

**Message: "Things Above and Things Below"**

**Have you ever heard the expression "you can tell a lot about people from the clothes they wear"?** Our clothing is influenced by the different ways we view our lives. The clothes we choose to wear often reflect our status, our values, and even our priorities or character. At Hollywood red carpet events reporters often ask actors and actresses "Who are you wearing?" to find out which designer created the clothes they wear. Clothing is often a signal of one's economic class and power in business and politics. And different groups use clothing as a signal of their affiliation, ranging from the Red Hat Ladies to gang colors or shirts worn at summer camp. The same was true in past as well.

**Why am I talking about clothing when we hear words about how God sees us as children and warnings about sexual behavior and speech?** A single, pivotal word serves as the turning point. It's how we go from the old, negative, life-stealing image of ourselves and others to a new, positive, life-giving image of ourselves and others. In Greek it's the word ἐνδύω (enduo), which translates as "put on." More fully, it means "to clothe or be clothed with (in the sense of sinking into a garment)."<sup>1</sup> And Jesus is the one who invites us to be clothed with him (vv8, 12).

**Paul and Hosea are inviting us to take a chance.** To love God first and above all else comes with a risk. Being in relationship with God doesn't happen accidentally. We must choose to do so. This conscious act of free will is an expression of ourselves. It comes from who we are, reflecting our character and personality. It also comes from a deeper, spiritual place. We are made in the image of God, who gave us the capacity and awareness to choose how we will live. So, in a very real sense, we are choosing the spiritual clothes we wear.

**Our days are filled with choices.** We choose what we will eat, who we will talk to, what we give our attention to and, yes, what we wear. More important, we chose what's most significant to us in life and we choose whether to believe in God or not. Today, we're going to explore how this shapes us, draws us together and builds community.

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<sup>1</sup> Strong's Concordance, No. 1746. enduo, see <https://biblehub.com/greek/1746.htm>

**God uses the visual imagery of a parent caring for children to get across to Hosea the idea of the kind of relationship God has with us.**

Hosea recorded the words: *"God loved them ... and called them. The more I [God] called them, the further they went from me .... Yet it was I who taught them to walk. I took them up in my arms, but they didn't know I healed them. I led them with bands of human kindness, with cords of love. I treated them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them"* (Hosea 11:1-4).

**This is a moving image of a loving God.** You get the sense God will do anything for us, but we're like toddlers who say "no" while, at the same time, really need and want to be with their parents.

**Or perhaps the rebellious teenager is a more apt image.** You get a sense of God's frustration in the next part of the passage. They're going to lose what they have. Their scheming will backfire. The kids are bent on turning away from God. God points out the shallowness of their faith, saying *"You'll send your cries upward, even though you don't believe anyone is there to answer"* (v7, my translation).

**Then we arrive at this powerful image of God,** *"My heart winces within me. My compassion grows warm and tender"* (v8). Just like a parent. People often say the image of God in the Old Testament is too harsh and judgmental. This adds a different perspective. God is loving and caring, but like any parent, even a divine one, knows change only comes when the children are ready to embrace it. Only then are lives transformed, families restored and communities healed.

**We can lose sight of the power and majesty of God.** We can forget about the many ways we are blessed, large and small. We can even dull and deaden ourselves to the love God has for us. Even when we don't feel the compassion of God, we are recipients of God's mercy.

**You see, we live with the repercussions of our choices.** The people of Hosea's time did. Assyria conquered Israel a few years later. The people of Paul's time did. Rome destroyed the temple and persecuted Christians. Those who rebel against God, ignore God or follow selfish schemes will lose out. When they look for hope in their darkest moments, they won't find it. After all, there's no one where they're

looking. That's why Paul writes to point out what we're missing and remind us God has expectations for us to live up to. I worry about us in this day and time, and pray for God's mercy.

**There are two points I'll leave with you for reflection.** First, when we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior, we're united with Christ. "*Christ is all things and in all people*" (v11). This means our soul is in union with God. Our spiritual nature, our soul, is fully awakened and growing when connected to God's Spirit. This new part of us, our new nature, is hidden from others, as we're still hidden behind our old selves, our old nature, which is slowly dwindling away. This is a powerful change, a transformation which makes our lives and the lives of others better. You make the choice whether to embrace this life or not.

**Second, there's an expression you used to hear around the church.**

It's based on verse 17, "*whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God ... through him*" (Colossians 3:17, CEB). Thought, word and deed. This summarizes the final section of the letter. Paul is using a didactic form. He gives us the message in the negative and, by doing so, sets up the positive. Verses 4-11 set up verses 12-17. I invite you to read them.

