

“Does This Match?”

Colossians 3:12-17

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Perhaps you were struck, as was I, with the images coming forth from Iraq in the hours following the execution of Saddam Hussein. In addition to the images of both jubilation and consternation among Iraqis, and those detailing the day's dead, nearly one hundred Iraqis and six US military personnel, were the photos and video of the moments leading up to the hanging of Mr. Hussein. Mercifully, we have been spared actual footage of the hanging, but in advance of it, we were treated to glimpses of those Iraqis charged with handling their former president, leading him to the gallows, and presumably knocking the chair out from under him, or triggering whatever mechanism was used to initiate his hanging. What was noteworthy to me about these images was that these men were wearing ski masks, clearly not so that Saddam wouldn't know who they were but so that the public at large would not know. Undoubtedly, these men and their families would have been subject to retaliation by Sunnis for their role in the execution. Their identities may ultimately be compromised but at least they had some protection from the prying eyes of a vengeful public.

A contrasting image was that of Saddam Hussein himself who declined to wear a hood, defiant to the end. He was, we are told, dressed in a black overcoat, dark trousers and a hat, more dapper, no doubt, than his prison fatigues. There was,

to my eye, something vaguely elegant about him despite the gruesomeness of the event. That elegance ended quickly with his head turned at an odd angle, in the photos shown to prove he was dead, but as he went hoodless to the gallows, it seemed, oddly enough, as though it was on his own terms.

These images provoked me in light of our Scripture reading from Colossians in which godly attributes are likened to clothing: “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” and “Clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Paul reminds us that these virtues, these Christ-like characteristics, are choices we make each day, much as we choose to wear certain articles of actual clothing. This spiritual wardrobe has a certain set of very helpful and useful attributes: it is always coordinated; wearing these you’ll never have to worry about morally clashing. This wardrobe never goes out of fashion, even when behavioral fashions change around it. And it doesn’t cost nearly as much as a trip to the department store, even though the price of wearing it can be high.

Wearing this wardrobe is, as I said, a choice. We have been given the freedom by God to dress as we please, and it is a daily decision to pull from the correct spiritual closet. There may be days when we mix and match poorly, when we’ve worn humility and bitterness like a striped shirt and polkadotted pants, and there may be days when we we’ve only got one, small piece of goodness to keep us from parading around in an outfit made by the devil’s seamstress. But hopefully on

most days, with fashion advice from the Holy Spirit, we leave our homes to greet the day looking the part of the Christian whom Paul describes, and we show the world what a great designer we've got. You see, everyone looks better dressed in divine duds.

But what about black ski masks? Are the moral and ethical equivalents of black ski masks part of the Christian's spiritual wardrobe? To be sure, those attending to Saddam Hussein's death were Muslims with their own moral and ethical dress code, but what about those US soldiers who interrupted their breakfast in the barracks to cheer at the news of Hussein's death? What about the countless people of good Christian faith who expressed satisfaction at the exacting of this penalty, who are sure that it was the right thing to do? Are they not too wearing those same black ski-masks? And indeed, what about all of us who, in our sinfulness, are wearing unbecoming articles of spiritual clothing?

Please do not misunderstand me. Despite my opposition to the war in Iraq, I cannot help but see that God's intentions for human life have been furthered with an Iraqi leadership other than Saddam Hussein. Although I have my doubts about the wisdom of the methods used to remove him from power, his absence from power is a blessing. He was a brutal man whose spiritual wardrobe clashed with that of his own religious tradition or any other. He may have looked respectable in death but in life he was robed in hatred, violence, greed, and hubris beyond measure. There is no place in a civilized society for a man dressed like that to walk

freely in its streets. But if Saddam Hussein looked smug as he was led up to the gallows, if it seemed as though he was walking toward it on his own terms, could it be that it was because he had emerged victorious after all by causing us to follow his fashion sense by changing our moral and ethical wardrobe to one more like his, as we donned our ski masks and pulled the lever?

