

“Changing our Clothes”

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¹So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. ⁷These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. ⁸But now you must get rid of all such things-anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:1-14)

In one sense, our clothes are a necessity. Clothing is our first and most basic form of shelter, a functional defense against the elements. Clothes keep us warm in winter, cool in summer, comfortable in most other times.

But we all know that clothing is much more than that. For most of human existence, clothing has been a primary mode of expression -- a way for us to tell the world who we are, or perhaps who we want to be. Clothing can affect our mood and our feelings. It can make us braver, bolder, more hopeful. It can help us blend in or stand apart. It can be a source of shame or a source of pride. In fact, the expressive messaging of clothing has become so entwined with our sense of selfhood and identity that Mark Twain wrote this about clothing way back in 1905: “[One] realizes that without his clothes a man would be nothing at all; that the clothes do not merely make the man, the clothes are the man; that without them he is a cipher, a vacancy, a nobody, a nothing... There is no power without clothes.”¹

But, as is often the case when it comes to identity, the messages spoken by clothing can often be muddled and mixed. This can be an external confusion, as when the world interprets our clothing as saying something that we never intended to say. But the conflict can also be internal. We might wear something in the hope that it will make us feel a certain way, only to find that it didn't help that much. In one moment, we can be drawn to a sharp outfit in a store window, but in the same moment we can feel ashamed at why we get so worked up over -- and why we are willing to pay so much for -- something that shouldn't matter so much.

¹ Mark Twain, “The Czar’s Soliloquy,” https://www.jstor.org/stable/25105366#metadata_info_tab_contents.



Few people represent this tension better than the famous British intellectual and author Virginia Woolf. These days, the world of high fashion has elevated her to industrial sainthood for the way she would wax poetic about apparel. “Vain trifles as they seem,” she once said, “clothes have... more important offices than to merely keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us.”²

At the same time, Woolf's love of clothing was complicated. She even gave a label to her obsession with them. She called it “frock consciousness” – the keen awareness she had about what she was wearing and why. Frock consciousness was, for her, a paradox. There was something both pleasurable and horrible about how clothes made her feel... a perplexing tension between the public and private nature of clothing. One example of her frock consciousness is obvious in a particular entry in her diary. “This is the last day of June,” she wrote, “and it finds me in black despair... I sank into the depths of gloom.” The sole reason for this state of depression was that her brother-in-law had laughed at her hat.

“My love of clothes interests me profoundly,” she wrote later. “Only it is not love; what it is I must discover.”

This complexity behind the things we wear helps us to unpack this lesson from the letter to the Colossians, which repeatedly uses clothing as a metaphor for the way we can draw closer to the righteousness of God. The Greek word the letter uses is strong – we are to “strip off” the clothes we wear that are not honorable and pleasing to God. We don't just remove them – we cast them away, we “divest” ourselves from them, we “renounce” them, and we cast them away.³ And, once we have cast off the things that do not honor God, then we put on fresh new garments that do. The letter calls us to put on the clothing of a “new self,” clothing that is patterned after the image of God in which we are all created. As we do this, what are the things we take off of the rack? Compassion... kindness... humility... meekness... patience... the capacity to bear with one another in tough times... the capacity to forgive... and above all, love. We are to clothe ourselves with love. All of these things combine to be our ***uniform*** as disciples of Christ.

It's not complicated. In fact, it is very simple... perhaps deceptively so. Oh, if it were only that easy to just take off the things that hurt us or hold us back and toss them away into the dirty clothes hamper, and then to browse through the rack and pull something new, and fresh and beautiful off the rack – something that transforms our life into something cleaner, happier, and more useful. Can we imagine giving this simple advice to someone who struggles with addiction to drugs or alcohol... to the cancer patient who is running out of options... to the parent who feels like they are losing their child... to the person like Virginia Woolf who struggles with bipolar disorder and depression? Just change it into something better. It would feel almost cruel.

Even if we could swap out our identities so easily, there is still a vulnerability in the thought of taking off our existing clothes. They may not be great, but at least we know them. We all have those things in our closets that may not look that great... may not be completely in style... they may even have a few holes in them... but they have been with us for a while. They are well worn, soft, and comfortable. Wouldn't we be better off just sticking with the clothes we know, rather than taking the risk of exchanging them for new

² Lucy McKeon “Virginia Woolf, Fashion Influencer? She Might Not Have Hated the Idea,” www.vanityfair.com, posted February 14, 2020.

³ <https://biblehub.com/greek/554.htm>

ones that we don't know that much about? If something as small as a chuckle at a hat can send Virginia Woolf into a deep depression, let's not even think about what it would feel like to end up like the Emperor in that old story, getting taken in by someone trying to sell us a fancy new wardrobe, only to end up parading down the street in front of everyone wearing nothing but our nakedness. No thanks, I'll stick with the clothes I know.

