly dies away, revealing to us and to the world our true selves, our spiritual selves, as people embodying the hands and feet and heart of Jesus. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, we come to you in gratitude for your love, which is always present to us. In the stillness of these moments, we remember with thanksgiving the times when your love has enabled us to rise to our better selves.

We remember, too, the times when we have acted in ways that were less than loving and gracious. Breathe in us new life, making us joyful for the opportunity to try again, to do better.

Empowered by your love, O God, let us be a channel for your care and compassion.

Where there is injury and hurt, let there be healing.

Where there is anger, send the Spirit of your love.

Where there is grief and sorrow, confusion and upset, send your Spirit of peace and the assurance of your faithful presence.

We pray your healing touch upon those dealing with illness and disease.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.