

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 12, 2020**

DRESS FOR SUCCESS

Colossians 3:5-14

Four months ago, when we last met as a church family for Worship in this building, we were in the midst of a series of messages on Paul's letter to the Colossians. Now, on the first Sunday with some of you back in the church building for Worship, I want to go back to Colossians, because I believe God has some very important and practical things to say to us through Paul in his letter to the church in Colosse. What Paul says to those believers then and there is every bit as relevant to God's people right here and now in the year 2020 – a year that seems unlike any other we have ever lived through. So, let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word. For those watching on YouTube, the words will be on your screen. For those here in person, the words are printed in your bulletin.

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It feels good to have some of you back in the Sanctuary for Worship today. Preaching to a television audience with a team of fewer than 10 persons physically present in the church building is a strange experience – as it is for all of you who are accustomed to coming to church, who enjoy being together with our church family, when you are prevented from coming to worship and grow, to sing and pray, to laugh and cry and hug as you spend time with one another.

Some of you were ready to come back and resume meeting together for Worship. I'm so glad to see you all here today. Some of you aren't ready to come back to in-person Worship yet. That's okay! I get it. I hope the time will come soon when the plague of the coronavirus is completely behind us and it is safe for all of us to meet together without fear.

Those of you who are physically present at church today know you are taking a risk. Despite our best intentions, preparations, procedures, and guidelines, there is a risk that you could somehow contract the coronavirus while you're here at church. There is a risk that someone here today has the coronavirus and doesn't know it.

So, those of you who are here in person are taking a risk. As a church, we are taking a risk by resuming in-person Worship in the church building. Our prayer, of course, is that no one will contract or spread the coronavirus as a result of meeting together for Worship. But we know it could happen. And we don't take it lightly, which is why we encourage all of you to make the decision about coming back to church that is best for you.

Life itself consists of one risk after another. You take a risk every time you get into a car or plane or train. You take a risk when you go to the grocery store. You take a risk when you go skydiving and when you sit down in a chair. The risks are different. But both involve risks. You take a risk when you trust another person who might just let you down or betray your

trust. You risk getting hurt when you allow yourself to love and be loved. Faith itself is a risk. As a follower of Jesus, you trust that He has taken care of the problem of your sin and guilt before God. As a Christian, you live by faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). You believe the Bible to be the Word of God, breathed-out by God, unerring, invested with God's authority, the final and only infallible rule for faith and life. You believe it, even if there are things in it you don't understand. You trust that the promises of God are true, even though you can't yet see the fulfillment of all His promises. As God blesses you, you bring children into the world – a world filled with dangers, toils, and snares, pandemics, pain, violence, and uncertainty – even though you don't know how their lives will unfold. You do it because you believe children are a blessing, a gift from the Lord to be embraced and cherished. But you have no guarantees about how life will turn out for them. Or for you. Life is full of risks.

Some of us are more comfortable with risk-taking than others. Coming back to church is not nearly the risk for some of us that it is for others. Everyone's circumstances are unique, because each of us is uniquely made by God. What God brings, or allows to come, into one person's life is different from what He designs for another person. For some of us, it is too risky to come to church at this point. Others of us are ready to take the risk. What is essential is that we act wisely and humbly, and, as Paul writes in Romans 12:10, that we "be devoted to one another in brotherly (and sisterly) love" and "honor one another above (ourselves)."

Whether here at church in person or watching at home (or somewhere else) on YouTube, we are all one family of believers. You matter to God. You matter to me. You matter to our church family. We need to continue to reach out and come along side one another in the different circumstances and challenges we're facing. We need to make sure our attitudes, opinions, and words are laced with grace, so that we don't fall into the trap of thinking and living like the world around us. God has placed us *in the world*, for sure. We are *in the world* to be a witness to it, to shine the light of Jesus and His love into the dark places that exist in so many hearts, homes, and communities. But we are not *of the world*. We are different from the world and its values and ways of doing things. One of the ways we show that we are not *of the world* is by the qualities that mark our lives as belonging to Jesus. This is what Paul talks about in Colossians 3.

