**Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another**

Text: 1 Peter 5:1-5

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**Scriptures:** Proverbs 3:33-35; Jeremiah 9:23-24; John 13:1-17; 1 Peter 5:1-7

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 131, 138, 238, 249, 468, 505

**Series:** The ‘one anothers’ of Scripture (#14)

**Theme:** The Apostle Peter writes to Christians dispersed away from the land of Israel, firstly exhorting the elders to godly servant leadership in the church then the younger to willing submission to the elders and finally for all who are part of Christs bride to clothe themselves with humility toward one another.

**Proposition:** Brothers and sisters in Christ, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another.

**Introduction**

Do you ever wear an apron at home or work? Aprons are used to protect you from getting spills or stains on your clothing when you work. For example in the kitchen, as a butcher, in a workshop or in an operating theatre. My dictionary tells me that an apron is ‘*a protective garment worn over the front of one’s clothes and tied at the back*’. In Bible times a slave would put an apron over their attire in order to keep clean as he or she served. The Greek word translated ‘clothe’ in our text literally means to gather or tie in a knot and was often used to describe a slave’s apron. Putting on a slaves apron was like visibly wearing the badge of a lowly servant.

Now look at our text: ‘*clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another*’. The phrase ‘clothe yourselves with humility’ could be rendered ‘put on the slave’s apron of humility’. This is what Christ Jesus did, beginning from his conception and birth when he ‘*made himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*’ (Phil 2:7). Christ wore the slave’s apron of humility throughout his life on this earth. He showed this graphically when laid aside his outer garments, took a towel, and tied it around his waist and then washed the feet of his disciples. Having served them as a lowly slave would, he said ‘*I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you*’ (John 13:15).

Humility is the focus of our text, the last of the ‘one anothers’ in Scripture that we will consider in this series of 14 sermons. Humility is a way of thinking. It is an attitude of mind (Phil 2:2), a mindset. It is seen in unpretentious, modest, unassuming behaviour. It has helpfully been said that ‘*humility is not as much thinking less of ourselves as really not thinking of ourselves at all*’. The early ‘church father’ Augustine of Hippo called humility ‘*the mother of the graces*’. It is perhaps the hardest Christian virtue to attempt to master because it is the exact opposite of the root of all sin: pride. We are going to look at this command to ‘put on’ humility in the context of the wider passage in 1 Peter 5:1-5 under three headings:

1. Humble elder oversight
2. Humble younger people
3. Humble clothing for everyone
4. **Humble elder oversight**

Elders are tasked by Christ, the Lord of His church, with shepherding ‘*the flock of God that is among you*’ (1 Pet 5:2). To ‘shepherd’ is to guide, direct, protect and provide. A shepherd has responsibility for the care of those in the flock entrusted to him. An elder’s role is modelled after that of the Lord Jesus, ‘the Chief Shepherd’. Christ, the Good Shepherd, said “*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me*” (John 10:27). Likewise, the voice of Christ - the words of Scripture - are to be spoken by the elders to the disciples of Christ so that they follow Him. Just as Jesus knows His disciples, so the elders are called to know the individuals in the congregation, their background, their joys, their sorrows, their fears, anxieties, hopes and giftings.

The prophet Ezekiel speaks the Lord’s word of rebuke against the irresponsible shepherds of Israel saying: “*You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them*” (Eze 34:3-4). The elders of Old Testament Israel were guilty of a lack of pastoral care and of a forceful, harsh rule over the people of God.

Elders in Christ’s church are to ‘exercise oversight’. The Greek word translated ‘exercise oversight’ (episkopeo) is made up of two parts ‘upon’ (epi) and ‘to regard, give attention to, look at, contemplate’ (skopeo). This second part of the word is where we get our English word ‘scope’ from as used in ‘microscope’, ‘telescope’. So the idea of ‘exercising oversight’ is literally to look upon and examine in order to look after. The verb is in the present tense which means that elders are to be constantly, diligently and actively overseeing the care of those in the congregation over whom they have responsibility.

