

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 9, 2020**

**WHATEVER YOU DO (3)**

**Colossians 3:12-17**

I'm going to spare you another "embarrassing moment" story today. Not that there aren't more moments I could tell you about; there are. Maybe I'll tell you more another time.

Today I want to jump right into our text from Colossians 3. You may think we're spending an inordinate amount of time in these verses. Maybe so. But I think what Paul says in this passage is of extreme importance if you and I are to be the kind of people God wants us to be as His "chosen people, holy (set apart) and dearly loved" (3:12), and to live the kind of lives that bring joy to the heart of God.

As we have seen before, Paul uses the analogy of a person's wardrobe – the clothes you have in your closet or dresser – to describe the qualities of a Christ-like character God wants you to put on and to exhibit as you go through your life each day.

Some of you, I know, are NASCAR fans. It's OK to admit it. Anyone who follows NASCAR knows that every car, along with every driver's fire suit, is covered with the names and logos of advertisers who want their businesses and products to be identified with the success of the drivers they sponsor. You can see the same sort of thing in professional golf as well. From hats to gloves and shirts and shoes, golfers are walking advertisements for the companies that sponsor them.

In a totally non-commercial way, Jesus wants you and me to be walking, breathing advertisements for Him. He wants your life and mine to reflect the qualities of His character as we go about the business of living each day. That is what Paul is talking about here.

Whether you dress according to the latest trends or like the Amish, whether you wear hand-me-downs or always have new clothes, is not what Jesus is concerned about. What He is concerned about is that you and I reflect His heart in our attitudes, conduct, and relationships. Not because we have to prove ourselves worthy of His love or deserving of a place in His kingdom, but because we are already the recipients of His grace. Because of what He has done to save us and to shower us with His Fatherly love. Because of what Jesus has done for us, says Paul, this is the kind of people you and I are to be. Because of God's amazing love for us, this is how we are to live. This is the spiritual clothing we are to put on as followers of Jesus in this world.

Got that?

We have talked so far about compassion, kindness, and humility – the first three items of clothing Paul lists here in Colossians 3. These are not the only qualities God wants us to cultivate in our lives. From there Paul adds to the list gentleness, patience, forbearance,

forgiveness, and love. From there he goes on to speak of the peace of Christ (15), the place of the word of Christ and the worship of Christ (16), and the central role of thankfulness (15, 16, 17), so that whatever you do, you are to do it all in the name of Jesus and for His glory (17).

To glorify God (and enjoy Him forever) is, of course, the chief end of life. It is the purpose for which you and I were made. We glorify God when we incarnate and live out the qualities of a Christ-like character. Given the shape the world is in today, with all the crises we are experiencing and all the uncertainties we are facing, with all effects of the coronavirus, with widespread civil unrest and all the incivility in politics, with terrible tragedies like what took place in Beirut this past week, the need is as great as ever for Christians to live like believers, to put on the clothing of a Christ-like character, and to embody these qualities in all the relationships and responsibilities of daily life.

### **GENTLENESS**

So, in addition to compassion, kindness, and humility, let us put on *gentleness*. Gentleness is not the easiest quality to define. The dictionary equates gentleness with kindness and tenderness. There is a lot of overlap between them. Too often the world equates gentleness with weakness. But it is not so. Gentleness was a characteristic of Jesus (Matthew 11:29), but do not try to tell me that Jesus was weak. Gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach at UCLA (whom I actually met once, when he came to speak at Grove City College when Mary Sue and I were students there), said he learned from his father, while growing up in Indiana in the 1920s, that “it takes strength on the inside to be gentle on the outside” (quoted in Robert Morgan, *Worry Less, Live More*, 30).

Gentleness doesn’t make you weak. It doesn’t make you a wimp. It doesn’t mean you’re not strong. It means your strength is under control. You don’t act like a bull in a china shop. You don’t act like you’re the most important person in the room. You don’t act like your opinion matters more than anyone else’s. Gentleness is the opposite of arrogance (which makes it an expression of humility). It is the mark of a person who gives special consideration to the rights or needs or feelings of others (Curtis Vaughan, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11, Ephesians – Philemon, 215). Just like Jesus.

