

# I

## LOVE

### THE GOSPEL ABOUT THE GARMENT OF LOVE GOD CALLS US TO WEAR IT, TO SHOW TO WHOM WE BELONG

“But above all these things  
put on love, which is the  
bond of perfection.”

**COLOSSIANS 3: 14**

#### LITURGY:

##### READING:

Colossians 3, verses 1 – 17

Psalm 16 : 1, 2

Psalm 139 : 13 (after the Law), or

Hymn 3 : 1, 2, 3 (after the Creed)

Psalm 37 : 2, 3, 7 (collection song)

##### TEXT:

Colossians 3, verse 14

Psalm 45 : 4, 5

Hymn 58 : 1, 2

## *Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Sometimes, when couples get married, they choose today's text for their wedding address. At first sight, this might seem to be a perfect choice. We should however note that in Colossians 3, the apostle Paul is not speaking to married couples in the main. Instead, he is addressing Christ's congregation as a whole. He does so in the context of a section that speaks about our new life in Christ. He is telling us to put on the new man, telling that belonging to Christ means living a lifestyle that is different from the way in which people in the world around us live. It is a different lifestyle, yes, also in marriage. The new life in Christ embraces all aspects of life, including how we live together as husband and wife within marriage. Surely this is an aspect that should not be overlooked when dealing with this text. Yet, the spectrum of the text is much wider.

It is because of this wider spectrum that I chose this text in the series of sermons on the ABC of faith. The letter L for 'to love'. Love is the bond of perfection when it comes to living our faith. One could even say that 'to love' is the most important aspect. It is the key word of all God's commandments. That is why the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 13, verse 10 "*Love is the fulfilment of the law*". I also think of what we read in the first letter of John, Chapter 4, verse 8: "*He who does not love, does not know God, for God is love*". True love, love towards God and love towards our neighbour is at the heart of all God's commandments. Therefore, the verb 'to love' is a key verb with respect to serving God.

'To love' – this verb refers not simply to a feeling or an emotion, it is a commitment. A commitment such as husband and wife give to

each other on their wedding day - a commitment towards each other and together towards God. A commitment for life - unconditional, self-denying and total. We all know none of us is able to keep this commitment if we rely on our own strength. To be able to show true love, we need first of all to tap into the source of all love; a source which we can find only in God. We can only give true love if we have first turned to God's gift of love in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of our lives. We could put it another way: to be able to express sincere love we must first acknowledge our own inability. We must admit, "LORD, I am totally unable to show this love, this love towards Thee and my neighbour. Therefore, I thank Thee for the gift of the Saviour, in and through whom true love can be rekindled in me".

That is the gospel that I may preach to you today, the gospel of God's love for us - the love that we, through power from above, may radiate to others. We may wear it, as a garment visible to everyone who looks at us, the garment of love as the bond of perfection.

## **THE GOSPEL ABOUT THE GARMENT OF LOVE GOD CALLS US TO WEAR IT, TO SHOW TO WHOM WE BELONG**

We will look at:

### **1. The fibre of this garment**

#### **2. A fibre so strong that it will never wear out**

**1.** The Fibre of the Garment of Love. During my active ministry, I was able to run a number of marriage enrichment camps. At these camps I introduced the Love Dare book, which speaks about the true love by which every marriage can survive. When I read this book for the first time, it struck me that many of the aspects of love mentioned in this book applied equally to relationships within the congregation. As brothers and sisters we are called to live together in harmony to the glory of God. That is the kind of love we read about in our text: love as the bond of

## LEARNING THE ALPHABET OF FAITH

perfection, love as part of the new life in Christ.

This specific theme of the new life in Christ is at the heart of almost every apostolic letter of the New Testament. It must have been one of the most essential elements of the doctrine formulated by the early Christian church. We can be thankful that this instruction has been passed on to us also. It is equally essential for the church today to live this new life in Christ, equally essential for believers today to know how to live their lives as children of God in a world which has turned its back on God.

