

“God’s Fashion Sense” based on Colossians 3:1-17, and Psalm 49:1-12
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on August 3, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

About 13 years ago, a short man with gray hair, wearing a full warmup suit was dropped off by his friend at a basketball court. While his friend parked the car, this man walked out to play under the lights. This was at Seward Park, one of those legendary playground basketball courts in Chicago.

Big city playground basketball is no joke. There is a lot of talent out there and on the court were grown men from 18 to 30, and I’d bet that if you asked them, they thought they were good enough, at least to play well against the professionals, or even go pro, if only they were given the chance.

So, the old man walked onto the court and one of the players invited the old man to play. At this point, most of the people there laughed. When he moved slowly, they laughed. When he fumbled the ball, and it went out of bounds, they laughed. When he threw one off the backboard, they laughed. He certainly didn’t look like a basketball player. Then his friend showed up.

Equally old looking, the people laughed at the sight of these two gray haired men. But the second man was warmed up and came out on fire. He immediately made a long-range shot. He moved so quickly, some of the players fell down trying to guard him.

And then the little guy got his confidence. At just 5 foot 9 inches, he was ready to play. He hit some long shots. He went up and dunked on one of the tall talented players. Suddenly, these amazing playground basketball players were no longer laughing. Their mouths were wide open in amazement, as these two old men, made them all look like the playground players didn’t belong there on their own home court.

Then to top it all off, an old woman shows up claiming to be the shorter guy’s wife arrived. She yelled at him for playing, “You just had a hip replacement!” Then they insulted her. So, she joined the game, hit some big shots, and even dunked the ball.

As some of you may remember this, and as most of you probably suspect, these players were not old. They were wearing make-up to make them look old. They were professional basketball players at the time. The little guy was Nate Robinson of the New York Knicks. Then Kyrie Irving of the Cleveland Cavaliers at the time, and Lisa Leslie of the Los Angeles Sparks.

The truth is that as good as playground basketball players can be, there is a reason why they are not playing in the professional leagues. These NBA and WNBA stars in disguise crushed them. Of course, this was all for an advertising campaign for Pepsi Max, a zero-calorie cola in disguise. A few of the players – the ones who invited them into the game – knew what was up. But most of the crowd did not know what was going on. They were laughing at the players legitimately.

I’m sure they suspected something, but nonetheless, Irving who is still playing today, and his now retired co-stars, were underestimated when they looked like senior citizens, but they proved themselves to be the best players there. This commercial is an illustration that looks can be deceiving. There is something inside which we can’t always gauge, but it matters more.

After I had graduated from high school, I stayed local and commuted, but a few of my friends who had gone away came home and we went to one of the local gyms to play basketball. On the court

were some of the up-and-coming high school stars at the time. There were four of us, and we needed a fifth player to have a team. On the sideline was a woman we knew named Heather, who wanted to play. Heather wasn't getting into the game. The young kids assumed this 5-foot-7 woman didn't belong. She wasn't good enough to let her play in their minds.

We knew Heather, and we gladly took her on our team. We decided that we were just going to keep passing the ball to her. We beat the high school players. She might have scored all our points, which was quite embarrassing. They tried to exclude her.

In the first example, they used deception with players in disguise. But in the second, we told the kids that she was a really good player. We asked them why she wasn't playing. We told them they had been wrong to never let her get in the games. There was no lie or deception in what we were saying. But they had it in their minds that she didn't look the part, simply because she happened to be a woman.

Today's reading from Colossians comes after two chapters where Paul talks about what a Christian is to believe – the foundation of the faith. Now, Paul tells the church at Colossae what a Christian is supposed to look like. It is great if you believe that the Messiah is Jesus, and he is the head of all things. It is great if you believe that all things were made through him. It is great if you know that he is one with God and all things hold together in him. It's great if you believe that in life, he showed us fully God's image, and that he is the firstborn from out of the dead.