Paul tells Timothy to pursue gentleness, along with righteousness, godliness, faith, love, and endurance (1 Timothy 6:11). Elsewhere, in Ephesians 4:1-2, he says that to live a life worthy of our calling in Christ, we are to “be completely humble and gentle;” we are to “be patient, bearing with one another in love.” In Galatians 6:1, he says that if any of us gets trapped in a sin of some kind, those who are spiritually mature are to restore him or her – how? -- with gentleness. There is no room for a holier-than-thou kind of attitude, because “there but for the grace of God go I.” Any one of us can get trapped in a sinful habit or attitude at any time.

1 Peter 3:15 says that we are to be bold and confident in our witness, but how we do it is as important as actually doing it. Listen to Peter: “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have (in Christ). But do this’ – how? – ‘with gentleness and respect.”

How you speak to others – how you speak to your children, to your parents, or to your husband or wife; how you speak to your sisters and brothers in Christ; how you speak to your neighbors, to your employees or co-workers; how you speak to the clerk at 7-Eleven or Wal-Mart or Giant – is as important as what you actually say.

Proverbs 15:1 says: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” *The Message* paraphrase says: “A gentle response defuses anger, but a sharp tongue kindles a temper-fire.” The way you speak can either stir up anger, or it can defuse anger. It can start a fire, or it can prevent a fire from starting.

Someone said that 90 percent of the friction in daily life is caused by the wrong tone of voice (*Leadership*, Vol. 1, No. 4). I don’t know if that’s exactly true. But it’s true enough. The wrong tone of voice can produce a huge volume of friction. To paraphrase Richard Halverson, former Chaplain of the US Senate, we should use words like seeds, not bullets.

Speaking truthfully to and about one another is essential (Ephesians 4:25). Speaking truthfully is necessary if we are to live in fellowship with God and one another. We are to tell the truth, of course, in love (Ephesians 4:15). With gentleness and respect and a concern for the well-being of anyone to whom or about whom we speak.

Gentleness may not seem as important as some of the other items in our spiritual wardrobe, but it is a quality everybody needs.

## **PATIENCE**

The next item in the wardrobe of a Christian is *patience*. Like gentleness, patience is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). It is an evidence of the Holy Spirit’s presence and sanctifying work in your life. For most of us, it is the most difficult – or one of the most difficult – qualities to cultivate. It is an attribute of love itself, for, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:4, “love is patient.”

The essence of patience is putting up with difficult people or difficult situations without grumbling or allowing resentment or bitterness to take root. It is about putting up with hurts or wrongs we have suffered without seeking retaliation.

You know as well as I do that being patient – with yourself, with your circumstances (like the coronavirus pandemic), or with other people – can be really hard. Really hard. A Dad was at the grocery store with his 2-year-old son. The little boy was strapped in the cart. But he was not happy. He was fussing, he was irritable, he was crying. Whenever he could reach a shelf, he would pull down boxes or cans and throw them out of the cart. Through all of this, Dad seemed to be unruffled. His demeanor was very calm. As he went up and down the aisles, he spoke softly: “Easy now, John. Keep calm, Johnny boy. It’s all right, John.”

A woman who observed all this was impressed by his attitude. She said: “You really know how to talk to an upset child – quietly and gently.” Then she bent down and said to the little boy: “What seems to be the trouble, John?”

“Oh no,” said the father. “You’ve got it wrong. He’s Henry. I’m John.”

(Adapted from John Huffman, ‘The Fruit of the Spirit Is Patience, [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com)).

Whether or not you have young children, you may find this kind of self-talk helpful. Even better, talk to God and ask Him to cultivate this fruit of patience in your life. The danger in praying for patience, of course, is that God usually answers it by putting us in situations we would rather not be in, in order to give us the opportunity to cultivate it.

God is patient. If it were not so, if God were not patient with us, this world would be long gone. But in His great love for us and for the world He made, God is extraordinarily patient. Peter reminds us in 2 Peter 3:9 that “the Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness.” He is referring here to the promise of Christ’s return. Peter continues: “He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone (who will) to come to repentance.” In His sovereign power and love, God is waiting patiently until everyone He has elected for salvation comes to Him in repentance and faith. Only then will Jesus return.

