

Paul's Letter to the

COLOSSIANS

LESSON 7 COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

CLOTHED WITH CHRIST | COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

Paul has told us that in Christ we have been clothed “with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator” (3:10). Because we have died to the old world and have been raised with Christ into a new world, we must lay aside the old-world way of living.

In early church practice, people being baptized would often take off the clothes they were wearing before baptism, and put on literal new clothes after baptism to signify their new life. Paul uses this metaphor in 3:12-17 as he instructs the Colossians to *clothe* themselves with new behaviors (3:12), creating an image of a new look and new identity.

As we see in this passage, taking off the old self and putting on the new isn’t something we’re meant to do alone. We can’t live the Christian life on our own power. It can seem like an overwhelming – maybe even impossible – task on our own. We need the Holy Spirit to help us choose compassion over self-centeredness, love over vengeance, unity over division, and more (see Col 1:8; Eph 4:3; 5:18). Part of our new life in Christ is that the Spirit gives us a newfound desire for God and for living in ways that honor him. Not only do we have the power of Christ in us through the Spirit, but we also have a community of believers to encourage us forward.

The five “virtues” listed in 3:12 are those required for harmonious living as a community. These virtues describe the character of people who have been called out of the old realm of human existence to be dedicated to the purposes of God. The Christian community lives as it embodies the very gospel by which it was called and that it now demonstrates with its life. They are to bear with and forgive one another (3:13). Bearing with others involves fully accepting them

And above all these put on



which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Colossians 3:14

for who they are, with their weaknesses and faults, while affirming their worth and value. The motivation for the all-important ability to forgive others lies in our own experience of forgiveness. Knowing that we have been forgiven by Christ generates the strength required to forgive others.

Closely related to forgiveness is love. The sacrifice of one’s own interests out of concern for the welfare of others is the quality above all that is necessary in the new creation. The Colossians are to put “over” the clothing of these virtues the larger clothing of “love” (3:14). Love is the overgarment that binds all these virtues into harmony and unity. This bond of love leads to Christ’s peace ruling in peoples’ hearts, which is the goal of their calling (3:15).

All of these virtues, instilled by love and leading to peace, unity, and thanksgiving, lead to letting Christ’s word dwell within them (3:16). The new ways of life described in 3:12-16 are summarized in 3:17: *all that one does or says should be done in the name of Jesus with thanksgiving.*

In essence, all of Colossians celebrates the gift of God through Jesus Christ to the community of faith. As we clothe ourselves in Christ (take on his way of life) we are transformed, not merely by our own actions, but above all by God’s own love at work in the gospel of God’s grace at work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17 (NLT)

12 Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. **13** Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. **14** Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. **15** And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful.

16 Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. **17** And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17 | PUTTING ON

If we've taken off the old clothes that are no longer appropriate for our new life in Christ, what are the new clothes that we should put on? What are the basic things that people should see in us as Christians? What are the signs that we belong to Jesus? Those are the questions that Paul addresses in Colossians 3:12-17.

I have a feeling that if Paul were to come back today and assess the life of churches around the world, he might say that we should take Colossians 3:12-17 and spend a few years working on those things and nothing else. And after that, we would be ready to talk further. Because there are many things here that we easily forget.

Clothing Ourselves as God's People (3:12-13)

The mood of chapter three changes here in verse 12 from negative to positive, like coming out of the fog into the sunlight. The same motivation that prompts the Christian to abandon the old ways of life encourages her or him to embrace the new ways. Having taken off the old clothes appropriate for the old age, the Colossians are now to be fitted with new clothes, fitting for their position. The metaphor of taking off and putting on clothing is connected to what would happen in early Christian baptisms. Those who were being baptized would shed their garments for the baptism, and as they were raised out of the water, they were clothed with a new white robe to symbolize their transformed identity in Christ.

This transformation becomes evident through the fruit that it bears, and Paul begins by describing what the fruit of a transformed life looks like: **“Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience” (3:12)**. Paul's not just saying, “By the way, here are some instructions now that you've been baptized.” This is what we must do because of who God is and because of what God has done. And Paul is covering all the bases with the list:

- He tells the Colossians that they must be tenderhearted, kind, humble, gentle, and patient (3:12).
- They must “make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others” (3:13).
- “Above all,” Paul says, “clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.” (3:14)

That list is striking. If we were to name how we think God expects us to act, how many things from that list naturally come to mind? Do we expect those things to be true of ourselves and the people in our community? This is what Paul stresses because the whole gospel is about the kindness and mercy of God, the extraordinary love and tenderheartedness of God. Nevertheless, before we go too far down that road, some might caution that these things paint God as a benevolent grandfather who doesn't care much about what anyone does. On the contrary, Paul clearly thinks that God cares very much about what people do. He's already given a great list of behaviors and lifestyles that are completely inappropriate (see 3:5-9). Moreover, the appropriate lifestyles begin with *kindness* as a primary Christian virtue – the art of being able to bring a smile to someone's face, of being able to make them feel better about the day they're having, or whatever is going on in their life. We don't do this by glossing over difficulties, but by being gentle and gracious and humble.

Consider also Paul's point about forgiveness: **“Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others” (3:13)**. Forgiveness is absolutely basic to being a Christian. And yet it's incredibly hard. When someone really hurts us, being able to forgive is incredibly difficult. In fact, it's so hard that we can't do it by ourselves and sometimes can only be done through disciplines of prayer, praying for the other person, and then waiting and praying some more. Sometimes it can take a week and sometimes it takes five years.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17 | PUTTING ON

Nevertheless, we are not only commanded to forgive others, but we promise to do it when we pray the Lord's Prayer. In fact, it's one of the only things in the Lord's Prayer where we say what we're going to do. The rest of it is about what we pray that God will do in and around and for us. But when we say "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us," that's part of the deal on our end!

