

**Colossians 3:1-17 (NIV)**

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. <sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

<sup>5</sup> Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. <sup>6</sup> Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. <sup>7</sup> You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. <sup>8</sup> But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. <sup>9</sup> Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices <sup>10</sup> and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. <sup>11</sup> Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

<sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

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[...put on old coat...]

I had an aunt, one of my dad's sisters, who used to complain about everything. Even with perfect weather, if it was sunny and 75 degrees, she would say, "Humph, it won't last forever."

Some people see that sort of thing as a simple personality quirk, but in reality, it is a major spiritual issue, because God calls us to be thankful.

We've seen that call several places already these past couple of weeks, but we see it again in the passage that was just read for us. Turn there with me, if you would – Colossians, chapter 3.

What we find here is one of the most significant contrasts in the Bible: the description of the difference in the character of a person *before* they follow Jesus and *after* they choose to follow Him.

And Paul illustrates this transformation, this enormous change in character and behavior, as *a change of clothes* – something every person can understand.

Before coming to Jesus, a person, Paul writes, is clothed in – that is, a person *displays*, as evidence of character – these things that he lists in verse 5: "*sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed and idolatry* –" and he goes on there in verses 7 through 9: "*anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lies and division*."

Not that every person necessarily participates in *all* these things before they receive Jesus, but apparently enough of people at Colossae did that Paul is comfortable

saying there in verse 7, "*You used to walk in these ways. This is who you used to be.*"

But, upon receiving Jesus there is an *expected* change – nothing less than a transformation of the person such that all those characteristics, all that ratty, sinful "clothing" gets *replaced*

[...change to new coat...]

with *new* – a new, clean and pure and good character and demeanor, which includes, Paul says in verses 12 through 15 there, "*compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, love, peace and thankfulness.*"

To say it's a stark difference is a dramatic understatement, and the differences themselves, and the full definition and exploration of every one of those descriptors is certainly worthy of far, far more study.

But not today.

What I want us to notice today is that all of these descriptors share an *external component*: they all have to do, not just with *us* internally, but with how we *interact* with *other people*.

The presence of Jesus in us *changes, totally* (and for the *better*) how we *see, treat, think about* and *respond* to *other people*.

N.T. Wright puts it this way: Imagine there were two towns neighboring one another, maybe just a few miles apart. Wilmore and Nicholasville. Wilmore and High Bridge. Wilmore and Nonesuch.

In the first town, everyone behaved toward one another like what's described in verses 5 through 9.

In the second town, the people there interacted with each other the way verse 12 describes.

In which town would you want to live?

That's the simple fact of it: no one, who has any sense, would choose to live where people are immoral, angry, slanderous, liars and prejudiced.

Given the choice, people would always rather live where those around them are compassionate, kind, patient, forgiving, loving, peaceful and thankful.

And *this* is the *magnetic draw* of the serious follower of Jesus: this transformation of the way a person thinks about others and their manner toward others is exactly what God designed to happen to a person living in Christ, so that through the attractiveness of that changed person, other persons are drawn to Jesus.

The purification – the sanctification of our ethic – is not only to make us moral so that we can personally glorify God in a vacuum, but also, you see, part of glorifying God is the way we reveal Jesus to a world that needs Jesus – a world that God loves.

As John Wesley said, "the gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness," which is to say, Christians can never escape community. I don't care how much of a loner, an independent spirit,

or a one-man band we think we are or want to be, followers of Jesus can never escape community.

What happens *to* us and *in* us is for the *benefit* of those *around* us.

We don't live for ourselves. We don't make decisions for ourselves. We live and make decisions for Jesus.

And what matters to *Him*, along with abject *truth*, are those around us who have yet to know Him.

And we speak most clearly and loudly about Him to them when the body of Christ is whole and healthy and at peace – when we are the transformed people Jesus created and intends us to be.

That's why Paul wrote this.

Paul cared about the Colossian believers, certainly, but he also cared about the people *around* the Colossian believers whom the Colossian believers were affecting through their witness.

He cared if the Colossian church was pulling people *toward* Jesus or pushing them *away* from Jesus.

Paul sums this transformation up rather nicely there in verse 15 – he writes, *"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace."*

Literally, this says, *"Let the peace of God be the decider of all things within your heart."*

It's actually a phrase from athletics. You could translate it, *"Let the peace of God be the umpire in your heart,"* the ultimate decision maker about any issue that comes up.

When feelings within us clash, when we are conflicted, when we are pulled in different directions, when irritation or annoyance shows up in our hearts, Paul is saying here that we need to appeal to Jesus as the arbiter between the conflicting emotions and then accept His decision.

What does that mean?

Well, Paul sums it up there at the end, where he writes in verse 17, *"and whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus."*

Now, when we hear the phrase, "In Jesus' name," we tend to think of that as just a nice way to end a prayer.

But it's way more than that.

In fact, this actually may be the best test of any *feeling* or *word* or *action* that wells up within us or that we want to do: "Can I *think* this, can I *say* this, or can I *do* this in the name of Jesus Christ?"

"Can I think, say, or do this attaching Jesus' name to it?"

"Can I think, say or do this asking Jesus to help me accomplish it?"

"Can I speak this knowing Jesus will hear me?"

"Can I think this realizing Jesus knows my thoughts?"

