

What Not to Wear

Colossians 3.1-11

Scripture reading: Matthew 22.1-14

Have you ever turned up for a function inappropriately dressed? There aren't many things more embarrassing than that – you can feel everyone noticing you and laughing inside.

A few months ago, Emmanuel Baptist Church had a grand dedication service for its new building. I, along with the other pastors in the AFBC, was invited to be at the service as an honoured guest. Because the service was on a Saturday, I thought the service would be informal, so I wore a business casual outfit – open collared shirt, light coloured jumper.

Guess what – it was a formal occasion. All the other pastors and many in the congregation were wearing dark suits. So there I was, seated in the front row with the other pastors – dark suit, dark suit, dark suit, bright jumper, dark suit, dark suit. I felt like I was wearing neon.

Have you ever felt that way? Underdressed for an occasion? Or perhaps you came overdressed – like the student at school who forgot that it was mufti day and turned up in her uniform while all the other students were wearing what she would have chosen to wear if she had remembered.

It is no fun being inappropriately dressed. Standing out in a crowd in shame.

So how should you dress for eternity? This is a critical question, because as we heard in our Scripture reading earlier in the service, those who dress inappropriately are not even permitted inside.

Sermon in a Sentence: You cannot appear before the Lord as you are; you must be changed.

Paul gives three considerations to ensure we are dressed appropriately for eternity. Each of these three guides us to know what we must not be clothed in when Christ appears. Remember: You cannot appear before the Lord as you are; you must be changed.

1. The Place (vv 1-4)

The location of an event gives clues to the dress code. If a function is being held at the Opera House – how would you dress? What if the function were at Maccas in St Clair?

Verses 1-4 tell us about the place where every true believer in Jesus Christ must be. This place is both a location and a state of mind.

A. A Location

Colossians 3:1 (NKJV)

¹If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, **where Christ is**, sitting at the right hand of God.

The word 'if' is best understood to mean 'since'. Paul is addressing these thoughts to the churches at Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis – converted Christians. So the sense of this verse for truly converted Christians is 'since you have been raised with Christ, seek those things which are above' and the reason is because that is where Christ is. Location.

There are four essential locations for Christ, and a true believer identifies with all four. These four are the cross (crucifixion), the empty tomb (resurrection), heaven (ascension), and the earth (second coming of Christ). Paul makes reference to all four locations in this part of Colossians.

Cross

Colossians 2:20 (NKJV)

²⁰Therefore, if **you died with Christ** from the basic principles of the world, why, as *though* living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—

We must identify with Christ in His crucifixion. The problem at Colossae (and in Sydney) is that people bypass the cross and attempt to get to God by their religious regulations – do this, don't do that, keep the sacraments, do good deeds, pray the Rosary, and maybe, just maybe, you'll convince God that you belong.

But Paul clearly rejects religion. Why? Because our sin is so bad we could never atone for it with good works; and because Jesus Christ already atoned for it once-for-all at the cross. To add our own effort to His perfect work is to subtract from the truth.

So the first location where we must identify with Christ is the cross – clothing ourselves in humility as we admit the horror and hopelessness of our sin, and claim the cleansing and deliverance of His cross by faith.

Empty Tomb

The second location of essential identity with Christ is in His resurrection.

Colossians 3:1 (NKJV)

¹If then **you were raised with Christ**, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.

Paul puts this in the past tense – it has already happened. Therefore, he is not talking about the believer's experience of the last resurrection, but about our experience of newness of life – our liberation to do the right thing for the right reason. We no longer have to sin. We can choose to love and to serve and to rejoice because Christ's resurrected life is in us now.

Heaven

And that brings us to the third point of this identity – Christ's ascension. This is implied in verse 1.

Colossians 3:1 (NKJV)

¹If then you were raised with Christ, **seek those things which are above**, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.

At this moment, Christ is in heaven sitting at the right hand of God. By identity, we are there, too. This is our location – and this location has a specific dress code – and we'll talk about that later.

Earth

The fourth point of identity is inferred from verse 4.

Colossians 3:4 (NKJV)

⁴When **Christ *who is our life* appears**, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

This is the second coming. When Christ returns to earth to reign, all true believers will come with Him.

So let me summarise . . . Paul is saying true believers identify with Christ in four locations: His crucifixion (admitting sin and accepting atonement), His resurrection (living in freedom and hope), His ascension (our location), and His second coming (our anticipation).

Our location in Christ is currently above.

Therefore, we dress in keeping with the location. But what is it we dress? Our minds. The place is not only a location, it is also . . .

B. A State of Mind

This is described in verses 2-3.

