

“THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO DOGS (#3):
HANDSOME WITHOUT CLOTHES”

(Matthew 6:7-8; Luke 12:1c-3)

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[PROPS NEEDED: (#1) PPT Slide show of Buzz wearing different types of clothes; and (#2) PPT picture of Buzz “Naked”]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 7-22-07]

--I--

1. Read Text: Matthew 6:7-8; Luke 12:1c-3 (Luke read from THE MESSAGE) and Pray.
2. Today we’re continuing our sermon series called The Gospel According to Dogs (inspired by Robert Short’s book of the same title) in which we’re exploring a few of the lessons we learn about life, Christian faith, and our relationship with God from our four-legged canine friends.

A–For example, so far we learned how dogs can teach us lessons about humility, obedience, surrender, and singleness of devotion and purpose towards OUR Master (Jesus).

B–As we did last week, to introduce today’s topic I want to invite your attention to the media screen as we together watch a short slide show.

[SHOW PPT Slide Show of Buzz Wearing Clothes...]

3. Now, while these pictures of our dog Buzz with clothes on are amusing, humorous, and perhaps even cute, we all know that these are *not* natural poses – that I had to struggle not only to get him to *wear* the clothes, but also to stay in them long enough to take pictures!

A–In the words of author Robert Short, “*Whenever we see dogs with clothes on, we can be sure that this wasn’t their idea.*”¹ – and believe me, it certainly *wasn’t* Buzz’ first choice!

B–Be that as it may, I put my dog through this kind of “torture” just to be able to make an important point today about certain “clothing” that does *NOT* belong on a Christian.

C–Think about it: ...in their natural arena, dogs were *not* created to wear “clothing” – instead, they were created to live and work and serve in our world completely *naked*.

1–Now, lest some of you misunderstand, while I AM comparing Christians to dogs in this series, I am NOT suggesting that we Christians go around literally naked!

2– But what I AM wondering is if there are aspects to the way you and I often relate to one another (& to God) which are *not* natural, and *not* the way God intended?

3–In other words, are there sometimes unnatural “clothes” that we as human beings symbolically and metaphorically “wear”? And if so, what are they?

–II–

4. Well, I think this is precisely the heart of today's two scriptures.

A–In the Matthew 6 passage, Jesus warns his followers that when we pray, “*do not heap up empty, [wordy] phrases*” like some people do.

B–And in THE MESSAGE translation of the Luke 12 passage, we're to beware of being like the Pharisees – of *phoniness*,” of “*hiding our true self*”, and “*hiding behind a religious mask*,” lest “*the mask slip*” (Vs.2), & we finally get exposed for who we *REALLY* are.²

5. Now, what I think both of these texts are saying is that you and I as human beings have a tendency to want to put on and “wear” the unnatural “clothing” of spiritual, emotional, and relational masks and pretenses.

A– We have a tendency to want to pretend to be something and someone we're NOT in order to hide the person we really ARE.³

1–After all, we don't want others to see the “chinks” in our armor – to see the “*real*” us.

2–And so, if we have a problem or a challenge in life, we tend *not* to let anyone know about it, because it would be a sign of weakness.

B–Now we might think that this ailment is mainly among those who are not yet believers. But I've noticed that unfortunately, Christians do this far too often, as well!⁴

1–I know church people, for example, who're in pain and hurt, but they don't want to be on a prayer list at church or anywhere else because “*that's too embarrassing.*”

2– I know Christians who're struggling with marriage or family difficulties, or with personal addictions of some sort; yet, they're *won't* ask for help from a pastor, or a counselor, or even just another Christian friend.

C–Now, I know some folks will say, “*Well, they're just private people.*” And believe me, I understand and believe in the need for confidentiality when necessary.

1–But at some point, “privacy” becomes merely a “mask” for selfishness and pride.

2–Sometimes I believe we can be too PROUD to ask for help, or to even let others *see* that we *have* problems or challenges in the first place!

3–And so consequently, we consciously or (more often) unconsciously “wear” what I call the “mask/clothing” of “**Togetherness**”: ... “*My life is all together! I'm doing fine, and don't need any help, thank you very much!*”

D–In describing such people, Christian psychologist and author Larry Crabb says that “*Most of us cope with life by pretending. We pretend that what we have satisfies us more than it does. And we pretend that we haven’t been hurt as badly as we have. ... [As a result,] many Christians manage to keep life moving along rather smoothly without ever looking deeply at the pain in their souls.*”⁵

6. Now, you need to know that this actually described *me* for a good portion of *my* life.

A–Even though my family is not this way now, and didn’t intend it at the time, I grew up in a home where I got the impression that it was “improper” and uncouth either to show emotion, to ask for help, or let people see the “real” you – that the only person one could depend on in life is oneself: ... “*Pick yourself by your bootstraps & do it all by yourself!*”

B–But I later learned the hard way that this kind of independent, self-reliant spirit (which, by the way, is often praised and sought after by our American culture) is, in truth, a lie that can lead to the destruction of relationships and self.

C–I learned painfully that the only real solution to the pain and hurt and difficulties of life is to be willing to let down our guard in appropriate ways and let appropriate, safe people see, get to know, and love the “real” us.

1–And I learned, too, that there *are* indeed people (like my family now) who will love me just like God loves me, warts and all, and that especially around them, I don’t have to pretend to be someone I’m not.

