

INTRODUCTION

I’ve never been very interested in clothes because I’m color blind. I discovered I was color blind in the first grade when I was using crayons to color a horse in a coloring book. As you know, crayons are labeled on the paper, but this particular crayon didn’t have any paper. I thought it looked like the color of a horse, so I used it. My first grade teacher chided me because she had never seen an orange horse before. She suggested to my parents that I might be color blind—and I am.

Being color blind can lead to some interesting experiences. For instance, when I was in college I was the guest preacher at a little church in Alabama. I didn’t realize I had worn one green sock and one brown sock that day. But as I sat on the platform, apparently everybody else in the church noticed it. After the service several people came up and instead of commenting on my message, they all said, “Did you know you had on one green sock and one brown sock?” Having realized immediately what I had done my answer was, “Sure. And I have another pair just like them back in my dorm!”

The Bible uses many metaphors to describe the Christian life. A common metaphor is the picture of taking off old clothes and putting on new clothes. That’s the imagery we find in this passage of scripture. However, don’t take the analogy literally. Clothes are simply external coverings and the Christian life is concerned more with internal change than in external coverings.

The first two chapters of Colossians teach us what to believe, and the last two chapters teach us how to behave.

Colossians 3:5-12. “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”

Every miracle of Jesus contains a parable and every parable of Jesus contains a miracle. In John 11, Jesus performs a miracle illustrating this spiritual truth of taking off the old clothes and putting on the new. It’s the story of Lazarus being brought back from the dead. Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus, sent word for Jesus to come when Lazarus was sick. Jesus delayed for several days, and Lazarus died. The disciples were baffled by this, and when Jesus finally arrived in Bethany, both sisters said to Him, “Master if you had been here my brother wouldn’t have died.” When Jesus saw their grief, and the grief of others who loved Lazarus, the Bible says Jesus wept with them.

With his eyes filled with tears, Jesus approached Lazarus’ tomb and gave instructions for the

stone to be removed. Martha objected saying, “Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been dead four days.” I always preferred the KJV phrasing, “He stinketh.” Jesus said, “Did I not tell you if you believed you would see the glory of God?” They rolled the stone away and Jesus spoke in a voice loud enough to raise the dead: “LAZARUS, COME FORTH!” I remember hearing a preacher say once it’s a good thing Jesus specified Lazarus by name, or else every corpse in the graveyard would have come back to life!

At the sound of Jesus’ summons, Lazarus came stumbling and hopping out of the tomb. In those days, corpses were wrapped in long pieces of cloth soaked in spices. When Lazarus came out of the tomb, he was still wrapped in those stinking grave clothes. He couldn’t talk, and he couldn’t walk. He had received life, but he still had a problem—those pesky grave clothes!

That’s the story I want to use to introduce this message. Lazarus had been given life when he was dead—that’s a picture of salvation. But he was still bound by those old stinking grave clothes. Many Christians today face the same problem. Jesus gives us life, but we still struggle with the stinking grave clothes of our old life.

In some ways, we’re like Lazarus. He was saved, but he still stunk. He was rescued but he was still reeking. He was energized, but he was still entrapped. He had life, but he wasn’t liberated. When we compare this story about Lazarus with our text in Colossians, we discover the importance of getting rid of those old stinking grave clothes.

I. THROW AWAY YOUR OLD CLOTHES!

Did you notice the clothing metaphor in verse 10? “Since you have taken off your old self.” When you became a Christian, you were delivered from the penalty of sin. In other words, you were forgiven and you will never suffer the penalty of hell. But while the penalty of sin is removed, the presence of sin is still a reality. Paul wrote this letter to believers who were still struggling with their old habits. Paul described his own struggle in Romans 7 when he said, “I find myself doing the things I don’t want to do. And I have a desire to do the right things, but sometimes I don’t.” He cried out, “Who shall release me from this body of death?” And then he says Jesus Christ is the only source of help. In this passage, he gives two lists mentioning eleven different sins Christians should throw away like old, dirty grave clothes. Paul identifies specific sins Christians should take off. He calls a spade a spade. I know a man who called spade a spade until he hit his foot with it—then he called it something else! We tend to speak of sin in general terms—especially sexual sins. But the Bible never blushes to mention sin by name.

(1) Destroy the old earthly urges

He wrote in Colossians 3:5: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.” The word for sexual immorality is *porneia*, from which we get the word pornography. Impurity means perverted sexual acts, lust means looking at someone and fantasizing sexual acts; evil desires are recurring thoughts about inappropriate sex. Isn’t it interesting the Bible adds “greed” to this list? The word is actually the word “covet.” Remember, the Tenth Commandment warns against coveting your neighbor’s house or your neighbor’s wife. You can covet property or you can covet a person.

Don't think idolatry is bowing down before a statue or a totem pole. Idolatry puts any property, pleasure, or person ahead of God. God doesn't want to be a priority in your life; He desires to be THE priority.

