

Colossians Series: A New Way of Living Col. 3:1-17 7/25/21

A standard pattern in the letters written by St. Paul is that he never teaches theology for its own sake; He always follows his doctrinal teaching with instructions for how to apply those beliefs in daily living. Colossians is no exception. Following two chapters focused on what we believe about God's work in the world through Jesus, he details how we ought to live in light of those beliefs. In fact, Paul gets very specific about how we ought to live. He begins, however, by listing some of the ways we ought not to live. In chapter 3, verse 5, he writes,

⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. ⁷These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. (Col. 3:5-7)

The sins listed here are primarily sexual in nature. In the ancient world just about any kind of sex in just about any situation was permitted, leading to all kinds of abuse and exploitation. But Christians insisted that because sex was created by God, God's instructions about how this gift should be used were binding. The bottom line was that Christians were to refrain from sexual activity outside of marriage, a pretty radical concept for these new followers of Jesus! It continues to be a challenge for believers today,

but most of us understand that unbridled sexual passions are destructive to ourselves and others.

In addition, Paul adds greed or covetousness to the list. This may be connected to the sexual sins- coveting your neighbor's wife, for example. Or, it may refer to the issue of financial greed, which is rampant today, and has been normalized by a number of celebrities who make no secret of their desire to obtain as much money as they can, no matter who gets hurt in the process. Paul cautions us against greed. But he isn't done! ⁸*But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.* ⁹*Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices* ¹⁰*and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.* ¹¹*In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!* (Col. 3:8-11)

Notice that this is actually a pretty hopeful section. He instructs the Colossians to “strip off” these harmful practices, as one would take off old clothing. Then he tells them to “put on” new practices. There is hope here that we can change! Also notice that all of these practices have a direct impact on our relationships with other people. Paul is instructing us how to be the church, how to live with each other in a Christ-like way!

He begins with a warning about anger and wrath. In the original Greek, one of these words suggests a sudden explosion of anger, while the other involves a slowly percolating anger that is stoked over time. Most of us have seen how both kinds of anger are harmful not only to those at whom the anger is directed, but also to the angry person him or herself. When anger erupts, we may say deeply hurtful things that can't be easily taken back. A true follower of Jesus controls his or her temper.

Then we have several words related to our speech- slander, abusive language, and lying. Slander is spreading untrue information about another person. The temptation for this vice has been amplified by social media, as it is very easy to forward a story about someone, perhaps a public figure, without checking to be sure that it is absolutely true and not misleading. Sending untrue or misleading stories about a person to others constitutes slander, and Paul forbids it for Christians.

Lying is also a temptation for all of us at one time or another. Whether it is lying to evade the consequences of our actions, or to make ourselves look better, or to make someone else look bad, or to make more money in a dodgy business deal, lying is wrong and is absolutely corrosive to human relationships, as it undercuts the trust that is necessary for relationships to flourish. Get rid of it, Paul says!

Then there is a little aside, where Paul reminds us that in Christ the common human divisions of race, ethnicity, and social status have been abolished. We all stand equal before God as sinners saved by God's grace in Christ. Therefore, every one of us must be treated equally. In this time of racial reckoning, Christians must be open to hear about ways minorities are not being treated fairly in our country, so we can make the necessary changes in order to have a more perfect and just union.

Now, after describing what Christians should not do, Paul shifts gears to tell us what the Christian life should look like. ¹²*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.* ¹³*Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.* ¹⁴*Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.* ¹⁵*And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.* (Col. 3:12-15)

Having taken off the old ways, we put on the new! These same virtues are repeated in several of Paul's letters: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Famed anthropologist, Margaret Meade, was once asked, "What is the earliest sign of civilization in a given culture?" The questioner expected her to say something about a clay pot

or fish hook or grinding stone. Instead she answered, “A healed femur,” (which is the thigh bone). Healed femurs are not found where the survival of the fittest reigns. A healed femur shows that someone cared. Someone had to do that injured person’s hunting or gathering until that leg healed. Evidence of compassion is the first sign of civilization, according to Margaret Meade. And it’s also a sign of God’s Spirit at work in our hearts according to Paul.

The phrase “bear with one another” just means “put up with each other!” Whenever we get together with other people, there are bound to be things that rub us the wrong way. “Get over it!” says Paul. Those things are not worth breaking friendships and fellowship over!

And then he calls us to forgiveness. When I am doing a wedding, I often read this passage, and I tell the bride and groom that forgiveness is an essential trait of a healthy marriage. Because you will fail each other, I say. You will disappoint each other. You will even hurt each other. It is inevitable in any close human relationship. And it’s at that point, I tell them, that they have a crucial decision to make. They can choose to hold onto that wrong that was done to them, nurture it in their heart until it becomes a grudge and forms a wedge right down the middle of their relationship. Or, they can choose to let it go, trusting God to take care of it, and forgiving the other person, Of course, there will be important conversations to be sure

the same thing doesn't happen again! But, forgiveness is necessary in all relationships, because human failure is inevitable.

Finally, love is the crowning virtue- "*clothe yourselves with love,*" he writes, "*which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*" As we have mentioned before, this kind of love is not primarily about warm, fuzzy feelings! Rather, it's about acting in the best interest of the other person, treating them with compassion, kindness, humility, patience, gentleness and forgiveness. A child wrote the following prayer, "Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it." Yep. But it's because God so loved the world, that he can call us to do the same thing- to love others as he has loved us.

Verse 15 talks about the peace of Christ ruling in our hearts, which many people take to mean some kind of inner peace. But the context is about getting along with each other, isn't it? And the word "rule" is the same word used for a referee at a sports event. So, I think the verse means that making peace should be the priority or rule in our relationships with each other.

Now this would be a very good place to end this sermon, except for the fact that I'm married to a woman who has spent a great deal of her life

working as a church musician. And since the next verses talk about singing, and since I'd like there to be peace in my marriage, I'll read on!

¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col. 3:16-17) This verse calls us to mutual ministry with one another- "teaching and admonishing one another."

Teaching God's Word is not just the responsibility of the pastors and the Dir. of Christian Education or our youth leaders. We're all called to do that! What we learn, we share.

And we do it with gratitude which leads us to sing! One of my concerns about our live-stream option is that some people don't participate in the worship service; they just watch it. That's not worship! Worship is participatory, and one of the main ways we participate is through singing the songs. Are you regularly expressing your gratitude to God in singing? I hope so!

I hope you've enjoyed this study of Colossians. If you haven't read it yet, you still can! And I'll still be glad to answer any questions you might have about the book!