Indeed, you should have the fullness of life in him. But, if you believe and have this fullness, How then shall we live?

Paul says, "So then, if you have been raised with the Messiah" – if you believe and have fullness, "seek the things above, where the Messiah is sitting at the right hand of God." He is saying to seek the things that come from where the Messiah or Christ is in power. That's what the metaphor of "the right hand" means. Paul says that if we believe and have been raised with Jesus, then we have died in our baptism and have been hidden, so that when the Messiah, who is now our life, is revealed, we appear again in his glory.

This likely has two meanings. The first, in the picture of salvation, is that we will be resurrected with him. It's also about how we live our lives. The latter may even be the primary meaning, as Paul immediately goes into ethics. He calls on the Christians in Colossae to put to death earthly parts of themselves.

He says put promiscuity to death. Often translated as sexual immorality, as I've explained before that phrase in English is ambiguous and subjective. At the heart, this is about stopping the use of people sexually. He says to put impurity to death. This is to recognize that you are a temple of God and let that be important to you. Put obsessions or passions to death. These are those strong feelings that are so strong that they cause us and others to suffer. He says to put evil desires to death, that longing we have to do sinful things, even for good causes. And lastly, he says to put to death greed or covetousness. That is our desire to accumulate, because this is idolatry. This is an utter and complete lack of faith in God. The harder we work to accumulate things beyond our basic needs, the more it shows our lack of gratitude to God for what we have, and our unwillingness to trust in God.

These things have consequences in our life. They bring the wrath of God with them. It's not that God is stomping around looking for reasons to be angry. It's just the consequences of what these things bring. They are in and of themselves a burden, and how human beings naturally live. Human beings have long been unfaithful to each other, desiring conquest. That's the common thread here, whether sexual or military conquest, or conquest in business or politics. It is the defeat of others.

But Paul wants us to put these desires to win at any cost to death. The one who is desiring conquest of the world is not trusting God. They are not trusting in who the Messiah is and what the Messiah has accomplished. They do not trust in the "right hand of God," which is the Messiah in power.

But Paul is not being negative here, as he is recognizing the faith of the Colossae Church. He commends them for setting aside anger, rage, tantrums, slander, and disgraceful words, and then he says, "Do not lie to one another." I don't think this is just a command. I think this is a recognition that these things will still boil up as emotions.

Things get stirred up. There will be things that get us angry and, if fed, lead to rage. There will be times we get upset for not getting our way and throw a tantrum. There are times our speech will slip, and we'll say things that speak poorly of others or saying things that are disgraceful. I preach to myself as much as anyone else here, but we only make it worse when we lie to each other and make excuses. We need to confess, which means to tell the truth.

After all, if we have taken off, stripped, or unclothed the person we were before, then we are no longer supposed to wear these things and we should have on new clothes, which come as we are being made new. It's not that we're immediately clothed and made perfect, as if the only Christian is the one who is absolutely. This is about when we are being made new in knowledge according to the Messiah, who is the image of our creator, and therefore the creator of this knowledge.

Status and ethnic heritage do not make us followers of Jesus. There is no Greek and Judean. Circumcision is irrelevant. Barbarians north and south of the empire were not excluded. They were called this because the Romans and Greeks said their Germanic and North African languages sounded like "bar-bar" to them. (Think about this when people mockingly make fun of people who speak other languages, as this is how they spoke of the languages from which English came.)

Likewise, the Scythians are not excluded. This is the word for anyone to the East of the empire and beyond. This means the people of the Far East were not excluded. Are all invited to be in God's family. The enslaved and the free are equally part of God's family, because the Messiah is all in all. Only Jesus matters.

So then, unfortunately, looks can be deceiving. The person who claims to have faith in Christ, may not live it. Being obsessed and controlled by desire for conquest to defeat others and by greed, is not Christ like. Feeding emotions and making excuses with lies, is not Christ like. Relying on external markers like nationality and circumcision is not Christ like.

