

Putting on the Clothes of Christ

Written by Bob Stone

Growth and change are not easy transitions in a local church, but obviously there are specific actions and attitudes necessary if the church is to reflect the Lord and build a foundation for present and future generations.

As a church, we are in a 12-18 month transition to a new facility. We know that building this *facility* is not building a *church*, because the church is people, and there is still some very necessary people-building that must take place as our facility is being built. How a new facility will impact our church life will not be decided by the architecture. Our success will be built upon and framed by the attitudes and actions we build into our lives.

As an introduction to our study, I want you to think about the contrast between the horrific violence at the World Trade Center (September 11, 2001) and what should be the actions of a mature, Christian believer. I believe we can see many examples of the character of Christ in the recovery program at the former site of the World Trade Center. I am so thankful for those brave firefighters and the recovery people's diligent efforts. As I have watched their untiring efforts, however, I have to admit I have been asking, "Will this servant's attitude and outpouring of generosity continue?"

We don't know how our nation will respond to the continuing crises inevitably ahead, but we should be able to count on Christians in America to continue, in the good and the bad times, to show the character qualities of Christ.

As I said in [response to the terrorist attacks](#), I want to call you to make the most of the opportunity we have to show Christ, not only to those within the church, but to those outside the church. I think that as believers, we have a great opportunity before us unparalleled in the last 50 years, but it remains to be seen if we are going to put on the *grace* clothes, or lounge around in our old *grave* clothes.

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I don't think there is anything more attractive in this world than a believer who decides by God's grace that he/she will put on the character of Christ. We were made to be containers of Him and to reflect Him, and I am praying we will be what we were created to be.

Think about it. Don't you love to watch things becoming what they were intended?

- the excitement of parents when their children say their first words—"Da Da" and "Ma Ma." Yesterday they could only cry and babble; today they join the ranks of those who speak. Maybe there will be a day when the parents will regret it (when their child seems to chatter nonstop), but today they are excited.

- the ecstasy of 16-year-olds who earn their driver's licenses. Yesterday they were pedestrians. Today they are a danger to everyone they know.

- the firemen who have trained for years for a big fire, and then the biggest of all disasters happens in America. Without regard for their own lives, they rush up the stairs of a damaged building engulfed in flames to save others. We are all marked by these images of heroism.

On the other hand, there are few things sadder than a person not living up to his/her potential, calling, or training. They are victims of stagnation.

- a marriage that began with hope and dreams, but has now plateaued. Affections have cooled and intimacy has faded.

- a middle-aged man who spends his nights lounging in front of the television set watching whatever sport happens to be on the cable. He was once all fired up, with a bright future and a desire to make a mark on the world, but somewhere along the way

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the fire went out. His story is unrealized potential.

- the student who has the fantastic opportunity to get an education and earn a degree so he can make a living in a changing economy, and be productive and fulfilled in his life. Instead, each class and every subject is seen as something obstructing what he is really interested in, a good time and lots of fun. At the end of his 4 to 10 years of wasted classes and missed opportunity, this student hasn't developed a focus. He may have a stock degree, but mostly a big debt, nowhere to go, and nothing to do!

Stagnation and unrealized potential leads to unfulfilled longings, to a sense that we are not living our lives as intended; and to boredom—what Gregg Levoy calls "the common cold of the soul." Levoy says stagnation leads:

To sinful patterns of behavior that never get confronted and changed,
Abilities and gifts that never get cultivated and deployed—
Until weeks become months
And months turn into years,
And one day you're looking back on a life of
Deep intimate gut-wrenchingly honest conversations you never had;
Great bold prayers you never prayed,
Exhilarating risks you never took,
Sacrificial gifts you never offered,
Lives you never touched,
And you're sitting in a recliner with a shriveled soul,
And forgotten dreams,
And you realize there was a world of desperate need,
And a great God calling you to be part of something bigger than yourself—
You see the person you could have become but did not;
You never followed your calling.
You never got out of the boat (or out of your chair).

—John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get out of the Boat*,
Zondervan, pp. 34-35.

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That is not God's intention for us. He has clothes and a purpose for us—where we can get all dressed up and have somewhere great to go. I want to continue on with our series and focus on the attitudes and actions of a maturing, growing believer in the stretching and growing times of his/her life.

