

19 July 2009

Kindness: Real 'Haute Couture'

Colossians 3:12

*The Guardian* ran a story a week or so ago on *haute couture*—on high fashion. Now I'm even less qualified to talk about fashion than I was last week to talk about patience—I'm a Men's Wearhouse/Tie Rack kind of guy. But you know what I'm talking about. It's that strange line of designer clothing that makes the news every year—designers spend millions on the dresses and shows, even though historically *haute couture* lines never turn a profit. I know I'm supposed to understand or at least appreciate this sort of thing as an art form, but to me it tends to look like tall women in enormous hats and tiny dresses, all looking as though they wish they could be somewhere else.

The comments I usually hear, even from people, even those who appreciate this stuff more than I do, go like this:

Where could anyone really wear an outfit like that?

When would I ever wear that?

Is that really *useful*?

Keep those questions in mind as we hear our text this morning. This passage comes in the middle of one of my favorite books in the New Testament. Paul's letter to the Colossians is a guide to faith and practice not only in the 1st century, but today as well. In the 3rd chapter of the letter Paul is talking about how we align our lives to our faith in Christ (notice that it's not the other way around). He's encouraging his readers to set our hearts and minds on Christ as a regular part of our decision-making—as a part of the discipline of living in families and communities and society.

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*

On the front of your bulletin you'll find the text from Galatians that is guiding us through this summer series. The fruit of the Spirit is a new way of life, redeemed through Christ's work and empowered to live in a new way through the Holy Spirit. The 'fruit' here is singular—it's a list of nine qualities or behaviors that work together as an expression of what the Holy Spirit does in our lives—how God's spirit shows in us as we grow in faith and service.

Notice that these are relational qualities—the Spirit's fruit teach us how to live with God and with each other—with family and friends and even strangers. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—all of these together describe a radically different way of relating to each other.

But it's still important to remember that these are a package deal—there's no picking and choosing here. It's all or nothing. The fruit of the Spirit—shown in all nine of these qualities—is the result of us allowing God to show us how to live in a different way.

Our text today shows us an important facet of how all the fruit of the Spirit function in our lives. Our text today reminds us that in the covenant relationship we enjoy with God, sometimes something is demanded from us.

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.*

My friend Cameron preached on this passage a few years ago. He used the image of looking into a closet, trying to decide what to wear—how to look—what to communicate about ourselves—to the people with whom we come into contact with. His point was that we have to choose how our lives will reflect God's presence in us.

One of the fun parts for me of working through these nine qualities we call the 'fruit of the Spirit' has been seeing how the individual words have been used in other parts of the Bible. The word that Paul uses to mean 'kindness' evolved from a word in classical Greek that meant suitable and proper and...useful. The word was often used to describe a nice, mild wine, and more broadly, any food that was pleasing and satisfying.

In the Old Testament the word was used to describe the qualities of God—how he sustains us gently and lovingly, even when we're less-than-perfect followers of him.

In the New Testament we return to an old use of this word. Luke uses it in his parable about new wine in old wineskins, and again later as a way of describing how generous we're called to be to others—in light of how generous God has been with us.

But I'm drawn to this link between kindness and being useful.

Not just in a practical sense. There's an important difference between usefulness and utilitarianism, where people and things are valued and defined by their function. The usefulness here is more like the experience of a good meal—something tasty and filling and nourishing and communal. Kindness, as Paul uses it, accomplishes something important for the body—for the church—for the Kingdom. By using this word for 'kindness' Paul is describing a sort of holy usefulness.

Tomorrow we remember the 40th anniversary of the first people to walk on the moon. I met Buzz Aldrin here in London a few weeks ago—he still looks like he could take on another moon mission. The anniversary of the moon landing is bringing back my childhood memories of that day. I can remember all of us gathered around our state-of-the-art black and white TV, listening to Walter Cronkite describe the events taking place. I can remember Neil Armstrong's words about small steps and giant leaps.