Colossians 3:2-3 (NKJV)

²**Set your mind on things above**, not on things on the earth. ³For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Are you aware that your mind is a battleground? If you don't fight to keep your thoughts in the right place – 'on things above' – you will certainly go astray . . . ⁷For as he thinks in his heart, so *is* he . . . (Proverbs 23:7 NKJV).

That is why the Lord commands in verse 2 that you must 'set your mind' . . . and why we read such strong language in verse 5 'put to death' and in verse 8 'put off all these'.

If you are a converted Christian, God holds you responsible to control your mind; to clothe your mind with the right thoughts.

So what have you been thinking about lately? Have your thoughts focused on things above? Or things on the earth? The first is described in Philippians as

⁸. . . whatever things are true, whatever things *are* noble, whatever things *are* just, whatever things *are* pure, whatever things *are* lovely, whatever things *are* of good report, if *there is* any virtue and if *there is* anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. (Philippians 4:8 NKJV)

The latter is also described in Philippians:

Philippians 3:19 (NKJV)

¹⁹ whose end *is* destruction, whose god *is* their belly, and whose glory *is* in their shame— who **set their mind on earthly things**.

If your thoughts are often drawn to your belly; your appetites – that is, what you crave, what you are not getting – or to your glory; your acclaim – that is, who’s giving you attention or who’s standing in your way – then your mind is set on the wrong thing.

Be aware that there is no excuse for poisonous thoughts . . . because as verse three says, true believers are dead to vain thinking and alive to heavenly thinking.

Colossians 3:3 (NKJV)

³ For **you died**, and **your life is hidden** with Christ in God.

Every day, there are thoughts you and I must reject. When they pop into our minds, we must say by faith, ‘I died to sin with Christ, and I live with Him in the heavenlies . . . I will not think this way.’

The latter part of verse three is reassuring to us. The idea that your life is hidden with Christ speaks of power and security.

John MacArthur writes, “This rich expression has a threefold meaning: 1) believers have a common spiritual life with the Father and Son (1 Cor. 6:17; 2 Pet. 1:4); 2) the world cannot understand the full import of the believer’s new life (Rom. 8:19; 1 Cor. 2:14; 1 John 3:2); and 3) believers are eternally secure, protected from all spiritual enemies, and with access to all God’s blessings.”¹

You cannot appear before the Lord as you are; you must be changed. Knowing the place helps us know what we must be changed out of. Our place is with Christ in heaven. We dare not be there with a mind clothed in lustful, covetous, or spiteful thoughts.

That brings us to the second consideration for what we are not to wear:

2. The Protocol (vv 5-10)

God has a specific protocol for our thought life. In verses 5-10, Paul lists ten inappropriate thoughts that we must put off – these are all earthly in orientation. He groups these in sets of five – the first set has to do with sexual purity; the second with social purity.

A. Sexual Purity

Do you know what your most important sex organ is? It is your mind. Never let your mind be clothed in lustful thoughts.

Colossians 3:5-7 (NKJV)

⁵ Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: **fornication, uncleanness,**

¹MacArthur, J. J. (1997, c1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed.) (Col 3:3). Nashville: Word Pub.

passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, ⁷ in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.

Let's consider these five inappropriate thoughts.

1. **Fornication** is the Greek word *porneia*. It refers to any kind of sexual sin – that is, unmarried people having relations with one another, whether that is intercourse or simply touching. It also includes pornography – which comes from the word *porneia*.
2. **Uncleanness** goes beyond normal sex to encompass evil thoughts and intentions as well (see note on Gal. 5:19; cf. Matt. 5:28; Mark 7:21, 22; 1 Thess. 4:7).² When people clothe their minds with lust, they tend to go deeper and deeper into it – seeking stronger thrills. This can lead to accepting some things that one time they would have thought were repulsive – such as homosexuality, bestiality, even paedophilia.
3. **Passion** is the physical side of lust – the fleshly cravings.
4. **Evil desire** is the mental side of lust – the impulses and fantasies.
5. **Covetousness** is the state of always seeking more; never being satisfied.

God calls all of these things idolatry because impure thoughts crowd God out of our minds and drive our bodies to do things that are despicable. This, in turn, invites the wrath of God.

Are you indulging in impure sexual thoughts? Put them out of your mind every time they come up. Make deliberate decisions not to go places or be around people or access media (movies, music, internet) that will stimulate those thoughts.

In this our society gives us no help. We are immersed in a contradictory standard – free sex, but no exploitation of women or children. Yesterday, the Sydney Morning Herald contained an article arguing that prostitutes should be classified as therapists and compensated through Medicare. It called prostitution an honourable profession.

But the truth is that sexual expression is a deeply personal and vulnerable gift that God created exclusively for marriage. All expression outside of marriage – whether that be actions, words or especially thoughts – always hurts. Paul says elsewhere that this is the only sin we commit against our own body (1 Corinthians 6.18).