Before jumping into that, though, I want to tell you about my very first experience of donating blood. I told you last Sunday I might tell you about it today. I have always been needle-averse, so the idea of being voluntarily stuck with a needle has never appealed to me. Maybe some of you can identify with me. My guilt caught up with me, though, when I was a student at Princeton Seminary (please don't hold it against me!) in the early 1980s.

When I heard the Seminary was hosting a blood drive, I was really conflicted. Because of my feelings about needles, donating blood was something I did not want to do. It was a risk I did not want to take. On the other hand, what kind of spiritual leader (which is what I aspired to be) wimps out of the responsibility to do something to benefit others in the name of Jesus? I felt like it was something I *had* to do, in order to prove to myself and to others my creds as a future pastor.

So, I signed up and showed up. The experience was a breeze. It wasn't painful. It didn't take long. I felt fine. After giving my pint of blood, a volunteer led me to the canteen where I sat at the end of a table and had some crackers and juice. I felt really proud of myself.

Then, suddenly, everything went dark. When I regained consciousness, I was on the floor, surrounded by blood drive volunteers trying to coax me back to reality. Without warning, I had passed out, fallen and hit my head on the hard floor. The impact opened a gash above my left eye, which took several stitches at the ER of the Princeton Medical Center to close.

Talk about embarrassing moments! Talk about humiliating! I don't know if it is recorded anywhere in the annals of Princeton Theological Seminary (I hope not!), but it is forever etched in my mind. It was one of those jarring moments that remind me, if I ever forget, that I am not such hot stuff. It helps me not to think more highly of myself than I ought – though, the truth is, I still often think more highly of myself than I should. Pride is a most difficult, perhaps the most difficult, dragon to slay in our lives. As I said last Sunday, I don't think God is interested in *humiliating* us. But He is absolutely interested in making us *humble*. He wants us to learn *humility*. Most of us are slow learners. I am.

I *did* give blood again, in case you're wondering. Many times. And I never passed out again. Not because I am so great or so spiritual, but because God is merciful and kind, and He is able, more than able, to accomplish what concerns me today and to handle anything that comes my way.

Donating blood was a risk I believe God wanted me to take, trusting in Him.

In these trying and tumultuous days, with no end to the plague of COVID-19 in sight; with social, political, and racial unrest dominating the news; with tempers flaring and people acting out their frustrations around the country; with a never-ending parade of tragedies in the news; with opinions all over the map about when and how to re-open segments of our economy, and when and how to re-open our church buildings; one of the risks (one of the steps of faith) I believe God wants us to take as His people is to live our lives on purpose – intentionally – by cultivating and demonstrating the qualities that set us apart as followers of Jesus.

Paul describes it in these verses in Colossians 3 as a matter of taking off the “clothing” of a sinful, selfish, self-centered, abusive way of life that puts ourselves and our desires at the center of the universe, and then putting on the new clothes of a Christ-like, God-honoring lifestyle, marked by the qualities that marked the life of Jesus Himself: things like compassion for others, kindness, humility (walking humbly with God, as Micah said, which, if our humility is sincere, will result in our walking humbly with one another), gentleness, patience, bearing with each other, forgiveness, and over and under and around and through them all, love – the kind of love Jesus had and has for us.

Paul's classic delineation of the fruit of the Spirit is in Galatians 5:22-23. There are a lot of parallels between what Paul says there and what he says here in Colossians 3. I like to think of this passage in Colossians 3 as another “fruit of the Spirit” description. The two listings of the fruit of the Spirit are not identical. But they are complementary. They fit well together.

Perhaps you know the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 from memory: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5:22-23).

To say there is no law against these things is a huge understatement, isn't it?! How in the world could anyone have anything against love, joy, peace, and the rest? But, you know what? In this crazy, mixed-up world of ours, there *are* people and groups who seem to be opposed to many of these virtues, especially if these qualities are exhibited or promoted by Christians. We can either give up, and adopt the ways and attitudes and ideas of the unbelieving world, which is on display pretty much everywhere these days. Or we can be different for Christ's sake. We can put on the clothing of a Christian character. We can dress for success in the eyes of God, not the world. We can engage the world with the fruit and weapons of the Holy Spirit, instead of getting sucked into the strategies of the world that grieve the heart of God.