2– I don’t have to pretend I have everything “together” when I may not. I don’t have to pretend to be “fine” and “hunky doorey” when deep down I know that I’m not.

3–In short, I’ve learned that (like our dog friends), I CAN be “*Handsome Without Clothes*” – that is... I can be loved and accepted for who I AM, not just for who I want others to THINK I am.

7. Think back to some of the pictures that I showed at first of our dog Buzz dressed up in those unnatural clothes.

A–To *us*, he may have looked amusing and “cute.” But I guarantee that even if we couldn’t tell it from the pictures, he *hated* every minute of that photo-shoot!

B–The irony, of course, is that, UNLIKE dogs, we *humans* are often masters at wearing spiritual, emotional and relational “clothes” (images that we portray of ourselves) that may make us *look cute* and “smell good” to others, but which are not really natural or true.

8. So let me show you one more picture of our dog Buzz... [SHOW PPT PICTURE of “NAKED” BUZZ].

A—I want us to notice that with the exception of his collar (which indicates ownership), in this picture Buzz here is as he’s most comfortable, and as God created him... “naked.”

1—It doesn’t bother him a bit that he had no human “clothes” on. He, like any other dog, is not embarrassed to be “naked” in front of anyone, including other dogs.

2—*Unlike humans, all dogs are content to let others see them “just as they are.”*

B—Friends, I believe that today’s two scriptures are a calling for us to do no less – for us to learn how to live a more genuine, authentic Christian life by being willing to let our guard down, take off our masks, and become more transparent and “real” with both God and one another.⁶

C—Because when we do this, we discover the wonderful, freeing truth that in God’s eyes (and in eyes of those people of God who understand it), you and I (like dogs) can truly be **“Handsome Without Clothes”** – loved & accepted without the need for masks & pretense.

9. [PRAYER: “*Lord Jesus, we confess to you our human tendency to consciously and unconsciously hide behind the masks and pretenses of life, pretending to people who we aren’t, just so we can be accepted and loved by you and by others. Please forgive us for this, and help us understand and claim your love and acceptance ‘just as we are.’ Help us to learn from our canine friends how to be comfortable and content with who we are, to increasingly learn to ‘get naked’ for you – to allow your Holy Spirit to strip ourselves of those unnatural masks and pretenses we often wear in our quest to look and smell good to others, and instead learn to be more transparent and real before you and one another. Lord, help us to claim the truth that in your eyes, we are indeed ‘Handsome Without Clothes.’ In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.*”]

10. [CLOSING SONG: “Just As I Am” (Hymn); OR “Hear My Worship” (Praise Song)]

ENDNOTES:

1. Robert L. Short, The Gospel According to Dogs, p. 98.
2. Christian author and psychologist Larry Crabb writes, “A principle that must guide all our efforts to change into the person God wants us to be [is that] there is no place for pretense. We must come to grips with what’s going on behind the whitewashed appearance of our life,... [for] we can’t make it if we don’t [first] face all that we are” (Larry Crabb, Inside Out, p. 38).
3. Larry Crabb says that, “*Much of what passes for spiritual maturity [today] is maintained by a rigid denial of all that is happening beneath the surface of [one’s] life*” (Larry Crabb, Inside Out, p. 33).
4. Remember that in today’s story from Luke 12, this is precisely the problem Jesus has with the Pharisees: their mask of “self-righteousness” kept them so caught up in pointing out the sin of *others* that they couldn’t see the sin in their *own* lives right in front of their face! (Read Matthew 7:1-5)

5. Larry Crabb, Inside Out, pp. 97 & 99. He refers to this as the “*sin of self-protection*”—a style of relating to others designed to avoid the experience of personal pain. In describing how it affects our behaviors with others, he illustrates, “*Friendliness can protect us from rejection. Humor can help us avoid isolation. Businesslike efficiency can keep [us] from a tenderness that might be exploited. Shyness might be the means to keep us from ever looking foolish. ...We tend to relate to one another with the hidden purpose of maintaining our comfort and avoiding whatever sort of interaction we find threatening*” (Crabb, pp. 109 & 132). Christian counselor/author Paul Tripp refers to this same condition as “spiritual blindness,” and says that “*spiritually blind people do not think they are blind because their blindness wears many masks*” (Paul David Tripp, Instruments In the Redeemer’s Hands, p. 287).

6. “*When the mask of self-righteousness has been torn from us and we stand stripped of all our accustomed defenses, we are candidates for God’s generous grace*” [Erwin W. Lutzer, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper’s Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1992), Entry#5238]. Larry Crabb says that when our masks are acknowledged and dealt with head on, “*when people get to know each other’s hurts and disappointments, when issues that really matter are actually talked about, then there is the potential for life-changing fellowship*” (Larry Crabb, Inside Out, p. 177).

In fact, the reality is that when we come in the presence of Jesus, the “taking away of our masks” is something that will inevitably occur anyway: “*Jesus Christ is unique, and one cannot be in his presence and not reveal the man he really is. Jesus pulls each person from behind his mask. In the exposure of that bleeding love on the cross, men become what they really are. You may think you are wonderful until you stand in the presence of the One who is purity itself. It is the pure light of God that pierces a man. You can keep up your pretense of being holy until you stand in that light. Then immediately there is nowhere to hide, all your masks are torn away, all your hollow smiles fade. Revival means to be exposed for what we are. The presence of the Lord is revealing*” [Bishop Festo Kivengere, cited in Edythe Draper, Draper’s Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992), Entry #9741].