

## Does God care about what we wear?

Our first instinct in addressing this question might be to label it frivolous or shallow. Certainly, God loves us all no matter what we wear. But the problem with that response is it is unbiblical. Of course, God loves us, but that does not mean God doesn't care and what we do isn't important. In fact, Scriptures tell us God deeply cares about us. Even about what we wear.

The first place we see God showing care or concern about what we wear is back in the very beginning, in the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures, Genesis. It's part of the story we might not remember because it is right after the part where the first man and woman disobeyed God and then blamed the snake, each other, and God for their disobedience and God told them the consequence for their actions was they had to leave the safety and comfort of the Garden and go out into the wide and wild world. Out where they were going to have to work the land if they wanted to eat. Where they would have to work to build shelter if they wanted to be kept dry from rain and protected from the heat of the sun. Where they would have to work among thorny branches that can scratch the skin and risk getting the itchy and sometimes poisonous bites from insects. Knowing they were going out into such an environment; God knew the outfits the first man and the first woman had sewn for themselves out of leaves would not be enough; they would not wear well in the world. So, God, in an act of loving care, made them clothes from the skins of animals, which were better, tougher clothes than those made from leaves. God made the first man and the first woman work clothes that would be able to stand up to the challenges they would face and protect the people God loves.

God did not send God's people out of Garden naked and afraid, God sent them out clothed in God's love, clothed in skins that would stand up to the challenges that the world would throw at them. Clothes that would stay with them like a blessing and a reminder that even though they were no longer in the Garden, God was still with them, still loving them.

This is not the only place in the Scriptures where clothing is mentioned as being part of a person's relationship with God. In the New Testament one place we see it is in Paul's letters, particularly his letter to the Colossians, he wrote about being clothed in Jesus Christ. Scholars remind us that clothing played an important role in the Early

Church. New clothes represented new life in Christ, and the newly baptized would put on new clothes to show they had left behind an old life without Christ. The new clothes were not just for show, they represented a commitment to live a new way, to act and behave in accordance with their belief in Jesus. This belief was not just a private, personal aspect of life, it was a vital part of their identity. Scholars also tell us this concept of putting on a person like clothing is unparalleled in ancient literature and therefore unique to the Bible.

With this in mind, then perhaps it shouldn't surprise us, that clothing, or rather, not wearing the appropriate clothing, featured in the parable in today's Gospel. This parable can be difficult to hear, and at first might sound like there is no comfort in it. This discomfort has been felt by scholars, commentators and preachers alike who explain this parable as an allegory where the king is God who has reached out to God's people over and over again, only to be refused; rejected either by the people not taking God's invitation seriously or by violently killing God's prophets. The king's reaction to this rejection is two-fold mass destruction of the city and inviting whoever is left after the destruction, the good and the bad, to attend the wedding banquet.

A lot of folks struggle with the king being a stand in for God, especially with all the violence and destruction the king commands. I believe it is important to remember that it is believed Matthew's Gospel was written sometime between 80-100 CE, which means the author and their community were dealing with the tragedy and trauma of the destruction of the Jewish temple, and the loss of community that went with it. Their world was changing drastically, and, in some ways, it must have felt like their world was ending. That might account for the author of Matthew's unique use of violence to depict change in this Gospel and the author's focus on Jesus' second coming as another form of drastic and violent change.

It also might explain why the king, at the end of the parable, showed no compassion or forgiveness for the inappropriately dressed guest. Again, we might wonder if the king represents God, then is it a bad representation, for how could God get so upset over something as insignificant as what a person is wearing? But when we remember this is a parable, not something that really happened, and that clothing plays a role in scripture, especially in representing a person's life, their behavior, their relationship with God and God's blessing and love, then we might see what Jesus was getting at.

Perhaps the inappropriateness of the outfit represented that people forgot the clothing God made for God's people in the beginning, the clothing that was a blessing and reminder of God's love that gave people what they needed to do the work of living

in the world. Perhaps people had vested themselves in clothing that represented status, power, and greed instead. Perhaps people had used clothing to separate themselves from each other and God.

That is the storyline of the movie *The Devil Wears Prada*, which is based on the novel with the same title. *The Devil Wears Prada* is a story about a young college graduate named Andrea who was unable to find work in her chosen field of journalism, and out of desperation, took a job as an assistant to a demanding woman in the fashion industry. It was a job, she was told, “a million girls would kill for”, however she quickly realized she did not fit in the world of high fashion. She was not dressed for it. Her wardrobe seemed to come from secondhand shops, and her attitude showed she did not care about fashion. But as soon as she was given new clothes, couture of high fashion, her attitude changed. At first, she simply became more confident, and went from clumsily stumbling and running around to intentionally striding through her workplace and the streets of New York, where the story takes place. Then, slowly, bit by bit, her behavior changed to be more like the demanding, demeaning boss she worked for. Andrea began neglecting her friends and her family. She started showing up her co-workers, even taking from them the opportunities they cared about and prepared for. Once her boss told Andrea she was just like her, Andrea saw the truth in her transformation, and decided that was not the person she wanted to be. The clothing represented someone who was the opposite of what she valued, hence the title, *The Devil Wears Prada*. The truth of her transformation caused Andrea to repent, to change. She quite the job “a million girls would kill for”, gave away her couture, found a job in line with her values, goals, and dreams and the clothes that go with them.

So, if *The Devil Wears Prada*, then what garment was the king at the banquet hoping to see people wear? Nothing against the world of high fashion, but perhaps Jesus was using this parable to highlight people’s actions represented by garments. Which means the garments Jesus was referring to were those of the Kingdom of Heaven: acts of love, mercy, justice, truth, holiness.

The parable in today’s Gospel reminds us God does love everyone where we are, but that does not mean God does not care about what we do, or that there aren’t consequences for our actions. God deeply desires in us the change called repentance, a change from selfish actions that show no care or concern for God and our neighbors to that of behaving in ways that care for our neighbors because of our love for God. That is how the Kingdom of Heaven becomes more real here on earth. And this love for God and neighbors can be represented, in a sense, by what we wear.

In this unusual time, a garment or item of clothing that represents such love could arguably be the face mask. We've repeatedly been told face masks covering our nose and mouth is the best way we have for reducing the risk and slowing the spread of the COVID-19 virus, along with practices like staying at least 6 feet apart, refraining from attending large gatherings, especially indoors, and keeping public gatherings as brief as possible. It is a small thing, perhaps it might be uncomfortable for some, but when we look at the face mask through the lens of today's parable, the king was upset by the person who wasn't dressed appropriately, perhaps representing another way someone "made light" of God's invitation by expressing the assumption the rules didn't apply to them, which exposed a lack of love.

Which is why we have the rule that everyone who is on the church property, even if they are outside, needs to wear a face mask. It is our sign of love for each other and for God. It is garment that is a reminder God is with us and God cares in this extraordinary and uncertain time. That is why we are also giving away face masks on our Tree of Giving on the front yard of the church; we want to do what we can to give everyone what is needed to get through this pandemic together. These garments show we care for our neighbors because God loves and cares for us, cares about our actions. Because, it turns out, God does care about what we wear.