

Becoming Who We Already Are

Colossians 3:12-17

Laura Anderson ~ Faith Presbyterian Church ~ May 21, 2023

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¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

(Colossians 3:12-17, NRSV)

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It saddened me yesterday when I heard the news that Presbyterian pastor Tim Keller passed away on Friday. Many of you likely recognize Keller's name because his writings and sermons are frequently cited from this pulpit and, I would imagine, from pulpits all around the Christian world. Keller gained national prominence in church circles and beyond after he accepted the call to establish Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan in 1989, a job two others before him had turned down. Though he had no prior experience in urban ministry, his congregation grew from 50 members to over 5,000 in the first 20 years of his service there. Keller had an amazing vision of what the church is and what it could become. He steadfastly preached the gospel of Jesus Christ but in a way that addressed the postmodern doubts of the young, urban

professionals who came to his church, and he helped lead them to faith. Keller's Redeemer City to City program trained and mentored almost 80,000 pastors serving in urban contexts. Keller was a culturally astute man of intelligence and energy, whose vision for the church proved vibrantly transformative under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That transformation started within the Redeemer congregation but then flowed out in ministry to the city around it and to the broader church all around the world. What a vision, and what a legacy.¹

In today's passage from Colossians, I think we have a similarly compelling vision of the church. The Apostle Paul — like Keller, a culturally astute man of energy and intellect — has a clear understanding of who the church already is in Jesus Christ and how the church might more fully live out that reality. According to Paul, the way that we, as the one Body of Christ, will move in to a fuller expression of our identity in Christ is by cultivating Christian virtues in our individual lives and then enacting them among the family of believers. In our time together this morning, we'll consider what Paul has to say about our identity in Christ, and about the virtues and the practices that will allow us to become more fully who we already are in the Lord.

To get us situated in the text, remember that after two chapters of soaring theology where Paul extols the beauty, perfection, and supremacy of Christ against the misguided teachings of some within the church at Colossae, the apostle has now begun a four-part section of practical exhortations and applications beginning in chapter 3. Last week, Jeff shared with us the first major section of the exhortation, whose theme is "Put off." Specifically,

¹ You can read more at Tim Keller's website: <https://timothykeller.com/>.

strip off those sins related to sexual behavior and speech because they tear apart communities and destroy fellowship and thus have no place in the church. In today's verses, Paul's theme is "Put on," and in coming weeks, we'll consider how he addresses the themes of "Submit" and "Watch and pray." Let's turn now to the specifics of Paul's vision for the church and his advice for how we can live into that vision.

Part 1: Our Identity in Christ

Paul begins with these words: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved...." Already we need to pause. These are some amazing words! They bring to mind the words God spoke about Israel in Deuteronomy: "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the people on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you — for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors..." (Deut. 7:6-8). In Christ, then, we become a part of God's covenant people, his chosen ones. In Christ, we are made holy, or set apart for God's service. In Christ, we are beloved, precious to God. And notice that being chosen and holy and beloved is a present reality. This is not something we have to work to become. This is who we are. This is our identity. If you are in Christ, right now, you are God's chosen. You are holy. You are beloved. Whatever else follows in this passage, whoever the world out there is insisting you are, this is what is already real and eternally true: chosen, holy, beloved. This is who you are in Christ.

Paul goes on to tell us that we have to put our identity in Christ into practice. Our identity in Christ is real and assured, but our expression of that identity is not automatic. Instead, we need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in order for the reality of our identity in Christ to be actively cultivated and more fully realized. So, how do we do this? We do this, says Paul, by "putting on" Christian virtues. As we begin, it is important to note that each of these virtues is an attribute of God and is revealed in both the Father and the Son.

We are to dress ourselves in qualities that define the Lord and are best exemplified by the Lord.

Part 2: Putting on Christian Virtues

First, we are to put on *compassion*: Jesus exemplifies heartfelt compassion when he encounters the widow of Nain, whose only son has just died. She is not only grief-stricken but left physically and financially vulnerable with no man left in her house to protect her. When he sees her, Jesus is moved with heartfelt compassion. He tells her not to weep and raises her son back to life (Luke 7:11-17). His mercy brings healing and restoration. His compassion moves him to get involved and help. In like manner, we are called to put on compassion.

We are also called to put on *kindness*: Paul writes, "Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4). God's kindness is active and purposive. It is winsome and draws people towards salvation in Christ. In like manner, we are called to put on kindness.

