

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Rooted in Love | Colossians 2:6-7, 16-23**

We are in the middle of the first sermon series of the summer, and it's a letter—a letter that was written by Paul to a group of people he did not know that lived in Turkey. It's called Colossians, and we have been spending the whole month—five or even six weeks, maybe—studying one letter. Now, the problem with that . . . I shouldn't say "the problem". The challenge with that is that's not the way you read a letter, is it? If you are a mother and you get a note from your son—a miracle—who is somewhere else in the world; or if you're away for the first time and you get a letter from your parents; or if you open the mail and there is a love note, you don't look down and say, "Dear Phyllis, hey, hope everything's well with you. Everything is good here. Everyone is healthy. The big news is that last week . . ." Oh, I think I'll read it next week." You don't read the next paragraph next week; you read it right now. You read the whole thing because you want to know how the story turns out. When you chop up a letter into little bits, you can lose that sense of flow, where it's going. This is supposed to be a letter of encouragement and love and instruction. Now, there is still a place, I think, for breaking it up into chunks. My wife is gone now, so I can say that when I used to get love letters, you know, from girlfriends or whatever, I would read the whole thing and then I'd go back and reread parts—parts that seemed special or parts I did not understand. And that's what we're doing here.

We're right in the middle. There are four chapters in Colossians. We've done the first two, and now we're sort of turning the corner. That's a pattern in Paul's letters. He spends a lot of time talking about God and then he makes it practical, and that's what he's starting to do here. And this is a serious part of the letter that you'd probably want to reread to make sure that you got it right. Paul says,

⁵So, put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature: the sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, the greed that's idolatrous. ⁶Because of these, living this way, the wrath of God is coming. [Go down that road, bad things will happen.] ⁷You used to walk that way. You used to walk in these ways, ⁸but now you must also rid yourself of anger and rage, malice, slander, and the filthy language that comes from our lips. ⁹Don't lie to each other. [Colossians 3:5-9]

The way this is said, it's "Don't lie to each other anymore. You've taken off your old self. You've put on a new self, which is being renewed in the image of our Creator. You're not who you used to be; you are being remade so that you will look like your Creator. We are the Imago Dei. God made us in His image. We don't look anything like God." Paul says, "For new people, here, there's no Gentile or Jew; no circumcised or uncircumcised; no barbarian or Scythian; slave or free, but Christ is everything and

Christ is in everything." The part that I want to look at is that Paul says to this group of people who are trying to live a new life . . . He says, "You have taken off your old, broken self and put on a new self, which is being remade in the image of our Creator, so that when people see you, you will be the image of our Creator. You're supposed to take off death—this is the road that leads to death—and put on life. This is the way that leads to life." That's a huge change. And, frankly, it's hard to understand. What if you're hearing this, not for the fiftieth time, but for the first time? You're trying to figure this out.

Sometimes stories help. There's a famous set of stories by a guy who spent a long time walking down the road to death, and then when he became a Christian—started walking down the road to life. He did stories to help people understand. They were children's stories—the Narnia tales—but they were for kids who were five and kids who were 85-years-old. One of my favorites is the second book. It's called *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and the central character of this book is a rotten kid. No other way to describe him. He is a bad boy. His name is Eustace. He was greedy and arrogant and selfish, and made people not like him at all, and he would leave people whenever he could. And one time when he's away from the ship, he discovers a cave filled with treasure and immediately his reaction is, *oh, I ought to share all this with my friends. No! I'm going to hide this! My friends are never going to see this! I'm going to be the king!* And he stays at the cave, fingering the treasure, and ends up falling asleep.

