

Colossians 3:12-15 “How to Have Christlike, Peaceful Relationships”

Intro. As you recall, in our last message we learned about the characteristics of the old life that we are to put away as Christians. In v.5 we are to “put to death ... fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness...” In vv.8-9 we are to “put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another....” Now Paul moves on by presenting the positive side of living the Christian life. In vv.12-17 he gives a series of direct commands. If we will follow these commands, we will become more and more Christlike in our daily living. And that should be the goal of the Christian, according to v.10.

The commands given in vv.12-15 relate to personal relationships. It is very important that maintain good personal relationships. This is true because people are more important than possessions and love is the greatest commandment. We will also see that obeying these commands will promote unity and peace in your family and in your church, as suggested in vv.14-15.

So let’s study this text together, and learn what we must do to become the Christlike, loving Christians God wants us to be. First of all:

I. PUT ON CHRISTLIKE CHARACTER QUALITIES

Paul says in v.8 that we are to put off certain sins, as we would do with a dirty garment. Now in v.12 he tells us what we are to put on in place of the old habits which should have been discarded. The verb (aorist imperative) points to a decisive act, rather than a process. He gives seven, and then to complete the octave of virtues, he adds the 8th, which is really the basis and summary commandment of the previous seven. These qualities of life, if present, will eliminate or at least reduce frictions and conflict among any group of people. So Christianity has the triumphant solution of the problem of living together in community. First, we should put on:

A. “Tender Mercies” (v.12b) – This is literally “bowels of compassion.” The Greek people located the deeper emotions in the intestinal area, while we tend to locate them in the heart. However, at times we also will associate feelings with the gut, such as when we talk about “gut feelings.” We also know that certain emotions, such as anxiety, affect the stomach. Furthermore, the bowels were regarded by the Hebrews as the seat of the tenderer affections, esp. kindness, benevolence, and compassion.¹

Yet the main point is not the seat of compassion, but the fact that we *are* to be compassionate and merciful to people. Most people in Paul’s day lacked this virtue. They could care less about the suffering of the aged, the sick, or of their women. They especially were hard-hearted toward the suffering of slaves and prisoners. I am seeing a return to such callous attitudes toward the suffering of others in our society. The mass shooters lack any empathy whatsoever!

Senator John McCain told of an experience he had as a POW in North Vietnam. At the infamous prison called the Hanoi Hilton, McCain had been tied up in a way to create maximum pain. A guard came in for the evening shift, put his forefinger in front of his own lips as if to say, “shh” and loosened McCain’s bonds. As the guard prepared to leave the next morning he came back to tighten them again to hide his compassionate act. Later, on Christmas Day, McCain was given a

¹ Need more evidence for this last statement, but the following verses reference the stomach or intestines experiencing emotional effects (Job 30:27; Ps. 22:14; Song of Sol. 5:4; Isa. 63:15; Jer. 31:20; Lam. 1:20; 2:11)

brief ten-minute break outside his cell. That guard approached. He stood next to McCain and with his foot, the guard traced a cross on the ground and very quickly erased it. There in that horrible prison, the love of Christ had gotten through to one guard and had been extended to a hurting stranger.²

So what does this mean? We are not to be hard-hearted toward people who are suffering, but tender-hearted, compassionate and merciful. Is this the way you are with people? Harshness in dealing with suffering or failing brethren is anything but the spirit of Christ.

Next, we should put on:

B. “Kindness” (v.12b) – In 4 out of 8 occurrences of this word (*chrestotes*) it is used in reference to the character of God. Here the word probably means “kindness, a gentle, gracious, sweet disposition.” May God give us a mild, pleasant, gentle disposition, as opposed to one that is harsh or hard. In Gal. 5:22 it is listed as a fruit of the Spirit.

Are you a kind person? Or is there a rough edge in your personality? If there is, it is time to let God smooth off those rough edges! And may there be kindness in how we speak to and about other people. Let us practice kindness, especially with fellow believers.

C. Humility of Mind (v.12b) - We should have a humble opinion of ourselves, a modest self-appraisal in relation to others, especially to fellow-believers. Humility is not thinking poorly of oneself. Rather, it is having the proper estimate of oneself (Rom. 12:3), especially in reference to God. The person with humbleness of mind thinks of others and less of himself.

So put on humility by keeping in mind how great God is and how small you are in comparison. Remember your own weaknesses, and how prone you are to sin, and that should help you maintain humility of mind.

D. “Meekness” (v.12b) – This (*praotes*) is similar in meaning to the word translated “kindness.” It also refers to “mildness of disposition, gentleness of spirit.” Yet it also means that we accept God’s dealings with us as good without disputing or resisting. Then, when people deal with us, it refers to submissiveness under provocation, the willingness rather to suffer injury than to inflict it.³ Meekness is not weakness; it is power under control in the face of provocation.

