

SERIES Reading Paul's Mail: Colossians  
SERMON **Community Matters (Col 3.12–17)**<sup>1</sup>  
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A pastor-friend of mine recently posted a picture of a guy standing by himself with a shovel, doing nothing. The caption read: “**God is in control, but He doesn't expect you to lean on a shovel and pray for a hole.**” There's a lot of good, disruptive theology in that.

## 1. GET UP AND LIVE

A guest preacher filled-in during the absence of the Senior Minister. After the songs, the communion, and the offering; the guest preacher went up to the pulpit, opened his Bible, looked up, and smiled at the congregation. For a moment, he simply stood there. Staring and smiling. Just when the silence became uncomfortable, he read from John's Gospel: “**By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another**” (13.35, NASB). At the final word, the preacher returned to his seat; and the people sat silently, in total confusion. After a few moments, he returned to the pulpit and said, “**By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.**” And he again returned to his seat. This time the people began to whisper to each other about their confusion.

One last time, the preacher went back and read the words again: “**By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.**” This time it clicked. One group began sharing struggles with one another. Another group huddled to pray together. And a few members left the building—not because of frustration with the guest preacher, but because they wanted to share the love of Christ with others. They realized the need to start fulfilling the Great Commission. They realized that church-life is not something done only in a building, once a week, for an hour and nothing more (*because an hour is what's been allocated for spending time with God*). Instead, they realized that church-life is fulfilled outside the walls of the building, every day, and every moment of one's daily existence. An existence that's not about the self or what the self wants, but entirely about God and His life-changing will.

And that's the point of the story. The gospel is not something we simply read or simply hear. It's something we are to live. The guest preacher knew this. He knew about the tendency of simply attending church only to hear sermons about the gospel, or all that God has done for the world in Christ, and then return home—unaffected by what was heard or taught. He knew that it was much easier just to sit passively and hear great and powerful truths of the Bible than to actively learn them and put them into practice. And because he knew that, along with the knowledge of what God expects of true, faithful disciples, he wanted to change that. He wanted the people to rethink what it means to be committed to God. He wanted them to move beyond the surface of their claimed commitment, and to dig deep within themselves to find the true essence of their Christianity. He wanted them to live what they proclaim!

And this call to act and live what's proclaim is the summons of the gospel. A summons that was needed in the time of Christ, the early church, throughout history, and even today to

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations will follow the New English Translation (NET).

remind people: being a part of God’s redeemed community in Christ is not about living the life we prefer. It’s about living the life He’s graciously given to us and sovereignly transforms into the image of His righteousness and His holiness that comes from His truth. A transformation that reflects not only our new identity in Christ and our new status before God, but also our new purpose and assurance in this life because of the new hope we have for everlasting communion with God in His eternal kingdom. A life, identity, status, purpose, assurance, and hope that ought to matter to God’s people. And not just because of the real-life difference He’s made in their lives, but also because of the real-life difference He desires to make in the lives of others. A desire that reflects His gracious plan of redemption for the world.

But that plan—declared in the gospel and fulfilled in Christ—cannot be known by those who need it unless those who have been radically changed by it get up and live it. And so, Jesus told His disciples: “Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt 28.19–20). Notice that the whole thing is a command to all disciples. It’s not a suggestion for some outreach event that might be of interest to a few of the usual volunteers. If anyone truly belongs to Christ, this commission is for them. Also, the whole thing is active in process and external in its fulfillment. The disciples cannot be passive and think, “Oh people will just show up, and if they like us then we’ll introduce some basic ideas.” Disciples are called to be actively going where those who don’t know the gospel are, and to be willing to share the greatest news about the great thing that’s ever happened in this world.