When he wakes up, Eustace is no longer a little boy. He's turned into a dragon. You see, what he found was a dragon's treasure chest, and sleeping on it turned him into a dragon so that his outside matched his inside. He was greedy and selfish, and now he's become a dragon. He'd put a gold bracelet on his little boy arm, and now it was breaking his big dragon arm and the pain was terrible. Even worse, he's cut off from human beings. He can't talk to them anymore; he's not a human being. And even though he hated people, now he feels alone and isolated and ashamed, and he cries big, hot, dragon tears. Eustace looks over at a magic well and he knows that if he just gets into the well, the water will make his arm feel better. But then Aslan, the lion who's the Christ figure in this story, says that Eustace the dragon won't fit into the well. He has to get undressed. He says, "Well, I'm a dragon. I don't got clothes." But then he realizes dragons are like snakes, right? Snakes shed their skin and they go on. So, he tears off his outer skin and goes out, but underneath is another dragon. So, he tears that off and there's another ugly dragon. And he tears that off, but after the third time, he realizes it's impossible. He'll never get clean again. He'll never get rid of the pain. He'll never stop looking like a dragon.

Do you recognize the feeling? Do you ever have the sense that, as hard as you try, you're going to mess up again? As much as you say, "I'm not going to lose my temper," by the end of the day you lose your temper. As much as you say, "I'm never going to say that," you say it. As much as you want to be a generous person, you end up being cheap again. You're a dragon. You want to do the good thing, but you get trapped in that dragon. He feels hopeless, and that's when Aslan speaks—Aslan the Christ. Aslan says, "You'll have to let me undress you." And Eustace says, "I was so terrified of his claws, but I was desperate! So, I just lay flat on my back and the very first tear that

Aslan made was so deep, I thought it went all the way down to my heart. And when he pulled the skin off, it hurt worse than anything in my life. The only thing that made me able to bear it was the pleasure of feeling that stuff peel off. You know, like when you've got a scab and you pick at it a little and it hurts, but you go, oh, that feels good." Eustace says, "Well, Aslan peeled that beastly stuff right off and there I was, smooth and soft as a baby, smaller than ever. And then he caught hold of me in those big claws and he threw me into the well! And it hurt for a second, but then it was delicious and I started swimming and splashing. And I found that all the pain was gone from my arm, and when I looked over, I found out why. It was because I'd turned into a boy again."

That's what the Apostle Paul says happens to people who turn to Christ. In the first two chapters of Colossians, he had said, *You cannot tear off the dragon skin. You have to let Christ die for you and live for you and give you His grace to make you new again. You can never pull off the old self to get to the new self. You've got too much dragon in you.* I think that one of the reasons I like this story is because I look dragons in the face every day. I see people who are sin-filled and kidding themselves, and that's . . . in the morning, in the mirror, that's me! I'm not talking about you. That's a whole different story. I see a resemblance to the dragon in the mirror, but the grace of God beckoned to me the way that it did to Eustace. I got so desperate, I said, "God, help me," and God helped me. Now, I have to tell you, I have relapses. There are still a lot of days that I can speak dragon. There are a lot of days when we all have dragon's breath. But the cure has started. I'm not like I used to be. It's a cure that will finish in good time. It's what Paul says to the church in Philippi. He says, "I am confident that He who began this good work in you, turning you from a dragon into a child of God . . . He who began this good work will bring it to completion." And when it's done, I will live and walk with God, and I will become the kind of person that I have always dreamed I could be. And it'll be a pleasure, and it'll be a pleasure to go there with you.

That's what Jesus does. The first two chapters are about God rescuing us and changing us, but it's only the start of the story. The Colossians were tempted to say, "I love that story! I believe that story! That's a great story." And then you know what? They became dragons that believed about Jesus. You can believe about Jesus and still look a lot like a dead dragon. Where are you? Are you on the journey? Or do you still feel pretty dragon-y? It's an important question, and it's important for the church.

John Ortberg is a friend of ours and he talked about one of his parishioners. He says, "Let's call him Hank. See if you recognize him. Hank was a crank. Hank the crank. Hank didn't smile much. He had a knack for discovering islands of bad news in an ocean of happiness. Hank would always find a cloud in the silver lining. Hank operated on the assumption that if you compliment somebody, it might lead to a swelled head, so he worked to make sure everybody's head stayed small." I love this. Hank's native tongue was complaint. He carried judgment and disapproval the way that a prisoner carries a ball and chain even though he went to church his whole life. A deacon of the church asked Hank one day, "Hank are you happy?" He paused to reflect and he said without smiling, "Yeah." Well, Hank, tell your face!

