

Appropriately Dressed

Colossians 3:1-17

One of the key doctrinal truths of Christianity is that Christ imputes His righteousness upon all who repent and put their trust in Him and in His perfect sacrifice for our sins. People who are born again, not only have all their sins forgiven, but they are also dressed in the robe of Christ's perfect righteousness. Anyone who even gets close to comprehending the wonder of what God has done for us in Christ, can never be the same. **I Peter 2:24** puts it this way, "He Himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed" This truth is wonderfully illustrated in a story entitled "The Ragman" –

"I saw a strange sight. I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing my life, my street sense, my sly tongue had ever prepared me for. Hush, child. Hush, now, and I will tell it to you.

Even before the dawn one Friday morning I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our City. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear, tenor voice: "Rags!" Ah, the air was foul and the first light filthy to be crossed by such sweet music. "Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!"

"Now, this is a wonder," I thought to myself, for the man stood six-feet-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence. Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the inner city? I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn't disappointed.

Soon the Ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing, and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking. The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman,

stepping round tin cans, dead toys, and Pampers. "Give me your rag," he said so gently, "and I'll give you another." He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked from the gift to the giver.

Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he put her stained handkerchief to his own face; and then HE began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear. "This IS a wonder," I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing Ragman like a child who cannot turn away from mystery. "Rags! Rags! New rags for old!"

In a little while, when the sky showed grey behind the rooftops and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out black windows, the Ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek. Now the tall Ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart. "Give me your rag," he said, tracing his own line on her cheek, "and I'll give you mine." The child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. The bonnet he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw: for with the bandage went the wound! Against his brow it ran a darker, more substantial blood – his own! "Rags! Rags! I take old rags!" cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent Ragman.

The sun now hurt both the sky and my eyes; the Ragman seemed more and more to hurry. "Are you going to work?" he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head. The Ragman pressed him: "Do you have a job?" "Are you crazy?" sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket – flat, the cuff stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm. "So," said the Ragman. "Give me your jacket, and I'll give you mine." Such quiet authority in his voice! The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman – and I trembled at what I saw: for the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put it on he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs; but the Ragman had only one. "Go to work," he said.

After that he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, and old man, hunched, withered, and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it round himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes.

And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman. Though he was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, stumbling for drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, old, and sick, yet he went with terrible speed . . . through the alleys of the City, this mile and the next, until he came to its limits, and then he rushed beyond. I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow. And yet I needed to see where he was going in such haste, perhaps to know what drove him so. The little old Ragman – he came to a landfill. He came to the garbage pits. And then I wanted to help him in what he did, but I hung back, hiding. He climbed a hill. With tormented labor he cleared a little space on that hill. Then he sighed. He lay down. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with an army blanket. And he died. Oh, how I cried to witness that death! I slumped in a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope – because I had come to love the Ragman. Every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him; but he died. I sobbed myself to sleep.

I did not know – how could I know? – that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and its night, too. But then, on Sunday morning, I was wakened by a violence. Light – pure, hard, demanding light – slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the last and the first wonder of all. There was the Ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead, but alive! And, besides that, healthy! There was no sign of sorrow nor of age, and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

Well, then I lowered my head and trembling for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the Ragman. I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him. Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to him with dear yearning in my voice: “Dress me.” He dressed me. My Lord, he put new clothes on me, and I am a wonder beside him. The Ragman, the Ragman, the Christ!

I have shared this story with you because in Colossians 3:1-17, the Apostle Paul writes about putting off the old and putting on the new – so that Christians can be appropriately dressed for our new life in Christ.

Please follow with me as I read verses 1-4,

“If then you have been raised with Christ [we cannot be raised with Christ if we haven’t died with Christ by repenting of our sins and trusting in His perfect atonement. And for all who have, we are now to], seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God [the crucified, resurrected, ascended Lord Jesus has been officially declared to be the King of kings and Lord of lords. The task of local churches, which embrace that truth, is to help more and more people embrace Christ as their Savior and Lord. And how are people who have died and been raised with Christ supposed to live?].² Set your minds on things that are above [we must daily cherish what King Jesus cherishes, but also shun what He shuns. Which means we are **not** to set our minds] . . . on things that are on earth [the things of earth, in this context, are referring to self-centered, flesh gratifying desires].³ For you have died [with Christ to sin], and your life is hidden with Christ in God [the eternal life we gain at salvation is securely guarded by Christ].⁴ When Christ who is your life appears [is made manifest], then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Let’s pause here and remind ourselves that when the Lord Jesus returns to this earth to bodily raise the dead, all believers will receive glorified bodies that will be able to live in the very presence of our glorious Triune God. It is then that our glory will be complete and overflowing. But while we are in these mortal bodies, we need to do as the Apostle Paul says in verses 5-6,

“Put to death [utterly slay] therefore what is earthly in you [examples of earthly things that need to be slain are]: sexual immorality [which refers to any kind of sex outside of marriage – between a man and a woman. God has established these parameters for marriage and sex because He knows that a husband and wife who love God and love each other, provide the best nurturing environment for children. All sex outside of God-ordained marriage is wrong. Yes, God’s ways are quite narrow. Paul continues to list attitudes and ways of thinking which lead to wrong behavior] – impurity [mixing evil with good in our thoughts, words and deeds],

passion [uncontrolled, self-centered wants], evil desire [craving wrong things], and covetousness [which is the constant desire to have more than what we have – with a total disregard to the rights of others. I think of all the sins going on in the United States today, this may be the one that takes us down – if we do not repent of it. I say that for a couple of reasons: (1) because covetousness is rampant in our culture and is not uncommon even in our churches – and (2) because the Apostle Paul says that covetousness] . . . is idolatry [idolatry is taking what I selfishly desire and exalting it to be equal to or above God].⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming.”