This oversight is to be characterised by ‘*not domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock*’. ‘Not domineering over’ is sometimes translated ‘not lording over’ (NAS, NIV, KJV). This is fitting because the underlying Greek word means to have dominion ‘downwards’ on others and conveys the idea of a strong person exerting their power over a weaker one. Domineering means to bring another under your power, to force them into subjection, to subdue them. This is the way that many in the unbelieving world function in positions of leadership. We see this in many civil governments, workplaces, and also in some families. It is clear from God’s Word that it is **not** to be this way in God’s kingdom. In the church, elders are to be humble leaders who willingly serve and who model Christlike attitudes and behaviours as examples to the flock.

Faithful elders and ministers I have known over the years approach their calling to serve with trepidation, often asking the question posed by the Apostle Paul about gospel ministry “*who is sufficient for these things?*’ (2 Cor 2:16). The honest answer to that question is ‘nobody, apart from Christ’. An elder, minister or deacon who does not approach his calling with humility does not have the mind of Christ to count others more significant than themselves (Phil 2:3). It is hard to see how such a man can be a spiritual blessing to the flock under his care. In contrast, a man who knows that it is in his weakness that God’s power is made perfect, and that God’s grace is sufficient for him (2 Cor 12:9) is greatly used by the Lord to humbly serve His people.

The example of an elder to the congregation is to be the example of Christ’s holy character: above reproach, faithful to his wife (if he is married), sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money (1 Tim 3:2-3). An elder is called to exercise humble oversight as an example to the congregation of what a godly servant’s heart looks like. Jesus, the Good Shepherd said, "*If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all*" (Mark 9:35). First and foremost an elder is a humble servant of God’s precious people, lovingly leading by example and thereby encouraging those who are younger to be humble too. This brings us to our second point:

1. **Humble younger people**

It was the author Mark Twain who wrote: “*When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years*.” He was humorously making the point that we tend to think that we know more than we do when we are young. In fact, sadly some people never grow out of that mindset as they advance in years.

Generally, elders are older men, as the English term would imply. In the early years of the institution of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, many young elders were ordained, as there were very few older men who had emigrated from the Netherlands after the second world war. It is likely that at least some of these young men suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder after what they had experienced during the hard years of Nazi occupation.

Occasionally churches will ordain young men to the office of elder if they meet the Biblical character requirements and are able to teach the Scriptures well. This is the exception, not the rule, in our churches and can occur when there are insufficient older men willing and qualified to serve in the office of elder.

Peter writes in verse 5 “*Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders*’. Just as the elders are under the authority of Christ, the chief shepherd, so those who are ‘younger’ are to be subject to the elders. This begs the question who are these ‘younger’ members of the flock? Here are some answers that have been given:

* The term ‘elders’ here no longer means men ordained to the office of overseer, but now means ‘older person’. We see this usage of the term ‘presbuteros’ in 1 Tim 5:1 – ‘*Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father*’.
* The ‘younger’ are not ‘ordinary’ members of the church, but ‘lower clergy’ who serve in office, but are under the authority of the elders.
* The ‘younger’ refers to everyone in the church, all of whom are to be subject to the elders.
* The ‘younger’ are a particular section of the congregation who need to be subject to the official leadership in the church.

What can we say about these different interpretations?

* The context of 1 Peter 5:1-4 is the elders who shepherd the flock, a switch in meaning to ‘older person’ in verse 5 doesn’t fit with this theme.
* There is little, if any, Scriptural evidence that ‘younger men’ ever means ‘lower officials’ in the church (Ex 24:5; Eze 39:14 and Acts 5:6 do not imply that younger men here were holding an office).
* The Greek word translated ‘younger’ means a person who is literally ‘new’, ‘fresh’, of a lesser age and/or maturity. It is not used of those with a wide age range in a congregation.
* There are examples in Scripture where younger people are addressed as a group in the church (e.g. Tit 2:6-8; 1 Tim 5:1-2). There is also some evidence that sections of the church were addressed separately depending on age (e.g. Acts 2:17; 5:6, 10; 1 John 2:12-14).

