

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 19, 2020**

**WHATEVER YOU DO**

**Colossians 3:12-17**

I told you last Sunday about the first time I donated blood. It was one of the most embarrassing, most humiliating moments in my life. Here is another of my life's most embarrassing moments.

It took place when I was in junior high – 7<sup>th</sup> grade to be exact. It happened in gym class. My PE teacher was Mr. Johnston, but everyone just called him “Coach.” Over the years, he had coached baseball, basketball, and track. He also coached a physical fitness team that competed every year in a competition sponsored by the Marine Corps. For several years in a row, the team from my high school won the competition. I was never a candidate for Coach's physical fitness team.

The other thing to know about Coach is that he was a former Marine. I don't know if he was a drill sergeant or not, but he sure acted like one. One of our units in PE every year in both junior high and high school was military marching. He taught us how to march in unison. We would march in the gym. We would march outside in the school parking lot. Coach had the tough, gruff demeanor of a Marine. Underneath, though, there was a soft place in his heart. If you could find it.

During the winter of my 7<sup>th</sup> grade year, we had a unit of gymnastics in PE. We had the usual equipment – high bar, rings, horse, parallel bars, balance beam, and mats. One day – it may have been the first day of our gymnastics unit, I don't remember – I was on the high bar. Nothing fancy, we were to just swing back and forth, and then dismount. The only instruction I recall was to make sure you had your thumbs underneath the bar as you gripped it with your hands. It was made absolutely clear that you couldn't have your thumbs over the top of the bar. Your thumbs had to be underneath the bar, or else you would likely lose your grip and slip, potentially leading to injury when you dismounted.

I didn't realize how important it was to have the proper grip. It didn't seem like a big deal to me. I don't think I was being intentionally rebellious. I just didn't think it was important. So, what did I do? I gripped the bar with my thumbs on top of it. You know what happened? As I swung back and forth, I began to lose my grip. When I tried to dismount, I lost my balance and put my right hand down to try to cushion my fall. The result? A broken wrist and instant pain. As I am lying on the mat, writhing in pain, Coach Johnston hurries over to me and starts yelling: “What's the matter with you, Smith? Why didn't you listen to me? I told you to put your thumbs underneath the bar!” No compassion. No expression of concern about my pain. Just a lot of yelling. At least that's how I remember it.

I suffered the pain and inconvenience of a broken wrist, and the embarrassment of having done a stupid thing and becoming an object lesson in front of a bunch of my classmates.

The obvious lesson in this, boys and girls, is to always, *always* put your thumbs underneath any bar you're swinging on or just hanging onto. A less obvious lesson, perhaps, is to follow the instructions of your teacher or coach or parent or anyone in a position of authority, even if their directions seem unimportant to you – unless they tell you to do something you know is wrong in the eyes of God. There was no good reason for me not to follow Coach's instructions. I was just careless. And I ended up with both a broken wrist and a bruised ego.

Still, a little compassion from Coach Johnston would have gone a long way.

Compassion is one of the qualities with which we are to clothe ourselves as followers of Jesus (Colossians 3:12). It is one of the items of clothing "in the wardrobe God has picked out for (us)" (3:12, *MSG*).

Let's look at these qualities, this spiritual wardrobe, in the larger context of what Paul says starting in verse 5. As we saw last Sunday, there are old behaviors, old attitudes, old ways of thinking and doing and speaking, that we are to "put to death" (3:5). We are to kill off everything connected with our old way of life that was (or is) really a way of death. That includes sexual sins of every kind. Ours is not the first generation or culture to make an idol of sex. Though it may have been more hidden, the obsession with sexual autonomy is as old as the Bible. We are to have nothing to do with sexual sins. We are to put to death greed, covetousness, and the lust for more of whatever it is that we desire. We are to put away every sin related to anger and malice. We are to be done with them. We are to be done with lying to or about one another. How can you have a relationship built on lies? Instead, we are to speak the truth to one another in love (Ephesians 4:15). Grace is to be the hallmark of our conversation (Colossians 4:2). There is no conflict between truth and love, between truth and grace. But truth devoid of grace and love will never bring about the redemptive, righteous purposes of God.

Part of our problem is that too often we do not see ourselves as God sees us. We tend to view the sins of others as more serious than our own. We compare ourselves to others and we do it in a way that makes us come out looking pretty good. We judge other people by their actions, but we want to be judged by our intentions. In not seeing ourselves as God sees us, we do not take our sin seriously enough. Most of us, I think, are willing to tolerate a certain level, or a certain kind, of sin in our lives, because, after all, no one is perfect, right? The Bible, though, says that if we are in Christ – if we have been made spiritually alive through faith in Him – we have died to sin. Too many of us, though, can probably identify with the comic strip character who said: "I've never really died to sin ... but I did feel faint once." Feeling faint is not what God desires. He wants us to renounce our sin. All of it. Even as we continue the struggle to overcome our sins in the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

We are also to be done with sins of prejudice that only serve to divide and foster mistrust and hostility. Paul says in verse 11 that in and through faith in Christ, all of the distinctions that have been used to divide people have been removed. Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing. As Paul says elsewhere (Galatians 6:15), neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything. It doesn't matter where you're from. It doesn't matter what color your skin is. It

doesn't matter what your native language is. It doesn't matter what you do for a living (unless what you do is immoral and contrary to the revealed will of God in the Bible, or unless you do your job in an immoral way). It doesn't matter how rich or poor you are. It doesn't matter what neighborhood you live in. It doesn't matter if your political views are conservative, moderate, progressive, or socialist. It doesn't matter if you have a different view than others about wearing or not wearing a mask. What matters, says Paul – what matters more than any of these and more than all of them combined – is Jesus. When he says in verse 11 that “Christ is all,” Paul means that Christ is all that matters. Being in Christ is all that matters. Knowing Christ as Savior and Lord is all that matters. Loving Christ is all that matters. Living under the sovereign and grace rule of the Lord Jesus Christ is all that matters. Jesus is the foundation, the fountainhead, the source and goal of our life, faith, and unity. In His death on the cross, Jesus has erased all the sinful divisions that once separated and segregated people from one another. It's not about us. It's about Jesus. But it does have real-life implications for us.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy (set apart) and dearly loved by God, we must not allow any sinful divisions or racial prejudice or feelings of superiority to remain in our hearts. Or in the church. Or in our relationships and interactions in the course of daily life.