What is this new life? In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul describes it like this, Chapter 6, verses 3 and 4: *“Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life”*. The point that Paul wants to make is this: since in Christ we have been transferred from the realm of darkness into God’s marvellous light, we are now to live in newness of life. *“Therefore,”* Paul goes on to say, *“do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God”* (Chapter 6, verses 12-13).

We read the same at the beginning of Colossians 3, the Chapter we have just read. *“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth”* (Chapter 3, verses 1-2). Paul is not telling us to withdraw from this world. God allows us to enjoy life, the life He has given us.

I have formulated it this way on purpose. Life is a gift from God. We must acknowledge this. There is nothing wrong with enjoying life as such. In fact, God wants us to enjoy life, to enjoy it as His gift. That is the point.

When we realise this, our lives have a different focus. It will be quite different from the way people around us live their lives. They live life just as they see fit, only for themselves, for earthly fun and pleasure. Contrary to this lifestyle, Scripture teaches that we, as God's children, have been raised with Christ to live for Him. In Christ, our life has received a new focal point.

A new focal point – the apostle Peter says the same thing: *“through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead we have been born anew to living hope”* (I Peter 1, verse 3). Christ's resurrection from the dead gives new hope to a life that, as a result of sin, was beset with death. Due to what happened on Easter morning, God's children may look beyond the horizon of this life. In his letter to the Philippians the apostle Paul writes, *“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ...”* (Philippians 3, verse 20).

Beloved, this eager expectation – knowing that we are on our way to a better homeland – will also have its effect on the way we live our lives today. We know that although we are in this world, we are not of this world. We live in this world – and every day many things ask for our attention: study, work or leisure. That is life, and as such there is nothing wrong with this. The point is, however, as busy as we are, does it show up that our citizenship is in heaven, and that Christ is our King? In all that we do, it should always be our first desire to do His will, so that our life becomes beautiful in His sight, pleasing to God. Beloved, how clear is it that this is always your highest priority in life?

Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead we have been born anew to a living hope. Only when we live with Christ in all that we do – as the apostle Paul writes in our chapter *“whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him”* (verse 17) – only when we live life this way, beloved, will it really flourish. This is true, even if people around us may think we live

## LEARNING THE ALPHABET OF FAITH

rather burdensome lives, with no fun at all!

Do not let yourself be deceived by this kind of talk, beloved. Do not let yourself be deceived by what you watch on television or see advertised in the shops. We have something better to live for. People around us should also be able to see this. That brings us to verses 9 and 10 of our Chapter, where Paul writes: *“Put off the old man... and put on the new man...”*.

Since you belong to Christ, through whom you have been transferred from the realm of darkness into God’s marvellous light, says Paul, you should now also wear different clothes. People should be able to see to whom we belong and in whose service we stand.

Let us use a very simple example to make the meaning of this clear. Let us say that you have been working for Coles for a long time and you have been wearing the Coles uniform every day. Recently, you have had a new job offer from Woolworths, which offers a much better perspective. Would you show up at Woolworths tomorrow, still wearing your Coles uniform? This simply makes no sense; it could well cost you your job.

The point I want to make clear with this example is: the fact that we belong to Christ is something that should be visible, surely also in the actual clothes we wear, especially in this day and age, but especially in the clothes we have received from Christ: clothes woven from spiritual fibre, through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit within us.

We have been born anew. In other words, now that we are Christ’s, we have to put on new clothing. Just like that employee who now works for another company. Well, we have changed companies too, so to speak. We are no longer in Satan’s camp, wearing his trademark. Instead, we have been transferred from the realm of darkness into the realm of light and that means a change of uniform, clothes with a different trademark. From now on, we have to wear clothes fitting for the elect of God, (verse 12).

Elect of God – that is what we are in Christ. Elect – this word should motivate us to be eager to wear these new clothes, clothes that God has given us in Christ. Though totally undeserving, God has elected us. You and I, beloved, sinners of ourselves, have been given a new opportunity in Christ.

