

Everything in the Name of Jesus

Colossians 3:12-17

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September 20, 2026

Good morning. For those of you who don't know, I am Tobias, the Associate Pastor here at Christ the King, and it's my privilege once again to open God's Word with us this morning. Last week, we were in verses 5 - 11, where Paul tells the Colossians to put off the old life, anger, malice, lying, all of it. But we didn't end with the list. We ended with what God has already done for us. In Christ, our old self has been taken off, and the new self has been put on, a self that's being renewed in the image of the one who made us. And this morning, Paul finishes the thought and tells us what we're to wear now that we've put on the new self. But by the end of the passage, he's talking about far more than clothing. He's talking about everything we say and do. So what does that life look like, and what makes it possible?

Let's turn there together. Chapter 3 of Colossians. We're going to read verses 12 - 17.

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 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.” (ESV)

These are the words of the Lord. Let's pray.

Oh, Father, we bow before you. We are so thankful that you have called us here today, that we can gather freely to sing your praises, to learn from your word. We thank you, Lord, that we have heard the beauty of the gospel, that we have been buried with our Savior, that we have been raised with him, and that we are seated with him now, in union with him, we are hidden with him. Thank you, Lord, for that. We thank you that you have put on the new self, and we pray, Lord, that you will teach us as we listen this morning to put on the things that reflect you. We cannot do this on our own, and so we pray for the Spirit to work within us, even as we ask the Spirit to give us insight, to open our eyes and ears to what you would have us hear this morning. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, after last week, some of you may be nervous that a sermon about getting dressed is going to involve Lycra. Rest assured, I think we can all agree, once was plenty. Still, most of us know something about playing dress-up. Whether we've raised small children or simply remember being one, we know how much of childhood is spent that way. A towel becomes a cape, a pot becomes a helmet, and for an afternoon, a five-year-old is a knight or a doctor or whatever his older sibling happens to be. And working through this passage, I was reminded of something C.S. Lewis says in *Mere Christianity*. He says that every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we're doing something like dressing up. We're calling God our Father, which is language that belongs first to the Son. And so, in a sense, we're putting on Christ.

And Lewis admits how that looks. “Left to ourselves,” he says, “we’re a bundle of self-centered fears and hopes and jealousies. And so dressing up as Christ is a kind of pretending, even a piece of outrageous cheek.” But he says there are two kinds of pretending. There’s the kind that takes the place of the real thing, like a man who acts generous so that no one will notice he isn’t. And then there’s another kind. And he gets at that second kind with a question. “What is the good of pretending to be what you’re not?” His answer is that Christ uses it. As we put on what we don’t yet fully feel or live out, Christ is at work in us, making it real.

And I think Lewis is on to something here, but I’m not sure most of us would call it pretending. After all, when we try to put on compassion and patience and forgiveness, we aren’t playing a part. We’re honestly trying to obey. And yet we still fail, often the same day. And something in us wants to say, who am I kidding? I’m not those things. And that’s when we can start to feel like a fraud. And in that moment, pretending doesn’t feel far off the mark. But friends, Paul wouldn’t call that pretending either. In Christ, we’re not putting on something that is in ours. Our clothes aren’t a costume we wear in the hope of someday becoming God’s people. They’re the clothes of people who already belong to him. That’s why he calls us chosen, holy, and beloved, before he gives us a single garment. It’s as if he were saying, “Before I hand you something to wear, let me tell you who you are.” And so that’s where we need to begin this morning, with those three words, and with whose they were before they were ours. In verse 12, Paul calls the Colossians “chosen, holy, and beloved.” And we might be tempted to take those as merely warm words from the Apostle, but they’re more than that. They carry a history. They belonged to Israel.

In fact, these are the three words Moses uses to address them as they stood on the edge of the promised land. A people holy to the Lord, he says in Deuteronomy 7, chosen out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, loved simply because the Lord loves them. But now Paul says the same of the Colossians, and it helps to see who they were. Picture the room where Paul’s letter was first read aloud. Colossae is a small market town in the Lycus Valley. It’s overshadowed by larger neighbors. Most of the people in that room are Gentiles. In fact, most of them are the very people Paul named last week, Greeks, uncircumcised, Scythians, and some of them are still slaves. And yet Paul calls them chosen, holy, and beloved. Those words were never theirs. They belonged to somebody else’s nation, somebody else’s history, but now they’re “theirs.” Everyone.

