
Clothed with Divine Mercy and Power: A Portrait of How “Clothing” Characterizes Discipleship of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel

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Beyond being a basic necessity, clothing often conveys something significant about a person’s identity, status, and commitments—both in the first-century contexts of the New Testament and in today’s world. Descriptions in Luke’s Gospel of both literal and figurative clothing provide a powerful, albeit understated, portrait of key characteristics of life as a disciple of Jesus.¹ They also reflect the disposition of some characters to the coming kingdom of God.

Jesus, God’s promised Messiah

Before examining the connection between clothing and discipleship, it is important to assess briefly how Luke’s Gospel characterizes Jesus, the one who calls people to follow him. The opening chapters of Luke leave no doubt that Jesus is God’s promised Messiah (e.g., Luke 1:26–38, 54–55, 67–79; 2:10–11, 25–32). Through Jesus, God inaugurates the eschatological era of salvation in which both Jews and gentiles are offered forgiveness for sin and freedom from oppression so that they can live as God’s redeemed, renewed people.

Jesus himself affirms this in his inaugural teaching in the Nazareth synagogue (4:16–30). He declares that God has anointed him with the Holy Spirit to accomplish God’s redemptive purposes, which center on bringing good news to the poor (v. 18). In Luke, the *poor* are not only the economically disadvantaged but also those who are vulnerable or marginalized for various reasons, such as illness or low social status.² Jesus’ ministry brings such people well-being by freeing them from various types of illness, isolation, oppression, and sin, and gathering them into the broader community of God’s people (vv. 18–19). This flourishing in relationship with God and others gives a glimpse of life in the reign of God

1. We cannot know whether the author of Luke intended to create a cohesive message about discipleship through clothing references. Nonetheless, careful analysis reveals some significant connections between clothing and Luke’s vision of discipleship of Jesus.

2. E.g., Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 76–101; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, SP 3 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2006), 79–82.

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that Jesus the Messiah ushers into the world.³ According to Luke, to be receptive to Jesus’ liberating ministry is to receive salvation (e.g., 19:1–10; 23:39–43).

A portrait of how “clothing” characterizes discipleship of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel

John the Baptist

Although the famous description of John the Baptist’s apparel is absent from Luke (cf. Matt 3:4; Mark 1:6), only Luke includes clothing as part of John’s drastic call to true repentance in preparation for the coming Messiah. When people ask John what they should do in response to his message, he immediately replies that “the person who has two shirts must share with the person who has none” (Luke 3:11).⁴ Proper repentance, therefore, involves tangible acts of mercy, such as clothing those in need.⁵ This foreshadows the Lukan Jesus’ concern for the poor and insistence that willingness

3. There is tension in Luke’s Gospel between the kingdom or reign of God breaking into the world through Jesus’ ministry and its full realization coming in an eschatological future (e.g., Luke 20:34–38; 21:25–36; Acts 1:11), so that well-being and flourishing for all people is not fully accomplished in the present.

4. All translations of biblical texts are my own.

5. Cf. Luke 6:29; Matt 5:40.

to share one’s money and possessions is required to be his disciple.

In Luke 7:25, Jesus draws a contrast between John, whose prophetic ministry is praised (7:26–28a), and those who wear splendid clothing and live in luxury in royal palaces. This reflects how fine clothing marked high social status in Jesus’ context⁶ and implies that John does not share this status but instead represents the poor who are especially positioned to receive Jesus’ ministry and the kingdom of God (e.g., 6:20).⁷ Clothing, therefore, can reflect one’s disposition to God’s redemptive purposes. Although having wealth and the fine clothing it can purchase does not necessarily disqualify one from receiving divine salvation or becoming Jesus’ disciple (e.g., 19:1–10), Luke’s Gospel portrays it as a powerful challenge to embracing these realities that require one’s ultimate allegiance (e.g., 1:52–53; 6:24–25; 12:13–21; 16:10–13, 19–31).

