



Finding Insight from the Scriptures

RETHINKING EMPOWERMENT

But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him....So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love.

Colossians 3:8-10, 12-14

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While waiting for a friend for lunch, you think back over the years. You have known him since college and have met together almost weekly. However, not having seen him for more than a month, you look forward to catching up on things. Impeccably dressed, he enters the restaurant and the maitre d' points to your table. Good friends and good food go well together. As lunch ends, he promises to call and pick the location for the next meeting.

Time goes by and you have not heard from him. Walking to your car after work one day, you turn the corner and there he is looking quite different from your lunch together not long ago. He looks like he is down and out, no longer the snappy dresser you knew. His is unshaven, disheveled, and in rags. Stunned, you ask yourself, "What happened?"

So it is with Paul and the believers in Colossae. However, Paul was concerned not with their physical attire but with their spiritual wardrobe (Col. 3:1-14). His purpose in writing was to instruct believers in how to make right choices—how to "dress for success."

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Location! Location! Location!

Colossians 3:1-7, along with the parallel passage in Ephesians 2:1-10, state that each believer has been made alive, raised up, and seated in the heavenlies with Christ (Eph. 2:5-6; Col. 3:1). Paul re-

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minded us to hold on to that thought: “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col. 3:2). This heavenly perspective is based on the reality of our death to sin with Christ and our new life in Him (vv. 3-4). As a result of Christ’s work on our behalf, Paul commanded believers to put to death any behavior that represents an earthly mindset (v. 5).¹ Paul was

not making a suggestion; rather he was giving a command, telling us to “exterminate” our old way of living, which is the very basis for God’s coming judgment (Col. 3:5-7; Eph. 2:1-3). Paul pointed out that our position in Christ should radicalize our behavior.

Potential Possibilities

Often someone will say of another person, “He has real potential to make it big!” “He has all the tools” is the comment for football players who have size, speed, and agility. When a tennis player possesses an outstanding serve, perfect strokes, and excellent movement on the court, the comment is, “He has all the skills.” In business, the person graduating from the right school, with the right degrees, and with the right contacts is considered promising and we say, “He has what it takes to be successful.”

Likewise Paul wrote to believers in Christ telling us that we have been provided with everything to be successful in the Christian life (Rom. 6:4-11). For Paul, success is demonstrated in action and

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in behavior. Successful behavior is spelled out in verses 12-14 of Colossians 3. “Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other...Beyond all these things put on love.” On the other hand, the opposite behavior is described in Colossians 3:8-9a. “Put...aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech...Do not lie to one another.”

Colossians 3:9b-10 explain why believers should be successful in their Christian lives. Paul appeals to a previous event, saying, “You laid aside [put off] the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge.” Success in the Christian life is potentially ours because the old man has been “put off.” The imagery is the stripping off of our old self, as with clothing. This discarding of our old self paves the way to “put on” the new self. The believer is now clothed with the new man, a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). In Romans 6:3-5, Paul explained the believer’s union with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. The spiritual implications are revealed in verse 6. “Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.” Our new position is foundational for our new conduct.

In this verse there is a progressive development of thought. *First*, Paul noted that the old, unregenerate man has been “crucified with Christ.” The old man is dead. *Second*, the purpose of the old man’s death is that the “body of sin might be done away with.” The “body of sin” refers to our capacity to sin. The translation, “might be done away with,” seems to imply that the ability to sin has likewise been put to death since the old man is now dead. The demise of the sin capacity, however, is not the right

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idea; rather the word means “to make powerless, to render ineffective, or to render inoperative.”² The better translation, “might be rendered inoperative,” captures both the correct meaning of the word and also reflects the potential idea of this verb form.³ The purpose of the old man’s death is that the inclination to sin can and should be ineffective. *Third*, with the old man dead and the capacity to sin potentially inoperative, the believer no longer needs to be enslaved to sin. As a result, the new man in Christ should not be held hostage to sin since he has a new capacity to act toward God. However, he can set in motion his ability to sin because he continues to possess the capability to choose. This is why Paul appealed for believers to “consider [to count as true] yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God” (Rom. 6:11). Then he issued two commands, “Do not let sin reign in you mortal body” (v. 12) and “Do not go on presenting

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the members of your body to sin” (v. 13). Obviously, believers have choices and can allow sin to rule and ruin their lives.

Prior to regeneration, everyone had only one choice—to live according to their own conscience (Rom. 2:14-15). Following salvation, the believer now has two alternatives: (1) the choice to align with God’s Word or (2) the choice to live according to the world’s values. God provides everything for success in the Christian life. It is obvious that *the new person in Christ has what it takes to be successful*. However, just as in football, tennis, or business, having the potential does not guarantee the result. It is in the choosing which translates into successful performance.

So, what do clothes have to do with the Christian life? We find a progression from Colossians 3 to Revelation 19. Colossians 3:10 teaches us to clothe ourselves with righteous acts. Revelation 19:7-8 reveals the result of dressing successfully.