And finally, the whole thing provides a basic blueprint for the mission of the church and how it’s fulfilled. “What is the mission?” We are called to make disciples of all nations. (*Let the fulness of that commission sink in, and then honestly ask: how are we doing with that?*). “How it is fulfilled?”<sup>2</sup> On a general level: by going out into the world with the gospel. We can’t make disciples of anyone if we don’t go out and meet anyone. More specifically, we make disciples by baptizing them in the only name that has the power to save and give new life. And we teach them to know and observe all that Jesus taught, said, commanded, and expects. At the very least, this means: Jesus’ teaching is not to be simply read or merely thought about. It is meant to be known, obeyed, lived out, and used for His purpose and glory. As He clearly reveals in Jn 8: it’s easy to claim belief in Him; but true disciples are those who believe and faithfully follow His teaching—keep His word. The word of truth, which brings true freedom.<sup>3</sup>

## — PRAY —

<sup>2</sup> The grammar and syntax of the passage clearly reveals the cause-and-effect nature of the command. In vv.19–20a, the command, “you are to make disciples” (μαθητεύσατε [*mathēteusate*]) is the controlling verb, and “go” (πορευθέντες [*porēthentes*]), “baptizing” (βαπτίζοντες [*baptizontes*]), and “teaching” (διδάσκοντες [*didaskontes*]) are explanatory participles—i.e., they show how the making of disciples is to be done.

<sup>3</sup> Specifically: “Then Jesus said them [to the Jewish leaders], ‘When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak just what the Father taught Me. And the One who sent Me is with Me. He has not left Me alone because I always do those things that please Him.’ While He was saying these things, many people believed in Him. Then Jesus said to those Judeans who had believed in Him, ‘If you continue to follow My teaching, you are really My disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free’” (Jn 8.28–32). The language and structure of v.32 show the results (“you are really My disciples” and “you will know the truth...”) to be contingent upon the fulfillment of the condition (“if you continue to follow My teaching”). More to the point, and not easily conveyed in English translation: based on the construction, v.32 represents what’s known as a “third class condition,” which means the fulfillment is uncertain but still possible. Thus, and in context, mere stated belief does not guarantee true discipleship, knowing the truth, and being set free by that truth. Along with declared belief, there must be an ongoing faithful allegiance to following Jesus’ teaching—the source of truth and the freedom it gives. Without it, claimed belief means nothing and true discipleship does not exist. Something made abundantly clear in what happens in Jn 8.33–59.

## 2. COMMUNITY MATTERS (3.12–17)

Our passage begins with another “therefore” (οὖν [oun]). So, Paul is going to connect what he’s about to say with what he just said in vv.1–11, which dealt with the new life in Christ alone. A life that’s not meant to be a theological abstraction, a pietistic idea, a mental construct, or even some emotional or spiritual high—all of which are to be kept private, only personally experienced, and not permitted to claim any sort of ties to objective truth. That’s what the world wants Christians to believe and do. And not just because the mind of the sinful world self-contradictorily (*and delusionally*) believes there’s no such thing as objective truth,<sup>4</sup> and Christians are oppressively wrong to say there is. But it’s also because the world does not want its exercise of the subjective, personal truth it uses to define life and the self-given power it uses gratify and glorify the creature over the Creator to be held accountable by the one true, holy, and righteous God.

This is why the world hates Christ, the gospel, and those who belong to Him and declare its truth. And this is why—as promised by Christ Himself (cf. Jn 15.18–19)—there has always been and will continue to be a concerted effort from the world to shame and silence the Christian identity and message. And the reality and severity of that effort is an unfortunate reason why some will abandon the faith altogether or will simply try to keep it private and only personally experienced (*often made easier when it only has to be brought out in a safe place and practiced once a week, for maybe an hour*). Not only is such an approach to Christianity not what Christ defined and expects of true disciples, but it also creates a vacuum. As it was said many centuries ago: nature abhors a vacuum.<sup>5</sup> So, when Christians go silent and where the gospel was meant to fill with God’s light; it’s replaced with the voice of worldly darkness.

