

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. ⁷ These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. ⁸ But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

The messages communicated by advertisements whether in print or on television are always interesting. A recent one which got my attention has been running during Red Sox games and is for Just for Men Hair Color. Obviously I have no intention of using this product but what struck me is the slogan they use for a product that changes the natural color of one's hair into a different color. The line? "*Let the real you come through.*" Excuse me? It isn't the real you at all, you just covered up the real you, to outward appearances you may be changed, but at the root you still are who you are.

Colossians 3:5-17 presents one of the most vivid and detailed descriptions of what a truly transformed Christian life looks like. Paul makes it clear that living as a follower of Jesus requires putting to death, getting rid of, or stripping off not our grey hair

but certain practices: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed (which is idolatry), anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive or filthy language, and lying. All these behaviors are characteristic of “the old self,” of the person we were before we gave our lives to Christ and asked Jesus to rule and reign and live in our hearts and in all we say and do. If several of these behaviors are still manifested in our behavior, for example if we continually have a problem with anger and lashing out, or if in our speech we consistently find we are speaking inappropriately in hurtful or inaccurate ways about other people or situations, then at the least it is time for some serious reflection, confession, asking for forgiveness, and committing our selves to a deeper level of relationship with Jesus that truly transforms our living. At the most, if several of these ways of speaking and relating seem to permeate our daily lives, we need to truly examine ourselves to see if we have actually surrendered our lives to Christ, or if we are merely pretending or playing at faith and not truly serious about becoming a fully devoted disciple of Jesus who resembles the one we claim to follow.

I am very indebted to my father who has taught me so much in life including the importance of working hard and doing a job the right way. One of the summer experiences I dreaded the most as a young boy was when we painted the outside of our cottage in Ocean Park, Maine. We didn't have a power sander or a power washer. We used scrapers, sandpaper, our little hands and arms, and eventually, after what seemed like an eternity to me, we used paint and paintbrushes. I can't imagine all that my dad must have heard from us as we “helped” him in doing this job. My dad made it clear that my sisters and I needed to scrape and sand every bit of board in order to remove all the loose paint. It was necessary to get off every bit of loose or flaking paint and we needed to do it right. My dad said the better job we did sanding and prepping the wood, the better the paint job would be, the longer the house would look good, and the longer it would be before we had to do the process all over again. If we weren't thorough in scraping and sanding, the new paint wouldn't adhere to the wood, it would soon flake and in a short time we'd be out here in the July sun doing this again. That got my attention. When I would get tired or feel like quitting because I'd rather be at the beach, which was approximately every 15-20 seconds, I'd try to remember that I didn't want to do this every couple of summers.

In a sense, Paul is saying, we need to follow a similar process in becoming a transformed follower of Jesus. We have to strip off - like old, dirty clothing or the paint on a house - all that does not reflect the Spirit of the Living God in our lives. The more of

the practices and ways of our un-renewed self that remain, then like a house badly in need of a paint job the less attractive we will be and the less we will reflect the beauty and character of Christ. We can slap on a fresh coat of kindness over anger, but if we haven't scraped and sanded away at the anger that lies beneath, the kindness will only be a façade. As heat, wind, and storms come in life the kindness will quickly be peeled away and the anger underneath will be revealed again. The danger of not following the spiritual steps outlined by Paul in this chapter is similar to what happens to a house with a bad paint job. Unprotected by a good coat of paint, the wood is exposed to water and sun and eventually becomes rotten. Unprotected by a transformed self that reflects our Creator's love, the peace of Christ, the Holy Spirit's guidance and a thankful heart, the elements of life will reveal that what lies inside us is as rotten as an old board.

It seems some people associate holiness or faith with adhering to religious rules or agreement with particular doctrines rather than a life **that demonstrates the love of God, the peace of Christ, and a thankful heart**. This weekend the 107th US Open is being played at Oakmont, Pennsylvania, right now if you have been following the leader board you know who is winning – the golf course – since no one is under par. Tiger Woods is in second place but he has never come from behind on the final day to win a major – until today. Even those of us who are not golfers have heard of Tiger Woods. Woods has a contract with Nike for about \$100 million dollars that is, I believe, the richest endorsement deal in sports history. One Nike commercial featured Woods talking about the tournaments he's won and his use of Nike products because obviously if we all go out and buy Nike golf stuff we'll all be as good as him. In advertising language, Woods is a head-to-toe Nike man. He wears Nike footwear, clothing, gloves, and hats, and uses the Nike Precision Tour Accuracy Ball.

The Apostle Paul is telling the church in Colossians 3:12-15 that as God's chosen people we must be "head-to-toe" Jesus people. He begins by saying, "As God's *chosen people, holy and dearly loved,*" God has chosen us, God has made us holy through Christ, not through our own effort, and we are dearly loved by God. Therefore we are to become who we are in the eyes of God. Holiness is reflected in stripping off the old self and putting on the new self that is to be continually renewed on a daily basis as we grow in our knowledge of and relationship with God. And so to be holy we "**clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe**

yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And ***let the peace of Christ*** rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the ***one body***. And ***be thankful***.” That is what a transformed, holy life looks like: compassionate, kind, humble, meek, patient, bearing with one another, forgiving each other, above all clothed with love, with the peace of Christ ruling in our hearts, unified in one body, always thankful. How are you doing right now in those areas? Are these the practices that an objective observer would say are consistently on display in our lives? Some times we have difficulty seeing our own situations objectively or clearly.