During the first century, sexual immorality was pandemic. Sexual relationships outside of marriage were widely accepted. When you read about the sexual indulgences of the Roman Empire, you can see the similarities with our 21st Century culture. God created sex as a good thing, and He gave everyone a sex drive. Sex is like a powerful river that must be kept within the boundaries of marriage. Like a river flooding its banks, whenever sex gets outside God's boundaries, there is always destruction and misery.

When I was a kid, Playboy magazines were hidden behind the counter. But today, anyone with internet access can find pornography with about three clicks of their mouse. There are more porn outlets in America than McDonalds. Chuck Colson calls internet pornography “spiritual crack cocaine” because of how quickly people get addicted and how harmful it can be. I know many Christian men struggle with porn—because some of them have enough guts to ask me for help. It's not just a problem for men. Studies have shown 20 percent of those visiting porn sites are women.

You may feel uncomfortable hearing about this, but the Bible addresses it, so we can't ignore it. If you struggle with the stinking grave clothes of pornography (or know someone who does) there is help for you. You can find help at www.xxxchurch.com. This site is a Christian ministry to help people break the addiction of pornography. The reason they call themselves “XXX Church” is obvious—they want their link to come up when someone types “xxx” into a search engine.

You may be feeling pretty self-satisfied right now because you don't struggle with those kinds of sexual sins. Well, buckle your seat belt because the next list may be just for you.

(2) Discard the old ugly practices

The next six sins are found in Colossians 3:8: “Rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other.” Anger is the word *thumos*, which means a seething kind of anger that builds up pressure below the surface. Rage is a violent outburst of anger—a temper tantrum. Malice means having anger in your heart toward another person. Slander is attacking someone's character, whispering behind their back—suggesting ideas that hurt someone's reputation. Filthy language? Just turn on your television and you'll hear profanity that would have curled your grandmother's eyebrows. Finally, the Bible says we shouldn't lie to one another. Most of these sins have to do with what we say or how we say something.

Isn't it interesting how quickly we condemn someone from the first list, but we give believers a free pass from the second list? Have you ever heard the suggestion someone wear a scarlet letter “A” if they loose their temper? We've established a double standard. God detests all sin. All sin stinks. God wants you to get rid of all of it!

Sometimes we try to excuse our sin because of our genetic background. But we can't do that. Look at verse 11: “There is no Greek or Jew, barbarian or Scythian, slave or free.” Why did he write that in the context of bad conduct? It's because we can't use our ethnic background as an excuse for our behavior. You can't say, “Well, I'm just Irish, that's why I lose my temper.” You can't say, “I'm Italian, that's why I lust after women.” You can't say, “I'm blunt, because my whole family is blunt.” No. We're new creatures in Christ.

It reminds me of a funny story I heard about a Chinese man and a Jewish man who were eating at the same café. Suddenly the Jewish guy got up and slugged the Chinese man. The Chinese guy looked at him and said, “Why did you do that?” The Jewish guy said, “That's for Pearl Harbor!” The Chinese guy replied, “Pearl Harbor? That was the Japanese! I'm Chinese.” The Jewish guy said, “Japanese, Chinese, Taiwanese, they're all the same to me.”

After a moment, the Chinese man got up and slapped the Jewish guy across the cheek. The Jewish guy said, “What'd you do that for?” The Chinese man answered, “That was for the sinking of the Titanic.” The Jewish guy said, “I'm Jewish, what has that got to do with the sinking of the Titanic!” The Chinese guy replied, “Goldberg, Feinberg, Iceberg...it's all the same to me!” We shouldn't make any distinctions because of a person's background.

II. CHANGE INTO YOUR NEW CLOTHES!

The Bible says the Christian life is like putting on a new, clean set of clothes. Imagine a little boy who comes inside the house after playing outside. He's sweaty, dirty, and muddy—and happy. He has that unique smell only little dirty boys have. His mother tells him to march upstairs and put on clean clothes before dinner. How do you think his mother would respond if he just put on his clean clothes over his dirty ones? In the same way, we must be taking off the old clothes before we can properly change into our new clothes—the new self.

I'll be saying a lot more about this in the next lesson on “Fashion Tips for the Well-Dressed Disciple,” but for now, let me share with you three things a change of clothing involves:

1. Change involves a conscious decision

Colossians 3:10 says, “put on the new self.” We are powerless to change ourselves, but we must at least be willing to change. We must make a conscious decision to take off the old and put on the new. When you got up this morning, you didn't just automatically find yourself dressed for church. You made a decision to take off what you slept in and put on what you have now. Are you ready and willing?

2. Change involves a continual process

It also says in Colossians 3:10 “being renewed in knowledge.” Being renewed carries the idea of something that doesn't happen instantly. The putting on of your new self isn't a one-time event. It is a process. You wouldn't dream of putting on a new set of new clothes and then wear them the rest of your life. Most people change clothes daily—some more often!