Thus, not being faithful to the difference the gospel makes in our lives is to keep the gospel from making a difference in the lives of those around us. And that “not being faithful” is what happens when the gospel is only seen and heard as a good idea, an item on a religious to-do list, or something that’s meant to make people feel warm and fuzzy. Not only will that way of doing things fall short in knowing the truth of the gospel; it will also fail to provide and sustain faithful discipleship<sup>6</sup>—those who are called to live as new creations with a new identity and purpose, which are to have real-life effects. And this way of doing things is what happens when people only give a one-hour commitment, once a week to the gospel (*because that easily fits into one’s personal schedule*), instead of immersing one’s self into the gospel’s deep truths and living it as a daily-commitment to a life-long surrender to Christ’s lordship.

Thus, as Paul reveals in vv.1–11: the new-creation life in Christ is what necessarily follows from the truth concerning the reality that is defined by God’s wisdom to bless people through Christ’s saving, redeeming, and transforming work. A life-altering blessing that cannot help

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<sup>4</sup> When anyone says, “there’s no such thing as objective truth,” they are not only asserting an objective reality (*or truth*) but also expecting others to accept and uphold their assertion as binding for all people. But if truth is not objective and is only subjectively (or personally) defined, then such people cannot oppose or condemn anyone who disagrees with their any of their truth-claims—especially that “there’s no such thing as objective truth.”

<sup>5</sup> The expression is often attributed to Aristotle—ostensibly found in *Physics* 4.6–9 (especially 4.8). However, even a cursory read of that section reveals that Aristotle doesn’t ever say, “nature abhors a vacuum”—let alone anything close to it. This is not to say that the expression is not a decent (though not entirely correct) summary of what Aristotle means. It’s simply pointing out that claiming he said it (and then criticizing his conclusions from) is a bit unfair. Truth be told: the specific phrase, *natura abhorrent vacuum* was coined in the 16th century by François Rabelais—see *The Very Horrific Life of the Great Gargantua Father of Pantagruel*, in *The Complete Works of François Rabelais*, trans. D.M. Frame (University of California Press, 1991), 18. But funnily enough, the context of Rabelais’ use of the phrase has hardly anything to do with Aristotle in general or physics in particular.

<sup>6</sup> I recently heard someone say: “Do you know why Deconstructionism exists? Because discipleship didn’t.”

but be faithfully, openly, boldly, and graciously lived by the community of God's people before the community of the world. And when that life is lived in that way—faithfully to God and humbly before the world—it is reflecting and fulfilling the call to be a living testimony to the world. A testimony that shows the world the life-changing difference Christ makes. A difference that frees us from the old life imprisoned by our sin and gives us the new life God provides through Christ's redemption. A new life that's revealed in several ways—but all are necessarily united to one source—and it's to those ways that we now turn our attention.

### a. New People

If we follow most English translations, the first thing that jumps out at us is the Colossians' identity as a new people. Look at what Paul says at the start of v.12: “Therefore, as the elect of God, [or, “God's chosen people” (NIV)] holy and dearly loved...” (Col 3.12a). Since Paul is a 1st century Jewish Pharisee-turned-apostle for Christ and not a 16th century Calvinistic reformer who has issues with the Roman Catholic Church, this “elect” or “chosen” language has far less to do with God predetermining the salvation of particular individuals (*and the condemnation of others*) and a whole lot more to do with covenanted communal identity.

In a Jewish context, “elect” or “chosen” language refers to the covenant people of God: Israel—the descendants of Abraham who, because of their loving devotion for God, were to faithfully live holy and distinctive lives from the rest of the world, according to God's wise design for life. Moreover, because of God's loving devotion toward them, they were also to be the means through which His blessing upon them would extend (*or reach out*) to all nations—the rest of the world. That's Israel's identity and mission, upheld (*in part*) by them remaining in covenant faithfulness to God alone, but entirely lost for those who become faithless and play the harlot with an unholy and God-hating world without repentance.