The Gerasene man

A powerful illustration of the connection between clothing and status—both social and in relation to Jesus—comes in Luke’s account of Jesus freeing the Gerasene man possessed by demons (8:26–39). The name Legion (v. 30) given to the multitude of demons who possess the man implies a militaristic invasion that renders him unable to control his own life. The man’s physical and spiritual torment is so severe that others perceive him as a threat, so they bind and guard him. Even so, the demons seize him and drive him into deserted places. Although he is from the city, his condition has forced him to dwell among the tombs, leaving him on the fringes of society and life itself.

Luke’s two references to the man’s clothing (or lack thereof) emphasize his marginality (vv. 27, 35). The parallel account involving two possessed men in Matthew 8:28–34 does not mention clothing. Mark’s version states that the Gerasene man was clothed after Jesus healed him (Mark 5:15)—a note also in Luke (8:35)—but does not clarify that he had previously been naked. Luke alone explicitly notes the man’s nakedness when introducing him at the outset of the narrative: “for a long time he had not worn clothes and did not live in a house but among the tombs” (Luke 8:27). This Lukan addition emphasizes the man’s physical vulnerability to the elements and demonic seizures, as well as his marginal status, since public nakedness was shameful.⁸

It is especially those who have no claim to status or power that Jesus comes to save in Luke’s Gospel. His deliverance of the man from the demons heals him in body and mind, paving the way for him to return to life in relationship with others. This life-changing

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healing is depicted by the man sitting at Jesus’ feet, “clothed and of sound mind” (v. 35). His transformed status from naked to clothed reflects that Jesus has transferred him from the realm of oppression and death to that of well-being and life. Although the source of the man’s clothing is not specified, his very ability to wear clothes results from his transformative encounter with Jesus. Thus, his clothing can be seen as a gift that accompanies Jesus’ unsolicited, gracious healing. In contrast to the wealthy who purchase fine clothing for themselves, this man represents the poor who cannot provide for themselves and therefore are positioned to become unsuspecting recipients of the unearned divine mercy extended through Jesus’ saving ministry.⁹ The form of this man’s story in Luke’s Gospel, therefore, displays a connection between physical clothing and being figuratively clothed with the divine redemption that comes through life-giving encounters with Jesus.

The man’s healing also transforms his relationship with Jesus. Previously, the demons who possessed the man spoke to Jesus, begging him not to torment them (v. 28, 31). After his healing, the man himself speaks to Jesus, begging to be with him, which implies that he is seeking to be Jesus’ disciple. Rather than granting the man’s request, Jesus commissions him to return to his city to testify to what God has done for him (vv. 38–39). The man complies and widely proclaims how Jesus changed his life. Carrying out his new vocation requires the physical clothing he now wears because he has been figuratively clothed with divine mercy.

The beaten traveler

There are key resonances between the situation of the Gerasene man and that of the man who falls victim to robbers in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is unique to Luke’s Gospel (10:25–37). This parable comes in the context of a lawyer testing Jesus by asking him what must be done to inherit eternal life. Jesus refers the lawyer to the law’s requirements to love God and neighbor. When the lawyer asks who his neighbor is, Jesus responds with a

6. Jeremy Punt and Hennie F. Stander, “Dress, New Testament,” *EBR* 7:8–11.

7. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 124.

8. I assume that Luke used Mark as a source and modified some of its content to fit Luke’s narrative, consistent with the Two-Source Hypothesis for the composition of the Synoptic Gospels. See Frank H. Gorman, “Nakedness,” *NIDB* 4:217, on the shame of nakedness in the Hebrew Bible. The dividing of Jesus’ clothes while he died on the cross points to the practice of stripping those who were crucified to further dishonor them as they perished in public. See, for example, John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 466.

9. E.g., the forgiven woman who anoints Jesus (Luke 7:36–50); the faithful woman healed of bleeding when she touches Jesus’ cloak (8:43–48). Cf. Luke 5:27–32; 18:9–14.

parable that inverts his question by calling him to become a true neighbor through showing mercy to those in need.