"Can I write this – post this – knowing Jesus will read it and approve it – even sign His own name to it?"

Barclay says that if a person would bring every word and deed to the test of the presence of Jesus, they would never go wrong.

If you and I can, in clear conscience, fully attach Jesus' name to what we do, what we say, what we write,

how we act, how we respond to other people, and what we stand for and stand behind, then most things will, sooner or later, fall into place in our lives.

But if we can't – if we try to, but sense that uncomfortable nagging of His Spirit – that lack of the peace of Christ within us about it, then we have to conclude, "that's not of Jesus." And we'd better back off, lest we lose the peace and the witness that comes with the unity of the body.

These character traits that Paul talks about here are the central virtues of the Christian life.

N.T. Wright says that when the Spirit of God puts these to work in a person's life, they're as dazzling as they are demanding.

And they are demanding.

They tax us and they test us, because God is honing us and shaping us. He's ridding us of the clothing of our natural, born-with, self-centered, selves.

It's choosing to show kindness to someone when our born-with nature rises up and says, "Ah, tell 'em to buzz off."

It's being humble: lifting up others when our first thought is to lift ourselves up – usually in order to put someone else down.

It's choosing meekness – that's not weakness. That's choosing to keep our strength reigned in and under control.

It's being forbearing with other people – the word Paul uses here really means "large-hearted," and it means giving people more than they might deserve – giving them grace instead of a piece of our mind.

Living these is not easy. In fact, it's incredibly demanding, but it's what God promises to *help us do*, if we'll so choose, in order to keep peace and unity in the body for the sake of the witness of the body to an unbelieving world, for the sake of the healing – the salvation – of the world.

That's what this is all about, you see?

The unity of the body and the witness of that body to the unsaved world – for the salvation of the world – for the glory of God.

Paul just says, "This is the way of the follower of Jesus."

To know Him and to follow Him is to be so changed that it's possible – God makes it possible – for our own healing and for the healing of the world.

This is a big, big thing that followers of Jesus are a part of. And our participation in it and success at it are almost entirely dependent on the internal transformation of our character.

And so, you see, the sanctification – the transformations – of our character and our manner are not optional or just some Christian accessory to decorate our salvation.

The transformation of our character is essential to the very mission of the Church to go into the world and make disciples – to lift up Christ so that others will be drawn to Him.

It's how we do what Jesus wants us to do – what Jesus saved us to do.

It's how we live the Kingdom of God right here in the middle of a broken, sinful, sick world.

So that, sooner or later, those around us who are hungry for a better way – those around us who are living on emotional scraps – will see the body of Christ feasting together in abundance. They'll see we're satisfied and filled to the point of thanksgiving and praise – and they'll want what we have.

They'll see, and then they'll say, "You know the rest of the world is fighting right now, but you all are at peace.

"The rest of the world calls names and shouts insults, but you all are kind to each other.

"The rest of the world thinks they know it all, but you all behave humbly and meekly.

"The rest of the world gets mad and leaves, but you all hang together – you bear with each other.

"The rest of the world is whining and complaining, but you all give thanks.

"How do you do that?"

And right there is where the church of Jesus Christ can say, "Well, let me tell you what Jesus did for me. I used to be all these things, but Jesus changed me..."

And in that lifting up of Jesus, in deed and in word, Jesus will draw them to Himself – and begin to heal the world.

So, here's the question: Have you given Jesus access to the depths of your heart, so that He can change all the clothes He wants to change in your life?

These days in which we're living are challenging days, and the thing about challenging days – a good thing, really – is that they reveal the condition of our hearts in ways that easy days don't.

It's when people are put under pressure that their weak points start to burst.

So, this is the time – this is the perfect time actually – for you and me to ask ourselves, "Has the pressure of these days revealed clothes that need to be changed?"

Is the way we're handling these days – is the way we're handling people, church people, our brothers and sisters in Christ – something that *attracts* a watching world to Jesus, or is it something that *turns them away* from Jesus?

Are you – am I – doing, saying, writing, thinking, posting, obsessing over things that Jesus' name can be attached to without reservation?

Or, would we be embarrassed or ashamed to attach His name to that part of us?

[...hold up old coat...]

Are we wearing clothes of "impurity, greed, anger, rage, slander, bad language, lies and division"?

Or are we wearing clothes of "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, love, peace and thankfulness"?

God will help us, if we'll ask Him to. If we'll admit our need and ask, "Lord help me exchange the clothes of lust for the clothes of love.

"Help me exchange the clothes of greed for the clothes of humility.

"...the clothes of anger for the clothes of gentleness.

"...the clothes of division for the clothes of forbearance and large-heartedness toward others.

"Lord, help me put on the clothes of thankfulness for Your glory."

We were made to live in these clothes.

Will you let him put the new clothes on you?

These are the clothes that will draw people to Jesus.

These are the clothes that will heal the world.

Closing Song - *Give Thanks*

Benediction:

May the Lord use all that is frustrating about life these days to change us deep within. As He changed the Colossian believers, may He change our clothes:

- to make us better, not bitter, people,
- to move us from haughtiness to humility,
- from anger to peacefulness,
- from frustration to thankfulness,
- to bring glory to Himself,
- to bring others to Jesus,

for the healing of our world.