Hank could not effectively love his wife or his kids, couldn't have good relationships outside his family. He was easily irritated. Hank had little use for the poor. He had a casual contempt for accents or skin pigments different than his own. Whatever capacity for joy or wonder or gratitude that he had, had atrophied. He criticized and he complained and he judged and his soul got a little smaller every year. It's a bad story. It's a bad story. What's the worst part of that story? Is the worst part of that story that Hank would never change? Or is the worst part of that story that Hank didn't even realize that he was the one who needed to change? Or, was the worst part of that story that in the kingdom of heaven, in the church of Jesus, people get so used to having Hank around and having Hank act that way that we don't expect that he would ever progress and become more like Jesus, that you would do the same thing?

Hank decided to stay a dragon in spite of his beliefs. How do you move from belief to become less dragon-y? I have the impression that you're here because you long to become a better person. I think you want to become a better person. I'd like to make that possible, not because of me, but because of what God said to the Colossians through Paul. It happens in the very next verses. He says,

12Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly beloved, clothe yourselves. Clothe yourselves with compassion and kindness, humility and gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other. Forgive each other any grievance that you have against someone. Forgive the way God forgave you, 14 and all of these virtues wrap around yourselves love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. [Colossians 3:12-14]

I think that's the way I want to live. The way it happens, I believe, is twofold. I want us to operate on two applications in this. I want to get very practical. Every pew should have a basket in it. Take, please, everybody, just take one of the sheets. Not every family, every person. Take one of the sheets, and if you don't have enough, the ushers will bring them around, and as many of you as possible, take one of the pens. Take a pen, take a sheet, pass it down the aisle. If there's not enough, the ushers will bring more. That's going to be the second application that we do about how to go from looking like a dragon to looking the way that Paul just described.

The first application is only twelve words long. Twelve words. You ought to be able to remember twelve words, right? How many of you have memorized the lyrics to any song? Any song. You got a song, right? That's more than twelve words. You can memorize twelve words. If we memorize it, it might sink in. So this morning, I'd like us to memorize it together. I memorize this because I see it every single morning. When I walk into our closet, my wife has written these twelve words on the wall so that I see them every day. "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly beloved, clothe yourselves." That's eleven words. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly beloved, clothe yourselves with . . ." That's the twelfth word, but it almost cries out for the next word. Clothe yourself with what? That's what we're going to talk about. But I think we should be able to memorize those twelve words together. Let's start with the first word. Therefore.

[Crowd] Therefore.

Perfect. Therefore. When we see in the Bible the word "therefore" we should ask, "What's it there for?" Right. Therefore. What's it there for? When you see the word therefore, it's referring to what just happened, and he's saying because this happened, therefore, do this new thing. What does therefore mean in this case? Therefore means you have taken off your old self and have put on the new self, the image of your creator. Christ is everything and Christ is in everything, therefore, because of that, therefore, we're new people. Old differences don't matter. Jew, gentile, slave, free, male, female: that doesn't matter. That's what God does in Christ. You can even not stay a dragon. Therefore. Therefore, as God's chosen people. Let's do that together. Therefore, as God's chosen people. You're a third of the way there. Therefore, as God's chosen people. What this says is that God chose you. God said, *Yeah, you. The skinny one in the fourth row? Yeah, you. The bald guy in the back? Yeah, you. I chose you. I love you. I love the person sitting next to you, but I love you. I know you. I know everything bad you've ever done, everything good you wanted to do and didn't do, and I love you and I chose you.* Therefore, you are chosen by God. Because you are chosen by God, life will be different.

Let's go to the next phrase. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly beloved. Let's say that together. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly beloved. To be holy doesn't mean what you think. When we think of holy, we think of holier than thou. That means I may not be perfect, but I'm better than her. I may not be perfect, but I'm better than I was. That's not holy. Holy just means we are set apart; we are changed from the path we are on to a new part. Holy means we are becoming different than we used to be. We are not becoming better than others. Holy people don't fit in the world the same way that they used to. Holy and dearly beloved.

