

LESSONS IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

WHAT TO WEAR TO CHURCH

COLOSSIANS 3:9-17

I grew up in a church with a dress code. On Sunday morning, men and boys sported suits, and white shirts, and ties. *It was a clip-on tie for me.* That's about as unconventional as we got. The women and girls would wear dresses - or blouses and skirts.

We were a church in the Deep South, before the days of central air-conditioning. Everybody arrived early to grab a seat under a ceiling fan. The summer heat made the dress code especially oppressive for a young man 8-12 years old. My mom would dress me and my brother up - then march us to that torturous, hot cauldron of misery called "*church.*"

Even on sweltering days - on days when the dogs stayed under the porch - we'd observe the dress code. I recall sitting next to an open window... the ceiling fans buzzing like helicopter blades... our only relief were the paper fans on popsicle sticks provided by the funeral home. In retrospect it was great marketing by the undertaker. Everybody knew the odds were great that somebody would drop dead from heat exhaustion. We couldn't get home fast enough to shed our church clothes. It was the most spiritual we got - shorts and a T-shirt were a foretaste of heaven!

I grew up in a Fundamental Baptist Church - and trust me our church managed to keep all the *fun* out of *fundamental*. We were so conservative we saw the Southern Baptists as liberal. Ask a deacon what translation we used, and he'd assure you... "[The King James Version, that's the version the Apostle Paul read.](#)" We weren't accused of being too open-minded. But we were proud of that dress code. It was rigorously enforced. The big scandal that rocked the church of my childhood occurred when one of the ladies came to church on a Sunday night in a pantsuit! Aghast! Ladies wore skirts and dresses only... and the hemline never rose above the knee - never. After church, if the girls wanted to play softball with the boys they'd better not slide. It's a bad idea to slide in a skirt...

I'll never forget when the church put my dad up for consideration as a deacon. One old coot voted against him. In the interview he asked my mom if she ever wore short pants. She answered "[Sure, I always wear shorts when I clean the house.](#)" You would've thought she'd just confessed to prostitution. That was all that old goat needed to thumbs-down my dad. Needless to say dress codes were taken seriously in those days. I never actually saw it, but I heard of a preacher who mowed his lawn every Saturday - all summer long - in a suit. *It was holiness gone haywire.*

Here was the rationale behind our church's dress code... God deserves our very best. Never give God your leftovers - only the pick of the litter. So my mom went to the closet and pulled out the best clothes we had.

Understand, I believe in that basic premise... God does deserve our best. *Our best efforts, our best concentration, our top talents, our prime time, the first of our income...* I believe we should give God the best in lots of areas of life. *But how does this get translated into a fashion statement?*

Why did we think God cares about the clothes we wear? Garments last a few weeks. They're eaten by moths. They wear-out and shrink. They disappear from the fashion racks quicker than a Southern snowflake went it hits the ground. Trust me, the God we serve cares far more about *the content of our heart* than He does *the clothes on our back!*

When I look back in the rearview mirror of my life, the churches I attended judged people by *how they looked or seemed* on the outside. How did we miss Jesus' teaching when He told the hypocrites that to clean the inside of the cup was more important than polishing the outside? I remember the passage that set me free, 1 Samuel 16:7. When the Prophet Samuel went to anoint David as king, God told him, "**Do not look at his appearance... for the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.**" I read that and realized the Church should see people as God sees them. It doesn't matter *the length of your hair*, or *the clothes that you wear*, or *the pigment of your skin*, or *the tats on your shin...* it's what's in your heart that matters to God, and that's what needs to matter to His Church.

Sadly, I've been in churches that made coming to God too complicated. They put lots of stuff between God and people... *a haircut, or a wardrobe, or church attendance, or a political persuasion, or a preferred denomination, or a specific day to worship, or observing religious tradition..*

This is why our mission at CC has always been to make *coming to God as simple as God makes it* – and God has made it all about His grace! Just step over your pride, and trust your life to Jesus - *that's it* - the gate to God will swing open wide! *No pledges to sign – no rules to enforce - no passwords to memorize - no oaths to take - no courses to pass – no rituals to observe - no secret handshakes to learn - no dress codes to adopt...*

I can't tell you how many times over the years I've had people tell me, "**Sorry Sandy, I can't come to church... I don't have any church clothes.**" I hope the phrase "**church clothes**" gets lost from the vernacular.