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Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready. It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

The apostle John pictures the gathering of believers, Christ's bride, at the marriage feast and stated that "His bride has made herself ready" (v. 7). Verse 8 tells the exact fabric which His bride is to use in preparation for the wedding. "It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen...the righteous acts of the saints." Godly choices over a lifetime weave the fabric, which in turn creates one's spiritual, wedding garment. Each believer has the potential to have a beautiful garment, pleasing to Christ our heavenly Bridegroom. What you will be wearing is up to you.

Potential Performance

As we begin to consider the two possible behavioral responses available to each believer, it is noteworthy that the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in Colossians 3. In fact, the Holy Spirit is mentioned only once in Colossians: "he [Epaphras] also informed us of your love in the Spirit" (1:8). In the four prison epistles the Holy Spirit is used fourteen times (Ephesians, eleven times; Colossian, once; Philemon, none; and Philippians, twice). Obviously Paul taught the importance of the Spirit in the life of the believer. However, we must consider the extent of the Spirit's ministry in the believer's daily walk. I will suggest and then support throughout this book that the Spirit assists in filling, leading, and teaching rather than being the actual cause of the believer's behavior.⁴ If the Spirit actually caused specific behavior, Paul's use of commands to obey and conform to God's Word seems absurd. The command would be directed to the wrong person. The Spirit, not the believer, would be responsible for obedience to God's commands. God would be demanding obedience

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of Himself. Instead, the Scriptures direct believers to obey and act in accord with the Word. They are to choose to conform to Christ, to make choices that will produce behavior reflecting one's new life in Christ.

As previously noted, Colossians 3 brings to the forefront two kinds of behavior—the bad (vv. 8-9a) and the good (vv. 12-14).

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What sets one believer apart from the other? In chapter 3, *Free to Choose*, we will discuss the various laws of God and the inner conflicts that are experienced in the Christian life. In this chapter, choices are the issue. A believer decides whether he will put on Christ and be clothed in Christlikeness or put on the characteristics of the old self. Positionally the believer has “put off” the old man which is now dead and has “put on” the new man who is alive to God. But the believer’s ability to sin remains. Knowing the conflict, Paul issued two commands aimed directly at the struggle. Since

the old man has been “put off” by our position in Christ (v. 9b), Paul’s first command was for believers to “put off” or quit living the old life (vv. 8-9a). On the other hand, since the new man has been positionally “put on” (v. 10), Paul’s second command was for believers to “put on” or live like they belong to Christ (vv. 12-14). In each case Paul demanded decisive action. One can imagine Paul penning these words and thinking, “Just do it!”

The “putting off/putting on” theme is also addressed by Paul in Romans 13:12-14 and Ephesians 4:22-25. In each passage behavior, which reflects Christ, is based on the believers’ new identity.

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They were to behave in accord with their present position. Their conduct should give evidence to their new status in Him. The significant word here is “should,” since they could in fact live as they did prior to salvation. This is exactly why Paul instructed them to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh” (Rom. 13:14). Chapter 3 will address this topic.

The characteristic behaviors defined in each list distinguish the carnal life, living in the “far country” (Col. 3:8-9a) from the spiritual life, living in the “Father’s home” (Col. 3:12-14). Neither the six items (anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive speech, and lying) to be put off nor the eight items (compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing one another, forgiving one another, and love) to be put on are exhaustive. These lists are representative of either the ways of the world or the ways of God. Paul told believers to strip off the old clothes and put on the new custom wardrobe God has made available.

Clothes Do Make the Man

When shopping for a new suit, you select an item from the rack and go into the dressing room to try it on. Returning to the sales floor, you step in front of the full-length mirror. In the vernacular of the day, you either say to yourself, “Look’n good!” or “Bad choice!” The two lists of Colossians 3 represent choices from two distinct racks in the character-clothing store. Believers can select from either one, but how the final outfit appears to God is the only criteria. Paul’s appeal is to select carefully, making the right choices, because clothes really can make the man.

James 1:25 uses the image of a mirror, saying, “But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.” As the believer gazes into the mirror of God’s Word, it shows if the reflection is acceptable or

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not. Conformity to God's Word can be ignored and a poor wardrobe can be chosen. On the other hand, blessing—happiness and contentment—can be the reflection of Christlike clothing made through wise choices. Choices do determine your behavior and your behavior does determine the quality of your fellowship with God.

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Chapter 2, NOTES

1. The NASB's translation of Colossians 3:5 is as follows, "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry." This translation fails to convey the command to "put to death" improper behavior.
2. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 375; Rene A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked* (Springfield: 21st Century, 2005), 130-31; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Pattern For Maturity* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 99-100.
3. The Greek verb form of the translation, "might be rendered inoperative," is in the subjunctive mood, indicating a probability of action taking place. H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey (*A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [Toronto: Macmillan, 1955], 166) provide perspective on the subjunctive mood, saying, "Possible action may employ, in Greek, either of three moods. If it is viewed as contingent upon certain existing and known conditions—being objectively possible—the subjunctive is used."
4. Ken Neff, *Free To Choose* (St. Augustine, FL: LQ Press, 2011), 135-73.

The filling, leading, and teaching ministry of the Spirit is further developed in chapters 9, 10, and 11 in *Free To Choose*.