We can't really change ourselves; instead Jesus changes us from the inside out. Philippians 1:6 says, “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” Each of us is a work in progress. I saw a Christian lady once who had a lapel button with the letters PBPWMGIFWMY on it. I said, “What does PBPWMGIFWMY mean?” She answered, “It stands for: ‘Please be patient with me, God isn't finished with me yet!’” And God isn't finished with you either—it's a daily process.

3. Change involves discovering God's purpose for your life

God has a purpose in changing you, and you can find that purpose in Colossians 3:10: where it says, “in the image of its Creator.” When God first created people, He made them in His image. But sin and rebellion has marred that image. The purpose of salvation is to re-create us in God's image again. The reason God saved you was not to take you to heaven when you die. If that was the purpose of salvation the best thing we could do for a person who trusts Christ would be to shoot them immediately! No, God's purpose for saving you can be found in Romans 8:28-29: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose: (now we all know that verse, but don't stop there—keep reading to find out what God's purpose is!) For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son. God wants to change you every day and in every way to become more and more like Jesus. That doesn't mean you will *look* like Jesus, with a beard and long hair! It means your personality will become more like Jesus. That's what it means to take off the old clothes, and put on Christ.

CONCLUSION

Let's go back to our story of Lazarus and those stinking grave clothes. I've studied this story for years and even preached on it many times. But there is a powerful truth in this story I never noticed before. This week as I was praying over this message, the Lord gave me a new insight into a truth I had missed all these years. The Bible says in John 11:44: “The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” Can you how frustrated Lazarus was when he was all wrapped up in those old sticky, stinking grave clothes?

A lot of churches make a mistake: They expect you to clean up your life by yourself. They say, “When you get rid of those old grave clothes, and start looking and smelling like a REAL Christian, then we'll welcome you.” But the truth is we all struggle with those old urges and bad attitudes from our sinful nature. We need help. We can no more help ourselves than Lazarus could have extricated himself from his grave clothes.

Jesus could have exercised His divine power and Poof! The grave clothes would have disappeared miraculously. But I think He wanted to involve the other people in what He was doing. He said to those bystanders, “Loose him, and let him go!” And fortunately, there were people there who cared enough to get their hands dirty and obey the words of Jesus and help Lazarus remove those old grave clothes. And I'm quite certain there was someone standing by who quickly found a clean garment to put around Lazarus as well.

So, if you don't recall anything else from this message, learn the Lazarus Lesson: We all need help getting rid of our grave clothes—and God calls us to help free others and show them how to dress.

Here's God's message for you: If you're struggling with the urges of your flesh, or you find yourself consumed by anger and hatred toward others, then you need to get rid of those old clothes so you can put on those new Christlike thoughts and actions. But you can't get rid of those grave clothes alone.

That's why the church is so important. It's our job to do what those bystanders did to Lazarus—help you get rid of those old clothes so you can put on the new. Just this past week, several guys asked me to pray with them about sin in their lives. I didn't condemn them; I prayed for them and told them about our Celebrate Recovery ministry, and our GraceWorks Ministry. If you are struggling, find someone to help you. Find a trusted friend to pray with you and to hold you accountable.

But look at this truth from another perspective. Do you know a Christian who is still struggling in their grave clothes? Don't just stand by and let them suffer, or worse don't criticize or ostracize them. Jesus is telling you the same thing he told those guys standing next to Lazarus, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” (John 11:44). How should we treat people who call themselves Christians, but yet live like they were still wearing those old stinking grave clothes? We should love them and help them change clothes. The Bible says, “Brothers, if someone is caught up in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. Carry each others burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:1-2)

So, what is your need today? Do you need to be getting rid of some junk in your own life? You can't do it on your own. Reach out to Jesus and reach out to His servants. Do you need to be putting on the new life? Or who do you know that needs your help in being set free? But by all means, get rid of those stinking grave clothes!

OUTLINE

I. THROW AWAY YOUR OLD CLOTHES!

“since you have taken off your old self.” *Colossians 3:10*

1. Destroy the old earthly urges

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.” *Colossians 3:5*

2. Discard the old ugly practices

“rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other.” *Colossians 3:8*

II. CHANGE INTO YOUR NEW CLOTHES!

Change involves:

1. A conscious decision

“put on the new self.” *Colossians 3:10*

2. A continual process

“being renewed in knowledge.” *Colossians 3:10*

3. Discovering God's purpose for your life

“in the image of its Creator.” *Colossians 3:10*

The Lazarus Lesson:

We all need help getting rid of our grave clothes—and God calls us to help free others and show them how to dress.



DISCLAIMER: These messages are offered for your personal edification and enrichment. There is no legal copyright on this material. I have used many sources, and I have always attempted to cite any exact quotations. Any failure to cite a quote is simply an oversight on my part.

If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material to stimulate your own Spirit-driven imagination. Additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners. You have my full permission to use any of this material as long as you cite the source for any substantial amount used in your message.

If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes