

On Monday Dr. Jim Denison wrote on *denisonforum.org* that “Oppenheimer won five Golden Globes Sunday night, including best drama, while Barbie took the award for cinematic and box office achievement. But everyone who attended the ceremony won something as well. They each received a gift bag worth \$500,000—thirty-eight different items were included in the bags, among them Colombian emerald earrings valued at \$69,000 and six bottles of wine worth \$193,500. Giving such opulent gifts to such wealthy people seems to say something about the materialism of our consumeristic culture.”

I’m sometimes curious about the obscene amounts of money that celebrities spend on their wardrobe when they appear on award shows like the Golden Globes, the Emmys, or the Oscars. The Scripture today speaks about how we should dress as a follower of Christ, but it has nothing to do with fashion, rather with taking off the old self and putting on the new self. You see, Colossians is part of Paul’s effort to counter heresies that have infiltrated the Colossian fellowship. He highlights the contrast between the supremacy of Christ’s person and work and the shallowness of the heretics’ claims.

Bible commentators use a variety of terms to describe this passage because it contains an ethical code. Leonard Klein calls it a *haustafel*, a summary table of specific actions each person in a household is expected to perform. Other folks have called it “the Christian’s wardrobe” because of the putting off and putting on language used by Paul. No matter how we label this set of invitations to be more Christ-like there is little denying that they reflect a variety of virtues that in the end need something to bind them all together.

In verse 8 Paul says, “*you must rid yourselves of such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language.*” The Apostle also summons his brothers and sisters in Christ to empty their closets and throw in the dumpster things like sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed. These are the practices that characterize what he calls “the old self” which gets its fashion

sense from the evil one. Jesus' friends can discard this old, tattered "clothing," says Paul, because we've already "*put on the new self*" (v. 10). God dresses us in Christ Jesus when we are baptized. So, the "rags" that are malice and slander were really covering up the "clothing" that is the image of God who created us.

As part of this new self, the Apostle invites God's "*holy and dearly loved*" people to clothe themselves with "*compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience*" (v. 12). The "one another" we've been waiting for comes in verse 13: "*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*" Grudges are let go, revenge is out of the question, judgment is left to God. We forbear and forgive. Forgiveness of course is at the very heart of the gospel. Where it really gets hard is that Jesus expects forgiven people to be always forgiving. As God forgave us, we must forgive others. I don't think it's an exaggeration of Jesus' teaching to say only the forgiving can be forgiven. We may think that forgiving someone else is our personal accomplishment, but the forgiveness that Paul describes is a gift. We do not forgive by our own power, design, or will, but *as the Lord forgave us* (v. 13).

Biblical scholar N.T. Wright sees imagery of love as an outer garment. In that light, we should understand the phrase "*over all*" more like "*on top of everything.*" Wright suggests that it's almost as if the Apostle invites his hearers to put the "clothing" that is love on top of the other pieces of clothing like a winter coat—compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Paul might also be suggesting that while God's beloved people have a role in clothing ourselves in Christ-like virtues, but we can't do this all by ourselves. We're in a sense like spiritual babies or toddlers who need the Holy Spirit to help "dress us" in love? We might think of compassion as the lovely shirt or blouse that doesn't quite reach the waist, and humility as the dress pants or slacks that are too tight around the middle. Someone should have told us that Christmas cookies can shrink our clothes. Love isn't just an all-purpose

garment that we should never be without. It's also the outer garment that holds our Christian wardrobe together.

Yet love doesn't just bind together diverse Christian virtues; it also binds them "*in perfect unity*." In verse 11 the Apostle insists, "*There is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all*." It's a lovely description of the complete unity Jesus' different friends have through our Elder Brother. Now, in verse 14, Paul adds that love completely unites the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and forgiveness. Genuine love, by the power of the Spirit, helps remove the sinful elements that sometimes weasel their way into our flawed humility and gentleness.

But if verse 14's insistence that love is "*over all*" the other virtues is the thrust of the passage, then verses 15-17 amplify that claim. We might think about it this way: verses 14-17 describe the implications of Christian love that is "*over all*." Because of this, Jesus' friends can let Christ's peace rule in our hearts (v. 15). We love, because God first loved us, and planted God's peace deep within us. What's more, God's people are thankful because the Holy Spirit nourishes within us an all-surpassing love for God and our neighbor. Because love is "*over all*" we celebrate and proclaim God's love in the context of Christian worship (v. 16). And because love is on top of it all, God's dearly beloved people do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus (v. 17). God's love for us spills over into our loving and grateful service to God and our neighbors.

If you are someone that is "sartorially challenged," you can seek out fashion advice from so-called fashion experts, like *Vogue* magazine's September 2021 "Ultimate Guide to Fall Fashion Trends." Even though I have never EVER actually read a *Vogue* magazine, I read about the "Ultimate Guide to Fall Fashion Trends" that urges readers to "Try a Sweater That Makes You Smile." "The classical knits are essential, but...the brighter the color, the better the sweater." To me, that advice sounds, uhhh, interesting, but way too trendy. So, I'm inclined to stick to the tried-and-true clothing that never goes out of style

and: Put on love. It may not be especially trendy in a culture that appears increasingly hostile toward Christian virtues and values, but the Holy Spirit gives the clothing that Paul describes. It has the kind of staying power that, by God's amazing grace, won't wear out or go out of style until Christ returns.

My oldest son gave me a book at Christmas titled *The Second Mountain* by David Brooks who is a social commentator and op-ed columnist for the New York Times. He tells a story early in the book about a hospital janitor named Luke. In the hospital where Luke worked there was a young man who'd gotten into a fight and was now in a coma—and he wasn't coming out. Every day his father sat by his side in silent vigil and had done so for six months. One day Luke came in and cleaned the young man's room. His father wasn't there because he was out getting a smoke. Later that day, Luke ran into the father in the hallway. The father snapped at Luke and accused him of not cleaning his son's room.

Luke's response to the situation was a perfect reflection of verse 13: "*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*" Luke didn't respond to the father by saying, "I did clean your son's room except you were out smoking." Instead, he realized the man needed comfort. So, he quietly decided "I'll clean the room again." And so, he did. As he told an interviewer later, "I cleaned it so that he could see me cleaning it... I can understand how he could be feeling. It was like 6 months that his son was there. He'd been a little frustrated, so I cleaned it again. But I wasn't angry with him. I guess I could understand." (© 2019 David Brooks, *The Second Mountain*, Random House, New York, p. xiv)

To know about the garments of grace is one thing, to wear them gracefully is another. "Forgiving One Another" is so clearly an essential part of being a Christian person that it is shocking when we hear of another believer bearing a grudge or withholding forgiveness. We are all such a mishmash of passion and love, of fear and hope, of jealousy and trust, of cynicism and goodwill, of indifference and concern, of distrust and awareness. How are all these feelings

to be processed? Verse 15 says *“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.”* I really think the secret is in possessing these values without parading them.

One last point is Paul’s instruction in verse 16: *“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.”* What we have here is the fellowship-life of a Christian congregation described in one verse. This is an exciting rationale to guide our congregation as we come together to give thanks to God, plan programs, choose curriculum, structure our ministry, strategize for the future, and enlarge our witness throughout this community.

A person can’t remain unforgiving or ungrateful when they are singing psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Every hymn or song is sung with gratitude and every service of worship reflects God’s grace given to us in Jesus our Lord.

When we sing and worship together, the Holy Spirit forms in us a deep desire to *“Bear with each other and forgive one another.”*

And to be thankful! Amen.