Friends, that is a remarkable thing to say to a gathering like that, and yet Paul’s saying something more than that, because before these words were ever spoken over them or over us, they were spoken over someone else. In the New Testament, we hear them spoken over Jesus. At his baptism, he came up out of the water, and the Father said, “this is my beloved son with whom I’m well pleased.” Peter calls him “the living stone, chosen and precious in the sight of God.” And when many of his disciples turned away in John 6, Peter said, “we have believed and have come to know that you are the holy one of God. You see, before these words belonged to the church, they belonged to the Son.” And so when Paul calls the Colossians chosen, holy, and beloved, he isn’t only telling them they’re God’s people like Israel, he’s telling them that what belongs to Jesus now belongs to them. Not just God’s people, sons in the Son, and he says it of us too.

And what’s true of those three words is also true of the clothing and the rest of verse 12, because nearly every garment Paul hands us here was God’s first. Take compassion, kindness, and patience. The gods the Colossians grew up with were famous for their tempers, for being touchy and fickle and easily offended. Kindness definitely wasn’t their reputation. But when

the Lord passed before Moses on the mountain in Exodus 34, he proclaimed himself “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” That’s the compassion, kindness, and patience on Paul’s list. And the Lord said it of himself first. And it’s worth saying something more about compassion, because Paul’s word for it is stronger than our translation suggests. The ESV says “compassionate hearts,” but the word behind it is Paul’s. It’s not Paul’s usual word for the heart. It means the inward parts, the gut. The King James renders it “bowels of mercies,” which is faithful to the Greek, but I’ll leave you to imagine how that would land today. The point though is that this compassion is felt deep inside, so much so that it turns us toward others. In fact, Paul uses that same word for Onesimus. Sending him home, Paul tells Philemon, “I’m sending him back to you, sending my very heart.” A slave had become Paul’s innermost self. And then there’s humility, which would have sounded strange to Colossian ears. In their world, it was hardly a virtue at all. It was closer to an insult, a word for the posture of a slave, someone with no standing to speak of.

And yet there it sits in the wardrobe of God’s chosen ones. And I imagine the slaves in that room heard it a bit differently. But it’s there because Jesus said of himself, “I am gentle and lowly in heart.” That word “lowly” is Paul’s humility word. And the word behind gentle is the same one behind Paul’s meekness. Both belonged first to the Son, who took the form of a servant. And humility and meekness as he showed them, set aside whatever standing would keep us at arm’s length from others and move toward the lowly. Friends, these are our family clothes. And every one of them was Christ’s before it was ours. But what is it like to wear them? I mean, it’s not like a cozy sweater on a cold morning. These clothes are demanding. They cost something.

And so Paul goes on in verse 13 to tell us what wearing them involves. “Bearing with one another. And if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other.” You see, Paul isn’t naive about the church. He knows perfectly well that someone is going to have a complaint. And he doesn’t mean a misunderstanding or a bruised ego. He means a real wrong. The kind that requires forgiveness. And we acknowledge the same thing every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer together as we did this morning. “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” In that one prayer, we confess both that we owe and that we are owed. And that’s what Paul’s getting at. He isn’t describing a church that stopped wounding one another. He’s describing how wounded people are to live together. But bearing with one another and forgiving, it’s hard for us, isn’t it? A complaint rarely feels like something we need or want to let go of. It feels like being right. And when we’re right, we don’t move toward the person. We nurse the complaint.