Here is Paul's list again from Galatians 5:

- Love
- Joy
- Peace
- Patience
- Kindness
- Goodness
- Faithfulness
- Gentleness
- Self-Control

In Colossians 3, the list includes:

- Compassion (feeling deeply for others)
- Kindness (Galatians 5:22)
- Humility
- Gentleness (5:23)
- Patience (5:22)
- Forbearance
- Forgiveness
- Love (5:22)

Four of the eight qualities in Colossians 3 are also in Galatians 5.

While Paul describes these qualities as spiritual fruit in Galatians 5, here in Colossians he uses this analogy of clothing. He spells out in specific detail the kind of clothing we are not to wear. You could call verses 5-9 the “What Not to Wear” section, except that it is more than this. It is not merely “What Not to Wear.” It is more like “What to Get Rid Of,” “What to Throw Away,” or even more radical, “What to Burn.” Even if you never intend to wear them again, you must not keep them hanging around in the closet of your heart. No way! Just having them in your wardrobe puts you in spiritual danger. You are to put them to death, as

Paul says in verse 5: “Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly (sinful) nature.” In verse 8, he says: “You must rid yourselves of ...” these things. There is no place for them in your lives as followers of Jesus.

Here is the “put to death” list in verse 5:

- Sexual immorality: The word Paul uses is *porneia*. We get the word pornography or “porn” from it. But it is really a broad term that applies to sexual immorality of any and every kind. You know as well as I do that there is a pandemic of *porneia* in the world today. You and I are to have absolutely no part in it.
- Impurity
- Lust: The Greek word *pathos* in this context means “passions” that are out of control.
- Evil desires
- Greed (or covetousness), which Paul says, is a form of idolatry.

As Paul makes clear in verse 6, God takes all these things seriously. They are not incidental or insignificant sins. It is “because of these things” that “the wrath of God is coming” on those who practice them.

The “get rid of” list in verses 8 and 9 include these:

- Anger (by which Paul means *unrighteous* anger, which is what most, but not all, anger is)
- Rage (there is a lot of it these days)
- Malice
- Slander (literally, blasphemy)
- Filthy talk (that demeans people and is full of profanity)
- Telling lies (to and about one another)

These things may all be characteristics of the world in which we live, and it may be easy to let your frustrations and hurts and disappointments and worries about the present or the future pull you down into the gutter of these feelings, actions, and talk, but Jesus calls us to reject them all in His name and power.

When my time on earth is up, I don’t want to be remembered as someone whose life was characterized by things like anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy talk, or dishonesty. I don’t want to be or to be known as someone who engaged in *porneia* or sexual immorality. I don’t want to be or to be known as someone whose life is epitomized by greed or lust or any other attitude that brings grief to the heart of God. I’m sure the same is true for you.

I want to be and to be known as a man who dresses for success in the eyes of God – a man who, as a sinner saved by grace, with undying gratitude to God for His grace and love, daily, consistently, happily dresses in the wardrobe God has picked out for me, so that others see in me a reflection of the compassion, humility, kindness, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness (grace), and love of Jesus Himself.

Isn't that what you want in your life, too?

It is a risky way to live these days. But this is one risk that is absolutely worth it. This is what the world needs today. And the church, too.

Let us, in the name and power of Jesus, dress for spiritual success in the eyes of God. Let us, in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, cultivate these qualities and put them into practice in all our dealings with one another in the family of believers and with others in the world who may see Christians as the enemy. Let us not play by the world's rules or embrace the world's ideals. Let us be different from the world for the sake of Jesus. Let us hold fast to Jesus and let His love be the distinguishing mark of our lives. It is a risk worth taking.

Lord, let it be so. To the glory of Your name. Amen.