

I want to warn you that this morning's sermon contains no deep theological insights. I *will* draw from the Bible; but you may not hear a profoundly religious message. I want to share with you one of my personal passions and, in so doing, I hope to pass along some spiritual food for thought.

I love fashion! And let me be clear, I'm not necessarily talking about clothes you can't afford by designers whose names you can't pronounce. I just like regular clothes (and shoes, boots, hats, bowties, watches and accessories of all kinds). I get especially excited when I find a cool item at a bargain price (like at the Clothier or Marshalls). I love window shopping and surfing online – it's meditative. It's a passion. And the clothes that I wear, the way that I put different items together is a means of self expression. I don't really care about what's "hot" according to *GQ Magazine*. I have my own sense of style. I know what I like. I express myself in public; but fashion is one of my *private* passions!

Now, where did this all start? I got this sensibility from my mom. This sermon is my gift to her this morning -- Mother's Day. When I was in high school, she used to take me shopping in downtown Hartford. I still remember some of the clothes we found on those trips; but, more than that, I remember the time we spent just being together. I remember pieces of conversation that still mean the world to me. I remember character lessons that she taught. And that is what I have in mind this morning. The text from Ephesians teaches us a character lesson. The author has some definite ideas about self expression and some specific instruction about how to wear our character. We learn, in an eternal sense, '**How to Make a Fashion Statement**'.

As I have said, I remember some of the clothes that my mom and I found on those shopping trips. I want to tell you about two outfits, in particular. The first outfit, we put together in my junior year of high school. In the late winter of that year, I was to attend a school dance and at that dance they were having a “Sharp Dressed Man” contest. In 1983, the band Z.Z. Top had a song of the same name. The chorus went: “They come running just as fast as they can...’cause every girl’s crazy about a sharp-dressed man.”

Well, I wore a cream-colored, double-breasted corduroy suit. This was wide-waled corduroy too – really fancy. I had a wing-tipped tuxedo shirt with pleated front (in some kind of earth tone). And I found a cordovan-colored leather bow-tie! I know that we bought shoes for the occasion and I’m sure that I had some kind of hat to top off the outfit. “They come running just as fast as they can...’cause every girl’s crazy about a sharp-dressed man.” I don’t remember that any girls came running; but, listen, I WAS sharp *in my own mind*.

And that’s a good fashion tip. I watch these makeover shows and I always hear the same message. The message is that attractiveness is in your mind – it’s an inside job. I was a junior in high school – self-conscious and awkward – and my mother, who believed I was an attractive kid even when I didn’t, took me on shopping this spree so that I would believe. It took me years to believe; but she kept trying. Those trips weren’t about materialism. Those trips were about her maternal care. I didn’t fully get it then; but I get it now. **Attractiveness is an inside job.** By the way, I won the sharp-dressed man contest!

In interest of preserving my dignity, I should keep the next outfit entirely to myself. But, I want to finish what I've started. The next year, as a senior, I really got into this whole idea of fashion as a means of expression. At some point during the last half of my senior year, my mother and I found another suit that was almost too cool for school. It was gray with a hounds-tooth pattern (and that was the only traditional thing about it). The pants were pleated and hemmed with cuffs. The jacket had leather piping along the sleeve inseam and massive padding in the shoulders. I had this tiny head with high-topped hair and huge shoulder pads! I look at the picture now and I think to myself, "That's not a fashion statement. That's a crying shame!"

Anyway, I loved the gray, hounds-tooth suit. And this was a suit that – maybe you have an outfit or article of clothing like this – I had to **strategically** plan when I'd wear it. The last thing you want to risk is overexposure of a cool suit. So, I knew from the start that I could wear this thing maybe four or five times in the school year before people would begin to roll their eyes when they saw me coming. "Here comes Mr. Tiny Head-Big Shoulders in that suit again!"

You see, there is a certain amount of planning required when you get dressed and go into the world. I don't mean vanity or excessive pride in one's appearance. I mean *consciousness* that people are watching -- judging, criticizing, snickering and measuring – measuring your character and the way you carry yourself. In a very real way (though not literally), we need to put on a suit of armor so that we can "stand against the wiles of the devil." (verse 11)

Let me put the letter to the Ephesians in context. Some New Testament scholars believe that this letter was not, in fact, a letter to the Ephesian church but an open address to Christians everywhere. Furthermore, there is some question about authorship. Are these the words of the Apostle Paul or an admirer of Paul writing in Paul's name? That is a mystery. Still, what we can take away, even in the face of mystery, is that early Christians faced threats from hostile forces and "cosmic powers". **Criticism** and **skepticism** were hostile forces. **Vanity** and **egotism** were hostile forces. **Temptation** might have been a cosmic power.

