

Sermon: A Portrait of the Glorious Community of Faith (Colossians 3:12-17)¹

Lee Tankersley

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And 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 3:12-17, ESV).

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What comes to mind when you think of the church? It is no doubt the case that mentioning the idea of the church to individuals can bring about diverse reactions. For some, to

speaking of the church is a reminder of something gone wrong. Whether it was a pastor who sinned grievously in some manner, a person who gossiped or slandered, or poor stewardship of money entrusted to the church, there is some reason why mentioning the church to some people is like pulling a scab off a wound. Something happened that left them thinking they would never be part of the church again.

On the other hand, for others, the mention of church is a reminder of something they are committed to but, sadly, it brings them no joy. After all, the meeting of the church together each Sunday often gets in the way of certain sporting events or other leisure activities, causing them to lose a crucial day in the weekend. Yet, for some reason these individuals are committed either out of duty or some kind of obligation. For the most part, they gather with believers on Sundays, are pretty regular in their attendance, maybe even sacrificially give of their resources, but yet the thought of the church does not elicit great joy. It's like brushing one's teeth—a necessary thing to which most are committed yet few (if any) get excited about.

Still yet, for others, the mention of the church is like telling your dog that he's about to get a treat. It's a reminder of what—and more importantly, whom—they love. They're willing to alter their lives just to be able to be involved in this believing community, whether it means passing up a job opportunity in another town or being away from family. The church, for them, is one of their greatest delights. The thought of going through life apart from these people with whom they have linked arms and walked through joys and trials is almost too much to bear.

When I was growing up, I don't know that I would have been able to place myself in the last category just described. It wasn't until I was a part of this church, which I now know as my own, that I began to realize what a church community could be, and, to tell you the truth, it has literally changed my life!² I am now at a place that if for some reason I could no longer serve as your pastor, I'd still want to be able to keep my family in order to be part of this church. And I know that I'm not the only one who thinks this way. I've watched as many people have made great sacrifices to be a part of this body of Christ and continually make sacrifices in order to fellowship with this group of believers. The Lord has simply lavished his grace upon us as a people, and I cannot thank him enough for bringing this church into my life.

Yet, I also realize that there are people who may have thought of the church in this last category, which I now thankfully do, but for some reason have moved into the categories of either despising the church or of thinking of the church as something that simply reminds them of numerous heartaches. There are local churches that at one time epitomized everything good and beautiful about the bride of Christ that are now simply gone. There are people who at one time sacrificed much just to be a part of a certain believing community who later voluntarily walked out the door and never came back.

Perhaps it is this reality that leads Paul (and the other biblical authors) to spend so much time instructing us on how to relate to one another as

part of a local church. It's because, on the one hand, we desperately need one another, can become a portrait of something beautiful and delightful together, and can shine brightly together in this world, and, on the other hand, can so quickly end up on the other end of the scale, bearing hatred in our hearts toward one another, picturing disunity and malice, and can provide a false witness to the glory of Jesus Christ.

So, it should not surprise us that as Paul turns his attention to exhorting the Colossians in day-to-day practice that he focuses specifically on the Colossians laboring and living together as a community of believers in 3:12-17. And as we pay attention and heed Paul's exhortations in these verses, it will aid us in growing as a delightful community of believers and in preventing and fighting against those things that stand to destroy such a community.

If you want to sum up Paul's picture of what makes a thriving church community, I think it's found in verse 17 of our text. Paul closes this section of exhortations by noting in verse 17, "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." The idea of doing everything we do "in the name of the Lord Jesus" in light of the rest of this text and the rest of this book seems to be the idea of always acting in accord with the nature and character of Christ. That is, in everything we say or do, let's make sure that we are demonstrating the nature and character of Christ. That is our goal. But, how do we do that? I think the answer is by walking according to the exhortations we find in verses 12-16.

How do we live as a Christ-honoring community of believers? I want to mention four points from our text which will enable us to do so.

FIRST, IN ORDER TO LIVE AS A CHRIST-HONORING COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS WE MUST LABOR TO DEMONSTRATE THE PEACE OF CHRIST IN OUR MIDST.