A striking example is Moses (Num. 12:3). He bore so much provocation from the Israelites, and yet most of the time did so with humility, patience, and restraint of anger.

Have you put on meekness? Meek people do not add fuel to the fire of conflict, but they extinguish those fires.

E. “Longsuffering” (v.12b) – Paul said in v.8 that we are to “put off ... anger, wrath...” Instead, we are to put on the virtue of being longsuffering. This word (*makrothumia*) also refers to patience under the ill treatment of others. Yet it adds the idea of being slow to avenge wrongs, for this word is literally “long-tempered.” It denotes the self-restraint that enables one to bear injury and insult without resorting to hasty retaliation. After all, God can be depended on to vindicate His own. The short-tempered person speaks and acts impulsively and lacks self-control.

This also is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), so if you need to put off anger and put on being longsuffering, seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

F. “Bearing with One Another” (v.13a) – Here it probably means “to bear, to endure” characteristics and actions of each other that you do not like, or that even irritate you. God is

² J. Michael Shannon, “To Illustrate” in *Preaching*, Nov./Dec. '07, p.88 [Illus.#C-1831].

³ 1 Cor. 6:7b says, “Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated?”

forbearing toward sinners in that He patiently holds back His judgment (Rom. 2:4; 3:25). Moulton speaks of the failure of Christians to practice this as “probably the most prolific cause of Christian division.”

Here we see another example of the fact that you are not responsible for the *actions* of others, but you are responsible for the *reactions* you have to others. So instead of raising a fuss, just bear with it! As someone said, “If you put up with yourself, why not put up with everyone else?”⁴

G. “Forgiving One Another” (v.13a) – It is not enough that the Christian must endure grief and provocation and refuse to retaliate if you still seethe in anger. He must also forgive the troublemaker. Paul says more about this character quality than the previous ones. First, he mentions the occasion of forgiving others. He says in v.13, “if anyone has a complaint against another.” The word translated “complaint” (*momphe*) is based on the verb meaning, “to blame, find fault.” If you withhold forgiveness, you probably feel that you have a legitimate complaint against that other person. Yet, you are to forgive, and Paul tells us why. The basis of forgiving others is found in the last of v.13, “even as Christ forgave you....” We are to forgive others because God forgave us, and in the degree that He forgave, that is, a full forgiveness. How can we withhold forgiveness when we have been so freely forgiven? The Lord’s generosity to you must be the model of your own generosity. Your responsibility now is to forgive as you have been forgiven. Also, the word translated “forgive” (*charizomai*) is based on the root word for grace.⁵ We are to forgive graciously. We are not to withhold forgiveness until they earn it or deserve it. If you fail to forgive, you are just hurting yourself with the additional stress that unforgiveness causes.

Finally, we are to put on:

H. Love – He says in v.14, “But above all these things put on love....” This is not mere sentiment or fondness. Paul has in mind the love of God produced in the heart of the yielded believer by the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:22; Rom. 5:5). As we can see from I Cor. 13, these virtues listed in vv.12-13 are among the true characteristics of love. But we must not merely imitate these characteristics. They should flow from a heart of love. Without divine love they are as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal (I Cor. 13:1-3).

Notice also that we should put a priority upon the virtue of love. He says, “above (*epi*) all these things put on love.” Love is the first of the fruit of the Spirit. If we have love, all the other virtues will follow.

Finally, notice that Paul calls love “the bond of perfection.”⁶ In doing so he may be saying that love is what binds and holds the members of the body of Christ together, as ligaments hold the members of a physical body together. In fact, the word here is translated “ligaments” in 2:19. Thus he may simply be calling love “the perfect bond.” “Love” is the perfect bond also in the sense that it embraces and completes all of the other virtues.

So above everything else, be sure you put on love. Do that, and everything else will fall into place.

II. WHY PUT ON THESE CHARACTER QUALITIES

Why should we put off the old deeds and put on these qualities of the new life? Paul explained three motives that ought to encourage us to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4). He says

⁴ Guigo I, Meditations, *Christianity Today*, September 2006, p.112 [Illus.#C-1633].

⁵ The same word is used in Eph. 4:32, “forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.”