The world today is not so different. The same devilish forces are at work in our daily lives. Daily...our spirits are assaulted from every possible angle. We doubt ourselves and our self-worth. That's an attack on the spirit. Others evaluate and question our value...on the job...in family systems...even here at church. Those are attacks on the spirit.

And don't dare turn on the television or pick up a magazine or surf the internet. That is an identity crisis waiting to happen! There are IDOLS and IMAGES and TALKING HEADS who wage an endless assault aimed to tell you what to believe, what to think, where to go, what to buy and, yes, what to wear! Sandy and I watch a show on Friday nights called: "What Not To Wear". Don't wear that! Wear this...it'll make you more attractive.

It's a hostile and critical world and daily we need to find refuge. So, the Biblical writer suggests that we need to outfit ourselves with **the whole armor of God** and, thereby, make the bold fashion statement: "I am strong in the Lord and in the strength of the Lord's power."

If someone were to model such an outfit on life's runway, what would it look like? What would it look like to put on the whole armor of God? What would it look like to be clothed in the Lord's power? Well, I once served as master of ceremonies for a fashion show. If I had been asked to describe an Ephesian ensemble, I might have said something like this:

Belts made from exotic materials – especially snake skins -- were all the rage last season. This fashion season, however, you'll want to be seen with a belt of TRUTH fastened around your waist. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly disciples; and you will know the TRUTH, and the TRUTH will make you free." Whether you're hanging around the house or hanging around the town, the belt of truth is a must-have item for the fashion-conscious disciple of Christ.

The devil may wear Prada; but Prada doesn't make a breastplate of righteousness. Pick up your breastplate of righteousness at Psalm 112 which reads: "Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in the Lord's commandments. Their descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed. Wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever." The only way to wear righteousness is right next to your heart...it comes in three colors for Spring: key lime, coral and pink.

As for shoes...the only thing better than a good pair of shoes is...multiple pairs of good shoes! The fall lineup of shoes includes flats, pumps, high heels, sneakers, lace ups and slip ons..."whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace". There's no greater fashion faux pas than to wear shoes that don't fit the occasion and the occasion is always near to speak a word of peace. There is a word from the book of Proverbs concerning the connection between shoes and speech: "Put away from you crooked speech, and put devious talk far from you. Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you. Keep straight the path of your feet, and all your ways will be sure."

And when you're accessorizing your outfit, do remember that less is more. Maybe you'll want to limit yourself to three essential accessory items.

The **shield of faith**, the **helmet of salvation** and the **word of God** complete any ensemble. You can display your **shield of faith** prominently if the situation calls for it or you can wear it tucked in.

When you wear the **helmet of salvation**, don't make the same mistake that David made before he faced Goliath. One size does not fit all!

And finally, let the Spirit speak through you...take the **word of God** into the world. The word of God is available in classic or modern translations. Dressed up or dressed down, the word of God helps you state your highest self!

Page 7

Well, I told you this sermon would be on the lighter side. Nonetheless, I want to leave you with this idea of being clothed in the Lord's power. Fashion is one of my many passions; but it's not my greatest passion. My interest in earthly clothing represents a fraction of my entire identity.

My greatest passion is for the Power that comes from knowing God. That's the wider picture of who I am and WHOSE I AM. I love Christ, in whom God's love for us is most perfectly revealed. My true identity is disciple and not fashion maven.

I'm passionate about serving and leading in Christ's church – the body of believers who have been called to take the gospel into the world. That is our common calling, I believe. I'm passionate about the Bible and its many mysteries because the Bible points us in the direction of the Creator. In seeking the Creator, we make ourselves ready to receive lessons in character as in this letter to the Ephesians...like the lessons my mother taught me as young man. In seeking the Creator, we receive the strength of God's power as well.

If you want to know **how to make a fashion statement**, hear this: "...be strong in the Lord and in the strength of the Lord's power. Put on the whole armor of God."

Amen