Consider this as a clear miracle. You have been rescued, no longer kept captive in Satan’s camp, but free again - free in Christ. Who would not, in humble gratitude, wear those new clothes given to him? In humble gratitude – it is out of pure grace that I may wear these beautiful clothes, woven of spiritual fibre: the new man in Christ!

However, it is when the marvel of the love of God in Christ is lost that living in obedience to God, living a holy life, becomes more a chore than a joy. When this happens, then slowly bit-by-bit the enthusiasm to serve the LORD with joy fades. What is out there in the world becomes more and more interesting. We forget that we are not of this world and we start compromising. Our eyes grow dim; we no longer discern clearly what it means that in Christ we have been redeemed from the slavery of sin.

Slavery, beloved – for no matter how much the world talks about freedom, in the end it is nothing else but being enslaved to a certain lifestyle. It never satisfies, for you will always want something more or something different. You may have had a great night out, but the next morning you suffer from a hangover and feel empty again. It did not really give that lasting kick. It only lasted for an evening. After a great weekend – what the world calls great – when Monday comes, you hate going back to work: Monday-itis!

Only when you see what it means to be redeemed from that enslavement, to be set apart by God – elect and holy, says Paul – only then will you truly rejoice. In addition, you will also make sure that this beautiful garment

## LEARNING THE ALPHABET OF FAITH

given to you does not get stained. We are God's bride, and the heart's desire of every bride is to please her bridegroom. Her heart's desire is to live in harmony, to make sure nothing endangers this relationship of love. Then the heart beats with love every day: the L of love.

Having looked at the wider context, the apostle now starts to pay attention to the detail of this spiritually-woven clothing. The point is clear: it is not that we are trying to please God by putting on this clothing. If that is what we think, then wearing them can so easily become a chore again, something that *we* have to do. No, beloved, these clothes are evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit within us, and that is what we rejoice in. It is only when we see it in this way that living for the LORD becomes a joy, for we know that these clothes that He has given us make us as beautiful as a bride before her bridegroom. That will then make us eager to wear them.

When we look more closely at the various qualities – if you like, when we examine this spiritual wardrobe - we should note that the list is not just a variety of pleasant virtues, a rack of clothes, so to speak, from which we can pick and choose. Instead, *all* of these qualities point to Christ and what He has done for us. This means that we are called to reflect on them *all* in our lives, as a total package. We are to wear them as a suit of clothes, a complete outfit, kept together by the garment of love as the bond of perfection.

Now, before we come to the word 'love', let us briefly look at the other qualities that Paul mentions first. Paul writes, verse 12:

- “*Put on tender mercies...*” - just as God has shown mercy to us, we are to show mercy to one another, reflecting God's compassion by a living faith.
- ... *kindness* ... – this is mercy translated into deeds; the willingness to be there for the other.
- ...*humility*... – never put your own rights first, but



always count the other better than yourself.

- *...meekness...* – this is a quality closely related to humility. It is the opposite of a harshness that seeks one's own way above all others.
- *...longsuffering...* – this is patience, the ability not to fly off the handle when things go wrong; to take a long breath, so to speak, before you say something or before becoming angry.
- *...bearing with one another and forgiving one another* - as kindness was mercy in deeds, so this is patience in deeds.

In a nutshell, the clothing we are to wear sets aside our natural reactions and makes us want to reflect the example Christ gave us, renewed by the Holy Spirit. These are the clothes – says Paul – that we are to wear in our attitude towards each other. Christ calls us to be kind, patient, bearing with one another, as members of the congregation towards one another, as husband and wife within marriage.

Then finally comes verse 14, “*But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection*”. Love as the bond of perfection! At the beginning of the sermon, we already saw that if our faith is living, then ‘love’ is the key word. Love, not as a feeling or an emotion, but as a commitment! Love as we sing about it Psalm 116: loving the LORD as the fount of life and grace, reflecting this also by loving our neighbour as ourselves; in true love always seeking the other's interest first, denying oneself, prepared for unconditional sacrifice.