In my understanding of the Bible, the ultimate day of judgment will occur at Christ’s Second Coming. At that event I believe evil will be ultimately judged and completely abolished. But over 1900 years ago, when the Apostle Paul wrote that the wrath of God is coming, he used the present tense, which means the wrath of God was active in his day. In other words, we do not have to wait until Christ’s Second Coming in order for God to judge evil. The Bible repeatedly speaks about a universal reality, “We reap what we sow.” This truth is constantly in effect. No one escapes it. For example, in **Hosea 10:12-14**, spoken seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, the prophet Hosea told the people of Israel,

“Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; for it is time to seek the LORD, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.¹³ You have plowed iniquity; you have reaped injustice; you have eaten the fruit of lies . . .¹⁴ therefore . . . all your fortresses shall be destroyed . . .”

Shortly after Hosea spoke those words, the armies of Assyria demolished Samaria, the capital city of the Ten Northern Tribes – and carried away her people. The Assyrians next attacked Judah’s capital city – Jerusalem. But Isaiah and King Hezekiah had led the people of Judah

into repentance and renewed faith in the true and living God. And God faithfully stepped in to deliver Judah from the armies of Assyria. Friends, reaping what we sow not only occurs in the lives of individuals, but if enough people are involved in evil behavior, with no repentance, God will bring judgment upon a whole nation – as He did in the days of Hosea. The Bible refers to these kind of judgements as “days of the Lord” [Isaiah 13; Ezekiel 30; Joel 1 and 2; Zephaniah 1] or “comings of the Lord” [II Samuel 22; Isaiah 19; Isaiah 64; Micah 1]. About five years after the Apostle Paul wrote Colossians, a “day of the Lord” began to unfold upon apostate Israel. The unbelieving Jews were either killed or carried off to the salt mines by armies of Rome.

Aren't you glad that none of the Christians at Colosseae had ever indulged in their fleshly desires? Actually Paul says that at one time, they all did. Let's look at verses 7-9,

“In these [sinful behaviors and evil desires] you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander [the Greek word Paul uses for slander is where we get our word blasphemy. Slander is a serious sin. Before we repeat anything about anyone – we must ask ourselves, Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind? Other wrongful deeds which need to be removed are], obscene [or abusive] talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another [if we stop and think about it, something as common as buying and selling cannot be conducted in a community filled with liars. And can a church properly function if it is full of liars? Of course not, which is why we must] . . . put off the old self with its practices”

But it is not enough to put off the old self – which is dressed in rags. We must also do what Paul states in verses 10-17,

“ . . . put on the new self [we get our new nature when we are born again. However, we all start out as baby Christians. This is why our new nature needs to experience what Paul says next] . . . being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator [pastor Sam Storm writes that “Ignorance is the mortal enemy of sanctification and a Christlike life.” We must learn that in Christ, we have become a part of a new humanity – and in this new humanity] . . . ¹¹ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian [considered to be the most savage of people], slave, free [the early church could not instantly abolish slavery, but what they could do was to select qualified slaves to be elders in their churches. Why did they do that? Because] . . . Christ is all, and in all [Christianity destroys barriers of hatred between people – which came about because of Adam’s fall. But the Second Adam has now come – and as a part of Christ’s new humanity, the most diverse people can peacefully sit together around the Lord’s Table]. ¹² Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts [and] kindness . . .”

Let me pause here and quote from William Barclay’s commentary on verse 12,

“If there was one thing the ancient world needed it was mercy. The sufferings of animals were nothing to it. The maimed and the sickly (were not cared for). There was no provision for the aged. The treatment of the . . . simple minded was unfeeling. Christianity brought mercy into this world. It is not too much 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.”

The Apostle Paul goes on to say that we must also put on,

“ . . . humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another [when churches merge together, there are multitudes of opportunities to bear 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 [Jesus said that people who think they have been forgiven only a little, love only a little. And may I add, they will also forgive only a little. But people who realize they have been forgiven much, will love much and

forgive much. Which category are you in? If you are in the first category, what are you doing about it?].¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony [just think, if God was only holy and not loving, where would we be? Hopelessly lost].¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts [and if each of us will do that, then peace will rule in the church], to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful [If I could choose the kind of people I wanted to be surrounded by – it would not be the physically beautiful, the wealthy, the talented, or the intellectually gifted. I would choose to live with grateful, thankful people – because they are the truly beautiful people on earth. And one of the great blessings of going to heaven and then living on the new earth, is that there will only be grateful, thankful people in those places].¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly [so richly that it shapes and forms who we are], teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God [one of the commentaries I read reported that great periods of renewal in Christendom have been accompanied by an outburst of hymnology, spiritual songs].¹⁷ 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.”

Friends, we cannot do anything in the name of Jesus if it does not conform to the will of Jesus. We cannot even pray in Jesus’ name, if what we are praying for is not in accordance with the will of Jesus.

Question: What is the best way for Christians to overcome the enticements of sin? Is gritting our teeth in determination our only course of action? I believe Colossians provides us with a better way. Christians need to become enamored with Jesus. We need to be overwhelmed with His glory. We need to be so filled with the knowledge of what Christ has accomplished for us, and the greatness of the promises He has made to us, that all the short-lived pleasures of sin – lose their allurements. Let’s pray.