CCSM *has always been and will always be* "**a grace place.**" Over the years we've had Hippies in tie-dyes... and Yuppies in Polos... and Bikers in leather... and Africans in dashikis... and Rednecks in overalls... all different stripes and types. Everyone gets welcomed at CC. God loves us "**as is.**" That's why we insist, "**come as you are.**"

Once, we had a beefy-guy - maybe 300 pounds. He came to church in a pair of worn-out overalls. That's it... bare chested, no shoes, *just overalls...* For years your pastor wore flip-flops to church. My favorite shirt was black with pink flamingos. My wife tried to burn it on a couple of occasions. One Sunday a guy walked in to CC wearing a T-shirt that read, "**Die Yuppie Scum.**" At the time Pastor James was our only yuppie. At first I was worried about his safety. Instead the guy got saved and was baptized.

I'll never forget my mom coming to CC on a Christmas Eve. Our ushers that night were a couple of really rough-necks who'd been gloriously saved by God's grace – *but they still looked and dressed like tough-guys...* Later, I asked my mom if she enjoyed the service? She said, "**It was lovely. But I wasn't sure if the ushers were going to rob me or seat me.**" God's grace takes people *just as they are*, and *right where they're at...* And as the Church, this is how we should relate to one another. If we want a real relationship with God - we'll start by being authentic ourselves.

In some ways the Baptist Church of my childhood was right - the Church does need a dress code. It does matter what you wear to Church. But in Colossians 3 we learn that our dress code has nothing to do with what we hang on our frame. It has everything to do with the attitude of our heart. Paul tells us what to “put off,” and the attributes to “put on.” Now that we belong to Jesus we should wear the attitudes worthy of a child of God. In fact, our text addresses not only *what to wear to church*, but *what to wear wherever we go*. Chapter 3 outlines, “[The Dress Code for a Christian](#).” Proper attire involves **our love**, and **our peace**, and **our praise**.

First Paul tells us what to “put off...” In verse 5 he lists **sexual sins** - like *fornication and evil desire*. In verses 8-9 he names **social sins** - like *anger and filthy language*... Let’s pick up Paul’s stream of thought in verse 9... “Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds...” This was part one of this new dress code – “put off the old man.” But now for part two... “And have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.”

The Christian life involves a new wardrobe. Like a runway model, we’re busy *putting off* and *putting on*. Shedding old attitudes and behaviors – slipping on new perspectives and practices. And here’s why, **a change occurs when a person becomes a Christian**. In Christ “the old man” is dead. That’s your **BC life**. That’s who were “before you came to Christ.” According to Romans 6 that old you was put to death on the cross with Jesus. *Say a few words over him and bury him. You’re better off without him. You’re now a new you!*

But here’s the problem, that old man had a closet full of clothes that he liked to wear – habits and attitudes that reflected his life apart from Christ. God has worked a marvelous, miraculous change in you, but here’s the change you need to make. You need a new wardrobe - *put off and put on*. When you hit the street in the AM what do you wear? Do you sport your old ratty lifestyle, or do you dress for success and wear a new attitude?

One year my son played on a soccer team that featured two Caseys - *one Casey was a boy, the other was a girl*. At first the Coach did nothing to distinguish between the two kids. He’d yell “Casey do this,” and “Casey do that.” Both kids went nuts! But it didn’t take long to resolve the chaos... The coach started shouting, “pass it Casey boy...” or “clear it Casey girl...” For the rest of the season he called “Casey boy” and “Casey girl.”

This is how you live the Christian life. You’ve got to learn who’s who. When temptation calls my name, or I hear an echo from my past - it wants the **Old Sandy** - but the **Old Sandy** is dead. He’s not taking calls. I’m the **New Sandy**. When I’m sure of that identity it changes how I respond. The idea of *putting off and putting on* is to know who you are in Christ. Adopt a new identity. Bury the old man, and see yourself as a new you!

After his conversion, early church father, Augustine, was walking down a street when he was spotted by a former lover, his mistress. She was excited to see him and approached him calling, “Augustine, it is I, it is I.” Augustine took off in the opposite direction, saying, “But it is not I.”