The parable itself recounts a traveler being attacked by robbers who strip him of his clothes, beat him, and leave him half-dead (v. 30). This victimized traveler remains vulnerable as he lies naked and helpless in the road, bearing similarities to the man in Luke 8 who was also naked and susceptible to ongoing violent attacks—in his case, by demons. Despite the different circumstances of each unnamed man, both are unable to reverse their own dire situations but instead need the merciful intervention of another. In the Luke 10 parable, an anonymous Samaritan has mercy on the abused traveler by tending to his wounds and providing ongoing care for him. Although the parable does not explicitly state that the traveler was eventually clothed, it is reasonable to assume that clothing was part of the thorough care the Samaritan provided for him, including housing him at an inn (vv. 34–35). And the Samaritan’s initial bandaging of the man’s wounds provided a degree of protective covering for his body, analogous to that of clothing (v. 34). Although Jesus is not named within this parable, the Samaritan’s actions clearly reflect the saving mercy that Jesus demonstrates throughout his ministry, which literally or symbolically “clothes” those in need with divine mercy and restoration.

So far, we have seen how different types of clothing (or lack thereof) can reflect one’s social status as determined by various factors, such as wealth and health. Some references to physical clothing also take on symbolic dimensions, with insufficient clothing signaling the gravity of a person’s isolation or suffering. With both the Gerasene man and the beaten traveler in the Good Samaritan parable, lack of clothing reflects vulnerability and marginal status that can only be remedied by the merciful intervention of another.

God provides clothing

Luke 12:22–34 powerfully merges literal and metaphorical meanings of clothing. Here Jesus admonishes his disciples against anxiety caused by false confidence that people can secure their lives through their own efforts and possessions. This warning derives from the promise that God the Father knows what people need—including clothing—and provides for them abundantly, freeing them from the anxiety of self-preservation to strive instead for God’s kingdom (vv. 30–31). Living more fully into the reign of God, as actualized through Jesus’ ministry, is to be the priority of Jesus’ disciples.

This message is illustrated through the metaphor of God clothing the lilies with their beautiful appearance (vv. 27–28). The fact that flowers do not strive or toil demonstrates that their very existence is a gift from God, who clothes them more gloriously than even King Solomon was dressed. Jesus highlights the fundamental fragility of lilies to convince his disciples that since God provides so lavishly for plants, whose existence is especially transitory, God will provide even more abundantly for Jesus’ followers, enabling them to pursue God’s purposes (vv. 28–31).

God’s provision, however, does not always take the form that Jesus’ disciples might like. Elsewhere in Luke, Jesus starkly

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states that his followers will be persecuted and even killed (e.g., 21:12–17).¹⁰ As with the fleeting existence of grass, the earthly lives of Jesus’ followers are not permanent or always safe. There is a risk and a cost to following Jesus. But in Jesus, God gives imperishable life beyond death as a gift (e.g., Luke 12:32–34; 21:12–19; 23:39–43). Thus, although Luke’s Gospel emphasizes sharing material goods with those in need as a characteristic of being Jesus’ disciple, the life of the disciple is not guaranteed to be without times of physical want. Fully putting oneself at God’s service involves relinquishing attempts to secure one’s own life and trusting instead that life itself is ultimately found in God.

This point is emphasized by Luke’s unique narrative framing of Jesus’ admonishment about worry in 12:22–31, which is paralleled by Matthew 6:25–34. Most significant to this essay are Jesus’ words that are uniquely found in Luke 12:32: “Do not be afraid, little flock, because your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”¹¹ The reason Jesus’ disciples can live free from anxiety and confident in God’s gracious provision for their daily needs is because God is pleased to give them the even greater gift of God’s kingdom. People are called to receive this gift but they cannot bring it about on their own, any more than lilies can create their own “clothing.” Relying on divine provision frees Jesus’ disciples to sell their possessions and give to those in need, thereby demonstrating that their treasure is with God in heaven.¹² Thus, to be properly disposed to the reign of God as a disciple of Jesus is to accept the “clothing” of divine provision that enables one to provide for others.

10. Acts portrays the predicted suffering of Jesus’ disciples, such as the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54–60) and Paul’s Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:11–31).

11. The parable of the rich fool (12:13–21) that precedes Jesus’ discourse on worry is also unique to Luke among the New Testament Gospels, although it has some parallels in the Gospel of Thomas (NHC II 72, 63).

