Putting on Christ

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Colossians 3:1-14

Sermon Series:
The Life You’ve Always Wanted

...the jersey became his persona.

W hen David Whitthoft was seven years old, he received a Green Bay Packers football jersey as a Christmas present. The jersey displayed Bret Favre’s name and number, the Packers quarterback whom David most emulated. Although David’s family lived in Connecticut, his dad was a devoted Packers fan and passed his team loyalty to his seven-year-old son.

David wore his jersey every day to school. He wouldn’t entertain the thought of changing his wardrobe. He became known around town as the boy in the Bret Favre jersey. He was interviewed on radio and TV. He was recognized by the Packers at a game for his exceptional loyalty.

His name appears in the Guinness Book of World Records for wearing the same jersey for 1,581 consecutive days. His mother also ought to be in there somewhere. She washed his jersey twice each week for 225 consecutive weeks. What began as something of a novelty back in 2003 evolved into “the streak” that didn’t end until 2008, on the occasion of David’s 12th birthday. He didn’t want to part with his nearly threadbare jersey. He simply outgrew it.

Nobody had to second guess David’s loyalties. He was a Packers fan through and through. David was so closely identified with Bret Favre and the Green Bay Packers that the jersey became his persona.

Perhaps this is what Paul means when he writes about “putting on Christ.” Would that people would see Christ in us! Would that Christ’s presence and power be seen in our behavior!

The Greek word Paul uses to describe putting on Christ originally referenced the taking off and putting on of clothes. Christians are called to put on Christ much as someone would a suit of clothes.

Some people are really into clothes. In some circles, where a person shops for clothes is a really big deal. When our kids reached a certain age, it was cool to shop in places like H&M and Abercrombie and Fitch. I had to ask my daughter for pointers about what’s cool these days. She tells me places like Forever 21 and Anthropologie. But this will all change quickly. Fads always do.

Paul correlates, in Colossians, this taking off and putting on metaphor to the sacrament of baptism. The
most common mode for baptism in the early church was a total body immersion. Although, when there was a shortage of water, pouring and sprinkling were sometimes used as a substitute. When new converts presented themselves for baptism, they took off their old clothes to represent their former manner of life and wore new baptismal robes to symbolize their new lives in Christ.

Paul utilizes this taking off and putting on metaphor in verse 5: “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed.” All five vices on this list have to do with sexual sins, except the last sin on the list—greed. Sexual immorality receives top billing because it was a major issue in the Greco-Roman world where Christianity originated. Nothing has changed. Sexual immorality is still a killer sin.

Paul’s language of “put to death” sounds rather drastic, I know. But when you calculate what pornography does to people and what infidelity does to marriage and family life, perhaps it’s not too strong a word after all. Sexual sins demean and abuse and cheapen what God has made. Put sin to death. The Puritan writer John Owen said it well: “Be killing sin or it will be killing you.” Kill sin or it will kill you.

I’m reminded of an old Cherokee legend that involves a grandfather and his grandson. The grandfather tells his young grandson that every person has two wolves fighting inside of him for supremacy. One wolf is mean and angry; the other is gentle and loving. His grandson asks the obvious question, “Grandpa, which wolf wins?” The wise grandfather answers, “Whichever wolf you feed.” If you feed the mean and angry wolf, you can expect this big bad wolf to grow in you. Feed the good; don’t feed the bad.

What needs to die in you so that Christ may come alive? Each of us is plagued with habits that are killing us; that are separating us from God and robbing us of our joy. We may try to ignore these vices and push them further down, but that’s like holding a beach ball under water. You never know when repressed sin will shoot to the surface unexpectedly.

Paul includes a second vice list in verse 8: “But you must get rid of such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language.” This second list focuses on various forms of anger. I spoke about anger last Sunday in relationship to Paul’s counsel in Ephesians, “Be angry but do not sin” (4:25). Since we are directed to “be angry” but “not to sin,” it’s obvious from the passage there is a form of anger that is not considered sinful. Anger may not necessarily be a sinful emotion, but it’s a dangerous one. If unchecked,
anger leads to other vices on this list like malice and slander.