John Wayne was and is my all time favorite actor. And I love what he told a reporter, "When I take a role I play John Wayne regardless of the character I happen to be portraying!" Dress him up as a cowboy, or soldier, or firefighter it didn't matter – *John Wayne always played John Wayne*. The Old Duke knew who he was and he refused to be anybody else. This is "putting off" and "putting on." We need to know who we are in Christ and live accordingly - regardless of our *predicament* and *peers*.

And speaking of the new man, Paul says in verse 11, "There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all." There were teachers in Colossae who were spiritual elitists. They boasted of a special knowledge of God. Paul denies their claim. In Christ all distinctions - race, culture, status - get abolished. The ground at the foot of the cross is the flattest in all the universe. The cross of Jesus is the great leveler. We're all in the *same condition* needing the *same salvation*. "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling." At the cross everyone is on equal footing before God.

Paul says in verse 12, "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved..." If there's an elite group – it's those who are *in Christ*. We were chosen by God. We've been elected, *and we didn't know we were running!* Apparently, a vote was taken and you were elected into God's family... *Here's the bad news: you won by a single vote. But here's the good news: you got God's vote!* And He was the only person to cast a ballot. God now considers you "holy and beloved." I'm special in Christ. This is why when God calls my name He's shouting, "New Sandy, New Sandy!"

And this is where the Dress Code kicks in. If I see myself as that "New Sandy" I'll dress accordingly. I'll "put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering..." I'll "put on love." I'll treat other folks with the same love with which God has loved me. *And I'll do it for the right reasons*. Mark Twain once said of an acquaintance, "he was a good man, in the worst sort of a way." I hate to say it, but I've known a few folks like that. You can be a moral person with standards and convictions – but still be a pompous jerk. In fact, my rearview mirror is full of church-folk who would've never been caught smoking, or cursing, or dipping, or sipping – but they were hard and harsh people. They lacked compassion and love...

Understand, whenever virtue is sought for virtue-sake we end up self-righteous moralists. Recall the rich, young ruler, he kept all the rules, but there was something missing. Jesus didn't die just to make us moral. You can keep your nose clean, and not know God... When you make **humility** the goal, you can become proud of your humility. I know two Christian musicians who named their band, tongue-in-cheek, "The Fabulous Humble Brothers." They knew how elusive humility can be. The moment you become aware that you're humble, it disappears.

Understand, why we put on love... we do it for Jesus' sake and for the sake of other people, not to make ourselves prideful and self-righteous. Here's why we put on **tender mercies... because people are guilty...** The world is one big death row. Why show **kindness... because people are cruel...** Why walk **humbly... because people get down...** and we can't lift them up, or ease their load, until we get down under their burden. Why be **meek or gentle... because people are fragile**. Why be **longsuffering or patient** to one another... **because people require time**. Why **bear with one another... because people are different**. Why **forgive... because people sin**. Everyone of us needs forgiveness. When I seek to be humble, meek, patient, tolerant, forgiving - I'm not showboating an exemplary character. I'm not pinning on a badge that I can wear proudly and pompously. I just want to "put on" the love I've received.

So “*Put on tender mercies...*” Imagine people stranded alongside the road, and no one stops. No one cares but the Christian. “*Tender mercy*” is compassion. It sees needs and cares. It’s taking *your pain* into *my heart*.

And “*put on... kindness.*” This is “*mercy in action.*” With all our modern technology it’s so easy to live our lives vicariously. We see a need on television or the internet, and because we’re moved by it, we feel a relief. It may’ve eased our guilt, but it did nothing to effect real life... “*Kindness*” is an “*act of compassion.*” It’s a tenderness that touches.

Put on “*humility...*” Football coaches have a saying, “*Low man wins.*” The player who gets up under the other guy’s pads has the leverage. Even if you’re smaller, if you hit lower, you can move your opponent. And this is what the Holy Spirit is saying to us, “*Low man wins.*” You don’t help folks who are down, from the top of a soap box. You intimidate or infuriate from up there, but you help by coming humbly. Get under their burden and they’ll know you care – you’ll help carry their load.