12. Cf. Matt 19:21.

The lost son

The famous Prodigal or Lost Son parable (15:11–32) is another unique Lukan text that conveys key characteristics of God’s reign through clothing imagery. It describes how the younger of two sons receives his share of his father’s property, then departs to a distant land where he squanders his wealth. When he has spent everything, a famine hits that leaves him vulnerable and desperate, so that he resorts to feeding pigs and wishing he could share in their food. Like other Lukan characters described above, this son is isolated from his community and struggling to survive.

Eventually, the son decides to return to his father and home. Before he even arrives, the father runs to meet his son with an embrace and kiss. And before the son finishes his prepared confession of his sin and unworthiness, his father lavishes him with honor by clothing him with the best robe, a ring, and sandals, as well as preparing a celebratory feast (vv. 22–24). In this scene, the father physically clothing his son in finery expresses the father’s unconditional love and acceptance of his son as a member of the family. The son’s clothing change reflects a shift in his status from a hired hand in a foreign land to beloved son back at home—a change as drastic as moving from death to life (v. 24). It thus resonates with the Gerasene’s liberation being marked by a shift from nakedness to wearing clothes.

As with both the Gerasene and the victimized traveler, the lost son’s perilous situation is transformed by the merciful intervention of another, bringing healing and the possibility of restored relationships with family and society. Strikingly, the same Greek verb (*splanchnizomai*) used for the father being “moved with compassion” for his son (v. 20) is also used for the Samaritan being “moved with compassion” (10:33) for the beaten traveler. This reflects Jesus’ own compassion (*splanchnizomai*) for the widow of Nain that moves him to raise her only son from death back to life (7:13). All these examples express God’s own merciful intervention on behalf of humans that reverses their vulnerable situations and grants them renewed life.

The rich man and Lazarus

The unique Lukan parable of the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–31) provides a negative example of some of the themes related to clothing described above. The introduction of the rich man as regularly dressing himself in fine linen and purple, an expensive dye associated with royalty, indicates his wealth and elevated status, as does his daily feasting (v. 19; cf. 7:25; Rev 18:12; Judg 8:26). By contrast, the poor man, Lazarus, is introduced as being covered with sores (as opposed to fine clothing) and hungry enough to eat scraps from the rich man’s table (Luke 16:20–21). He lies in this condition at the rich man’s gate with dogs licking his sores, emphasizing his low social status and vulnerability. Lazarus’s location also implies that the rich man neglected to provide for him out of his abundance. After both men die their statuses are reversed, so that Lazarus is comforted at Abraham’s side while the rich man is tormented in Hades (vv. 22–23). Abraham’s message to the rich man clarifies that his postmortem suffering results from his

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failure during his lifetime to fulfill the requirements of Scripture to provide for the poor (vv. 25–31).¹³

This parable, therefore, reflects the Lukan theme that how one uses one’s possessions reflects one’s disposition to God’s purposes.¹⁴ And it continues the theme, discussed above, of *how* one is clothed, and *who* one is clothed by, reflecting something about one’s relationship to Jesus or the reign of God he proclaims. In this case, the rich man clothing *himself* in luxury while neglecting to clothe or otherwise provide for the poor man suffering at his door indicates his lack of alignment with God’s reign. His initial self-sufficiency also provides a powerful contrast to the vulnerable characters in Luke who are necessarily clothed *by others* in acts of mercy that reflect God’s own gracious provision.

“Clothed with power from on high”

The final clothing reference to be examined in this essay comes in Luke’s unique description of the risen Jesus commissioning his disciples immediately before his ascension (24:44–53). Prior to this scene, the resurrected Jesus revealed himself to his disciples, proving that his crucifixion was not the tragic end of God’s redemptive purposes through him or of his disciples’ vocation (vv. 13–43). On the contrary, Jesus enabled his followers to grasp that his death and resurrection fulfill God’s plans and the Scriptures, which confirm that he is God’s promised Messiah. This new capacity to interpret Scripture messianically is foundational to the disciples carrying out their transformed vocation after Jesus’ ascension. They will no longer physically follow Jesus and witness his ministry as they had pre-crucifixion. Instead, they will bear witness to the life-changing truth that the crucified Jesus is now the exalted Lord. The disciples will be transformed from learners to leaders of nascent Christian communities that will form around their testimony that God

13. See Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 253, n. 29 for a list of relevant biblical texts.

14. In its immediate literary context, the parable functions as a rebuke and warning to the Pharisees who were “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14).

raised Jesus from the dead and their calls to repentance for the forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name (vv. 46–48).