It is therefore best to understand ‘younger’ here as meaning those who have lived for few years than older people in the church. Spiritually strong young people in the church are often junior leaders in various capacities, ready to assist with the good running of the church. Sometimes, their very readiness to serve can make them impatient with their older leaders who, either due to pastoral wisdom or to a degree of inflexibility that often comes with age, are not ready to change things as quickly or as radically as the younger people would like. Sometimes, some zealous young people can display an attitude a bit like that of Mark Twain at age 14 *my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around.* It takes humility to accept that you still have much to learn from those who are older than you.

Many of us men, when we were younger, thought that ‘we knew it all’ and might have thought or even said to an older person ‘*who are you to tell me what to do?*’ For me, by God’s grace I believe that I am growing in knowledge, wisdom and humility, but I still have such a long way to go. The older I get the more I realise just how much I do not know. How about you younger people? Are you willing to be subject to the elders in this church?

The Greek word translated ‘subject to’ literally means ‘to place under in an orderly fashion’. It is in the passive tense which means that the Lord is calling you to willing, voluntary submission to the elders in the church. To submit in this way requires Christlike humility, whether it is: the submission of children to their parents (Eph 6:1), the submission of a wife to her husband (Eph 5:22), the mutual submission of brothers and sisters in the church (Eph 5:21). Humility is therefore not only to characterise the elders and the younger people, but all of us no matter what our age and stage in life. This truth brings us to our third point:

1. **Humble clothing for everyone**

Imagine for a moment that you are in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, USA. There you see a man sitting in a horse-drawn carriage wearing a dark-coloured suit, trousers with buttons (not a zip) at the front, suspenders, a solid-coloured shirt, black socks and shoes, and a black or straw broad-brimmed hats. Who is he? He is wearing the ‘uniform’ of the Amish – a Christian group with Swiss German or French (Alsace region) origin and anabaptist roots.

If you spot a woman wearing a tunic, a shoulder covering (scapular) and a hood covering her hair (cowl) moving a necklace with rosary beads methodically through her fingers you would likely identify her as a Roman Catholic nun.

Perhaps you catch sight of a man with a prayer shawl (a tallit), a skull cap (kippah), a white knee-length cotton robe and long side curls because he has not trimmed his hair. He is probably an orthodox Hasidic Jew.

What is the universal costume that identifies the disciples of Christ? Spoiler alert! It is not a tie - I think that I’m the only one here wearing one! The universal Christ-like item of character clothing revealed in our text is **humility**. The Apostle Peter writes, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to all those saved by God’s grace in Christ: ‘*clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another*’ (1 Peter 5.5). Humility is a ‘lowliness of mind’. One preacher has helpfully said it is ‘having a low opinion of your own opinion’.

This ‘character costume’ is to be put on by everyone - without exception – notice the strong emphasis in the words ‘**all** of you’. This means men, women, boys, girls, of every age, those who have recently come to the Lord and those who have walked with Christ for many decades. It includes elders, deacons, and ministers. This ‘one another’ command refers to Christians who are part of a local church where they share together in a ‘common life’. Brothers and sisters, we are **all** of us called to wear the same item of character clothing: humility.

We started this sermon by noting that the Greek word translated ‘clothe’ was used to refer to a slave’s apron – the badge of a servant. Clothing yourself with humility towards one another often finds expression in serving one another. Here are three possible groups of people in a church:

* Those who do not serve others at all.
* Those who serve so that they can be acknowledged, thanked, and/or rewarded. They may get annoyed if others treat them ‘just like a servant’.
* Those who serve because, first and foremost they love Christ who first served them by humbling Himself and becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:8). They do not serve in order to receive anything back from those they minister to in word and in deed. They are thankful for kind words of encouragement and appreciation, but they do not expect them.