A woman was working as a receptionist for an eye surgeon when a very angry woman stormed up to her desk. *"Someone stole my wig while I was having surgery yesterday,"* she complained.

The doctor came out and tried to calm her down.

"I assure you that no one on my staff would have done such a thing," he said. *"Why do you think it was taken here?"*

"After the operation, I noticed the wig I was wearing was cheap-looking and ugly."

"I think" explained the surgeon gently, *"that means your cataract operation was a success."*

The sad thing is that many people think holiness is found and displayed in using religious language a lot, agreeing to certain doctrinal statements like *"I believe in Jesus,"* or in particular practices such as attending worship while seemingly making little effort or progress over the years in becoming kinder, more loving, more patient, more forgiving when others hurt us or bearing with others different than our selves more compassionately. Spending a lot of time in a garage and claiming to be a car does not make us one. Spending a lot of time in church and claiming to be a Christian, doesn't guarantee that we are in fact living out the faith we claim to possess. Leo Tolstoy describes this dynamic. *"People live as everyone lives, but they all live according to principles that have nothing to do with the teachings of faith, but for the most part, are contrary to them. The teachings of faith have no place in life and never come to play **in the relations among people; they simply play no role in living life itself.** The teachings of faith are left to some other realm, separated from life and independent of it. If one should encounter them, then it is only as some superficial phenomenon that has no connection with life."¹ In other words, people who claim to have faith or to be holy, end up living and responding to people and situations and relationships like people who*

¹ Leo Tolstoy in *Confessions*. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 32. no. 10.

have no faith at all. What we say we believe doesn't come into play in our relationships and we scheme, lie, talk about other people behind their backs, make assumptions and assertions, lose our tempers, fail to trust, seek what is best in our own eyes, hold grudges and fail to forgive – just like people who have no intention or desire to be like Jesus at all.

Moving forward with Jesus means leaving the past and past ways of relating and behaving behind. In the late 1990s, Pete Peterson was appointed U.S. ambassador to Vietnam. Peterson had served six years as a prisoner of war in the dreaded “Hanoi Hilton” prison camp. When asked how he could return to the land where he'd endured years of starvation, brutality and torture, he replied, *“I'm not angry. I left that at the gates of the prison when I walked out in 1972. I just left it behind me and decided to move forward with my life.”*

How do we move forward with our life? How do we actively participate in the Lord's desire to transform us? By stripping off the old and putting on the new and recognizing that just like painting a house this is a process that will need to be done until we die. Stripping off old stuff, whether we're working on a house, a car, or piece of old furniture – is time consuming, messy, and requires effort and commitment to see the job through to completion. We do so because we have a vision of what that house, car, or piece of furniture will look like when it is completed.

The same principle is true in our lives. In Colossians 3 God is sharing the vision of what a transformed and renewed person in Christ looks like so we will not quit or lose heart when we are in the time consuming, messy, painstaking process of partnering with the Holy Spirit to scrape out every nook and cranny of old self stuff so our new self can emerge, take hold, and shine forth. That's why Paul says *“Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”* I doubt there was anyone who seriously contemplated coming to worship naked today. It would be obvious to everyone if we came to worship without clothes, which is why we don't do it. However, Paul knows we can come to church dressed in nice clothes, but we can come naked in terms of leaving love, the Peace of Christ, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, humility, and patience tucked away deep in drawers or hanging in the back of the closet. How many of us ask ourselves on the way to worship each week if we have clothed ourselves for even this brief moment in our week with all these Christian attitudes and virtues? As surely as we pull on socks, shoes, pants, skirts, shirts and blouses before we

tend to leave our bedroom or our home— we need to make sure we are always fully dressed spiritually with our new self in Christ before we get going about our day.

One writer put it this way, “If love is the soul of Christian existence, it must be at the heart of every other Christian virtue. Thus, for example, justice without love is legalism; faith without love is ideology; hope without love is self-centeredness; forgiveness without love is self-abasement; fortitude without love is recklessness; generosity without love is extravagance; care without love is mere duty; fidelity without love is servitude. Every virtue is an expression of love. No virtue is really a virtue unless it is permeated, or informed by love.”²

One of the joys of walking on the beach here on the Cape is finding pieces of sea glass. Sea glass was originally glass that has been broken and is sharp and dangerous. Broken glass has the potential to be harmful. However, through a journey that takes time and repeated encounters with the rough, abrasive terrain of sand and rocks and storms God’s creation works together to transform what is broken into pieces of art. Like sea glass, our own lives are often broken, sharp, even potentially harmful, but God can transform us as well. Just as calm quiet waters will not produce smooth, well rounded sea glass, it is often the storms we face in our lives that help to shape us and to smooth off our sharp edges.

Stripping off the old self, getting rid of that which does not glorify God, reflect Christ or the fruit of the Spirit, nor endear our selves to others and putting on the new self God has enabled and created us to become is a life long process that we neglect not only to our own detriment but to the detriment of every one around us. We all need to look in the mirror and ask ourselves – what kind of person do we look like – one of anger, wrath and malice who speaks about others inappropriately, or one who is clothed in love, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with and forgiving one another, and allowing the peace of Christ to rule, literally “be umpire” in our lives telling us what is “out” and what is “safe.” We need to hold each other accountable to live this way because like scraping a house on a hot July day it isn’t always pleasant or easy. But the result can be beautiful to behold.

² Richard P. McBrien in *Catholicism. Christianity Today*, Vol. 40, no. 1.