The risen Jesus not only commissions his disciples for this new phase of ministry that unfolds in the Acts of the Apostles, the sequel to Luke’s Gospel, but also promises to empower them for it.¹⁵ This is evident in his last words in Luke, spoken to his disciples right before he ascends: “. . . I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; so stay in the city until you are *clothed with power from on high*” (v. 49; emphasis mine). The parallel account of this command at the beginning of Acts specifies that the awaited promise of the Father that will empower the disciples’ ministry is the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4–5, 8). It does so without using the clothing metaphor of Luke 24:49, raising the question of the significance of this metaphor in Luke—especially since prior clothing references in the Gospel play a role in characterizing life as Jesus’ disciples and in God’s reign.

A major function of the metaphor of the Holy Spirit clothing Jesus’ followers with power is to allude to Elisha succeeding his master, the prophet Elijah (2 Kgs 2:1–18). As Elijah promised before being taken to heaven alive, Elisha receives a double portion of his master’s spirit when he witnesses his departure. This is confirmed by Elisha taking up the mantle that fell off Elijah and using it to miraculously part the Jordan river, as Elijah previously did, demonstrating his empowerment to continue his master’s prophetic ministry.

Given Luke’s emphasis on the prophetic character of Jesus’ ministry, it is fitting that its description of Jesus’ ascension in Luke 24 and Acts 1 recalls that of Elijah. Like Elisha witnessing his master’s departure, Acts 1:9 explicitly states that Jesus’ disciples were watching him as he was lifted from their sight.¹⁶ Shortly afterward, the Holy Spirit who activated Jesus’ ministry comes upon Jesus’ disciples as promised (Acts 2), empowering them to continue Jesus’ prophetic ministry of healing, proclaiming divine truth, and even raising the dead—activities that Jesus and his prophetic predecessors also did.¹⁷ Thus, like Elisha, Jesus’ disciples take up the mantle of Jesus’ ministry as his successors, aptly described by the metaphor in Luke 24:49 of them being clothed with the Spirit’s power. This image coheres with earlier passages in Luke, described above, in which receiving new clothes reflects transformed circumstances or status. And like the Gerasene man being clothed because Jesus healed him and then commissioned him for proclamation, the

15. I hold the view that the author of Luke also wrote Acts as a sequel that shows the spread of the gospel and the growth of the early church. The two works are linked in part by Jesus’ ascension being recounted at the end of Luke and again at the beginning of Acts.

16. Context suggests that Jesus’ closest followers—i.e., the eleven remaining apostles minus Judas Iscariot—are specifically the ones who receive Jesus’ commission and see him ascend at the beginning of Acts (1:2, 12–13; cf. Luke 6:12–16). Luke 24:13–49, however, suggests a wider group of disciples may have been present for these events. Although the apostles are the first leaders of the Christian movement in Acts, others also receive the Spirit and become disciples who participate in Christian ministry (e.g., Acts 2, 9).

17. E.g., Luke 7:11–17; Acts 9:36–43; 20:7–12; 1 Kgs 17:17–24; 2 Kgs 4:18–37.

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disciples’ promised change of “clothing” in Luke 24:49 also signals a shift in how they will serve Jesus.

This clothing imagery also emphasizes the disciples’ dependence on the Spirit. The Greek verb for *clothed* in Luke 24:49, *enduō*, can connote both literally putting on clothing and figuratively taking on certain characteristics or virtues, as is the case in this verse.¹⁸ By stating that his followers will be clothed with power *from on high*, Jesus vividly expresses that divine power, working through the Holy Spirit, will characterize their ministry. Since clothing in the ancient world (as in today’s) could be a marker of status and identity, the reference to being *clothed* in Luke 24:49 indicates that the disciples’ very identity will be defined by the active presence of the Spirit in their lives and ministry. The intimate nature of wearing clothing on one’s body reinforces this understanding. Although the disciples will not always be spared from danger or suffering, the “clothing” of the Spirit signals that divine presence and provision will sustain them in their mission, consistent with the message of God clothing the lilies (Luke 12:22–34).