⁶ This phrase is only found here, though in Eph. 4:3 Paul refers to the “bond of peace” when appealing for unity.

in v.12, “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved...”⁷ Let’s look at each of these, which relate to our identity in Christ. First, we should be clothed with these Christlike character qualities:

A. Because We Are Elect of God - Election is a common theme in Paul’s writings. What a blessed privilege it is to be chosen of God! The basis of election is grace. It has nothing to do with merit (Deut. 7:7-8). It is not for us to figure out this doctrine, but just enjoy what it means for us who see evidence of God’s election. If you realize that you are privileged to be chosen of God, then you should obey Him and put on these virtues.

B. Because We Are Holy – Not only are we chosen, but we are also set apart unto God. We are to be separate from sin. We are to live differently from others in this world, and if you put on the characteristics of love mentioned in vv.12-14, you will be different!

Just as the marriage ceremony sets apart a man and a woman for each other exclusively, so salvation sets the believer apart exclusively for Jesus Christ. Would it not be a horrible thing, at the end of a wedding, to see the groom run off with the maid of honor? It is just as horrible to contemplate the Christian living for the world and the flesh.

Holiness is not just separating ourselves from sin, but being set apart unto the service of God. Putting on the character qualities that I am talking about today is an aspect of living a holy life.

C. Because We Are Loved by God - We are dear to God because we are His own children. “Beloved” is not an adjective, but actually a verb in the perfect tense, which is used to show the far reaching and the abiding character of that love. We were loved in the past, even from before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8), and especially as demonstrated at Calvary (Rom. 5:8). So we are loved with Calvary love, a love that denies self for the benefit of the object loved. And the tense also indicates that such love impacts our lives into the present and beyond.

How does this relate to the context? When a Christian sins, he is a child of God breaking the loving heart of his Father. Eph. 4:30 says, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God...” How can we sin against such love? Furthermore, we should respond to God’s love by loving Him in return. One way we show our love is by putting on the virtues that Paul is about to describe. Love is the strongest motivating power in the world. As the believer grows in his love for God, he will grow in his desire to obey Him and walk in the newness of life that he has in Christ.

So Paul is basing his appeal on a threefold fact: Christians are chosen of God, set apart by and for God, and loved by God. And Paul is saying that we are to see that our manner of life is fitting, seemly, and in accordance with that kind of life we should live as elect, holy, and beloved of God.

Finally, Paul says that we should:

III. BE RULED BY THE PEACE OF CHRIST

Paul says in v.15, “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body...” Textual evidence suggest Paul actually wrote, “the peace of Christ.” After all, the prophet said the Messiah would be called “Prince of peace” (Isa. 9:6). One thing that is clear is that God expects you to experience this peace in your heart. So consider first of all:

A. The Nature of this Peace – This peace comes as a result of a right relationship with God (cf. Isa. 32:17). Romans 5:1 says, “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with

⁷ Every one of these words originally belonged to the Jews, but now they are stated of Gentile believers!

God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Before we can know the peace *of* God, we must first experience peace *with* God. Jesus said in John 14:27, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” Peace is that calmness of mind that is not ruffled by adversity or a bad conscience. The sins of the past have been forgiven, the present is being overruled for good, and the future cannot bring about separation between Christ and His own. That’s peace!

Yet this peace is not just a blessed possession we can have, but it also has a functional purpose. So notice with me:

B. The Function of this Peace – Two are given in my text. One surprising purpose of God’s peace is:

1. To Rule Our Hearts - The word translated “rule” (*brabeuo*) literally means “to be an umpire,” thus “to decide, determine.” So let each individual constantly ask himself, “Will I have peace within if I do this or do that?” When the believer loses his inner peace, he knows that he has in some way disobeyed God. On the other hand, when we trust God and obey the will of God, we have His peace within.

We must beware, however, of a false peace in the heart, based on a false understanding, or that comes from drugs or alcohol. Jonah deliberately disobeyed God, yet he was able to go to sleep in the hold of a ship in a storm! “I had peace about it!” is not sufficient evidence that we are in the will of God. We must pray, surrender to His will, and seek His guidance in the Scriptures.

2. To Promote Unity in the Body - This peace not only refers to individual tranquility of heart but extends to peace among the members of the body in their relations to one another. That is what Paul means when he says, “to which also you were called in one body.” God calls us to live in peace with one another. Jesus said in Mark 9:50, “...have peace with one another.” Hebrews 12:14 says, “Pursue peace with all *people*....”

Conclusion: So let us strive to maintain peace with God by faith and obedience. Let us also remember that we have been “called” to maintain peace in the body of Christ. One way we do so is by putting on the virtues listed in vv.12-14.

Sources: William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1964); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on Colossians* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1929); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:10] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2011); Curtis Vaughan, *Colossians: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); Warren W. Wiersbe, “*Be*” Series: *New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, Colossians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, inc. *Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Nothing available from Maclaren.

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