However, their failure does not affect, negate, or scuttle God's redemptive plan. Even if it's through a remnant, God will fulfill His twofold promise to Abraham—i.e., to make him the father of a great nation (*Israel*), and that through Abraham's seed God will bless the nations (*Gentiles*). A fulfillment that's happened in Christ, who is the true seed of Abraham and the One who is truly chosen, holy, and loved by God. The One who establishes the promised and awaited new covenant. An age where identity and mission are not defined by blood-line family trees, physical circumcision rites, or even external laws written on stone. Instead, identity and mission are defined by God's laws being written on human hearts; hearts that have had sin removed and they've been made clean through the atoning sacrificial work of Christ. A sacrifice whose shed blood covers and seals all who belong to Him in covenant faithfulness: Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, rich and poor, smart and D-for-diploma.

So, from the perspective of the whole redemptive plan: God's “elect” or “chosen” people is not meant to be limited to only one nation, defined by an old covenant. As Paul says in Rom 9: not all who are of Israel are truly Israel, and not all of Abraham's bloodline descendants are his promised children. Instead, as revealed and fulfilled through the new covenant, and as Paul says in Gal 6: all who faithfully belong to Christ have become the new Israel of God, which includes believing Gentiles. The very ones whom Israel once called not elect, not chosen, or not called by God. But now—not only because they enter the community in the same way Abraham did (*through faith*) but especially because of the redeeming and unifying work of Christ—believing Gentiles are now a part of God's “elect” or “chosen” people. And

not just a part of God’s people, but those whom God has adopted as legitimate children and made rightful heirs to all of the promises given to Abraham.

And while Christ fulfills the promise given to Abraham, there is an expectation for the new covenant people of God to fulfill. Just as Israel was the “elect” or “chosen” people through whom God would bring about salvation (*in Christ*), to Israel first then the Gentiles (*thus uniting them into one, new people—fellow-citizens in one kingdom*); the new Israel is the “elect” or “chosen” people through whom God continues to fulfill His promise of bringing the blessing of salvation to the rest of the world. And just as God expected old covenant Israel to faithfully live holy and distinctive lives from the rest of the world, according to God’s wise design for life (*i.e., His written Word*); the new Israel (*of the new covenant*) must also faithfully live holy and distinctive lives from the rest of the world, according to that which embodies His wise design for life: His incarnate Word—Christ Jesus. And He is the One the faithful are reflect.

### **b. New Clothes**

Which brings us to where Paul goes next: the need for new clothes. Look at the whole of **v.12**: “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience” (Col 3.12). In the Greek, “clothe yourselves” (ἐνδύσασθε [*endusasthe*]) is the first word in the sentence, thus stressing its importance in what Paul says. Moreover, it’s a command—not a suggestion or an option. This is something all faithful disciples are to do if their claims of allegiance to Christ alone are to mean anything or reveal authenticity. Now, for quick context: when Paul uses language about being clothed, it covers(!) two related realities: salvation and new life. (*Spoiler alert: he doesn’t use it to talk about literal clothes. Even when he says, “Clothe yourselves with the full armor of God” [Eph 6.11]...it’s not real armor*).

For salvation, its associated with baptism. In Rom 6.3–7, Paul says baptism into Christ is baptism into His death; and baptism into His death is putting to death (*or crucifying*) the old self—along “with its passions and desires” (Gal 5.25)—so that we are no longer slaves to sin but have been made free in Christ—further illustrated in vv.8–10 with the reality of being raised to a newness of life in Him. Thus, by going into the water of baptism we die to self, and by coming up out of the water of baptism we are made alive in Him. That being the case, we are not surprised that, in Gal 3.27, Paul explicitly says: this dying-to-self-and-rising-with-Christ in baptism is the point where we have clothed ourselves with Christ (*same word as in Col 3.12*). This means, no one can rightfully say: it’s possible to be saved and not clothed with Christ. That not only ignores biblical testimony but it’s also a contradiction of ideas.

