"NEW CLOTHES"

TEXT: COLOSSIANS 3: 12-17 CEB

12 Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. 13 Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. 14 And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 The peace of Christ must control your hearts—a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people. 16 The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 17 Whatever you do, whether in speech or action, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus and give thanks to God the Father through him..

MIKVEHS & BAPTISM

Paul tells us to "*put on* compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." The imagery is literal—like putting on a garment—which is intentional. In Romans 13, Paul says we put on Christ and clothe ourselves with a new nature, a new being. This refers, in part, to Jewish baptisms, or *mikveh.*

For the Jews, the mikveh were ritual purification baptisms by which one purified him-or-herself. They would step down steps into water and back out again as a sign of renewal and changed life. Every soul *needs* and longs for this kind of renewal.

We find all around the Holy Land ancient mikveh uncovered and revealed. Among the Essenes, these purification baptisms took place several times a day. In some instances, one might put on a new, clean garment upon exiting the water as a sign of new life, cleanliness, and renewal.

If you've ever been particularly grungy—spent a day in the garden, on a farm, or on a beach day with the junior high group—you'll also know the exquisite pleasure of taking a shower at the end of it all and putting on clean clothes. That's a lot like the mikveh at the skin-deep level. But mikveh also stood for special blessings—for moments where one's life is legitimately changed and reformed—the kind of change you can never undo even if you wanted to.

Is this mikveh the same thing as Christian baptism? Yes and no, with some significant differences which we must name to understand how Paul means putting on these virtues.

Unlike the mikveh, Christian baptism—like the baptism of John the baptizer—was never solo. Unlike a mikveh, you couldn't baptize *yourself*—it required someone else to baptize you. This makes baptism necessarily relational and communal, not merely personal. Also, Christian baptism was issued only *once*, not repeatedly. Judaism had a kind of baptism for converts to Judaism—that was a once-for-all baptism. Christian baptism is like that. We die to self once and for all, and take on the new identity as ones who belong to Christ for life. The sacrament is made effective by God, not by our felt experience of the event. Boomers, Busters, and Xers made hay over this—getting re-baptized because "I was just a baby and don't remember it and didn't *experience* it"—but this is an error because baptism is neither legitimized nor authorized by personal experience. Rather it is the promise of God that we trust.

In Christian baptism, we put on Christ, and rightfully can put on new garments as Paul tells us.

Compassion

The Greek word for compassion is an ugly word: *splangxna*, which means intestines. Paul tells us — quite literally — to put on intestines. Whaaat?

Gut feelings — we know them. Do we experience compassion this way? The English word comes from the Latin *com-passio*, literally "to suffer with" another. The Greek word for intestines may be close to "suffer with," but it may mean much more as well.

Why do you think the ancients associated compassion with the gut? We don't know exactly why, but it takes very little imagination to capture the sense of it. What happens to you — I mean in your body — when you witness a tragedy? Have you ever visited an emergency room? Ever watched an intern sew up an open wound with needle and thread? If you're healthy, you get a certain feeling, and yes, it might feel like something is happening in your intestines.

I used to be okay with heights. I've climbed Half Dome a couple of times and scaled a couple of steep peaks in Colorado. But today, if I so much as watch a video of Russian teenagers playing at the top of a construction crane, or see photos of young people shooting selfies at the top of El Capitan, my gut goes into panic mode. That feeling — like your splangxna would like to jump out of your body through your mouth — is a kind of suffering with.

What is it in us that makes us go all gooey if we see, say, a black widow crawling on another person's hand? The correct word is *empathy*, and you and I are absolutely hardwired for it.

The word empathy may be a superior translation of splangxna — guts, intestines — because in empathy we not only suffer with others in their tragedies, but we rejoice with those who rejoice, laugh with those who laugh, and share a full array of emotional states with those we empathize with.

Paul tells us to "put on empathy" just as we would a toga, robe, or shirt. We are to put on empathy in the way a soldier puts on armor; it is our equipment — our equipping for life as Christians. There is nothing we do — no work we perform, no play, no worship — without first donning compassion, empathy, sympathy, gut-feeling.

I think people agree that compassion is a good thing, and empathy a necessity that enables us to bond and connect as families, villages, communities, and nations.

One rather remarkable field of research that has grown legs in the past twenty years is Social Cognitive Neuroscience. Using brain-scanning technology (MRIs), we can see which parts of the brain fire up during most any activity. A couple of the more amazing findings threaten to reshape all of Western philosophy and politics.

Research began by testing the human brain through all types of activities — working, playing, sorting, calculating, and so on — but the really interesting thing happened when they started measuring what brains do when not engaged in any meaningful task at all, when the mind was "at rest" or otherwise relaxed and disengaged. What they found is that nearly 90% of our brain work is social. When not otherwise engaged, all our thinking is about other people. We are primarily, basically, social.

We are hardwired for empathy, and empathy is our basic human coping mechanism. The implications are enormous: human life is not primarily motivated by the will to power, but by the need to belong. Power is not the central human drive; belonging is. What would a world look like whose main motive for public thought and action was empathy? What if we were to replace all the language of power with the language of belonging? We are on the edge of great changes, and we would do very well to heed the text and "put on empathy" as our primary garment as we make our way forward.