We may wish to console ourselves that this was an Iraqi act of justice and vengeance, that it was an Iraqi choice, and Iraqi courts that condemned him and carried out the verdict. But that would be donning a article of moral clothing called hypocrisy since, at least for those of us who are US citizens, our country does the same thing on a regular basis. Though several states have recently imposed moratoriums on capital punishment, the US populace is overwhelmingly in favor of executing convicted criminals. Looking at it historically, in 1965, according to a Harris poll, 38 percent of U.S. poll respondents believed in the death penalty; 47 percent opposed it. In 2001, 67 percent said they believed in the death penalty and only 26 percent opposed it. A 1996 poll conducted by Sam Houston State University found that 73.4 percent of respondents nationwide favored the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. You might be interested in knowing that of all the countries that have abolished the death penalty, only two countries did so before Costa Rica did it in 1877. Nearly all the others did so in the late twentieth century. In terms of religion, Christians are as represented in the national majority as they are in the population as a whole. While most mainline Protestant

denominations and the US Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops are officially opposed to the death penalty, they seem to be out of step with many of the people in their pews.

The Iraqis wearing ski masks were doing so for their own protection, which of course begs the question, as might also be asked of the KKK clansmen who wore hoods to burn crosses and lynch people, would they do it without the anonymity provided by their headcovering? Would they be courageous enough to do what they had decided to do even if everyone knew who they were? Could they believe in the rightness of their cause enough to risk the consequences? Even, and maybe especially, in the context of factional violence in Iraq, this seems to be the crucial moral and ethical question for those involved and for those of us wondering how to think about issues as important as those like the death penalty in the context of our faith in a living God whose son's death came at the hands of an executioner. Could we, as followers of Jesus Christ, followers clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love, make the decision to kick the chair out from under a man at the end of a rope?

The end of tonight's passage is powerful, for it gives guidance to all we do, for every spiritual outfit we might wear. "And whatever you do," Paul says, "Whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." My question is this: if we are to advocate for the death penalty, as many Christians do, effectively kicking the chair

out from under someone with a noose around their neck, are we willing to say that we are doing it in the name of the Lord Jesus? Is the name of the Lord Jesus to be synonymous with taking, rather than offering, life? With seeking irreversible vengeance when there are alternatives for punishment? With addressing injustice by taking an eye for an eye despite what he taught us? I am well aware of the biblical and theological arguments in favor of state sanctioned capital punishment. But what I am not so clear on is how we can do that clothed as Paul instructs us, and do it in the name of Jesus Christ. I know that I cannot. I hope that one day none of us can.

Tomorrow we move forward into another calendar year, a year like the last, in which we will be faced by challenges to our faith, our integrity, our decisionmaking. Clearly, tonight's passage is not addressed specifically to such global issues as capital punishment, but in fact to every area of life. But in the end, as difficult as it can be, I think we are called to a consistency in our morals and our ethics that makes issues like the death penalty just as important as how we speak to our spouse or our children, how we treat our employees, how we shop and spend our time, how we present ourselves as Christians earnestly seeking to follow our savior's example. You see, the key word in that last verse in tonight's reading is "everything." We are called to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, not just those that happen to agree with our personal perspectives on social or political issues. If we are not prepared to physically bully or coerce those with whom we do

not agree “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” are we prepared, “in the name of Jesus” to take their lives just because the government allows us to do so?

As anyone who has tried to live a Christian life knows, consistency is perhaps our greatest challenge. The good news of the Gospel is that even though we often mismatch our spiritual outfits, God still loves us anyway. I love the way Paul begins this passage: “As God’s chosen ones, holy, and beloved...” Chosen, holy, and beloved. I’m so glad to hear those words instead of “As God’s consistent ones,” because if God’s love for me is based on my consistency, I’m in big trouble. But those same words, “As God’s chosen ones, holy, and beloved,” make me want to be more consistent and to clothe myself more carefully because I am chosen and holy, and loved. I thank God through Jesus Christ that I have not found myself in the position of choosing whether or not to don a ski mask for an execution, and I ask God’s help to help me avoid putting one on for any other ethical dilemma or daily choice. In this New Year, may we all rejoice in God’s grace and respond to that grace in faith by wearing divine duds. Amen.