For new life, “being clothed” represents the new identity and lifestyle we have because of Christ. A newness that cannot continue wearing the “old clothes” of the old life—i.e., the sinful ways, practices, or lifestyles of the world. Those things we put to death and they can no longer define us. Thus, as Paul says in Rom 13.14: “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to arouse its desires.” Or in Eph 4.23–24, Paul shows what happened when people faithfully gave their lives to the true Christ of the true gospel: “you were taught with reference to your former manner of life, to lay aside the old man, who is being corrupted in accordance with deceitful desires, to be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and to put on the new man, who has been created in God’s image—in righteousness and holiness that comes from truth” (*emphasis added*).

There is a complete rejection of the old identity and lifestyle (*defined by the self*), and a complete acceptance of the new identity and lifestyle (*defined by God*). And so, because we have put on Christ, our identity is new and how we live is to be different from the world around us. A difference seen, at least, in our “new clothes”—things described as core character traits: “a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience” (Col 3.12). And just to be clear: like the armor of God, Paul is not listing off bits of “new life clothes” as individual options that we can pick and choose to wear—based on our ever-changing mood, plans, or even felt-personal bent. If those criteria are used, then we are the ones defining the standard of how we are to live for Christ. But we aren’t the definer of the standard. Christ is.

And His expectation (*as revealed through Paul*) is all that of the traits are to be “worn” by everyone who has been clothed with Christ—the One who is not only our one true Lord, definer of life, and standard for how to live, but also the One who perfectly embodied all of the listed character traits—and so many more—all of the time... First, the “heart of mercy” or “compassion.” The language means being greatly moved from deep within. We see this in Jesus’ ministry when He perceives the true needs of those who struggle. He doesn’t simply feel bad for them and then move on, or throw some money at them because that’s easy. Instead, He’s deeply moved with compassion. He comes alongside, gets in close, shares in their suffering, and acts on their behalf for their long-term well-being. He doesn’t simply fix a little hiccup in life. He restored them and gave them hope for life. We need to be people who are moved in the same way for the same purpose.

Second, “kindness.” The term here is, *χρηστότης* (*chrēstotēs*) and it shows that we’re dealing with something more than just trying to be nice. It refers to a moral goodness and integrity within a person, revealed in how they treat others. In fact, this term is typically used for God (cf. Rom 2.4; 11.22; Eph 2.7), especially to describe His dealings with the undeserving, which means all of us. Thus, Paul can say that our salvation is the result of God’s kindness and love—as perfectly embodied in Christ our redeemer (cf. Titus 3.4–7). Not because we deserved His salvation, kindness, or love; but because that’s who God is and what He does. We need to be people who reflect God’s kindness in our dealings with others—especially when we might think that are undeserving.

Third, “humility” (*ταπεινοφροσύνη* [*tapeinophrosunē*]). If in all of your stories: you are the focus, the central character, the hero, or even the underdog who beat the odds; it’s safe to say humility’s not your thing. And none of that changes if you choose to call any of it, a “humble brag.” That’s just another kind of false humility, which Col 2.18 and 23 shows to be contrary to God’s new creations in Christ. So, what does real or true humility mean? Often, people think it means devaluing the self or subjecting the self to the lowest form of existence possible, without threatening life. However, that’s a bit too extreme, and it overlooks the biblical portrayal of humility. As one pastor put it: “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.”<sup>7</sup> And as Paul says in Phil 2, we can reflect such humility when we have the mind of Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> R. Warren, *Purpose Driven Life* (Zondervan, 2012), 149. While less catchy, C.S. Lewis provided a deeper explanation: “Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man, he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him, it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all. If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realise that one is proud. And a

The One who personally (*and selflessly*) gave Himself to redeem us and make us worthy before a holy and righteous God (cf. Col 1.9–14). And when we recall that such a gracious work of saving redemption is made available to all—i.e., that it wasn't just for us and no one else (*to think that is to fail at true humility*)—then it's easy for us to keep the self out of the way so that we spend our lives showing others the way to the One is the way to true life. Thus, true humility means the needs of others are greater than the wants or preferences of the self. True humility means we know it's never about us; it's always about Christ and what He is ready to do for others through us. We need to be people who live humble lives in Christ before the world.