**Paul reminds us our words and actions matter.** We express our rebellious nature through what we do and in the ways we communicate. It's why Paul starts with the reminder to lift our attention from the desires of our body and mind, putting our focus on our spiritual life, our soul. God wants to care for us. Hosea shows us God's compassion and mercy even under the harshest of circumstances. Jesus shows us love and forgiveness, even from the cross. There is hope.

**When we choose to go our own way, don't be surprised by what life will be like.** It's divisive, self-centered and all about taking what you can get. This is a negative, life-stealing image.

**When we choose to be in relationship with God, there are good surprises.** It's a life in unity, harmony and peace, where we are given love, respect and kindness. Forgiveness is the word of the day. We will be grateful and content. This honors families and builds communities of trust through wisdom and joy.

**I invite you to turn to God, ask forgiveness and accept Jesus.**

Things will be fine from there. After all, God is in control. This is the message Jesus gave to us and it gives hope. But, as we know, the simplest things of life aren't always the easiest to live.

**Henri Nouwen shared a bit of his journey.** If you will permit me, I'll paraphrase it as I believe it will help us. He wrote: "... I have been increasingly aware true healing mostly takes place through the sharing of weakness. We're usually afraid of our weaknesses, so we hide them. This makes them unavailable to others but also often to ourselves. And, in this way, we end up living double lives even when we don't mean to. We end up with one life in which we present ourselves to the world, ourselves, and God as a person who is in control, while living another life in which we feel insecure, doubtful, confused, anxious and totally out of control. We can end up living half a life due to fear. The split between these two lives causes us a lot of suffering. I have become increasingly aware of the importance of overcoming the great chasm between these two lives. I have become aware that facing, with others, the reality of our existence can be the beginning of a truly free life.

**It's amazing that true friendship and community become possible to the degree we are able to share our weaknesses with others.** I know this is true in my life. I realize that, in the sharing of my weaknesses with others, the real depths of my human brokenness, weakness and sin start to reveal themselves to me, not as a source of despair but as a source of hope. As long as I try to convince myself or others of my independence, a lot of my energy is invested in building up my own false self. But once I'm able to truly confess my most profound dependence on others and on God, I can come in touch with my true self and real community can develop."<sup>2</sup>

**God accepts us as we are and who we are, unconditionally and with grace.** What a great blessing it is to know such deep, radical love. If you haven't yet taken the step to confess and believe, I invite you to do so now ... *prayer of confession*

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen Society, *Sharing Our Weakness*, devotion from July 27, 2022 (modified)

**Let’s take a moment to share God’s blessings with each other.**

You’ve given and received blessings since we last gathered. Please turn to a person seated near you and ask:

**“What blessings did you give or receive this week?”**

I invite each of you to share now.

**Thank you for sharing.** I look forward to hearing your story during our social time. Ask each other the question and then listen. We’ll be amazed at what God is doing in, with and through us. May God richly bless you, your family and your service. To God be the glory!

Let us pray:

*Lord, help us to trust you, each and every day. Give us the boldness to speak in your name, to offer your love to a world hurting and in need of hope. Help us to follow you and be transformed by your love so we may bless others with the same love. Bless us when we live generously, sharing your love with others. We commit ourselves to you in faith and in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

**Hosea 11:1-11 (CEB)**

When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.

The more I called them,  
the further they went from me;  
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,  
and they burned incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;  
I took them up in my arms,  
but they did not know that I healed them.

I led them  
with bands of human kindness,  
with cords of love.

I treated them like those  
who lift infants to their cheeks;  
I bent down to them and fed them.

They will return to the land of Egypt,  
and Assyria will be their king,  
because they have refused to return to me.

The sword will strike wildly in their cities;  
it will consume the bars of their gates  
and will take everything because of their schemes.

My people are bent on turning away from me;  
and though they cry out to the Most High,  
he will not raise them up.

How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
My heart winces within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.

I won't act on the heat of my anger;  
I won't return to destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God and not a human being,  
the holy one in your midst;

I won't come in harsh judgment.  
They will walk after the Lord,  
    who roars like a lion.  
    When he roars,  
    his children will come trembling from the west.  
They will come trembling like a bird,  
    and like a dove from the land of Assyria;  
    and I will return them to their homes, says the Lord.

**Colossians 3:1-11 (CEB)**

Therefore, if you were raised with Christ, look for the things that are above where Christ is sitting at God's right side. Think about the things above and not things on earth. You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

So put to death the parts of your life that belong to the earth, such as sexual immorality, moral corruption, lust, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). The wrath of God is coming upon disobedient people because of these things. You used to live this way, when you were alive to these things. But now set aside these things, such as anger, rage, malice, slander, and obscene language. Don't lie to each other. Take off the old human nature with its practices and put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it. In this image there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all things and in all people.