It doesn't matter how many verses we post on our Facebook feeds, or if we act these ways to defend Christianity or the church. None of the things Paul tells us to take off shows we believe in Jesus. They do not reveal a Kingdom led by the Messiah. Beloved, if the Messiah is all in all, then Jesus, who is the Messiah or Christ, is our example.

Jesus is the one, who being equal to God, through whom all things were created, came into creation to live as one of us in our limits to show us how to live. Sin and death tried to destroy him, turning his own people against him, including a close friend. They handed him over to the world's greatest power, the power of empire – Rome. God in our flesh was crucified on a Roman cross, a shameful death meant for rebels and the enslaved.

He died for us and in doing so, he defeated sin and death for us. He rose again for us. Yes, all of humanity is made in God's image, but he is the perfect example. He is God's image fully.

So then, what makes us Christian? It is our encounter with this amazing mystery. The work of the Holy Spirit in and among us, as God's gift to us, works in us when we hear and receive this message, then respond to it. This Spirit is what empowers us to put those earthly parts of us to death. It is the Holy Spirit that helps us to clothe ourselves like Jesus, to wear his deep compassions, his gut concern for others. The Spirit is what empowers us to wear his kindness, to help others, and wear his humility, to lay down our power as he laid down his to raise up others.

Indeed, these are hard. We lose compassion. At times, we become unkind, and we become proud, but because of Jesus, we can repent – be open to change and turning to him. When we find him, we find our grace, to be forgiven. I need this as much as any of you.

The Spirit likewise empowers us to be like Jesus in his meekness, his gentle use of strength, and to be like Jesus in his patience, his longsuffering for us. Think about all the mistakes of humanity God puts up with, and yet we can't put up with the mistakes of another person when they annoy us. The Spirit helps us to endure each other, in all our quirks and differences and idiosyncrasies. The Spirit lets us be gracious, or forgiving, to each other, just like Jesus.

Be gracious – be forgiving – just like Christ when someone has a complaint because on top of all of this, we must be clothed in love. It is love which unites us, makes us complete, or perfect.

Beloved, the measure of our faith is not in how we market our beliefs to others, but how we live them even when no one is looking. The measure of our faith is not in what we claim to believe, but how those beliefs move us, how they change us, how they transform us to look more like Jesus every day.

None of this is instant. None of us – especially me – is done being changed. God's fashion sense is not our outward appearance. It's not the stuff we put up from Hobby Lobby with the bible verses on it. It's not our church shirts. While I'm glad we wear these, it's really about how we clothe ourselves with Jesus's character traits.

This is why Paul uses this metaphor of clothing. Some translations will say, "put on," but the word means "to immerse yourself" and was used to describe putting on clothes. He uses this metaphor to teach the Colossians and also teach us. Indeed, let us make room for the peace, or wholeness, of the Messiah to rule within us, to be in our hearts individually, and into the body of the church we are in. We can give thanks for this, and we have the word, or reason or logic of Christ, making a home within us and among us through the Holy Spirit.

We can do this, and we can choose to sing in our hearts to God, so that whatever we do in life – whether that is your career or your job of the moment, or your role in your family, or the activities

you choose to do as a volunteer, the things we do for fun, or even just the chores that need to be done – yes anything we do should be done in Jesus's name, giving thanks to God, our Father, through Jesus.

We don't need to dress in Christian cultural markers, but instead, we must dress in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, enduring each other and being gracious to each other, clothed in God's love. It's a lot easier to put a sign on a house quoting Joshua, "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord," but it's a lot harder to actually do it.

However, we can choose to hear Paul, who says for us to let the peace of the Messiah rule in your hearts, in the one body into which you were called. We can be thankful. Let the word of the Messiah make its home in you abundantly, teaching in all wisdom and influencing each other in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with the grace of singing in your hearts to God.

And so, all that you do in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Amen.