Okay. We're on the downslope. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly beloved, clothe yourselves. Put on some clothes! Clothe yourselves with . . . let's do this together. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly beloved, clothe yourselves with . . . with what? Well, we'll get to that. But that's what every morning I see. I am not going anymore just into our closet. I am going into God's wardrobe. Somehow, I need to clothe myself with the clothing of God. People who follow Jesus apparently get new clothes. The old clothes don't fit. Apparently, people who follow Jesus need new clothes. The old clothes don't fit. Going into God's wardrobe, though, is odd. There's no other way to say it. You are going to become an odd person. You are going to become different and not fit in the world the way that you used to. And sometimes that comes because, more than anything, what do kids want? You lay out an outfit for them, do they say, "Oh, great? Can I wear that?" They say, "No, I want to dress myself." Right? How does that work out when they dress themselves? I think sometimes it works out like this. And you say, "Aw, how cute," unless it's your child. Or it works out like this, and they say, "Oh, this was not what I hoped for." And sometimes they go off to school and you say, "Oh God, I love you, I love you. Please come to your senses."

Now, I think that it's clumsy; it's awkward when we try to put on new clothing. I really have to work on this myself. I don't have great fashion sense. Many of you have gone out of church and seen Laura and said to Laura, "So, you didn't dress him today, did you?" But I walk into that closet every morning and I am walking into God's wardrobe to look for clothing for the people that God loves, holy and dearly beloved. And when I get in there, I find the gloves of compassion, the shirts of kindness, the pants of humility, the sweater of gentleness, the shoes of patience, the coats of forbearance—*forbearance is tolerance*—the belts of forgiveness, and this huge, great overcoat that's marked "Love" that pulls everything together. Again, I believe you're here because there's a part of you that wants to look like that. You want to look like that and you're trying hard and it's just not working for you.

Here's where you pull out that card. If you would, please pull it out and turn to the little chart on the back. I'd like to ask you if there is one addition to your wardrobe from God's wardrobe that you would want this week, which one would you want? We're going to talk the rest of the time about that. But let's start positive, okay? Let's start positive. I want you to look at this list—compassion, kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, whatever it is—and I want you to say, "On your best day, on your best behavior, what would your best friends think you have as one of those pieces of clothing? Are you a gentle person? When people say you're patient, are you a forgiving kind of person? Look at that list. On your best day, on your good times, you are already some of this. Which one is it? Which one jumps to you? Please put a plus mark next to that one. Pick one. Just pick one. If you pick seven, don't pick humility. Okay? I'm just saying. But all of us could do at least one that we have at least started. Put a plus or a star next to the status of that one, because holiness is about not being better than other people, but it's saying, "Oh, God, I know I'm not what I'm supposed to be, but oh God, thank God I'm not what I used to be." There are small changes already taking place in you. What's one of those? We're going to look at one addition to your wardrobe that you most want this week.

Let me give you just three thoughts about this. The first one is that people find God's wardrobe not by effort, but by prayer. You don't get there by sucking it up, trying harder, pushing the donut away, by pretending that you have learned four new Bible verses and so you must be looking more godly. It's not about effort. It's about praying to remember that clothes are God's gift of *grace*. *God, thank You for grace*. Not suck it up. Matt said it great last week. Matt said, "The Gospel is not a promise about who you might become someday if you really work hard and don't mess up. The Gospel is a loud announcement of who you already are now." That's the good news of Jesus. Who you were created to be is good. Who you were redeemed to be is great. And so, when we talk about the clothes, we are all beggars who have been invited to God's banquet feast. Remember that story? He invited people and they didn't come, so He said, "Go get the prostitutes and the homeless and the beggars and bring them in, and when they come in, wash them off and give them tuxedos. Give them ball gowns." We're all beggars putting on the king's clothes for the banquet. We're all prodigal sons and prodigal daughters who have turned toward home, and God runs up and says, "Get this kid some new clothes!" And He puts on a beautiful suit or a lovely dress, and the kids learn to dress themselves and they laugh. So, it's prayer, not effort.