The word “therefore” at the beginning of verse 12 is a very important word. You know what it's there for, don't you? It's there as a bridge between what Paul has just said about how not to live, about the sins we need to put away, the sinful attitudes, ideas, habits, and behaviors that we have to get rid of (even if it takes the rest of our lives to get rid of them), and what he says about the new way we are to live as followers of Jesus, about the new clothes of a Christ-like character we are to put on.

These new clothes are necessary because we have a new identity in Christ. We are, as it says in verse 12, “God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved.” Can it get any better than this? You have been chosen by God, in His free and gracious choice, to be included in His family. Chosen by God to be adopted as His son or daughter. You did not choose Him. He chose you. He chose you before the foundation of the world, long before you were conceived in your mother's womb, and He set you apart. That is the meaning of the word “holy” in this context. Set apart by God and for God. You are dearly, infinitely, eternally, and unconditionally loved by God. Nothing you do or don't do will ever change God's love for you. It is a gift of grace from a grace-giving God.

Now, says, Paul, because this is who you are; because your identity is rooted and lodged in Jesus Christ; because you are chosen by God, set apart and dearly loved by Him, you must dress in the clothing that properly reflects your identity and life as a follower of Jesus.

All the qualities Paul names in verses 12-14 are embodied by Jesus. If you want to see compassion in action, look at Jesus. If you want to know what true kindness and humility look like, look at Jesus. If you want to see the essence of gentleness and patience, look at Jesus. If you want to see someone who bears with all kinds of people in all kinds of situations, if you want to see someone who embodies forgiveness, look at Jesus. If you want to know what real love is – the kind of love described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 – just look at Jesus.

Compassion. Kindness. Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Forbearance. Forgiveness. Love. These are indispensable items of “clothing” in the spiritual wardrobe of every Christian. And every church.

Do you know what word is not included in this list? The word “nice.” Not that there is anything wrong with being nice. You should be nice to others. When you go on a trip you hope to have a nice time. The basic meaning of nice is agreeable, or pleasant, or satisfactory.

I did a search for the word “nice” in the Bible. It didn’t take very long. Know what I discovered? The Greek word for “nice” is not found in the New Testament. In fact, the word nice does not occur in the NIV translation of the Bible at all. It would not be nice to say that being nice is never important or appropriate. The Bible does not endorse being un-nice to others. But niceness can be just a shallow veneer covering up unsavory thoughts or attitudes.

Check out these life lessons Dave Barry says he learned along the way:

1. Never, under any circumstances, take a sleeping pill and a laxative on the same night.
2. If you had to identify, in one word, the reason why the human race has not achieved, and never will achieve, its full potential, that word would be *meetings*.
3. Never lick a steak knife.
4. A person who is nice to you, but rude to the wait staff, is not a nice person.  
(Source: Dave Barry, “Things It Took Me 50 Years to Learn”)

Don’t settle for being just a nice person. True compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, along with a spirit of forbearance and forgiveness, all bound together in the fabric of God’s kind of love, are much richer and more enduring than just being nice.

Jesus wants us – you and me – to dress ourselves in these spiritual qualities every day. When these things get woven into the fabric of our lives, the life and love and heart of Jesus for one another and for the world will be evident. It will be on display. And it will make a difference. *The church* will make a difference. *We* will make a difference. *You* will make a difference.

In the best sense of the word, “pity” is a synonym for compassion, which, in its essence, means to come along side and share in the pain and suffering of another. Eugene Peterson distinguishes between pity (or compassion) and self-pity this way: “Pity is one of the noblest emotions available to human beings; self-pity is possibly the most ignoble. Pity is the capacity to enter into the pain of another in order to do something about it; self-pity is an incapacity, a crippling emotional disease that severely distorts our perception of reality. Pity discovers the need in others for love and healing and then fashions speech and action that brings strength; self-pity reduces the universe to a personal wound that is displayed as proof of significance. Pity is adrenaline for acts of mercy; self-pity is a narcotic that leaves its addicts wasted and derelict.” (Peterson, “Earth and Altar,” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 32, no. 13.)

Self-pity, if left unaddressed, can destroy your soul. Compassion is a means by which God can use you to touch the life of another with healing and hope. And to show the compassionate heart of Jesus.

I could have used some compassion from Coach Johnston the day I broke my wrist. Maybe there is someone in your life who needs compassion. I'm sure there is, because the truth is that everybody needs compassion.

We didn't even get close to making it to verse 17 today, but that's okay. We'll come back to it next Sunday. We can still take verse 17 and apply it to the spiritual qualities we have named. Verse 17 says: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

*Whatever you do*, clothe yourself with a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. *Whatever you do*, bear with one another and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. *Whatever you do*, forgive (as freely and fully) as the Lord forgave you. *Whatever you do*, don't do anything or go anywhere without the all-purpose, all-season, all-weather garment of love. For, as Jesus said, it is by our love for one another that the world will see and know that we belong to Him (John 13:35). *Whatever you do*, do it all in the name of Jesus and for His glory.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.