

Series Colossians

This Message Live as God's Chosen People

Scripture Colossians 3:12-17

One of the unique aspects of the book of Colossians is how much theology and practical application is presented in just four chapters. I'm sure you have recognized the depth of Paul's writing and his exhortation for believers. Paul first provides a very thorough theological basis for what it means to be in Christ and then he calls on his readers to live according to what he has explained.

Paul wanted his readers to grow in their faith. He taught that the work of the gospel was not complete until every believer could be presented mature and "perfect in Christ." He emphasized over and over that spiritual growth would not happen through human efforts, but only through confidence in the fullness of the indwelling presence of Christ Jesus.

We are in chapter 3, which is the portion of the letter most concerned with practical application. There is a clear outline of the material in chapters 3 and 4. In the previous message the emphasis was on the believer's relationship with Christ. We said that the believer "has been raised with Christ," "is seated with Christ at the right hand of God," and "will appear with Christ in glory." In keeping with this identity in Christ, the believer must "put to death ... what ever belongs to the earthly nature," and "rid themselves" of practices which damage interpersonal relationships. In other words, believers were expected to be Christ-like in all their attitudes and behaviors because "Christ is all and is in all."

In this message we will look at verses which have another emphasis: the believer's relationship to other believers. In future messages we will examine verses in which Paul gives instructions about the believers' relationships with family members, relationships with daily work activities, and relationships with individuals who are outside the faith. In all there are five practical sections. At the present time, the believer's life is "hidden with Christ in God," but Paul wants us to understand that the power of the Christ-life must be manifested in Christ-pleasing holiness, in Christ-honoring loving unity with other believers, in a happy Christ-honoring home, in Christ-honoring work-related relationships, and in Christ-empowered effective witness to non-believers.

Read Colossians 3:12-17

Paul introduced the illustration of new clothes in the previous message. He wrote, "You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (*Colossians 3:9-10*). Paul builds on this illustration in verses 12 through 14.

When believers become new redeemed people in Christ, they must adapt themselves to attitudes and behaviors which are appropriate to their new identities in Christ. They are expected to clothe themselves with the characteristics of the new self.

Verse 12 states that the believer is "chosen by God," "set apart by and for God," and "loved by God." The actual words are "chosen", "holy" and "dearly loved." God used these same words in the Old Testament when He described His relationship with Israel. For example, when God met with the newly rescued Hebrews at Mount Sinai, He said, "You are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. ... It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery" (*Deuteronomy 7:6-8*).

Paul lifted these words from the Old Testament and applied them to New Testament believers because he wanted his readers to understand the special position they have in Christ. They are deliberately "chosen," "set apart for God," and "dearly loved." When we consider that the majority of believers in Colosse were Gentiles, not Jews, this new understanding of God's purposes was significant: in the New Testament, non-Jews were among the chosen ones.

Earlier in the letter Paul had written about his responsibility to reveal "the mystery that had been kept hidden for ages and generations, that God had chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you" (*Colossians 1:25-27*). In Christ, all people are God's special people.

Here in chapter 3 Paul was reemphasizing the fact that each Gentile believer was specifically included in God's new creation and empowered by God's Spirit to be His representatives in the context of their time and culture, just as the Israelites had been God's special people in the Old Testament era.

Holiness in the lives of God's people is the ultimate objective of salvation. The character of holiness is to be manifested in attitudes such as "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." These characteristics point to those qualities of life which, if present in the community of believers, will eliminate, or, at least, greatly reduce, frictions between people. The five virtues mentioned here are not a complete list of the virtues mentioned in Scripture. Rather, they seem to be selected by Paul to offset the two lists of undesirable attitudes and behaviors mentioned in previous verses. Those were lists of attitudes and behaviors that believers were to "put to death" and discard. Taken together, the lists are examples of what the believer must "put off" and "put on."