But my favorite memory of that day came after my friends and I got bored watching the news reports and cooked up an idea for turning it all into a game. The three of us got backpacks and our football helmets (mine was in the old blue and white colors of the LA Rams), and went to the park to re-enact the landing. What I remember most is walking very slowly, pretending we were trudging along in zero gravity. I'm not sure how we

decided who was who, or what we did with the third kid. Maybe we had him circle the park as Michael Collins. I do remember that we had a great time doing it.

Hard to imagine that was 40 years ago—getting back to the moon seems like such a remote possibility these days. One of the main reasons the US and other nations stopped going to the moon is the enormous cost of planning and executing missions like that. But so many of the inventions that came from the space program have become central to our lives—so many useful things came out of the research that made space exploration possible.

Have you ever seen the list of inventions from the space program that improve our lives today?

Baby food, satellite dishes, padding for shoes, high-resolution body scans, the ear thermometer, smoke detectors, firefighter protection, cordless tools like dustbusters and drills and saws. We have the space program to thank for the joystick controllers we use in our video games, the Teflon that prevents so many kitchen disasters, and also for pens that will write in zero gravity. Now about the pens, NASA spent something like \$25000 developing a pen that would write in space. The Russians simply gave their cosmonauts pencils.

But apart from that, so many useful things came out of the creativity and enormous investment that it took to send those astronauts into space.

In our text today, and in the list of the fruit of the Spirit, what we see is a call to live as people who have received a great gift from God—a gift that came at a huge cost—the call to show a genuine, useful sort of kindness as a mirror or reflection of the kindness God has shown us. One writer said that Paul's "purpose is to show the meaning of kindness in the life of a [person] whom Christ has grasped...As a direct outworking of God's love, it is always alive and active, breaking out spontaneously in the life of a [person] who is led by Christ."

How often do you feel "grasped" or "led" by Christ?

How often do you see this useful, nourishing sort of kindness breaking out spontaneously in your life?

I don't think I experience this nearly enough, and yet it's so central to the life God calls us to—it's so central to the life we can live when the Spirit gets in and starts to work in us and through us. But it begins with us making a choice to clothe ourselves, as God's people, holy and dearly loved, with "compassion, kindness, gentleness and patience."

I went to the National Prayer Breakfast here in London a few weeks ago. All around Westminster Hall there were church and political leaders talking about big programs and all the great things they wanted to do. At one point a young Irish folk singer named Foy Vance went up front and sang for the entire gathering.

The song was called "An Indiscriminate Act of Kindness," and it told the story of a

desperate young woman who stumbled into a hotel tired and cold and broke. She asked for a room, but made it clear that she had no way to pay for it. The concierge showed compassion to her and gave her a room, dried her off, and sat with her as she cried.

In the morning the young woman says to the concierge: "What you did for me was hard to believe." But he said back to her: "I was only doing what was right. No one who knows love could leave you out there on such a night." If you can help someone, bear this in mind, and consider it an indiscriminate act of kindness."

There's a temptation for us to see 'kindness' and the rest of the fruit of the Spirit simply as nice personal qualities to have, like clean hands or fresh breath. When we do that we miss the point. We miss the radical, transforming power of relating to each other and the world in a new way. We miss the way that all nine of these examples of the Spirit's work demonstrate the presence of the Kingdom of God in the world.

That takes me back to my friend Cameron, and his image of staring into the closet and deciding what to wear.

As followers of Jesus—as people who have known love—Paul's words to the Colossians leave us with some questions:

How do we want to look to the people around us?

How do we choose a way to look and to be that communicates the work of God's Spirit in each of our lives?

As we stand in front of the mirror and prepare to meet the world, what do we reflect about how God loves us, how he forgives us, and how his kindness changes our lives forever.

That's real high fashion—not the kind you see on the catwalk, and not the kind you'll see in any magazine, but it's the life we're called to—the sort of life that changes the world one indiscriminate act of kindness at a time.

My prayer for us as we move through this season of looking at how the Spirit works in our lives—my prayer for myself and each person here, is that we'll clothe ourselves with the love and compassion and useful kindness we see in the Scriptures. Not just so that we'll be nicer people, but so we can share the blessings we've received from God to a tired, hungry world. Amen.