The exhortation to let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts doesn't come until the first half of

verse 15, but I think this is where these first few verses are heading. I think this for a couple of reasons. First, in the book of Ephesians (which has a number of parallel texts with Colossians), Paul begins his exhortations in that book by writing, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:1-3, ESV). Does this not sound similar to what we read in Colossians 3:12-17? I think it does, and given this fact, we see that the goal of Ephesians and Colossians is that in the church, we are called to work hard at maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Second, the nature of the commands that Paul gives in verses 12-15a, if obeyed, would indeed bring about peace amidst a community of believers. That is, where these commands are obeyed, peace will be the result. And, given that Paul opens the letter (as he does others) with a declaration of peace (1:2), I think that his aim is for the Colossian church to be one characterized as a community of peace, where the gathering of believers together is a haven of peace.

But how do they get there? We see this in the opening verses of our text. Paul exhorts them first to “put on” those qualities that characterize the nature of Christ. He writes in verse 12, “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” I don’t think it’s by mistake that Paul lists five of these qualities after listing five vices in 3:5 and in 3:8. He is countering those things which we must put away and put to death with five characteristics that we must “put on,” as if putting on clothing.

Therefore, the kind of person that Paul envisions each of us being is a person characterized by these qualities. As those who have been called out of the world by God and then called together as his church, we must exercise first, compassion. That is, we should be characterized by a willingness to demonstrate tenderness and mercy toward

others. We must be kind. We must be humble, riding ourselves of arrogance that looks down on others. We must have meekness, not wanting to exalt ourselves above others. And we must have patience. This is what a covenant community of believers should look like. This is the New Testament’s vision of what the church should be and how she should act in the world.

And, I would dare say that all of us would want to be part of a community of believers characterized by these qualities. Yet, that means that each one of us must labor to ensure that we ourselves are characterized by such qualities. This must be a focused and disciplined goal on the part of each one of us.

Yet, Paul is realistic as well. He knows that we are prone to failure. He knows that he’s calling us to link arms together with people who will hurt us, even as we will hurt them. We will sometimes be careless with our words and offend. We will sometimes look past our aching brother or sister because we’re focused on our own needs. Therefore, Paul reminds us that we must bear with one another. He writes in verse 13, “Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”

Paul knows that not only will we need to bear with one another as we walk together, and he also knows that there will be times when we have legitimate grievances against one another. What do we do when someone does us wrong? What do we do when our pain is magnified because the wound comes from someone we’ve drawn close to in our walk? Paul simply reminds us that we are to forgive. And he reminds us that we must forgive, *even as we have been forgiven by our Lord.*

We’ll see this more particularly as we progress through the text, but we should note here as well that walking together in peace with other believers is always necessarily undergirded with the gospel. The only reason we will be able to live like this is because we recognize that we are not doing these things so that we can be right with God.

We're living this way because we've already been declared right with God. And the only way we'll find strength to forgive others when we've been wronged by them is by recognizing and remembering that we've been forgiven for much greater evil than anyone has committed against us.

So, Paul sets for us a vision of a covenant community. We are to be a people characterized by compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, who are willing to bear with and forgive one another. This is what unity and peace among a believing community requires. Where it is present, we delight and love the church. Where it is absent, we are simply mirroring those around us who have not died and been raised with Christ.

Yet, Paul continues. Next, he mentions an element that we must not simply assume, namely the reality of *love* in our midst.

SECOND, IN ORDER TO LIVE AS A CHRIST-HONORING COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS WE MUST LOVE OTHERS GENUINELY.

After mentioning these virtues and characteristics that we must put on, Paul says in verse 14, "And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." The greatest reality that must characterize those of us in this covenant community of believers is *love*. Every responsibility we bear before Christ stems from love. This is why Paul says that "above all" we are to put on love.