It shows up as the conversation we keep rehearsing in the car. The one where we finally say exactly what we mean and the other person finally understands. It shows up in how we tell the story to a friend and how the other person comes off a bit worse each time. We convince ourselves we’re just remembering accurately. But really, we’re keeping a record. And a record is exactly what Paul won’t let us keep. His answer instead is to bear one another and forgive. As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And I think this is where we need to come back to Onesimus. You see, he was from Colossae, and so was the man he wronged. Philemon was in that room, a man with a real complaint. And Paul asks him to receive Onesimus as a brother. And he asked the whole church meeting in his house to do the same. That’s what Paul’s command looks like in person. But it’s a hard thing to ask, and Paul knows it. And this is why he gives us one final garment, love. In verse 14, he says, “Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

Now, above all sounds like a ranking. But Paul's still talking about getting dressed. Love goes over the rest, the way a cloak goes over everything else and holds the whole outfit together. In fact, the word he uses for that binding is the one he used in chapter 2, for ligaments that knit a body together. Love is what makes it possible to bear with the brother who's wronged us, to be patient with him, not just the seventh time, but the seventy-seventh time, and to receive him when he comes back. And friends, the comforting thing is that this isn't a love we have to manufacture. It's the love the Father spoke over the Son at His baptism and has now spoken over us. We are beloved, and that's where our love for one another begins. And yet, knowing we're loved and living like it with one another are two different things. And so, in verse 15, Paul leaves the clothing behind and tells us what our life together will need.

“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you are called in one body.” That word rule comes from the world of games. It's the word for the umpire, the official who decides the contest and awards the prize. And it's just like Paul to use an athletic image, right? Writing to the Philippians and the Corinthians, it was running for the prize. Here, it's the man who decides the race. And his point is this. In every heart, someone is making the call. Something is deciding what counts and where we stand. And that, Paul says, must be the peace of Christ. And Paul's used that word before in this letter, but pointed the other way. In worship of angels, to disqualify is to be ruled out. And there were men in Colossae who'd set themselves up as the officials of the Christian life. And they had a rule book, special days, food laws, a hard discipline of the body, and a kind of humility that could be displayed and admired. It had, Paul says, the appearance of wisdom, and it was working. Some of the Colossians were beginning to wonder whether they'd been disqualified. And some had started keeping the rule book, hoping it would settle the question. And, you know, it's not hard for us to imagine why men like that found an audience.

After all, when we ourselves keep failing at the same sin, when we're not sure we've grown at all in years of following Jesus, what do we do? We start looking for something that will give us some confidence that we're really his. A new devotional practice, maybe, or a season of fasting, a conference, or a pastor or a friend whose walk with the Lord seems to be everything ours isn't. None of these is wrong in itself, and some of them do us real good, but the danger is that we hand them the whistle. We let someone other than Christ tell us where we stand, and that's exactly what was happening in Colossae. Men who weren't holding fast to the head, as Paul says, had found their standing somewhere else, and they were telling the Colossians to do the same. But the peace of Christ is a different official altogether. It's the peace he made by the blood of his cross. That peace doesn't disqualify us. In Christ, we've already been received, but it isn't only about our own comfort. Paul says we were called to that peace in one body, and when he tells the Ephesians that it broke down the dividing wall of hostility, he means that that peace did something between people, not just inside them.

So the peace that comforts us is also the peace that rules between us, and this means it's going to have something to say about the complaint we're still nursing against a brother, and it won't simply take our side. And if we're honest, we don't like that, do we? It means the Lord's ruling might put something, point something out in us, and none of us enjoys being told we're wrong, or that we're the one who needs to change, and so instead of submitting to his rule, we often resist it. But friends, his rule is meant to be a mercy, and it should lead us to gratitude. This is why Paul adds three words almost in passing, “and be thankful.” But they're not in passing. He's going to return to them twice more in verses 16 and 17, three times in three verses.

Thankfulness is what he's building toward, and that's because of where the passage began. You see, people who are chosen, holy, and beloved, who've been rescued from the domain of darkness, forgiven all their trespasses, and raised with Christ, have a great deal to be thankful for. But there's something else too, and it goes back to the umpire. If the peace of Christ is what makes the call, then we don't have to, and that's a weight we were never fit to carry anyway. Instead, we submit to him, and trust him to bring us back to each other, and that's something to be thankful for. And there's one more thing worth pointing out here. Paul's word for forgiving one another, back in verse 13, is built on the word for grace. So his, so is his word for thankfulness. And this makes sense. Thankfulness is grace received. Forgiveness is basically grace passed on. And when we can't do either, we've usually got the same thing wrong. We're basically keeping accounts. Either we've decided that someone owes us, or we've decided that what we've been given was no more than our due.