On top of this, the wrath of God is reserved for this horrible sin.

How's your sexual purity? If you are violating this protocol, don't think that you can hide it. Be sure your sin will find you out.

B. Social Purity

²MacArthur, J. J. (1997, c1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed.) (Col 3:5). Nashville: Word Pub.

Colossians 3:8-10 (NKJV)

⁸ But now you yourselves are to put off all these: **anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language** out of your mouth. ⁹ Do not **lie** to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, ¹⁰ and have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him,

This part of the protocol has to do with how we relate to other people. Be careful not to let your mind be clothed in any of these:

1. **Anger** is a strong spirit of dislike or animosity, a vengeful spirit, a settled feeling of hatred.³
2. **Wrath** extends to violent outbursts.
3. **Malice** is wicked conduct intended to harm another person – such as their reputation. John MacArthur calls it the ‘damage done by evil speech’.
4. **Blasphemy** in this case is not referring to God, but to another person. It is thinking and talking about a person in dehumanising terms. When we label a person as an idiot or a tyrant, or when we slander a person to another, we blaspheme.
5. **Filthy language** is just what it says – lewd, offensive, vulgar. A Christian should never use profanity, and should never talk dirty.

Are you meeting this protocol? Do you actively put out of your mind, and away from your mouth, these socially damaging thoughts and words?

At this point I want to warn you against a dangerous belief many people have. That is this: ‘My thoughts don’t matter as long as I don’t speak them. So I feel no responsibility for the spiteful thoughts I have against another person . . . because when I see them, I speak politely to them. They have the problem, I think, not me.’

But there is a not-so-funny thing about thoughts – they always tend to come out. Maybe not in our words, but in our attitudes, demeanour and actions.

More than this, God knows all of our thoughts, and He holds us accountable. Imagine standing in a crowd before the Lord and having all your thoughts exposed. Would your mind be inappropriately dressed? Do you have some thoughts you need to put off? Does your mind need to be reset on heavenly things?

Again, do not think that you are okay if your thoughts are never verbalised. That is what verse 9 calls lying – if you think you can have angry, malicious and dirty thoughts and hide those from other people and God, you are deceiving yourself.

³MacDonald, W., & Farstad, A. (1997, c1995). *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments* (Col 3:8). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

The only solution is to come under God's authority and declare that the old man is put off – killed at the cross – and intentionally be clothed with the new man that verse 10 says is renewed in knowledge – the purity of Christ.

You cannot appear before God as you are; you must be changed. We have seen the place – heaven (Are you dressed appropriately for it? Your mind set on heavenly things?). We have also seen the protocol – sexual and social purity (Are you renewing your mind daily with the knowledge of Christ?). We now consider the third and final key.

3. The Proviso (v 11)

Colossians 3:11 (NKJV)

¹¹ where there is neither **Greek** nor **Jew, circumcised** nor **uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free**, but Christ *is* all and in all.

This is quite a list. Greeks were civilised philosophers. Jews were the chosen people of God. Scythians? A nomadic people who were the most hated and feared of all barbarians. Many people considered them animals.

But God considers Greeks, Jews and even Scythians equally. All hopeless sinners. And, post-conversion, all heavenly saints.

So the proviso is that there is no excuse for being inappropriately dressed for eternity. Christ is all and in all. The secret is having Christ.

Do you have Christ? Have you put your trust in Him alone for salvation?

Beyond this, are you living daily in submission to and in dependence upon Christ? I warn you that it does not happen automatically. You must seek Him every day. You must be disciplined according to His law of love every day. You must intentionally put off your old sinful thoughts and put on your new sanctified thoughts.

When you sin, confess it. When you are tempted, reject it. When you are weak, pray about it.

But don't make excuses. Because Christ is all and in all. That is the proviso.

You cannot appear before God as you are; you must be changed.

A few years ago, I was in Thailand for a training conference. I joined a tour group to see the famous Doi Suthep Buddhist temple on a mountain overlooking Chiang Mai. It was a hot day, so I wore shorts and a t-shirt.

That was a bad idea. I didn't realise it, but the temple has a dress code. No-one is permitted unless their arms and legs are covered. Because I was inappropriately dressed, I had to wait outside while the tour group went inside. How embarrassing.

Heaven has a dress code. It isn't about jeans and t-shirts or dress and skirts. It is about our minds.

Is your mind dressed appropriately for the place – heaven? Is your mind dressed appropriately according to the protocol – sexual and social purity? Is your mind dressed appropriately without making excuses, in keeping with the proviso?

Romans 12:1-2 (NKJV)

¹I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. ²And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.