You see, if we demonstrate kindness, patience, humility, patience, and compassion and yet do not have love, it is worthless. If we say that we forgive one another and yet do not love one another, then everything is a mere façade. Paul tells us as much as he writes to the Corinthians in 13:3, saying, "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

Now, imagine that. If you had a church full of people giving to each other what was theirs and some even laying down their lives for others, we would say, "This church is amazing." Yet, Paul says that those things can all be pointless if they are not

driven by love. You can actually give away all you have and give your body to be burned and not be driven by love but perhaps by something like pride.

Love is a necessary characteristic of the Christian community. Everything we do is bound together in harmony by our love for one another. What this means is that we do not make it our aim to serve others in this body, though we need to serve one another. We do not make it our aim not to sin against others in this body, though we need to fight sinning against one another. We do not make it our aim to meet others' needs, though we want to do that as well. Rather, we make it our aim to genuinely love one another. This is our goal, and everything else (our service, care, and kindness to one another) must flow out of this.

This means, among other things, that we take opportunities to spend time together, hear one another joys and burdens, and see one another's hearts so that we might cultivate love for one another. We need to provide for ourselves opportunities to see and delight in our brothers' and sisters' love for Christ so that we might grow in love for them.

Yet Paul does not stop here. On top of our labors for peace that are driven by love, we also see that we must be characterized by *thankfulness*.

THIRD, IN ORDER TO LIVE AS A CHRIST-HONORING COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS WE MUST LET THANKFULNESS RULE OUR HEARTS.

Now, perhaps among some of us gratitude has gotten a bad name. Soon after I was married, I began reading through John Piper's excellent book, *Future Grace*. Early on in that book, Piper has a chapter called, "When gratitude malfunctions." What he notes in that chapter is that we do not do things in the Christian life driven by gratitude *in the sense of trying to pay someone back*. So, for example, someone buys you lunch and from that point forward you walk around under the weight of feeling like you need to pay them back and buy them lunch. It's as if you are in debt because of their kindness.

However, this right warning by John Piper need not be confused with a call to throw out gratitude and thankfulness altogether. If you get rid of gratitude, you have to get rid of much of the Bible. Look at the prominence gratitude holds in our text. First, Paul ends verse 15 saying, “And be thankful.” That’s all he says. It’s out there without qualification, almost as if it’s just tacked on. But I don’t think that’s what’s going on here.

During my entrance exams for seminary, I had to answer some questions in a room, armed only with a pen and paper. So, a number of us sat down in a room together, opened an envelope that had a few questions inside, and we started writing. The problem was, as I’ve mentioned, that I just had paper and a pen. This wasn’t a “bring your laptop” kind of test. Well, the problem with writing out your answer (besides that your hand starts to cramping) is that if you forget something, you cannot just go back and insert it. And, it was only after I had finished answering the first question that I realized I had forgotten to write about an important detail.

I thought to myself, “What am I going to do?” I couldn’t just put in some kind of footnote, the point was too important. I couldn’t put one of those carrot top insert signs somewhere and write a brief few words. There was too much to write for that. So, I just decided to make my closing paragraph say, “But one of the most important things that I’ve not mentioned until now is” And I just hoped that it didn’t read like I’d forgotten it until then.

As I noted, you might think that Paul did the same thing as you read the text. It’s as if he looked over his outline and saw that he had left out “Be thankful” in verse 12, so he wrote it in as an out-of-place add on at the end of verse 15. However, that notion is soon dispelled as you read on and realize that Paul ends every section with an exhortation to giving thanks. If verses 12-15 provide the first set of exhortations, then Paul ends by saying, “Be thankful.” Verse 16 then turns their attention specifically to the gospel and Paul ends by saying that they are to do these things “with thankfulness in

your hearts to God.” Then, verse 17 summarizes everything, and it too ends, “Giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Clearly, Paul is not just tacking on the idea of giving thanks. Rather, he sees it as a crucial element that must be consistent within a covenant community of believers who honor God in how they live.