Fourth, “gentleness,” or as some translations say: “meekness.” Both come from the same Greek term, **πραΰτης** (*prautēs*).<sup>8</sup> In ancient Greek culture, and even today, this trait is often mocked for being a sure-fire way of getting walked on or defeated, because it's equated with weakness. Thus, it's not a good trait to have or even celebrate. However, as Aristotle defined it (*slightly paraphrased*): “there are those who, on one extreme, exhibit a behavior of hot-temperedness and those who, on the other extreme, exhibit a behavior of spinelessness. But the one who lives between these extremes is the one who is meek.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the meek are balanced in who they are and controlled in how they live—especially with the strength they truly possess. Let us be people who use our strength of character not to do harm or belittle others (*like the world does*) but to do good and build others up (*like Christ does*).

Finally, “patience” (**μακροθυμία** [*makrothumia*])—a term that always makes me think of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The wider meaning is to be steadfast and long-suffering with others—no matter how much of a royal pain they might be, or how deeply they might have wronged us. Several of the Psalms reveal God being the definition of patience toward us—despite our follies, rebellious inclinations, sinfulness, and even rejection of Him. And as Peter says: it is because of God's mercy that He “is being patient toward you because He does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3.9). Despite our utter failures, God is patient and extends His mercy by giving us the opportunity to reject the self as lord of life and submit to Him as the only true Lord of all things. Let us be people who reflect God's patience in our dealings with others—not just in the world but especially within the church.

And that need leads to what Paul says next in v.13: “bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if someone happens to have a complaint against anyone else. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also forgive others” (Col 3.13c). To bear with one another rules out the tendency of allowing others to carry (*or even suffer under*) the weight of their problems—especially when they're self-imposed. Instead, and reflecting the heart of compassion, to bear with one another means to come alongside and share the load. To relieve the fellow-believer

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biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed” (*Mere Christianity* [HarperCollins, 2001], 128).

<sup>8</sup> If you're really interested (*and if not, please feel free to return to the text*), the accented umlaut means the letter is pronounced on its own—thus, **πραΰτης** is *pra-u-tēs*.

<sup>9</sup> Here's the unparaphrased version: “Anger [**ὀργή** (*orgē*)] also admits of an excess, deficiency, and mean [**μεσότης** (*mesotēs* = central position or middle-ground for the two extremes)]. These are all practically nameless; but since we call the intermediate person [**τὸν μέσον** (*ton meson*)] mild [**πραόν** (*praon*)], let us call the mean mildness [**πραότητα** (*praotēta*, from **πραότης** [*praotēs*], which later becomes, **πραΰτης** [*prautēs*]). Among the extreme people, let the excessive person being irascible [**ὀργίλος** (*orgilos*)], and his vice [**κακία** (*kakia* = badness)] irascibility [**ὀργιλότης** (*orgilotēs*)], and let the deficient person be a sort of inirascible [**ἀόργητός** (*aorgētos*)] person, and his deficiency inirascibility [**ἀόργησία** (*aorgēsia*)]” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1108a).

(our brother or sister in Christ) of their burden. As Paul says in 1 Cor 12: when one member in the body of Christ suffers, “everyone suffers with it” (1 Cor 12.26).

And as Paul makes the explicit connection here in Col 3: that burden is often tied to a wrong that needs forgiveness. Thus, and keeping in mind what we saw a few weeks ago about “forgiveness” language meaning freedom: to someone who’s wrong us, we don’t add more weight to them by shutting them out, making them feel guilty, or even withholding forgiveness when they’ve asked for it. Instead—because we’ve been clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience—we forgive them. We set them free from the wrong they’ve done and the guilt they’ve carried by doing it. And in doing this—as Paul clearly says: we are reflecting what Jesus Himself did for us. We forgive because we’ve been forgiven.