The disciples being clothed with divine power also resonates with other clothing references in Luke that characterize God’s reign and redemption as something that people can receive as a gift but cannot ultimately control. Jesus’ disciples can no more manufacture the Spirit’s power that extends God’s reign than the lilies of the field can spin their own clothing. As with the lost son, Jesus’ disciples are clothed post-ascension *by another* in garments they could not obtain on their own. Such clothing reflects God’s merciful provision that positively transforms lives. This is the same provision Jesus’ disciples are called to provide for others, as seen in Acts (e.g., 2:43–47).

Concluding reflections

Clothing may not be the most prominent theme in Luke’s Gospel for conveying what it means to follow and serve Jesus. Nonetheless,

18. BDAG, s.v. *ένδύω*. This verb is also used in Luke 8:27, 12:22, and 15:22.

like the tiny mustard seed that grows into a hospitable tree (Luke 13:18–19), Luke’s clothing references provide a subtle, yet fruitful, resource for teachers and preachers to invite others to consider their own lives of discipleship. All people recognize the need for physical clothing. And given the current prevalence of fashion influencers and corporate sponsors today staking their claims on the uniforms of professional athletes, *how* one is dressed, and *who* one is dressed by, are arguably even greater markers of identity, status, and perceived power than they were in the first century. So, how might the messages conveyed by Lukan clothing references inform Christian discipleship today?

It is fitting to start this reflection at the end of Luke, which marks the transition to Christian vocation, properly speaking—that is, carrying out the commission of the *exalted Lord* Jesus. As with Jesus’ first disciples, all Christians are divinely called, claimed, and commissioned to bear witness to Jesus in word and deed. They do this not on their own, but by the power and guiding presence of the Holy Spirit. The metaphor of being clothed with divine power used in Luke 24:49 to express this is a vivid reminder to the church that its very existence and identity derive from nothing other than God’s gracious provision of Jesus Christ—crucified, resurrected, and exalted—and God’s gift of the Spirit. To fundamentally be “clothed” with divine presence and provision means that any other claims on Christians’ lives cannot be ultimate. Whatever apparel is appropriate to one’s profession or expresses one’s political affiliation does not, in the end, define a Christ follower. Similarly, Christians’ power and influence do not derive from their quantity of social media followers, just as a congregation’s faithfulness to the gospel cannot be measured by membership numbers. As also seen in other clothing references in Luke, the kingdom of God will ultimately flourish because of God’s own action. People are called to be conduits of God’s reign by yielding to the very real presence and power of the Holy Spirit, but they cannot create it on their own.

Indeed, being a disciple of Jesus requires not only clothing those in need but also a willingness to be “clothed,” or cared for,

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by others. To reciprocate the same life-changing mercy one has received through Jesus reflects well the economy of God’s kingdom. It involves tangible acts, such as giving one of the many coats forgotten in the closet to someone who has none. It also looks like accepting help from the stranger one might otherwise avoid when stranded on the highway by a stalled vehicle. Especially for Christians who experience economic security and some degree of social status, humbly accepting the need to be helped by another can be more challenging than doing acts of charity for others. Therefore, teachers and preachers might help people consider occasions when they have found themselves to be “inadequately dressed” (i.e., in need), like the Gerasene man, the beaten traveler, or the lost son, as well as how someone graciously provided for their needs.

Identifying moments when people have both “clothed” others and been clothed by them can raise awareness of the fact that all people are ultimately dependent on God’s provision, which covers us more gloriously than the apparel of the lilies. Dependence on God’s unearned goodness presents a liberating yet countercultural challenge, especially to those living in relatively affluent contexts. Despite the illusion of control and security that technology and possessions provide, disciples of Jesus are called to live in such a way that displays trust that God alone clothes with the abundant mercy and power that bestow true life.