But why? Why would thankfulness or gratitude be a repeated element among Paul’s exhortations? I think Moo is right at this point, noting, “Believers who are full of gratitude to God for his gracious calling ... will find it easier to extend to fellow believers the grace of love and forgiveness and to put aside petty issues that might inhibit the expression of peace in the community.”³ That is, if we are people who recognize that we are who we are and are in the place we are in because we have been chosen by God and loved by him (v. 12), have been called out of the world and united with other believers by God, and have been forgiven by God, then we will be the kind of people who love deeply, forgive quickly, endure others with patience for a long time, and walk in humility. That is, recognizing that we are who we are only by the grace of God and overflowing in thanksgiving because of that fuels our holy living together as a community. We love because we realize that we have first been the objects of God’s love and thus abound in thankfulness.

And this brings us to our last and extremely crucial point. It is one that has been briefly mentioned (and mostly assumed) to this point, but I want to make it explicit:

FOURTH, IN ORDER TO LIVE AS A CHRIST-HONORING COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS WE MUST SATURATE OURSELVES AND ONE ANOTHER WITH THE GOSPEL.

Paul writes in verse 16, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Now, when Paul mentions the “word of Christ,” I think he means the gospel. Most commentators agree with this, but let me show you one reason why I think this

is the case. Earlier in this letter, Paul mentions the “word of truth” in 1:5, and then immediately he defines it as “the gospel.” So, for Paul, in Colossians, “word of truth” is his way of referring to the gospel. Similarly, then, I think we are to read the similar phrase “word of Christ” in 3:16, with the same understanding. That is, we should understand “word of Christ” as “the gospel.”

So, what Paul is envisioning here, then, is a community of believers saturating themselves in the gospel. That is, a community of believers lives in peace with one another only to the extent that each one is constantly reminded about the gospel and lives out the gospel in their daily lives. Why is this so? Because apart from Christ we are sinners condemned under the wrath of a holy God, yet Christ came and lived a perfect life for us, died to pay the penalty for our sins, and was raised from the dead on the third day so that if we place our faith in him, then we will be forgiven of our sins and declared righteous on the basis of Jesus Christ and his finished work for us. We must meditate on that message again and again. It must be something we consciously apply to our minds and hearts on a daily basis and multiple times throughout the day. We must be a people obsessed with this message.

And it’s important and crucial that we do this individually. However, in this section that focuses on living together as a community, the focus is corporate. Therefore, I want us to notice how Paul envisions us being saturated with the gospel, allowing it to dwell within us richly. He writes, “teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

Paul envisions us hearing and delighting in the gospel as we are together and are taught and admonished. This is why in every sermon we want explicitly to declare the gospel and remind ourselves of it so that we might allow that word to dwell in us richly. But, Paul doesn’t just envision

the person who may handle the teaching load on a particular Sunday as applying the gospel. Rather, he envisions every member together lavishing the gospel of grace upon others in song.

What this means is that you carry a responsibility as you gather with your brothers and sisters in Christ to sing the gospel to them. Our singing is not just something we’re doing because we’ve always done it. It’s something that we do because Christ has commanded it, and one reason he’s commanded it is because singing is a beautiful means by which the whole of the church can proclaim the gospel to one another—through song.

This also is a means to cultivating love among a believing community. As we remind one another of what Christ has done for us and the forgiveness we have in him, it powerfully draws our hearts together in love. This reminder will help us bear with one another and forgive one another. It will cause us to be thankful. It will unify us in peace.

So, as a community, everything we do is undergirded by the gospel. The gospel is why we are grateful and walk in thanksgiving. It is how we can love, and it is why we’re able to put on the characteristics that characterize our Lord. Therefore, this morning, as those whose faith is in the crucified and risen Christ and who have been justified by faith, let us remember the gospel, sing of it, and strive to live lives that are characterized by our Lord himself. Standing in the gospel, let us “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” As we do, we will provide a beautiful picture of the glorious community of faith. Amen.

ENDNOTES

¹ This is a slight revision of a sermon preached at Cornerstone Community Church in Jackson, TN on May 29, 2011.

² Editor’s Note: The church described is Cornerstone Community Church, Jackson, TN.

³ Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and Philemon* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 285.