And yet, this idea of changing our clothes can be a very healthy mental and emotional exercise. Just like an athlete visualizes the perfect kick, the perfect throw, or the perfect swing, or the perfect shot, we can visualize the act of removing a sinful, harmful, or broken part of our life – taking it off like we would a dirty sock or a stained shirt – and then replacing it with something clean and fresh. We all have some things in our lives that have been there for a long time... things that may have become comfortable and familiar but are not healthy and not good for us... things that are mean-spirited or foul... things that are corrupted or dysfunctional... things that are greedy or malicious or abusive. We know we would be better off stripping these off and tossing them away, but we know that work will be difficult, perhaps even painful. In these tough, embedded situations, we can begin by visualizing the act of stripping off those vices and putting virtues in their place, replacing our old ragged clothes with new, healthier garments. As Richard Bach, the author of the inspirational book *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, once wrote, *"To bring anything into your life, imagine that it's already there."*

It is actually a strategy that is repeatedly used in the New Testament. As Paul famously preached to the church in Philippi, *"whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."*⁴ Visualize what it is like to live a Christlike life, he said, because the more we imagine ourselves to be that way, the closer we get to actually living that way.

Back in the Middle Ages, an Englishwoman by the name of Julian worked hard at this kind of visualization. Living in the religious center of Norwich, she devoted her life to prayer and meditation. When she became deathly ill, many thought she would surely die. But it was during this period that Julian of Norwich received a series of powerful visions from God. Her writings on these visions became the first known work by a woman to be published in the English language, and their beautiful expressions of God's love have been treasured ever since.

Notably, some of her most memorable writing about these visions relates to clothing. More specifically, one of the ways she experienced the love of God was like clothing. *"[God] is to us,"* she wrote, *"everything that is good and comfortable for us: He is our clothing that for love wraps us, clasps us, and all-encloses us for tender love, that He may never leave us, being to us all things that are good, as I understand it... For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the whole, so are we, soul and body, clad in the Goodness of God, and enclosed."*⁵

⁴ Philippians 4:8.

⁵ All quotes from Julian of Norwich are from her work, *Revelations of Divine Love*, http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1343-1398,_Julian._of_Norwich,_Revelations_Of_Divine_Love,_EN.pdf

She then envisioned Jesus standing on the left side of God, who was seated on the heavenly throne. She took particular notice of the clothes Christ was wearing. At first, he appeared in the humble garb of a servant. "Outwardly," she wrote, "he was clad simply, as a laborer... ready for his toil." She thought it was odd to see the Son of God clothed in such grubby attire, garments stained with the sweat of his body, worn out, ragged and rent. "Of this I marveled greatly," she said, "thinking this... unseemly clothing for the Servant that is so greatly loved."

Then she saw Jesus miraculously transformed. "Now sitteth not the Son on earth in wilderness," she wrote, "but He sitteth in His noblest Seat... Now standeth not the Son afore the Father as a Servant... dreadingly, meanly clad, in part naked; but He standeth [now] afore the Father... richly clad in blissful largeness, with a Crown upon His head of precious richness."

The wardrobe of Christ had suddenly become radiantly new, and he had also changed position. "Now standeth not the Son afore the Father on the left side, as a laborer," she continued, "but He sitteth on His Father's right hand, in endless rest and peace... in the highest nobleness of the Father's joys."

But for Julian, the most surprising part of Christ's radiant new wardrobe was the crown he now wore on his head. "It was shewed," she wrote, "that we be His Crown." In this vision, those who sought Christ, followed Christ, and worked to emulate Christ in their living had become the most beautiful garment Christ had.

Again and again, the Bible compares the life of faith to an everyday experience known to all of us – the act of shedding off old, dirty clothes in exchange for fresh, clean ones. This commonplace action is given eternal importance, so much so that I mention it every time I preside over a funeral, when I share the truth of Galatians 3:27, that everyone who has been baptized into Christ has clothed themselves with Christ. Just as he exchanged the rough, ragged burlap of the suffering servant for the glorious robes of the Son of Man, so are we invited to envision our own transformation – the stripping off of the old, worn-out, rotten parts of our own wardrobe and the donning of a new kind of living.

Like it or not, the Bible pushes us to a certain way of thinking about clothes – a particular "frock consciousness" that every disciple is encouraged to try on for size. If we think Mark Twain had it right -- if the clothes really do make the person -- then it must also be true that a change of clothes can change the person.

We might agree that, without our clothes, we are nothing at all; but it is definitely true that, if we can work to strip off those things that are soiled and harmful and replace them with good, pleasing, righteous garments that honor God, we can really be something.

As Mark Twain says, as Virginia Woolf says, as Julian of Norwich says, but most importantly, as God says, "There is power in the clothes."

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**