The second part of the prayer, though, is that I think you move from being a dragon toward the clothes of God when you pray to become self-aware, because the self-aware are already starting to dress differently. I used to be like that. I don't want to be like that anymore. The self-aware have a sense that they are an arrogant person. I have a friend who says, "I have always been the smartest kid in the class. I've always known that I was the smartest kid in the class and I didn't treat the kid at the bottom of the class very well." He's becoming self-aware. It's, *God, show me who I am*. So, when you're honest with yourself and you're looking in the mirror, do you see that the belt of forgiveness is a little tight, that the shirt of gentleness is ripped, that the pants of forbearance, of tolerance, are out of style? As you look at this list, let's go down the list right now, just in your mind. Look at this list again and say, as you look at this list, which of these virtues is most missing from your life? If you cannot find any, look for humility. If you're already tired of this exercise, look for patience. If you think I don't know what I am talking about, circle forgiveness. Which of these is your deepest struggle? We pray not to get it right. We pray for grace and we pray to become self-aware.

And then the third way that we find God's wardrobe is when we ask, "How does this look? How does this look?" This is God's . . . this is why you're here. God's gift of community, giving us one to another, means that I don't have to do it alone and guess when I'm dressing well and when I'm dressing badly, because God put me with you and God put you with each other. How does this look when we try on new clothes? Now, it's different for guys. I don't mean to be sexist, but it's different for guys. My family . . . I have four women, three generations in our family of women, and they dress just this way. They ask each other, "How does this look?" all the time. I don't know how they do it. One of them is in Chicago, one is in Minneapolis, one is in Berkeley, and one is in Washington D.C. They all shop together. You know how they do it? They do it like this. This is Katie in D.C. trying on a dress, sending the picture of how she looks to her mom, her grandma, and her sister and saying, "Do you like this one better or do you like the purple one?" And they know her and they love her. And so, because they love her, they say, "You know, I thought the purple one wasn't very flattering. Wear this one." "I think that you need to wear something with that." They are helping her see where she is poorly dressed and encouraging her. That's what God is calling you to do, and it is just as hard to say, "Yeah, I think you need to change that shirt," as it is to ask, "Do I need to change this shirt?" But you never learn otherwise.

Let me just . . . I don't care how long this takes. Just a couple minutes. There's just one caveat for this. This does not work well for men and women in actual clothing, okay? When she asks you, "How does this look?" do not answer. Because what she's really saying is, "Does this make me look fat?" And you're already a dead man because you've paused. So, we're talking about spiritual clothing and we desperately need to help each other. I have a friend who told me once in an elevator after a conversation we had just had with a third person, we got in the elevator, and as we went up the elevator he turned to me and he said, "John, you know that I think you're a great guy. You really ran over him. You really made him feel like he was stupid. I know you didn't mean to, but you really made him feel so bad." I was totally ignorant I had done that, and it was

his kindness to me that showed me how I was dressed. Do you have anybody in your life like that? That is the gift of the people of God. So, what's one addition to God's wardrobe that you want most this week? This will just be a lecture if you leave that in the pew, if you take it home and throw it away. It will be a sermon that goes from the head to the heart if you take this and put it someplace where you can see the one that I like—I'm doing pretty good at that—and the one that I need, where I can ask God to help me with that.

So, let's close this way. How do you get better clothing from the wardrobe of God? You ask. You ask by speaking God's word. Can we say this together, this little twelve-word phrase? We'll do it twice, once with a little help and once by ourselves. But let's end it when it says, "Clothe yourselves with . . .", and then you say the one thing you wrote down that you'd like help with. Okay. So, let's start. If I want come out of God's wardrobe, I say, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly beloved, clothe yourselves with forbearance." I said it out loud. You can whisper that last word, but say it out loud. Let's try it again without the notes. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly beloved, clothes yourselves with forbearance. May God's grace be upon us all.

Lord Jesus, we are all . . . well, there's a lot of dragon smell in the room, but there's a lot of us who desire to look like You. I pray that You would give us the clothing that we need, the desire of Your heart to be your children, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.