

Making a Fashion Statement

In the name of him who is all and is in all, dear friends in Christ: A popular expression assures us that “The clothes make the man” – or the woman, I suppose; I’m not trying to be sexist here. And to a certain extent we know that it’s true. What you wear, how you appear and present yourself to others by what you choose to put on (or not) makes an impression. It’s what people see. And it says something about you. Your clothes reveal who you are – or at least who you’d like to be: trendy, on the edge, in step with current fashion; or steady, reliable, conservative (or maybe too busy to care). Your clothes can communicate how you think about yourself: confident, powerful, self-assured, “look at me”; or timid, withdrawn, “I’m just trying to blend in – ignore me.”

Some clothes tell what you do. Step into a local restaurant at lunch time and immediately you know: That one’s a farmer. He’s a mechanic. Hairdresser. Cop. Guy over there is in the Army. She works at the hospital. That dude could only be a lawyer. The clothes say it all. And clothes reveal more: a couple weeks back we had a wedding here at the church. The evening before, we had the rehearsal. Folks were dressed in a wide variety of casual costume: jeans, shorts, T-shirts, flip-flops. Ah, but on the day of the wedding they were dressed to the max. The clothes said something about what people were thinking: that to them the first event was informal and relaxed while the latter was a dignified and solemn occasion.

Doubtless there are other things clothing can reveal about a person; but I’ll mention just one more: character. Some clothes say a person is sensible, modest, and they have good taste while others ... well, not so much. Enough said on that score. You get the idea.

Okay ... I’m guessing that by now I’ve made everyone feel a bit self-conscious. While I’ve been saying these things about what people wear, the chances are that you’ve had the thought, “What are my clothes – what I’m wearing right now – what are they saying about me?” If that’s true, keep the thought. If not, get it. I want you to think about what you’re wearing and what it’s revealing about yourself to others.

But now make the jump with me, because I’m not talking about the physical clothes hanging on your body. No, I’m talking about those intangible garments that you’re wearing on your soul: the clothing that displays to the world who you really are on the inside. This is what Paul is discussing in today’s Epistle reading: the way you present yourself, the clothing of thought, word, and action that reveals your true inner character. And what he’s saying is that you as a Christian should be making a bold fashion statement. What people should see is the real you.

It’s a continuation of the discussion we’ve been hearing in the Epistle for the last several weeks. Paul, writing to the Christians at Colossae, has been telling them of their new reality. Formerly they were godless pagans, pursuing the ways of the world and being led by their lusts for pleasure, wealth, fame, power, and sex. As such they were under the wrath and condemnation of God. They were outside the kingdom of his grace and destined for death and eternal punishment. But that changed. They heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was preached to them how in love the Father sent his only begotten Son into the world to be its Savior, how the Son took on himself a human body born of a virgin mother, how he lived for us a perfect life, how he died as the Lamb of God bearing the sins of all mankind, how he was

raised on the third day to show that his sacrifice was accepted – that the debt had been paid in full, and finally how he has ascended into heaven and sits at God's right hand in glory and with all authority given to him. They heard this wonderful good news and through the working of the Holy Spirit, they believed it. More than that, they were joined to Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection in their baptisms. Paul tells them that when Christ died, they died. When he was buried, by their baptisms they were buried with him. And when Christ was raised, they too were raised to a new life. This is their new reality. This is their new truth.

And so in view of all this, Paul says today, seek the things that are above. Set your minds on higher things, not on earthly things. And by "things above" and "higher things" he doesn't mean for you to be focused on attaining the eternal rest of paradise, as if all you ever did was sit around thinking how wonderful it's going to be in the next life where there is no want, trouble, toil, or pain. No, he means for you to concentrate on living the kind life – being the kind of person you will be in that life. You have been raised with Christ. Your life is hidden in him. Live like it. Show it to the world. Let Christ be what they see when they look at you.