It is clear, beloved, that from ourselves we can never give this love. We can only give it, we can only show it once we have tapped into the source of all love. This source is found in God the Father, who manifested this love by sending His only Son into this world to die for our sins. It is this unselfish love that God wants His children to reflect upon in their dealings with each another: love as the bond of perfection, just as it is

## LEARNING THE ALPHABET OF FAITH

to be within marriage. We think here of Paul's analogy of marriage in Ephesians 5, where he compares it with the relationship between Christ and His church.

When Paul uses the image of wearing clothes in this chapter, when he speaks about love as the bond of perfection, we should imagine something that holds all the other clothes together, something like a clasp or an overcoat. This overcoat, this garment of love, is woven of the most precious fibre, even more precious than the fibre from which the other garments were woven. Why is this? Well, where there is no love all of these other characteristics mentioned before become empty, even hollow.

The apostle Paul shows this clearly in that wonderful chapter about love, in Chapter 13 of his first letter to the Corinthians. Especially at the beginning of this chapter, verses 1 to 3, *“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing”*. Well, that is what Paul means in our text, when he calls love ‘the bond of perfection’. It gives the true dimension of all the other virtues mentioned earlier. Wearing this garment of love shows to whom we belong. In his first letter, the apostle John puts it this way: *“Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love”* (I John 4, verses 7-8).

Beloved, the most important question for us is: what clothes are we wearing? Is it visible in our lives that we are wearing these clothes; clothes, woven not of natural fibre, but of spiritual fibre? Woven of spiritual fibre – you cannot buy these clothes in a shop; they need to be given to us by God Himself. God does this by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit within us. Where God has woven these clothes for us – the new man – we are now called to wear them and not to throw them away.

This calling to wear these clothes comes to us every time the gospel is preached to us with the command to repent and believe. This gospel is the gospel of God's love for sinners, for sinners like you and me. The question now is, do we truly appreciate this gospel? Do we really appreciate it, every time anew? Will we wear the garment of love, as well as all the clothes mentioned, out of thankfulness? Do we wear them with much appreciation or can we perhaps not be bothered, because we like our old clothes better? This new clothing is being handed out to you again today. Are you going to wear these clothes tomorrow, showing in whose service you stand? The new clothes of *tender mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, all being held together with the clasp of love as the bond of perfection?* Beloved, these qualities never come naturally. They are gifts from God. We have to pray for them daily, and have to work on them daily through power from above. Of own strength we will achieve nothing here.

We saw that the garment of love is woven of *spiritual fibre*. This is also why the fibre of this garment, when worn in faith, will never wear thin, which we will see in the second point of the sermon.

**2.** A fibre so strong that it will never wear out. When we buy new clothes, it often does not take long before they are out of fashion again. What is hot today, is out of style next week. Nothing is more changeable than the fashion of the day. However, beloved, this does not apply to spiritual clothing, the clothing of the new man. Some modern Christians may think so, but that is because of their human way of interpreting Scripture. Of course, once we start interpreting Scripture in our own way, then even the new man, as Scripture describes him, becomes old-fashioned. It has become old-fashioned to live that way. But for those who hold on to the inerrancy of Scripture, these clothes will always stay in fashion.

Even if these clothes are new when we receive them, will they not, after years of use, get dirty and wear thin? If so, how do they become 'as new'?

## LEARNING THE ALPHABET OF FAITH

again? To stay with the image of clothing – which washing detergent is good and strong enough to restore them ‘as new’?

According to the advertisements we see around us, most modern detergents are so good and penetrate so deeply into the fibre, that all dirt washes out, no matter how stained the clothing may be. Indeed, some of these detergents seem to be able to live up to their promise. After all, all natural fibre gets dirty from the outside in. As long as it is treated deeply enough from the outside, it might become clean again.