Last week I spoke on [A Response to Terrorist Attacks](#) and quoted from Jude 1:22-23. We are to *"be merciful to those who doubt; 23] snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear..."*

The call in Jude 1 might leave some of us saying, "I don't know if I would have the strength to be one who snatches people from the fires of their pain and sin." (Of course Jude is speaking metaphorically about snatching people from an eternal separation from God. This is caused by the spiritual choices a person can make.) In the words of our current series, the question might be, "How might we have the attitudes and actions of a maturing, growing believer in the stretching and growing times of our life?"

The passage I want us to look at is what might be called a universal, all-encompassing preparation for whatever might be ahead for us as Christians in our nation and more particularly, in our church. It helps us to see specifically the character we must exhibit to reflect Christ in the stretching and growing times of our lives. We need never wonder how we should act; Jesus has modeled for us the right way to live and the attitudes we should have—Colossians 3:12-17.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever

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you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Paul makes it clear that first of all we must put off our old clothes. In the words of my grandchildren it says we are to make ourselves "skeeky," or "bare rudey," and then put on brand new clothes.

Colossians 3:5 tells us to *"Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry;"* and vv 9-10 continue:

"Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."

Paul makes it clear, we are to put off the old person and put on the new person.

A couple of weeks ago my wife was explaining again to my grandson that my father (his great-grandfather) had died, and was at Jesus' house in heaven. She said, "Now Papa's Papa is no longer in Wenatchee, he went to be with Jesus in heaven." This repeated explanation was important, because when my grandson first heard that my dad had died, Nancy thinks he thought *I* had died.

I wasn't in Bellingham at the time; I was in Wenatchee; so he thought I was with Jesus in heaven and therefore he wanted to go to Jesus' house and see me. This time she very carefully explained again—that Papa's Papa was with Jesus, but he was very old when he died. At that point my grandson looked at Nancy and with great enthusiasm said, "Well, my papa's not old; he's new."

You've got to know I liked that one: *"I'm not old; I'm new."* That's how you can describe me from now on: "There's our new pastor." I like it because that's not only truth for that little boy; that is the truth of Scripture. It says in 2 Cor. 5:17, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"*

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In particular, what does it mean to be new? The passage we're studying tells us that for one thing, it means we change our clothes. "[We] have taken off [our] old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." Col. 3:9b-10.

We put on the clothes of Christ—vv. 12; 9b-10.

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved..." How do we love like Jesus did? (We) begin by recognizing three truths about ourselves—as followers of Jesus Christ.

We must know and believe these things, because our identity precedes our actions and attitudes. (That's a very important truth.) Unless we know who we are, we will not act as we should. Therefore, as a follower of Christ, I must know and believe:

1. I am a **chosen** person. We were chosen before the foundation of the world—Eph. 1:4. In other words, we were chosen by God to be in His family, because we chose of our own free will to be followers of Jesus Christ. This decision represents a very definite decision we make to be a follower. Not because of our goodness, or our family, or any heritage we might have received are we in His family. It is because we have decided to be a follower that we are then classified in the Scripture not only as those who have chosen Christ, but as those He has chosen!

2. I am a **holy** person. That means set apart as God's special person. We are not our own; we belong completely to Him (1 Cor. 6:19-20). If we walk in obedience, we will reflect His goodness, His holiness.

3. I am a **dearly loved** person. If I am to love others, I need to know I am loved: not loved if I do certain things, or *because* of something I do. This is a love that reaches me where I am and says, "I love you because I love you." People who know they are loved aren't trying to prove themselves to God or others.

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With our identity and relationship with God thoroughly understood, we then have the motivation and faith to change the way we act.

Then (we) put on and make a daily choice to act with the following characteristics/virtues: *"...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience..."*

If we know we are chosen, holy and dearly loved, we clothe ourselves differently. We take off the grave clothes of our old lives and put on the grace clothes. This represents a very intentional clothing decision every day; it's planned! By the way, we put these virtues on one at a time, but they are all important.

Whenever we see a list, we should know it is very important; more often than not a list is the point of the passage. This list is very important for our witness to those outside and our life inside the church. All these characteristics have to do with personal relationships between people, especially believers. How we treat others and our reaction to how others treat us is the focus of this list.