Paul also tells us to treat each other with “*meekness*” or “*gentleness.*” *Meekness* isn’t *weakness*. It’s power under restraint. It’s a stock car with restrictor plates. Eager engineers would build cars so fast they would fly off the track, so NASCAR requires restrictor plates to slow the cars down. The goal is to limit wrecks and keep the drivers safe. This is why strength and boldness sometimes needs a restrictor plate. “*Meekness*” is throttled down strength. *People are fragile*. Humans break. If we get pushy, or in a hurry, or try to force our opinion on someone else we can cause damage. Without gentleness we run people over, and wreck relationships. Too many people have been wiped out by a pushy Christian.

Understand why gentleness is important. Gentleness promotes growth! Harsh environments and abrupt behavior are not conducive for saplings to take root. A living thing about to bud needs to be treated tenderly.

My wife enjoys plants. My son loves his mom. One year for her birthday Nick gave her a tiny tree for our front yard. Sadly, I wasn’t privy to the sentimental attachment my wife had for that tree... *until it was too late*. She planted it right in my mowing pattern. I saw it, but the sun was hot. It was humid. I had work to do. It didn’t register with me what it was. My yard is full of trees, why do I need one more? So you guessed it... I ran my lawnmower right over her tree. Crushed it – bulldozed it to the ground. If I lived in California the tree huggers would’ve thrown me in jail. And it would’ve been a light sentence compared to what I got from Judge Kathy.

But in my rearview mirror I’ve seen church leaders commit the same crime. They got busy. The pressure was on. They had a job to do. Someone got in the way of their ambition, and they bulldozed him over. Christians need to understand *the ends never justify the means*. It’s not just *what* we do for God that matters, but *how* we do it. Let’s not run each other over. Let’s show “*tender mercies, kindness, meekness...*”

And let’s be “*longsuffering*” or *patient*. *And why? Because people take time*. Spiritual growth takes time. God’s work in our lives produces what the Bible calls “fruit.” But fruit involves sowing, and then waiting, long before you reap. People grow not in “*my time*” or “*your time*,” but in “*their time*.” And sometimes it takes time for people to reach the right decision. Often they make the right decision only after they’ve made the wrong decision multiple times. That’s why we should never write anybody off.

I'll never forget a comment I heard from a fellow CC pastor who had spent his early years in another church. He said, "The denomination I was a part of had its prodigal children - so does Calvary Chapel. But in Calvary Chapel they come back because the kids know that they'll find grace." I've been a pastor now for 31 years, and there's one truth I've learned... "It ain't over till it's over." Yogi Berra was a prophet! The hound of heaven is tireless and relentless. He'll chase you down even if it takes some time.

We also need tolerance. As Paul puts it, "bearing with one another..." This doesn't mean tolerating a sin or heresy. It just means putting up with a person's humanness. All folks have their peculiarities – their quirks. One night, my wife and I accepted a dinner invitation from a couple new to our church. Afterwards, we were driving home, when I made the comment, "My, those were some really strange people." Kathy agreed. A few minutes later she started laughing. She said, "I'll bet they're sitting at their table right now saying, "My, that Kathy and Sandy Adams are some really strange people!" If the truth be known we're all a little weird.

It's easy to love the lovable. But Jesus loves the hard to love. He's not embarrassed by our awkwardness, or ashamed of our sordid past. Jesus is quick to call us His child. Jesus bears with us even on our grizzly days. And if we live out the love of Jesus we'll show the same tolerance. We'll be slow to criticize. We'll assume the best in others. We'll get that log out of our eye before we worry about the splinter in our brother's eye.

Paul also tells us, "And forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do." It would be one thing if Paul said, "forgiving one another..." and ended with that! There would be some wiggle room – maybe an exception or two. But he ups the ante exponentially with the phrase, "even as Christ forgave you, so you must also do." If Jesus is the measuring stick there's nothing we shouldn't forgive. We're to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Years ago some guys from our church went rafting down the Chattooga River. I had the bail bucket and was planning a splash assault on another boat. A water war was on the horizon, when one of my mates got hesitant. He was worried about making them mad. "Let's not make any enemies." And he was about to spoil the fun, when Tracy Waters straightened him out with his sage wisdom. Tracy said, "Ah, let's go ahead and drill them. They're Christians, they've got to forgive us." And he's absolutely right! If you're a Christian you have to forgive! Jesus left us no other option!