Paul expresses this idea in terms of changing your clothing. That's why you see repeated in today's text the terms "put this off" and "put this on". He's using the common Greek word for getting dressed and undressed. But before he gets to what shows on the outside, he begins on a level beneath the skin. He starts with what goes on in your mind and heart: the kinds of things no one will ever see because they're inside you. And so he uses a different word. Instead of "put off" he says "put to death" what is earthly in you: namely immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed – which he says is a form of idolatry because it makes a god of worldly wealth and the things it can buy. These are all sins of thought which if not dealt with early, upfront, and decisively will surely lead to sins of action – which in turn will cause shame and disgrace. To dress like a Christian should one must think like a Christian should by shutting down the source of evil in the human heart. Put it to death, Paul says. He means seek out these evil thoughts and desires, recognize and hate them for the sins they are, and confess them to the Lord. And the Lord who is rich in mercy for Christ's sake will forgive, restore, and by his Spirit renew you and give you the mind of Christ.

Then, when the inside is taken care of, Paul turns to what shows on the outside: those sins that have to do with your interaction with other people: anger, uncontrollable rage, malice – that is, wishing ill on someone, slander – speaking ill of them, obscene talk – cursing and using crude or inappropriate language, and finally lying to others – that is, using falsehoods to deceive, mislead, or gain advantage over others. I asked you before to look at what you're wearing, to consider the image you're presenting to the world. What do people see? Do they see you flying off at the handle when things go wrong? Do they see you hating someone because of what they did (or that you imagine that they did) to you? Do they see you doing mean and hurtful things to get even? Do they hear you saying bad things about someone else? Or using profane words? Or spreading lies and gossip?

If so, you are presenting yourself to the world dressed in torn and filthy rags that reek of foul odors and that fail to hide your naked shame. You are bringing disgrace on yourself and the family of God. You are shaming Christ whose name you bear. You parents who say to your kids, "You're not going out dressed like that!" Why are you? And what kind of example are you setting? And what are you showing the world about Jesus and those who belong to him?

Cast these wretched clothes off, Paul says. Don't let people see you walking around dressed in them. You've put off the old, sinful self. Keep it off. Each morning when you arise and get out of your pajamas to get dressed, take off also those nasty rags you've wrapped

around you by confessing to the Lord your sins toward others. And put on the new person, the new you who is in Christ and who is being renewed in knowledge after the image of your Creator.

Make a fashion statement. As you stand at your closet thinking about what you're going to wear on your body – how you want the world to see you – think about also how to adorn your inner being. Since you are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved by him, put on compassion, the desire to deal mercifully with others; kindness, that is doing good for them; humility and meekness, which is thinking of others as greater than yourself and wanting to serve them; patience, which is gladly putting up with their innumerable faults and shortcomings; and forgiving those who sin against you in any way even as Christ has so freely and completely forgiven you. Let the world see Christ in you. Let them see the fashionable re-creation he has made you. And to top it all off, to be the cherry on the sundae and the crown on your head, put on love, which is the highest of all Christian virtues. Put on love, which is not a mere feeling or emotion, but an earnest desire and commitment to seek the best for others at the expense of self. This is the love that God showed us in Jesus his Son, who gave himself for us. And this is the love that his Holy Spirit gives us to show to the world. Let's make a fashion statement.

But perhaps you're thinking, "Nice preaching, Pastor. That sounds well and good; but really? C'mon. It ain't gonna happen in this life. So why should I knock myself out?" If so, let me ask you, who do you suppose is saying that: your old sinful nature or the new one who is being renewed in the image of Christ? Which one are you letting decide what you will wear? It's been said that it's not that Christianity has been tried and found wanting. It's rather that Christianity has been found difficult and left untried. And, speaking from my own experience which I imagine pertains to others as well, I know that it's easy to stay always wanting to wear the comfortable old favorites no matter how soiled and ragged they may be.

We can do better. In Christ we can dress better. And yes, in this life we will always fall short. The dazzling white robe of Christ's righteousness that the Lord sees us in now, and that we ourselves will see in glory, in the light of this world always appears less than clean and spotless. That's the way clothes are in this life. They always get dirty. And they get dirty from the inside and out: soiled and smelly from contact with our bodies, and covered in who-knows-what kind of filth from the world around us. But that's why we have washing machines and Laundromats. And with this in view you might think of the church as a Laundromat – a place we come to wash our robes and make them white again in the blood of the Lamb – a place we come to be clothed and covered in Christ our righteousness so that we can make a fashion statement; not to be saved, but because we have been saved by Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!