Therefore, every day we decide/choose to put on the following:

Compassion—we choose to feel deeply about the needs of others—Matt. 9:35-36.

Compassion means literally, "to feel in the viscera," and in colloquial English can be rendered "feels for." Or, "I feel it in my gut!" But that doesn't really express the full

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meaning. It literally means a convulsion in the stomach, to be moved deep down inside, to be gripped with compassion and brought to tears. We are to have compassion like Jesus'. When Jesus sees people, He feels for them and they "reach" Him. Our Lord's compassion is deep—convulsing or upsetting, from His innermost being.

He is not motivated by His disgust for people because they are such sinners. His mission is motivated by what He sees and the compassion He feels. That's the compassion I want to clothe myself with. (See [A Compassion-Compelled Community](#) —Matthew 9:35-10:4.)

Kindness—we choose to put others' needs above our own and to show it by our actions—2 Tim. 2:24.

Kindness is used of a wind that has grown mellow with age and lost its harshness. It is the word used by Jesus when He said, "My yoke is easy/kind..." In everyday life, it comes down to who gets to be in charge of the remote control. (Note: Hesitations 5:9 says: "It is the Lord's will that a man control the remote...(that verse goes on to say), because that is the only thing he is in charge of."

Kindness takes the *initiative* in responding to the needs of others and means, therefore, that random, even secret acts of kindness need to be put on each day as a piece of our everyday clothing.

Humility—we choose to think more of others and think most favorably about God.

Specifically, we discovered in our study [Climbing the Ladder of Lasting Success](#) that we are to be humble toward designated leaders and each other, so we can learn from the positive lessons of history and avoid the traps, missteps, and failures of others as well. To do otherwise leads to proud independence—a focus only on ourselves!

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The results of proud independence is a backlash of consequences, the main ones being God's opposition and a shortage of His grace. James 4:6 relates the same message—*"But he gives us more grace."*

That is why Scripture says:

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Putting on the clothes of humility means we choose to do as a child does standing before Jesus—to be dependent, waiting, receiving strength and direction from Him—1 Pet. 5:5-7; Luke 9:46-48; Phil. 2:1ff.

Humility is not thinking poorly of ourselves, but having a proper/sober estimate of ourselves based on the measure of faith and gifts God has given to us—Rom. 12:3-8.

Gentleness—we choose not to be weak, but to have our strength under control—Matt. 5:5; Gal. 6:1; 2 Tim. 2:25.

"The word gentleness is used to describe a soothing wind, a healing medicine and a colt that has been broken.... In each instance there is power: a wind can become a storm; too much medicine can kill; a horse can break loose. But this power is under control." Warren Wiersbe, *Be Complete*, p. 114.

"It is the happy mean between too much and too little anger... A description of a gentle person might be: He/she has at the same time the strength and sweetness of true gentleness."—William Barclay. *Ibid.*

The lack of strength under control can cause serious damage in the church and the home—a passion, a character weakness, like a lack of gentleness can destroy many opportunities to be effective as a believer. We must deliberately put on gentleness.

These clothes are so attractive, but we are not through dressing yet.

Patience—we choose to be long-tempered and not be driven to cynicism, despair, insults, bitterness, wrath, or hurry sickness.

The short-tempered person speaks and acts impulsively and lacks self-control. It is not wrong to be angry or busy, for we can be angry and not sin—Eph. 4:26-27. We know

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anger can be a powerful energy of the soul when it is directed toward sin, but it is inappropriate to get angry quickly, at the wrong things and for the wrong reasons—Eph. 4:31. Patience reminds us again of the need to have our strength under control, to be long-tempered with those who irritate us.

Putting on Christ affects how we treat others. It is only in the working out of people's relationships with one another that compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience are worked out. The testing ground is when we have grievances against other believers.

Bearing grievances against others—we choose to put up with the "extra-grace-required" people and respond to them as Christ would.

Of course, that doesn't mean we don't confront others who sin against us—Gal. 6:1. Bearing with others doesn't mean we allow our lives to be in jeopardy. Turning the other cheek doesn't mean we are asked to be someone's regular punching bag, as an individual or as a nation.