This too is part of being new creation people. The themes of kindness, generosity, and selfless love spill over into forgiveness, and if it doesn't, then we are implicitly denying that we are part of the new creation. When we enter the new creation, we enter through a door that has the word "Forgiveness" written at the top, as we've already seen in Colossians 1 and 2. That's the house we are entering, a house characterized by forgiveness through and through. As Paul reminds us, just as "the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others" (3:13).

This sends us back to a teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18 where Jesus gives a parable about a servant who owed his master an enormous sum of money and wasn't able to pay, and the master forgave him. And then that servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a small amount of money but couldn't pay, and the man had him thrown in prison. Then the master heard of what happened and took the servant to task: "Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?" (Matt 18:33). As Jesus explains in Matthew 18:35, the door that we open to let God's forgiveness in must be the same door that opens to let our forgiveness out to others. And if we close one, we probably close the other as well.

Put on Love, Live in Peace (3:14-15)

On top of everything else, Paul says in 3:14 that we must put on love: "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony." He's talking again about the new clothes that we must put on.

As early Christians came up from baptism, the white robe they're given is put on and holds up everything else into place. And that, Paul says, is love itself. Love for the early church meant not just warm feelings for the other, but also caring for one another like family. Families don't always get along well, but they are people with whom we belong and with whom we must share a common life. And in the ancient world, that would mean not only living in close proximity to one another, but also sharing in the same business, so that you had to get along because your livelihood depended on it.

I remember hearing a young adult being asked what was different since he had become a part of the church. He said "it was like having a great big second family." That's a great picture for what it means to be a part of a real church, a place where family means that there are people all around you who are caring for you and looking out for you. That's what love is all about, not just a bond of love between two people, but a love that enfolds you into a community where somebody is always there to rely on, to pick you up when times are hard, and to celebrate with you when things are going well.

When we think about what Paul really wants to see in the church, what he's really passionate about, one thing comes to mind: *the unity of the church* – people who care for one another and love one another across traditional boundaries because they are one family in Christ. Yes there are going to be disagreements and disputes in the church. But as Paul says in 3:15, "Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful." The peace of Christ is what we were called to as one body, as well as thanksgiving and gratitude, which in many ways is what Colossians is all about.

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17 | PUTTING ON

Teach and Counsel Each Other (3:16)

Paul also says there is a mutuality of the teaching ministry: **“Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives.” (3:16)**. Teaching is something which should go all the way down. Because as soon as someone has been a follower of Jesus, even for a short amount of time, they will be learning things which others need to hear. We all should be learning from one another.

Moreover, in the community’s corporate worship, elements such as the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs have multiple functions (**“Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts”**). On the one hand, they play a part in the community’s being formed by the word of Christ. On the other hand, such songs are an offering of praise to God.

Praise is the appropriate response to the good news of God’s work in Christ; it is an indication that grace has had its liberating effect, moving us from preoccupation with ourselves to the worship of God that constitutes what it is to be truly human. Far from leading simply to a passive acceptance of the status quo, the thankfulness that underlies such praise is also the motivation that ensures that we, individually and as a community, bring to bear the lordship of Christ in every aspect of our life in the world (which leads us to the great statement of 3:17).

Whatever You Do or Say (3:17)

In 3:17 Paul comes to an extraordinarily broad and deep rule for life: **“And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father” (3:17)**. We must always ask ourselves in whatever we’re doing, “Can this be done in the name of Jesus? Can the name of Jesus be honored by me saying this or doing this?”

I don’t think God has necessarily called us to do *great* things. I believe God has called us to do many little things: small, intentional acts of love and grace in the midst of everyday life, things that are as visible as the clothes we wear.

And what does that look like? Here Paul says it looks like:

- Blessing others with kindness, gentleness, humility, and patience.
- Having such gracious speech, that when people encounter it, they want more.
- Making allowance for each other’s faults. Forgiving anyone who hurts us, b/c we have been forgiven by God.
- Loving others like family, picking them up when times are hard, celebrating them when things going well.
- Striving for peace and unity with one another and always giving thanks.
- And in whatever we say or do, speaking and acting in the name of Jesus

The name of Jesus is a name of power and glory. Throughout the book of Acts, the name of Jesus carries an authority to break down walls, to do new things, to change situations, to heal people. The invoking of the name of Jesus is a power which God uses for God’s purposes, and God calls us graciously to be a part of the action.

Whatever we do in word or deed, we must do it in the name of Jesus – filling our life, and the lives of those around us, with the presence and love of the One who loved us more than we can even imagine.

DISCUSSION

1. In our behavior and in our way of life, what are the basic things that people should see in us as Christians? What are the signs that we belong to Jesus? How does God expect us to act? Make a list of whatever comes to mind.
2. Read Col 3:12-15. What are the 'new clothes' that Paul urges believers to 'put on'? Compare the list that you made for Question 1 to the things that Paul lists in 3:12-15. What is similar? Different? Why?
3. Being *tender-hearted* doesn't mean being sentimental. Being *kind* doesn't mean being a pushover. *Humility* isn't the same thing as low self-esteem. *Gentleness* is not weakness. How might you instead define each of these character traits?
4. Since being tender-hearted, kind, humble, and forgiving are absolutely basic to the Christian life, why are these virtues so challenging to live out?
5. Describe what it means to 'put on love'. How is this related to the unity of the church?
6. "And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus..." (3:17). Practically speaking, what does it mean to act as a representative of Jesus in whatever we do or say? What does this look like in your life? (Consider how the list in 3:12-16 relates to this)