Then verse 14, "But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection." You could say that love is the material from which all the other Christian virtues are cut! It's the fabric of Christian fellowship. Love is the "bond" or "glue" that holds us together. Bring us all into the room to discuss politics or sports - and we'll splinter faster than cheap plywood - but focus on the love of Jesus and His grace will transcend all our differences. *We are loved* and *we love* from the same fountain.

The love of God produces the peace of God - in our hearts and among each other. But once it's experienced, verse 15, "Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful." When I look back in my rearview mirror here's what churches refused to do - *let peace rule*. The churches I attended were a war zone. There was always contention. Our peace was interrupted with opinions and prejudice. One night while our building was under construction, I came up to check on the progress. I found a fellow in prayer. He told me, "I just find such peace in this place." Church should be a place where God's peace rules.

The Greek word translated “*rule*” referred to a judge at an athletic competition. In essence, *the umpire*. Paul is telling us when decisions are too close to call – when it’s a bang-bang choice - *let the peace of God rule. Has God given us a peace over the matter? Are we at ease with the decision, or is there something still troubling us we can’t put our finger on.* Don’t ignore your uneasiness. If you’re restless, don’t pull the trigger. Let God’s peace umpire your decisions. Let His peace call it fair or foul.

The problem though with *the peace plan* is that it’s pretty subjective. There are times when we can deceive our own hearts. So along with God’s peace, “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom...*” Church is where *the peace of God rules and the word of Christ dwells!*

Every now and then I’ll have a guy say, “*Pastor Sandy, I’ve been praying about it for some time and God has finally given me a peace about divorcing my wife.*” And I can respond dogmatically, “*No He hasn’t! You don’t have a biblical justification. The Word tells you to love your wife.*” *True peace* comes from God, but a *false peace* is the work of the devil. It’s possible that you can be deceived. God will never give us a peace to do what He’s forbidden in His Word. That’s why – along with “*the peace of God*” we need “*the word of Christ.*” Our new attitudes and values should be informed and shaped by the Word of God – not just a personal peace.

Then Paul adds, “*teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*” Here’s something else to wear to church – a passion to praise God. Where the *peace of God rules*, and the *word of Christ dwells*, the *praise of God rises up*. We’ll sing to God. We’ll sing with grace in our hearts. I attended church for years, and sang *hymn* after *hymn*, but never did I direct my singing to *HIM!* I mouthed lyrics, and hummed tunes, but it wasn’t directed to God. I never sang with grace in my heart. I knew little of grace.

When you attend church I hope your heart is decked out in praise! We sing “*psalms*” or Scripture songs. We sing “*hymns*” – anthems about God’s glory and greatness. And “*spiritual songs*” – choruses that express our heart for the Lord. All three song types can be part of our praise. I love how Peterson paraphrases the end of verse 16, “*singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.*” He renders it, “*Sing, sing your hearts out to God.*” Here’s a way to put on the new you - “*sing your heart out to God.*”

And don’t think that praise is confined to a few songs on Sunday AM. This is what I overlooked for so long in my life. You can turn your sports, or job, or exercise, or talk, or chores – *whatever you do, whenever you do it, turn it into an act of worship* – direct it to God! Rather than complain about your job – *you can turn work into worship by doing it unto the Lord!* You can load trucks for Jesus... and handle customers for Jesus... and do landscaping for Jesus... and manage spreadsheets for Jesus... Verse 17, “*And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.*” That’s pretty comprehensive – “*in word or deed.*” Every thought, every activity, every conversation – whatever it is – you can use it to praise the Lord Jesus.

Here’s the Believer’s wardrobe... *love, unity, praise.* As a new creation in Christ let’s dress for success... Treat each other with “*tender mercies...*” Let *the bond of love*, and “*the peace of God,*” and “*the word of Christ*” unite us... Then turn all we do and say into praise... When you come to church – and all throughout the week as you go out to be the church - let’s “*put off*” the old treads, and “*put on*” the new you!