Interestingly, the terms given in verse 12 are used elsewhere in Scripture to designate attitudes of God and of Christ. The lesson here is that believers are to act toward others as God in Christ acted toward them.

"Compassion" is the attitude of pity and tenderness toward people who are suffering and miserable. "Kindness" is a combination of several virtues, such as goodness, helpfulness, thoughtfulness, and respectfulness. "Humility" is the attitude of placing others in a higher position than one's self. Believers were to think of themselves as servants to others. "Gentleness" describes a person who is sensitive to the rights and feelings of others. "Patience" is sometimes translated "longsuffering." It is a description of self-restraint, the kind of behavior that does not retaliate after being insulted or injured. These are God-like attitudes which the people of God must "put on."

These virtues, especially "humility" and "gentleness," were not generally considered important in the "rough and tumble" Gentile pagan world of the 1st Century (nor, it can be added, are they important in today's ruthlessly competitive world). For this reason, Paul insisted that believers had to be distinctive; they had to clothe themselves in Christ-like attitudes and behaviors as a testimony to the reality of their salvation and new life in Christ. Good conduct within the faith community would be a strong witness to the power of God to overcome the evil influences of culture and society. Good conduct among believers would also be a witness to non-believers since non-believers would be able to see the fruit of the gospel in the lives of members of the church body. Believers were to be a distinctively different kind of people.

In verse 13 the terms “bear with” and “forgive” summarize the virtues listed in verse 12. Believers who are truly compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, and patient will have a willingness to bear with, tolerate, and endure people who have faults or unpleasant characteristics or bad behaviors; and also a willingness to forgive people that they have grievances against. Please keep in mind that Paul is writing about relationships between believers!

“To bear with” means to put up with things we don’t like about other people. “To forgive” means to not hold a complaint against another person. One definition of “forgiveness” is “the willingness to absorb the consequences of another person’s behavior.” This, of course, was modeled by the actions of God the Father: “He forgave us all our sins” by canceling the written code that was against us and that stood opposed to us by nailing it to the cross” (*Colossians 2:13-14*). In other words, Jesus absorbed the consequences of our sin nature through His death. That’s why Paul reminded his readers that we are to “forgive as the Lord forgave us.”

The final and ultimate characteristic in these virtues is “love.” This is the word which describes a selfless concern for the well-being of another person. Love is the motivating force behind all the other virtues. Love is described as the bond which fastens together separate items so that there is cohesion and unity. It is this bonding that reveals the maturity level of believers, and makes possible the perfection and completeness of faith, which is the goal of every local body of believers.

In His teaching, Jesus summed up the Old Testament law as love for God and for one’s neighbor (*see Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-28*). However, shortly before His arrest Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment: “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” And then He explained the purpose: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (*John 13:34-35*). This purpose was behind Paul’s instructions about relationships within the community of believers. The quality of love that believers were expected to display in their lives was to be like the love which Jesus had for His disciples. It was this new pattern of love, based on the example of Jesus, that explains Jesus’ use of the term “new commandment.” It was a higher level of love than was required by the Mosaic law.

Remember that all these virtues are compared to clothing that believers are supposed to wear. Note that love is like a separate garment that is worn on top of all the other clothing. Verses 12 through 14 explain the first of four specific commands listed by Paul. That command is “Clothe yourselves with Godly virtues.” The remaining commands are “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,” “Let the word of God dwell in you,” and “Whatever you do, ... do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” These are Paul’s commands for “living as God’s chosen people.” They explain how to get along with fellow believers!

The second instruction is in verse 15. Not only must there be love and unity among believers, but there must be peace. Paul has insisted over and over that the fullness of God is in Christ and that believers must focus their attention only on Christ. Here he states that the “peace of Christ” must rule in their hearts. This would be an appropriate goal “since as members of one body, (Christ’s body,) all believers are called to peace.” “Love” would reveal to the world the character of the believer’s interpersonal relationships, and “peace” would reveal the inner quality of the believing community.