The application of Jesus' instruction to turn the other cheek and this passage to bear grievances against others, in essence, means we show grace when possible and leave any retaliation to judges, the courts, the government. The judicial, legislative and executive branches of local and national government are to see that equity and justice are given to both victim and perpetrator. There is no reason for anyone to personally take the law into their own hands.

The courts are to dispense justice, to see there is an eye for an eye and no more—Ex. 21:22-29; Lev. 24:19-20; Deut. 19:19-20. For a more complete response to that question I have written about [how we should respond to an evil person](#) —Matthew 5:38-42.

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So in summary, we choose to put up with irritating people and respond to them as Christ would. We may have to correct or confront, but we still bear with them.

Forgive the sins against us—I don't bring up the matter with the person I have forgiven.

I choose not to be hysterical or historical. I do not gossip about it to other people. (In other words, I will not share with someone else the problem I have had with another person, nor the solution.) I do not remind myself of what has been forgiven! Forgiveness means I let it go. To forgive implies continual, mutual forgiveness of the problems, irritations and grievances that occur in the congregation.

By the way, forgiveness and forbearance are possible only if we do both at the same time. It takes forbearance to forgive; and forgiveness means putting up with offensive people. A whole lot of people live their whole church life holding on to things that irritate them and as a result, they miss all the good that is going on around them. They miss the joy of God's work because of an offense they will not forgive, and/or a person to whom they will not show forbearance.

This kind of situation is so sad! I see these people going from church to church—never happy, always carrying some grievance. Jesus offers a better way to live—to bear with and forgive one another. It is the new way of the gospel: let God worry about the wrongs you've suffered.

Please don't quench your life in bitter feuding; rather, live renewed in love and joy. In those times when your life is in danger or the law has been broken, appeal to the courts, the law of the land, or arbitration; but do not seek revenge. Leave that to God, for He will repay and ultimately right the wrongs.

We make an overall commitment to put on love.

3:14—*"And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect*

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unity."

This is the attitude that holds all the other qualities together. Love is like a belt that holds all the other qualities in place. To practice any list of virtues without practicing love will lead to distortion, fragmentation and stagnation. In any congregation, it is Jesus and His love that unifies the people and builds them up.

Love must be our highest priority.

What are the results if all these clothes are put on?

We're ruled by the peace of Christ.

Colossians 3:15—*"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful."*

Putting on all these virtues, with love binding them together (3:14), will lead to peace between individuals and among members in the local church. To live in peace will not mean we always agree with each other, and there will be no differences of opinion, but it requires we work together in spite of our differences. This kind of peace/tranquility can't come from mere human effort. God's help is required to enable people to get along, but how much easier it is to get along with people when they are exhibiting this list of virtues!

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Sometimes understanding what a word means helps us to know how to put it into practice.

Here's a picture of a player in a baseball game. Who is the most important person to this player right now? It is the person you can't see, the umpire behind the plate. *To rule* is an athletic term which means to

umpire

. The umpire is the one who has **the final say.**

The application question is, who makes the call in a hectic office, a busy home, a growing church, or a stretched student's life? Is it you, your emotions, the guy who irritates you, or the peace of Christ? Look at the verse.

What is the motivation for all of this peace? Besides the fact that everyone is exhibiting the character of Christ (vv. 12-14), verse 15 gives us three reasons why we need to let the peace of Christ be the umpire in our lives:

1. We are members of one body. We are not isolated from each other; we are joined together. If we hurt or mistreat each other we are inflicting pain on ourselves.

2. We have God's calling in our lives. God is calling us to peace. Are we going to answer the call?

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3. We have much to be thankful about. When Christian believers have an overriding attitude of thankfulness, and a constant gratitude in their hearts for what God has done for them, it is easier to live out the kind of life Paul is calling us all to.

We have here in Colossians a wonderful passage for times like these. It's very clear Jesus wants us to put off the grave clothes and put on the grace clothes and be ruled by the peace of God. It is only in these clothes that we will be fulfilled, and that the world will see Jesus. I urge you today to put on Christ and His whole wardrobe; there is real life in dressing like Him.

We will be all dressed up with somewhere great to go—all new in Christ!