In this regard, listen to James: “Wait patiently, brothers and sisters, for the Lord’s coming. Farmers do this all the time. They wait for their valuable crops to mature, patiently letting the rain do its slow but steady work. Be patient like that. Stay steady and strong” (1 Peter 5:7-8a, *NIV, MSG*).

With the help of the Holy Spirit, God wants you and me to learn patience and to clothe ourselves with it as we deal with the challenges of life in these extraordinarily challenging times. Like all the rest of these qualities, patience is never out of style.

## **FORBEARANCE AND FORGIVENESS**

Finally (for today), let’s think about *forbearance* and *forgiveness* together. Bearing with others who do things that annoy us, who don’t do things the way we think they should, who have views with which we disagree, requires a continual exercise of patience. And *forbearance* cannot be divorced from *forgiveness*. The nature of bearing with people who rub you the wrong way or do things, intentionally or otherwise, that hurt you, makes forgiveness absolutely necessary.

To say that forgiveness is necessary, of course, is not to say that it is easy, or that we always feel like forgiving when we have been wronged. C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* that “everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.” When you have something (or someone) to forgive is usually when you are least in favor of it. Isn’t that true? We know forgiveness is right. We know forgiveness is necessary. But when you have been hurt, and hurt deeply, it can be extremely difficult to bring yourself to forgive the person who has hurt you.

For Christians, of course, as hard as it sometimes is, forgiveness is not optional. It is essential. The need to forgive is presented to us as a command in the Bible: “Bear with each other and

forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). We are to forgive as quickly and completely as God has forgiven us. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. Paul returns to this theme in Ephesians 4:32, where he says: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Forgiveness is necessary because we are all sinners. We are redeemed sinners, yes. The church is the fellowship of forgiven sinners. We are both forgiven *and* sinners. Because our sin nature has not yet been eradicated, because our sanctification is not yet complete, we still sin. We still offend one another. We still take offense (even when no offense is intended). We still disappoint one another. We still mistreat one another. We still speak to and about one another in unloving ways. We still hold grudges. We still hurt each other with our words and our actions.

You’ve probably heard it said that hurt people hurt people. There is truth in that. We should also say that forgiven people forgive people. Forgiven people are forgiving people. As forgiven people, we have the privilege and opportunity and duty of forgiving others, and of sharing with them the message of the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ.

The word for “forgive” used twice in verse 13 is the Greek word *charizomai*, which comes from the root word *charis*, the Greek word for “grace.” The verb *charizomai* literally means “to grace,” “to show or extend grace” to another. What Paul is saying is that we are to extend the grace of forgiveness to one another just as God has extended the grace of forgiveness to us. And we are to do it as freely and fully as God has “graced” us. A place of grace must be a place where forgiveness flows.

According to Alexander De Jong, real forgiveness involves three things: First, it means giving up the right to strike back. You reject the urge to repay gossip with gossip or a bad turn with something worse. Second, you let go of the feeling of resentment and anger, and replace it with good will that desires the other’s welfare, not harm. Third, to the extent it is possible, you take concrete steps to restore (or forge) a good relationship.

That sounds hard, doesn’t it? It *is* hard. In fact, it is beyond hard, if you try to do it yourself. It takes the help of the Holy Spirit – whose help is available to you and me at every moment. All we have to do is ask for it. The Holy Spirit can and will give you the power to forgive the one who has hurt you, just as God has forgiven your sins. All of them.

Whatever you do, do it with compassion, kindness, and humility. Whatever you do, do it with the gentleness that comes from strength on the inside – the strength of Jesus Himself. Whatever you do, clothe yourself with patience at all times. Whatever you do, bear with one another and show grace to each other, just as God, in His amazing love, has graced you with forgiveness.

And don’t forget to put on love. Don’t forget to love God first and best. Don’t forget to love one another as Jesus has loved us. Even with social distancing, find ways to show your love to

your church family this week. And don't forget to love your neighbors. Do something to help someone this week.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.