Humility: In the dog-eat-dog, zero-sum world of the Roman Empire, where an ill-timed belch could ruin your social standing forever, humility was not a virtue. It was associated with servility, cowardice and humiliation. No person of standing in society would want to be seen as humble. And yet, the very early Christ hymn of Philippians resoundingly proclaims Jesus' countercultural humility, as he first takes on the humble form of a human through the Incarnation and then humbles himself even to death on a cross (Phil. 2:7-8). In that same letter, Paul goes on to explain that for believers, humility means regarding others as better than ourselves and looking not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others (Phil. 2:3-4).

But there's another nuance about humility that I think is helpful in this context. I heard it in a sermon by my then pastor, Hank Postel, back when I was in junior high. Rev. Postel defined humility as "an honest acknowledgement and assessment of our God-given strengths and our weaknesses." Humility isn't false modesty, some "aw-shucks, I'm not good at anything" attitude. Humility is being honest about what we're good at. It's being honest about Who

gave us those skills and talents. Humility is recognizing our weaknesses and taking responsibility for those bad habits and patterns that are within our control and are not befitting of someone who is God's chosen one, holy and beloved. We are called to this sort of humility because as we come to know our strengths, we can better serve the body of Christ. As we find trusted brothers or sisters with whom we can be honest about our weaknesses and struggles, the body of Christ can better minister to us.

Meekness. We sometimes confuse meekness with weakness, but this is a mistake. In the Greek, the word for meekness also referred to domesticated animals, like oxen, whose strength is properly harnessed or bridled so as to be put to fullest good use.

Back when I was in junior high and high school, my family lived on a small farm in upstate New York. Among our cast of very odd animals was a quarter horse named Blake. In the words of my Dad, Blake was a mean son of a gun. The tales I could tell you! For now, you just need to know that Blake did not like to be ridden. Which was his one job on the farm — to let my horse-loving sisters have a ride.

In the face of Blake's reluctance to take a rider, my parents thought that Blake just needed to get used to us. So my sister Meg and I got on Blake together — she had the reins and I was on his rump. Our ride did not last very long as he decided to try his hand at being a bucking bronco. Meg landed against the barbed-wire fence. Fortunately, I had a softer landing. In the manure pile. Younger sister Ingrid, more of a horse lover, tried her hand and was thrown off equally fast.

Then came Jennifer, my oldest sister. 100% Viking blood. No horse would master her. She got on Blake. Blake threw her off. She got back on. Blake threw her off and bit her. She bit him back. She bided her time. She worked with him. She wasn't so much a horse whisperer as a horse cusser. But if her technique was rough around the edges, it eventually worked: Jennifer did ride Blake. More than that, they moved together. Jennifer would ride Blake on a track around the hay fields, the longest stretch of which was visible from our back porch, where I

would watch them. Jennifer's posture and body movements and pull on the reins would tell Blake what to do, and he would respond immediately. I loved to watch them gallop. It wasn't a horse with a rider. It was seamless, fluid, united. It was power properly harnessed and directed. It was beautiful. In the same way, we are called to put on meekness, so that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, our strengths, too, might be properly restrained and more fully released for God's purposes.

The fifth virtue we are to put on here is *patience*, or long-suffering. Again, the Lord's patience is our finest example. Peter writes, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). This verse tells us that God is patient; it is one of his qualities. But his patience is aimed towards a goal: bringing those who don't yet know God to repentance. What God demonstrates to us, then, is that as we put on these virtues, we are not to put them on simply for the sake of being properly dressed. We don't need virtue for virtue's sake. Instead, these Christian virtues fit us for service to the Body of Christ. They move us to action on behalf of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Compassion and kindness move us to get involved and to help. Humility moves us to think of others rather than ourselves. Meekness moves us to submit our strengths and weaknesses to the Holy Spirit. Patience moves us towards a longer view, one shaped more by God's timing and purposes than our own. And *love*, the final virtue named here, is the bind that holds all of these other virtues together, the way sinews connect muscle to bone.

John tells us that God is love and that love is from God. We love because God first loved us, and God's love impels us, compels us, to love one another (1 Jn 4:7-8, 19-21). For a definition of love, I will borrow from Scot McKnight. He says that love is a rugged commitment to another person. It is a rugged commitment to be with that person over time. It is a rugged commitment to be someone who is "for" that person, not just tolerating them but truly being on their side, even when it's not easy or convenient. In the context of a fellow believer, love

is a rugged commitment to be with and for someone while you both strive to grow in Christlikeness.²

Okay, let's pause here to see where we are. We have our identity in Christ as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. That is who we are, but we are called to live out this reality more fully. We've got six excellent Christian virtues and the sense that these virtues will somehow help us become more fully who we already are in Christ. In other words, they will serve as the *vehicle* that will help us actively and faithfully express the identity that is ours in Christ. Great! How?