Then in v.14, Paul says there’s one more piece of new clothing we must wear at all times: “And to all these virtues add love, [ἀγάπη (*agapē*)] which is the perfect bond” (Col 3.14). Again, this “love” is not a gooey, Hallmarky emotion or feeling; and it is certainly not to be equated with how the world (*godlessly*) defines love. Instead, “love” is a way-of-being that reflects how God relates to us as the One who is the definition of love. This is partly why Paul describes it as the “perfect bond” for all of the other traits. And to see how that’s the case or what it means, look at what Paul says in 1 Cor 13: “Love is patient, love is kind, it is not envious. Love does not brag, it is not puffed up. It is not rude, it is not self-serving, it is not easily angered or resentful. It is not glad about injustice, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13.4–7). That’s the love of Christ we are to wear at all times.

### c. New Heart-beat

So after dealing with the new clothes we have because of Christ, Paul moves into the next bit of newness that is to identify and define how we live. The new heart-beat—or that which gets us moving in and excited about the new life we have in Christ. In v.15, Paul declares: “Let the peace of Christ be in control in your heart (for you were in fact called as one body to this peace), and be thankful” (Col 3.15). This calls to mind so much of what Paul has already said about Christ’s saving-redemption—especially Him freeing us from the chaotic darkness of sin and evil and bringing us into His kingdom of holiness and peace. Thus, “the peace of Christ” is the assured reality of our salvation and our right to be children in God’s eternal household.

And that assured reality—especially that Christ is the creator and sustainer of it—is what Paul says must “be in control of your heart.” Here he uses the term, **βραβεύω** (*brabeuō*),<sup>10</sup> which means: serve as an umpire, or the standard that determines how things proceed. So once again, we have the stress on God (*in Christ*) being the One who defines holy and righteous living and believers being those who follow His definitions—we live according to His ways for

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<sup>10</sup> A term found only here in the entire NT, yet it’s related to another single-use term in the NT: **καταβραβεύω** (Col 2.18), and both speak to a form of judgment (*or making judgment calls*). The difference between the two deals with motive or purpose. **βραβεύω** is a more general and it seeks to ensure the good or that right things are maintained. Whereas **καταβραβεύω** is more specific and it seeks to condemn as wrong those things (or persons) that are otherwise legitimate, good, and right. Hence, the earlier emphasis in Col 2.18 about the false prophets not only speaking against the identity and status of believers because they have faithful allegiance to Christ alone (rather than the extra-gospel teachings, traditions, and experiences the false teachers say are essential to salvation). And in speaking against the believers, the false teachers are seeking to rob them of their legitimate prize. That is why the believer cannot listen to such judgments—especially as they are offered as “umpires” of spiritual identity and status—because they will condemn believers to a life of slavery to the self. However, as declared here in Col 3.15, the believers are to allow Christ’s peace to “umpire” their hearts—i.e., to affirm their identity and status before God because of Christ’s saving-redemption.



true life. We do not follow our own or anyone else's—especially those who advocate a false gospel about a false Christ. And when our lives are defined by the peace that only Christ gives (*and makes real within us*), we always have cause for hope—despite the hopelessness we often endure in this world. And because our peace-fueled hope—and the assurance that Christ has overcome all things in this world (see *Jn 16.33*)—we always have cause for thanksgiving. Let our hearts always beat with worship.

#### d. New Tape

From the new heart-beat, Paul moves into the next bit of newness—something that we might call a “new tape.” What does that mean? Let me come at it like this. *\*\*Personal struggle with self-worth\*\** → counselor told me: “No matter how familiar the words are, and no matter how the tune makes you feel; you have to stop playing that tape in your head and replace it with a better one.” But the better one could not be Stuart Smalley’s self-affirming mantra, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me.”<sup>11</sup> Instead, and because she was a Christian, her counsel ran deeper than the usual advice of self-help, self-actualization, or self-manifesting (*or whatever self-focused notion is trending*).