However, with the clothes the apostle Paul is talking about, the clothes of the new man, this is different. They do not get dirty by what comes from the outside, but by what comes from within. Remember what the Lord Jesus said in Mark 7, verses 18-23, *“Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?”* And He said, *“What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man”*. These verses clearly show us that the clothes of the new man get dirty from the inside. It is clear, then, that we also need a detergent that works from within.

Now – to stay with the image – the apostle Paul points to this detergent in verse 16. It is the Word of Christ that cleanses us. It is only when we let this Word dwell within us richly, only when we let ourselves be guided by that Word of God, only then will the garment of the new man, the garment of love, stay clean and never wear out.

To let the Word of Christ dwell within us richly – this means to open our Bibles every day, not just within the circle of the family (such as at meal times), but by making time for personal Bible reading every day as well. To let the word of Christ dwell in you richly means wanting to live close to God, making His Word the guide for that kind of life.

Part of this life is to ask the Lord for His help every day. This prayer, beloved, is indeed of crucial importance, as we confess it in the Heidelberg Catechism, “*God will give His grace and the Holy Spirit only to those who constantly and with heartfelt longing ask Him for these gifts and thank Him for them*”<sup>1</sup>. Most of us know this sentence from the Catechism almost by heart. Yet, beloved, how often do you actually pray for the Holy Spirit? Do you pray for the guidance of the Spirit to help you live holy, Spirit-filled lives, to the glory of God and the well-being of every one who crosses your path?

By now I hope it has become clear how we ought to wear these new clothes; how we ought to wear the garment of love, also making sure that this garment stays clean by letting the Word of Christ dwell in us richly. The Word cleanses us from within. Remember what Paul writes in Ephesians 5, “*Christ so loved the church and gave Himself for her that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish*”.

This is the new man; you and I rejoicing in Christ, and in all that He has given us. Whoever sees this as a privilege will wear this garment of love with humble gratitude, full of appreciation. He will never want to go back to his old clothes. Then, as Paul writes in verse 17, “*whatever we do in word and deed, we will do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him*”.

As we are studying the alphabet of faith, today we dealt with the letter L; “L” for ‘to love’. This love is a commitment such as that which couples make on their wedding day. On that day, when they make a vow of love to each other, they promise to show this love always: in good days and bad, in riches and poverty, in health and in sickness, for as long as they both shall live.

Beloved, we have drawn the line wider today. For this is how we, as

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1 Lord’s Day 45, question and answer 116.

## LEARNING THE ALPHABET OF FAITH

God's children, must all wear the garment of love; every day, not only when things are rosy, but also when God puts difficulties on our path, when trials face us, in times of hardship and when we meet with enmity, gossip, lying and deceit. How are we able to do this? How can we also make sure in those difficult times that we wear this garment unstained, to the glory of God? We can only do this when we indeed let the Word of Christ dwell within us richly every day.

Every day – I would like to emphasise this. After all, we do not normally wear the same clothes every day. On Sundays we generally wear better clothes than we do during the week. However, when it comes to the clothes woven of spiritual fibre, there can be no difference between Sunday clothes and work clothes. Every day we are to wear the garment of kindness, humility, meekness and longsuffering, held together by the clasp of love as the bond of perfection. By wearing these clothes, we show to whom we belong. God is love, and He wants us His children to walk in love.

Beloved, may that love always be found among us in all sincerity and truth: love for God and for our neighbour. Always, every day. Let it be as a garment we wear, the garment of love as a reflection of God's love for us. Today, God has again handed these garments out to us in the preaching of the gospel. The Word of God has again strengthened us to live the new life in Christ. These are the riches of the Sunday. Let me leave you with this question: what clothes are you going to wear tomorrow and all the other days of the week? Are you going back to your old clothes, or will you put on the new clothes that Christ gave you today?

**AMEN.**