Paul writes, in verse 9, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self...and have clothed yourself with the new self.” This verse is another variation on the putting off and putting on theme. We are instructed to strip away the old self and be clothed with the new self. In verse 12, Paul writes something comparable: “As God’s beloved children, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” He returns to the same theme in verse 14: “Above all, clothe yourselves with love.”

All these passages underscore the point of putting on Christ. We clothe ourselves with these attributes of Christ. By so doing, we put on Christ. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, “Let us live honorably, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and licentiousness, not in grumbling and jealousy. Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 13:14).

Aurelius Augustinus may not be a familiar name to you. You might know him by his Christian name: St. Augustine. Augustine waged an intense battle with lust throughout his life. He’s remarkably candid about this battle with sexual sins in his book called, appropriately, *Confessions*. He lived with a mistress for years and fathered a child with her. Augustine is the one who famously prayed, “O God, give me chastity, but not yet.”

One day, Augustine was so racked by guilt and shame over his inability to control his sexual passions that he was heading for an emotional breakdown. He was walking in a garden with his friend Alypius when he asked to be left alone. He writes in his *Confessions*, “Solitude was more appropriate for the business of weeping.” He threw himself down under a fig tree to pour out his lament in prayer, “And Thou, O Lord, how long? How long? Is it to be tomorrow and tomorrow? Why not now? Why not this very hour put an end to my shame?”

He heard a child’s voice from a nearby house saying, “Take it up and read. Take it up and read.” He couldn’t place the words and came to interpret them as a summons to read Scripture. He ran back to his friend and asked for a Bible. He resolved in that moment to take it as God’s clear directive to obey the first passage he encountered. He opened his Bible and pointed to this passage from Romans: “Not in reveling and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and licentiousness, not in grumbling and jealousy. Rather put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” As Augustine writes in his *Confessions*, “I decided to read no further. I didn’t need to.” Augustine received the answer he was
“...there’s a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.”

seeking. In one of the great days in church history, Augustine decided to put on Christ.

What exactly does it mean to put on Christ? Let me say it as simply as I know how. When we put on Christ, we seek to order our lives in such a way that every aspect of our personality takes on the character of Christ. We invite Jesus Christ to indwell every single dimension of our being.

Paul writes, in verse 2, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth.” Paul wants us to focus on essential realities rather than superficial ambitions. To set our minds on things above literally means to take aim at something.

We’re preaching this summer about “The Life You’ve Always Wanted.” We’re utilizing the image of a dart hitting a target to express intentionality on our part. There is nothing casual or haphazard about living the Christian life. We are purposely and continually alert to the practice of putting on Christ. The use of present tense imperative indicates continual action. We must keep on setting our minds on things above.

If this language of putting on Christ still seems obscure, let me commend the practice of spiritual disciplines. We’re eager for you to incorporate such practices of prayer, worship, study, fellowship, confession and the like into your lives. Some of you have heard me talk about these things so often that you almost know what I am about to say before I say it. When I talk about such things, some of you shift into auto-pilot. Sure, these things are nice to do, if you have the time and the inclination. But you don’t do it. I hate to intrude, but day after day and Sunday after Sunday, I talk about such things and you don’t do them. Then, when you hit a crisis of some kind, you wonder why God is not more assessable or why your spiritual life has atrophied. Little wonder!

The movie The Matrix was the rage back in 1999. Movies like The Matrix seem to endure and attract a cult-like following. There is a scene near the end of the movie, after a dramatic helicopter crash and rescue, when Morpheus appears before Neo. Morpheus serves as a type of mentor and guide for Neo. Morpheus says, “Neo, sooner or later, you’re going to realize, just as I did that there’s a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.”

 Couldn’t have said it better myself. There’s a world of difference between knowing what to do and actually doing it.