The word for “rule” means “to act as umpire or decision maker.” Therefore verse 15 means that “the peace of Christ” must influence and control every discussion, dispute, and conflict which might arise among the members of the fellowship. Believers are not to do anything that would disturb harmonious relationships. Since believers are “called to (or into) the peace” provided by Christ, they are, therefore, expected to practice “the peace of Christ” in their interpersonal relationships. Just imagine the existence of a community of many individuals from diverse backgrounds in which every collective decision and action is characterized by the desire for unity and peace. That’s what can happen when Christ rules in the hearts of all believers; that’s when His peace will rule in the fellowship.

Believers are also to “be thankful.” We as believers should be grateful for the peace and contentment that Christ bestows on us. As Paul wrote earlier in the letter, he wanted his readers to “be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding in order that they may know ... Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (*Colossians 2:2-3*). Paul wants us to have confidence in and appreciation for the truth about Christ, to be thankful for who He is and what He has done. Peace and gratitude are essential components for harmony within the Body of believers.

Command #1: “Clothe yourselves with godly attitudes.” Command #2: “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” The next command is: “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” The phrase, “dwell in you richly,” means to allow or permit the Word of Christ to “have all the room it needs to have” in the life of the believer. In this letter, Paul stressed over and over the centrality and sufficiency of Christ. He also stressed the need of the body of believers to stay focused on “the Word of Christ” and to not become sidetracked into “hollow and deceptive teachings which depend on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (*Colossians 2:8*).

Instead of the confusion brought about by false teaching, Paul wanted his readers to focus on teachings that would encourage and bring about peace and thankfulness and give evidence of love and unity. That will happen only when believers have a deep familiarity with the Word of God.

According to Paul, believers have the ability to “teach and admonish each other with all wisdom.” What is not specifically mentioned in verse 16, but must be understood, is that the Word of Christ indwells believers in the person of the Holy Spirit. Since every believer is indwelt by God’s Spirit, each believer therefore has the potential to understand what Christ wants to communicate and to share that understanding with other believers for their spiritual benefit. The key requirement is that every believer pay careful attention to the Word of Christ guided the Holy Spirit.

Paul would insist that the Word of Christ must influence all the ministries of the community of believers, including the ministry of teaching and the ministry of praise, instruction and celebration. What is at issue in verse 16 is the content of the teaching and the worshiping. The content must be grounded in the Word of Christ. Joyful singing with gratitude in worship is an appropriate response to the teaching. Each additional insight into the truth of God’s Word should be an occasion of praise.

Verse 17 is a kind of summary of the previous information. “Whatever we do” includes our words and our deeds, an obvious reference to previous verses. Commentators have different opinions about the phrase “do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Some understand the phrase to mean that everything the believer does is to be undertaken in dependence on the Lord. Others think it means that everything the believer does must be done in recognition of the authority of Jesus and must be pleasing to the Lord Jesus. Still others understand the phrase to simply mean “I am a follower of the Lord Jesus.” This last interpretation reflects the thought that to act in the name of a person is to act as his representative. All three interpretations seem acceptable to me.

The main idea throughout this passage is to keep the focus on the Lord Jesus. I did not call attention to how this passage can be interpreted as Paul’s rebuke of the false teachers, but every statement undercuts their theology and influence. Their teaching called into question the work of Christ and cast doubts on the completeness of the salvation accomplished by Him. The false teachers did not keep their focus exclusively on Christ. Paul’s instruction for his readers to do everything “in the name of the Lord Jesus” is a particular jab because the false teachers would not accept the fact that God had become man, and that Jesus the man was with the Father in heaven.

“Giving thanks to God the Father through Christ” was another refutation of the false teaching. The statement meant that believers can communicate directly with the Father through Christ without intermediaries to assist with communications between man and God. The praise is, of course, for all that the Father has done for us through Christ.

In closing, I remind you once again of the key verses of this letter: “Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. ... For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ” (*Colossians 2:6-7, 9-10*).