Her counsel was (*slightly paraphrased*): “The new and better tape you need is God’s truth—not only about who He is but especially about what He’s done for you in Christ. He has made you a new creation, which provides a new definition of life, and that new definition offers a new valuation of your worth before Him. So, who you are now cannot be determined or even challenged by anyone else, and it certainly cannot be determined or challenged by you—the thoughts from the old tape from your old life. Who you are now must always be determined and sustained by Christ, His truth, and the reality of your salvation in Him.” It wasn’t long after hearing this that, in one of my morning devotions, I landed on Col 3.16. And when it I read it, it hit me in a profound way: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, [πλουσίως (*plousiōs*) = abundantly] teaching and exhorting one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, all with grace in your hearts to God” (Col 3.16).

So, “the word of Christ”—which includes the revelation about Him as well as the truth He’s revealed to us (*i.e., His authoritative teaching*)—this is the “new tape” we must listen to for knowing who we are now because of Him. But we must also ensure that knowledge and the wise application of His word are constants in our daily lives. Not simply because that reflects what we see in the early church (*in the book of Acts*), where people are gathering not for an hour one day a week, and hoping for a brief message because they have other things to do. Or as A.W. Tozer bluntly put it: “The devil loves it when we say we believe then prioritize everything in our lives ahead of God.” Instead, in the early church, we see believers gathering daily and not being able to get enough of God’s truth being declared from Scripture.

And quite honestly: it’s because of that daily, constant feeding on God’s Word as the new covenant people of God in Christ, that they not only had cause to burst forth in from-the-depths-of-the-soul worship of God, but also became equipped to engage in gospel-spreading ministry throughout the Roman Empire—especially when challenged, criticized, or confronted with alternative worldviews, moralities, and lifestyles. They were able to defend the truth because knowing the truth was their daily commitment. Are we truly surprised, then, that

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<sup>11</sup> Yes, I know the Stuart Smalley connection is a Saturday Night Live thing, and that Al Franken is the author of the book with that mantra-based title.

people who only give an hour (*max*) to God’s truth—and even then, it’s mostly passive—are often the ones who are easily swayed into false teaching or give up their faith because of negative critiques from the world? If we want to hear stronger voices for the gospel in our world, then we need to make sure we’re deeply committed to knowing the words.

#### **e. New Focus**

Finally, and we’ll (*obviously*) bring things to a close with this: on the basis of all that he’s said, Paul reminds us that we need a new focus—or the purpose for which we live our new life in Christ. In v.17, Paul says: “**And whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him**” (Col 3.17). Very plainly, this means: everything we say and do must be done for God’s glory; none of it can ever be done for personal gain. When Jesus said, “**let your light shine before people**”—which means, the way we live our lives for Him (*our identity and our lifestyle*)—He did not say we should do this so that others will praise our name, make us go viral, or hold us up as model of Christianity. Instead, He makes it very clear: “**let your light shine before people, so that they can see your good deeds and give honor to your Father in heaven**” (Mt 5.16).

How can they give honor to God by seeing the goodness we live? When we faithfully submit to God alone, faithfully follow His wisdom for life, and faithfully put on Christ—the One redefines everything about us by transforming us into His image. And when we are faithfully clothed with Christ, and daily live our lives walking in His ways; the world will see not us, but the One who is perfect in mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and love. The world sees the One in whose image we are being conformed by God—an image defined and made in His righteousness and His holiness that comes from His truth—and it will be to Him alone that others will seek His new life. And the world will see this because faithful disciples know why the gospel matters, and that it can only make a difference in the community of the world when community of God’s people actively and purposefully gets up and lives the gospel-revealed, life-changing difference in the world.

#### **Parting Challenge**

Need to be deeply rooted in the truth  
 Need to be committed to owning our faith  
 Need to be unafraid to live that faith in truth and love