Good questions for me and you to ask ourselves are: ‘*How do I feel when I serve others in the church, and I get no thanks or appreciation for what I have done?*’ ‘*How do I feel when I serve others in the church and they either treat me unfairly, leave the church, or just expect me or others to continue to serve them without ever serving others themselves?*’ Probing our inner selves like this can help us to see if we are really as humble as we might think. Humility is so tricky because as soon as we are confident that we are, we are not! Humility is so tricky because we can spot pride so easily in others but in ourselves - not so much! Pride is like a toxic disease that is ever present in the body but which a healthy immune system – humility - keeps at bay but never completely removes.

Significantly, the reason that the Apostle Peter gives for the Lord’s command ‘*clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another*’ is that ‘*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*’ (1 Peter 5:5). ‘Oppose’ is very strong language. The underlying Greek word means to ‘set an army in array against’. The idea is of powerful resistance and hostility. God sets Himself forcefully against the proud. When God is against you then you are really in deep trouble! “*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*” (Heb 10:31).

The call to humility is one that our fallen human flesh fights against. We naturally revert to pride when we take our eyes off Christ. In our text Peter quotes from Proverbs 3:34 as does James in 4:6: ‘*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble*’. The abiding truth that God is hostile towards the proud but gives grace to the humble. This was a commonly understood warning and encouragement to the New Testament church, as it has been throughout the history of God’s people. For example, David writes in Psalm 31:23 “*Love the LORD, all you his saints! The LORD preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride*”.

David had suffered from the Lord’s hostility when he proudly sinned. He also knew the blessing of God’s grace when He humbled Himself declaring “*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight*” (Psalm 51:4). The Lord declares his active and ongoing work of bringing down the proud and elevating the humble through His prophet Ezekiel: “*And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it*." (Eze 17:24)

When Mary was pregnant with the baby Jesus, she glorified the Lord declaring: “*He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away*” (Luke 1:51-53). Mary was a humble woman who was addressed by the Angel Gabriel with the words “*Greetings, O favoured one, the Lord is with you”* (1:28). The Greek word translated ‘favoured’ means ‘to bestow freely’. It comes from the same root as the word ‘grace’.

You are probably familiar with the good definition of grace as being “God’s unmerited favour”. Grace can equally helpfully be described as “God’s divine help”. How much each of us need the assistance of the Living God. He is the source of all good things.

This grace is also given to all who humble themselves in repentance and faith and trust in Christ. He is the God-man Jesus who ‘*made himself nothing, taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*’ (Phil 2:7). God gives grace to all those who humble themselves before Him, admit their sin, turn from their rebellion against Him and trust in Christ alone as their Lord and Saviour. Friend, have you humbled yourself before the Lord? You must. There is no other way to receive His bountiful gifts of grace. Today is the day of salvation (2 Cor 6:2), so come to Christ. He is ‘*gentle and lowly {humble} in heart and you will find rest for your soul*’ (Matt 11:29).

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, as we arrive now to the end of our series through the ‘one anothers’ of Scripture we come back to the primary command of Christ from which all the others flow: “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*." (John 13:34-35)

We have seen what the love of Christ looks like in practice. This love bears one another's burdens, is kind, encouraging, accepting of others, submits to others, bears with and forgives others, shows hospitality, teaches and admonishes, cares without discrimination or partiality, is peaceful and prayerful. Finally, this love is clothed in humility that serves others without the expectation of anything in return.

It is this Christ-like love that distinguishes the disciples of Christ from all others in this world. It is the presence of this Christ-like love in the church that makes her like a bright light set on a hill (Matt 5:14). So congregation of ----------------, including elders, pastor, younger people: all of us: ‘*Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*’ (1 Peter 5:5).

AMEN.