

THE GARMENTS OF HOLINESS

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Scripture Lesson

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

(Colossians 3:12-14 N.I.V.)

I lay in bed early in the morning half-asleep. Somehow I manage to open my eyes long enough to look at the clock. It's about 5:30. It seems like I'm waking up earlier and earlier as the days grow longer. I have an hour to doze before I get up. I think. I pray. I meditate. The words of my text play in my mind like some kind of internal tape recording. "As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved..." I recognise that these terms were all taken from the Old Testament where they were applied to the Old Testament church, Israel. Israel in the Old Testament and the Christian church in the New Testament are "God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved." It's funny though. I don't feel very holy at 5:30 in the morning. I don't feel dearly loved by God at the moment. I feel sleepy and tired. You would think God's chosen people ought to have a few privileges. Why doesn't God let his chosen people sleep in? "Dearly beloved" Paul calls us. If we are dearly beloved by God why is it then we are subject to the same misfortunes and woes that the children of darkness experience?

God's chosen people. I thought the Jews were God's chosen people but Paul says the church is. I remember that Paul told the Galatian Christians that we are all children of Abraham through faith in Christ and that a true Jew is someone who knows Jesus as the Messiah. That means I'm a Jew. I'm one of God's chosen people. I think of the pictures in National Geographic magazine of Hasidic Jews in New York City. They sure do look distinctive...with their little black skull caps, their black suits, their pig-tails and bushy full beards. They sure dress funny. They look like they have stepped out of some 18th century Eastern European ghetto. I wonder if God wants us Christians to dress differently as his chosen people.

Now it's 6:30. It suddenly occurs to me that I have spent an hour thinking about these things. I must get up. I throw off the sheet and roll out of bed, put on my maroon bath-robe and tip-toe to the closet so as not to wake up Kay and the boys. I look into

my closet trying to decide what to wear this morning. "How should I dress as a Christian," I wonder. I notice an old pair of bermuda shorts that I have never worn lying on a shelf. I wouldn't be caught dead in a pair of bermudas, walking around with my legs all bare. I wonder if it's because I am a Christian. Somehow bermudas don't seem very appropriate garments to wear for one of God's chosen people. Then my mind jumps from bermuda shorts to vacation and the sea-shore...and I muse, "I wonder if a Christian girl should wear a bikini?" I think of the girl who got kicked out of a Christian college because she went swimming with a hole in the knee of her bathing suit. How are we as Christians supposed to dress?

Isn't that what Paul was writing about in the Scripture lesson? How should Christians dress? Paul writes, "As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." I carefully examine one of my suits to see if there might be a few threads of kindness in it. Then I look over my shirts trying to decide which to wear. Personally I would be very happy if I had only long-sleeved white shirts and blue shirts. It makes it so difficult to choose what to wear when there is such a variety of prints and stripes and colors. I think of my Southern Baptist preacher friend who wears flashy cowboy shirts with silver sequins on them when he preaches. I cringe at the thought of preaching like that. The way he dresses really kind of embarrasses me. Non-Christians will think that all Christians are hill-billies when they see him preach like that. It seems to me that Christians should dress with more dignity. I wonder how comfortable Paul would have been in this three piece gray suit.

I finally choose a blue shirt and tan pants and go to the dresser for a pair of blue socks that will match the rest of my clothes. I find a nice pair, sit down on my bed, pull my right ankle onto my left knee and pull on one sock. "Clothe yourselves with...patience", Paul wrote. I think of how impatient I am. I hate waiting in lines at the bank or at the grocery store. It seems like I'm always choosing the slowest moving line. And I don't like to wait for God to answer my prayers. I think of the words of a Psalm,

I waited for the Lord my God,
And patiently did bear;
At length to me he did incline
my voice and cry to hear.

Why do I have to wait so long for God to answer my prayers? God seems to take his good old time. But my patience wears thin. As I put on my other sock I think of how I must also remember to clothe myself with patience today lest I become irritated and annoyed with people.

Now all I need is a tie to go with my tan pants, blue shirt and socks. I walk over to the tie rack to select one. I remember the rule of my wife, "Never wear a striped tie with a striped shirt."

"Be sure that the color of your tie doesn't clash with the color of your shirt and pants." And then the voice of Paul breaks into my thoughts once more, "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." I wonder how well patience goes with my tan pants. Does kindness clash with my blue shirt? I wonder if compassion comes in both solids and stripes. What would Joseph Malloy, the clothing advisor, have to say about wearing humility with my gray pin-striped authority suit I wear when I want to look successful, confident, and in control? Is it ever out of style to wear gentleness? If I were to wear this gray suit everyday people sure would get tired of it, but what if I wore compassion everyday? Would people get tired of that? I try to remember if I was wearing compassion the last time I voted. Was I wearing gentleness when I criticised my friend so bluntly the other day? I surely forgot to clothe myself with patience when I got stuck in that traffic jam on the Scajaquada Expressway last week.

Well, I'm pretty well dressed now. I go downstairs to the kitchen for breakfast and turn on the radio. The news is on. Ten Navy men killed when a plane crashed on landing on the aircraft carrier Nimmitz. The first female prison guard has been murdered. Another Irish Republican Army prisoner dies of starvation. Rioting breaks out in the streets of Belfast. War is threatened in the Middle East between Israel and Syria. How difficult it is to be clothed with compassion, I think. It's so easy to become calloused to the sufferings of others around the world when you are bombarded with the news of tragedies everyday. But if I clothe myself with compassion every morning God will keep my heart tender to the needs and fears and hurts of men and women and children.

I'm dressed and I have had my breakfast. It's time to go to work now. I look outside the kitchen window and see that it's raining. Drops of rain splash on the window pane. I can hear the sound of the rain beating down on the roof of the house. I'm going to have to wear my storm coat so as not to get wet. As I am buttoning the coat the words of Paul come once more to me, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

The world I am about to enter at the beginning of a new week is a stormy world. I hear the thunder of hate. I see the clouds of hostility. Anger and resentment so often flashes like lightening between friends and loved ones as well as between nations. I myself feel hostility in my heart at times for some people and I'm sure there are men and women who, for some reason, feel hostility for me. Christians are no exceptions. So often we Christians are divided. We are divided over important doctrines. We are divided over church priorities and methods and goals. We have such varied life-styles. Our personalities so often clash.

Our traditions and political opinions divide us. I must not forget to clothe myself with forgiveness this morning. How much I need to put on love, like my storm coat, entirely clothed in love from head to foot.

I remember the old bright yellow plastic rain coat I had when I was a kid. It had a hood that covered my head. All you could see was my face when I wore that raincoat. I must put on love like that rain-coat. I must wear love over all these other virtues, patience, gentleness, kindness, compassion, and humility. When others see me I would like them to see more than that my tie and shirt go together. I would like them to see, above all, that I am wearing love. Who is going to notice if my shirt and pants match if I am wearing love over all? Love has a way of binding together even clashing colors in perfect unity.

How are you dressed this morning? Does your wardrobe contain compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness and love? The Bible doesn't tell us anything about whether or not we should wear bermudas or bikinis, cowboy shirts or clerical collars but it does tell us to wear these virtues everyday. Your skirt may not match your blouse all the time, you may not dress like a preppy, you may wear tennis shoes with your three piece suit, but I don't think anybody is going to notice if over all these things you have put on love.

AMEN.