But a grateful heart can't keep those accounts. It doesn't hold on to grievances, and it isn't looking for another gospel. It knows its own debt was canceled, and it refuses to hold anyone else's against them. So how do we come to live like this? Well, Paul answers in verse 16. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly"- *Dwell in you richly*. He isn't describing a word that visits us now and then, but one that lives within us, and not just in us individually. The "you" there is plural. And friends, when the word of Christ dwells in us, Paul says we'll be "teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." Now that teaching and admonishing, it happens among us in all sorts of ways. But look at the one Paul names, singing. And it's not just the pastors and elders. It's all of us. You see, when we sing together on a Sunday morning, we're not warming up for the main event, the sermon. We're catechizing each other. And so even those of us who aren't confident singers shouldn't hold back. When we sing, we're handing something. We're handing something to the person beside us. And what we sing stays with us.

I think we all know this. There have been times, I'm sure, when you couldn't find the words to pray, and what came to mind instead was a hymn you'd sung for years. Or you've stood here on a Sunday too tired or too grieved to sing, and yet you've been carried by the voices around you. Horatio Spafford wrote, "when peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul." "Thou hast taught," he says. The Lord taught him to say, "it is well," whatever his lot. And what's beautiful about singing is that the Lord has taught most of us the same thing by putting Spafford's words in the mouths of the people beside us. And so we sing with thankfulness in our hearts to God. And that's where Paul ends too, with thankfulness. In verse 17, he gathers everything he said into one sentence. "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."

Some of you were with us for my first sermon years ago on the third commandment. "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." And what we found then was that bearing his name was never mainly a matter of how we speak. It's a matter of how we carry it. His name is on us, and it goes wherever we go. And that's what Paul's after here, only from the other side. Don't just avoid carrying his name emptily, carry it into everything. And yet it wouldn't surprise me if most of us, when we hear that we're to do everything in his name, feel overwhelmed, maybe even confused. We look at our lives and see only the failures and not the path forward. And so this is where we have to start asking, what would it look like for us to post or comment or scroll in the name of the Lord Jesus? To talk about politics and the news that way, including with the relative who sees it all very differently. To sit on the sideline at a soccer game or to coach one as people who bear his name. The path forward isn't

always obvious, and it isn't easy. It takes his wisdom and his strength, and that's one more reason we need his word dwelling in us richly.

But it isn't only that we find it confusing. Often in our embarrassment or our weakness, we find it too costly to carry his name into any of it. And so we let those moments pass. But friends, think about what it cost him. On the day Jesus was crucified, the soldiers divided his garments and cast lots for his tunic, and the son whose name we now bear hung on the cross, stripped of everything. He bore the Father's name perfectly in every word and every deed, and he was condemned as though he'd borne it in vain. Now this isn't a call to muster that kind of faithfulness ourselves. We carry his name the same way, Paul says, we put on the clothes as people who already belong to him, chosen, holy, and beloved. That's where he began this passage, and it's where we begin to, not with what we can summon, but with what we've been given.

And as we close, I'm reminded of a poem George Herbert wrote about being dressed in Christ called Aaron. It opens with the high priest in his vestments, holiness on his head, light and perfection on his breast, bells ringing at his hem. But then Herbert looks at himself and he finds the opposite. He finds profaneness on his head and darkness in his own breast, a poor priest he calls himself. And then he remembers he has another head and another heart, and in him he is well dressed. And this is what he says, "Christ is my only head, my alone only heart and breast, my only music, striking me even dead, that to the old man I may rest and be in him new dressed." Friends, the old man is the old self we took off last week. New dressed is everything Paul's given us this morning. And that's true of every one of us who belongs to Christ. We walk out of here dressed, not in what we manage to put on, but in him. And so we carry his name into everything, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Let's pray.

Oh Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for what you have done. We thank you that you have given us the gift of the Spirit that not only seals us and protects us, but strengthen us and strengthens us and empowers us to walk in your ways, to put on the family clothes. Help us to rest in these truths as we leave. We pray all this in the name of Jesus. Amen.