Limits of Compassion

Though we may put on compassion, we may need to ask whether there are limits to showing or acting on it. I think we can easily name ways people justify not acting with compassion.

1. The Justice Rationale

The dark side of justice is that it can lack compassion. Justice can be about getting even, about making someone pay. It can satisfy victims' vengeance and right past wrongs in purely economic terms. We hear it in certain phrases:

- "It's their own fault."
- "They made bad choices."
- "It's what they deserve."

2. The Achievement Bubble

This may be an extension of the justice rationale, built on assumptions about the world being a difficult place — which it is:

- "We've *earned* our place!"
- "They don't even try."
- "It's a hard world, and it's the law of the jungle."

This law-of-the-jungle mentality grows from Darwin and promotes survival of the fittest. The problem is that when you're one of the fittest, the unfit can start to feel unworthy of your best attention and help. Again — the death of compassion.

3. Fear and Ignorance

Some avoid the garb of compassion out of fear and ignorance — fear of getting involved, fear of being taken advantage of, fear of personal loss. All of it robs us of compassion and empathy. Ignorance, too, keeps us at a safe distance from people in need who ought to feel that they belong. We hear it in phrases like:

- "I don't care to be around that kind of person."
- "I just wouldn't know what to say."
- "I don't feel safe."

These, and more, are a normal part of our resistance to compassion. But giving in to them actually places us at odds with our true, human nature, which is empathy.

At an Inklings meeting, a discussion between C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien resulted from a newspaper article describing the horrors of death and starvation in Biafra. Tolkien asked, “Are we even designed to feel compassion over such distances?” It is a fair question and we shouldn’t think of it as cold or uncaring. Today, starvation and every other manner of human need can be presented to us live on our phones *via* live-feeds. I see someone in India begging on the street. Should I care? Yes, in my *heart,* but what can I do practically? Tolkien’s question puts perspective on something critical: God created us in these bodies and puts us in a particular place so that we can be the compassion of Christ *where we are put.* It is no mistake that we are to love *our neighbor* as ourself. This is to say our primary responsibility is to our immediate environment. We are *utterly* responsible for our family, friends, neighbors, and the strangers who cross our path on any given day. That is our primary calling. We don’t want to be the guy in the parable of the Good Samaritan who passes by the beaten man because he is hurrying to attend a *Feed the World and Bring Peace* convention.

Even so, neither we nor Tolkien should argue against feeling compassion on a world scale. We shouldn't spend so much energy trying to avoid compassion. We should argue for the expansion of compassion, not its limitations.

Whatever limits our compassion, our love, and our service in Jesus’ name is the enemy of faith, hope and love, and we should be vigilant to stand against and overcome every such obstacle.

Boundless Compassion

Christian love — *agapé* — can't be defined by the limits of compassion. We should rather think of love as boundless compassion, compassion with no limitations whatsoever. That is godly, that is Christlike love. When we exercise boundless compassion, we're formed into people characterized by virtue rather than consuming self-interest. Paul lists some of those virtues — we've already discussed these, so I'll keep them brief.

Kindness. Attitude matters. Kindness is rooted in empathy, as are good manners. We do well to practice both.

Humility. We surrender our advantage rather than living in fear that someone may take advantage of us. If someone wants to take advantage of our kindness, we'll give it to them willingly. That's love.

Gentleness. Again, this is not so much a soft touch as it is doing what is most noble and excellent. As sons and daughters of God, we should act like the royalty we are.

Patience. The word is "long-suffering." We endure, carry on, and endlessly seek to serve rather than be served.

Boundless compassion looks like even more than this, but these virtues are fruit borne by those who have put on compassion and live by their empathy more than by their need for power, control, prestige, or all the kingdoms of this world.

Limits Without Limiting Love

Here's the catch: compassion can become its own kind of danger if we're not careful. Psychologists have started using the phrase "toxic empathy" to describe something real — not a reason to care less, but a warning about *how* we carry care. It happens when we over-identify with someone else's pain to the point that their crisis becomes our crisis, their emotional weather becomes our emotional weather, and we lose the boundary between helping and drowning. The symptoms are physical as much as spiritual: exhaustion, burnout, a stress response that never turns off. Compassion, unmanaged, can consume the very person trying to give it.

So does that mean we should love less? No. But it does mean we need to understand something about how boundless compassion actually works in a bounded life. Here's the truth: giving ourselves away is easy. Almost anyone can do it. What's hard — what takes wisdom — is giving ourselves away *one person at a time*. We are not infinite. We cannot carry everyone's grief simultaneously, feel every stranger's crisis in the news at full volume, and still have anything left to offer the person standing in front of us. Boundless compassion isn't a command to be everywhere for everyone all at once. It's a posture we bring, fully, to whoever is in front of us *right now*. Then the next person. Then the next. Christ himself didn't heal every sick person in Judea in one afternoon — he touched the leper who was there, fed the crowd that had gathered, wept at the tomb of the friend he'd come to see. One at a time. That is how boundless love survives contact with a finite body.

When we put on compassion — rather than the more popular alternatives — we wear the new life in Christ, acting out the best characteristics and proving ourselves to be followers of Christ. †