Part 3: Putting Christian Virtues into Practice

Happily, Paul offers us some very concrete practical suggestions here:

First, we can cultivate and enact these virtues by **forbearing one another**. Are you kidding me? Job number one on Paul's list of practical advice is basically "put up with one another?" Yup. You know why? Because we're all pretty annoying at least some of the time. And Paul knows this. He's not talking about putting up with sin here. He's talking about cutting each other slack when our personal preferences and personalities clash. We don't always get along. So what? God forbears every single one of us. We can do the same for each other.

The second practical task Paul gives us is harder than forbearing: "If anyone has a complaint against another, **forgive each other**." Here Paul recognizes that believers will have grievances against one another, they may sin against one another, and forgiveness will be necessary to restore right relationship between them. At its heart, forgiveness means surrendering to God the right to judge another person for their sin. When someone wrongs us, it means leaving in God's hands any just payback that may be needed.³

To forgive doesn't mean we can't talk to the person who wronged us to work towards reconciliation. To

forgive doesn't mean that we won't need to talk to a trusted friend or counselor about the wrong that was done. To forgive doesn't guarantee we'll forget. To forgive doesn't mean that the pain or consequences of the wrong disappear, though eventually they may. To forgive isn't always a one-and-done act; sometimes it is an incremental process, and it takes time for us to release our hurt and bitterness to the Lord. To forgive doesn't mean you have to stop hoping for justice. Instead, to forgive means that you entrust into God's hands how that justice will ultimately come about.

To forgive is a very, very tall order.

And yet, we are obliged to forgive, aren't we? Because once again Christ is our exemplar. Jesus died for us and for our forgiveness, and because of this, he has the right to place upon believers today the obligation to forgive. But he also gives us the Spirit to help us in our need.

One of the heroes of my growing-up years was Corrie Ten Boom, who was imprisoned in Ravensbruck concentration camp for the crime of hiding Jews during WWII. Just a couple of years after her release from the camp, she was in Germany, preaching the Word of Christ's forgiveness to a people who, in her words, really needed to know that God would take away their sin and bury it at the bottom of the sea. Afterwards, a man came up to her. He had been a guard at Ravensbruck. He didn't remember Corrie, but, oh, she remembered him. The man had since become a Christian and said he knew God had forgiven him. He asked Corrie if she would forgive him, too, and he held out his hand to her.

Inside Corrie's head and heart, there was an explosion of conflicting emotions and memories and theology. How could she forgive this man? For the sake of Christ and according to his commandment, how could she not? She pleaded with Jesus to help her, saying to him in prayer, "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." And she forced herself to shake the

² <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2015/05/01/the-four-elements-of-love/>.

³ This definition of forgiveness, as well as the following insights about what forgiveness is not, come from Sam Storms, in his book, *The Hope of Glory: 100 Daily Meditations on Colossians* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 263-70.

man's hand. As she did, she felt a warm current race down her arm and into their joined hands. It flooded her whole being with healing and release, and she said to the man, "I forgive you, brother! With all my heart!"

It's such a moving story, isn't it? But here's the kicker: After that night, when she forgave that man who, for her, had been an agent of terror, Corrie thought that forgiving others would be a cake-walk for the rest of her life. But then, some believers who were friends did something that hurt her deeply. Forgiving them completely took her over a decade.⁴

That's because forgiveness *is* a tall order. It is hard work. And yet this is the work Christ commands. Forgiving others is the practical work, says Paul, that will put godly flesh on the bones of our identity in Christ.

The third practical assignment that Paul gives us is to "**let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.**" The word "rule" here means to serve as umpire. Among Christians, the peace of Christ must be the decisive factor. In places of strain, where we can choose to lean into a relationship or break fellowship, Christ's peace gets to be the umpire. This doesn't mean that we abandon key principles and stand around singing Kumbaya with plastic smiles on our faces. Some things need to be addressed. But there is a lot of stuff that we will be able to put in a place of lesser importance when we commit to making Christ's peace the deciding standard.

Fourth, "**be thankful.**" Two little words but notice how open-ended they are: Be thankful to whom and for what? An invitation to cultivate expansive gratitude!

Fifth, "**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.**" While the word "in" is a fine translation of the Greek preposition used here, many scholars feel that the word "among" better fits Paul's focus on the Body of Christ here: Let the word of Christ dwell *among* you richly. The word of Christ is the

message that proclaims the whole story of Christ. If that word dwells richly among God's people, then we are inescapably Christ-centered in our relationships with one another. Christ – in his life, death, resurrection, and inauguration of the reign of God – is the heart of our shared life.

Paul goes on to say that there are two ways we will know that the word is dwelling richly among us. First, we will **teach and admonish one another in wisdom.** Notice this is not reserved for teachers and preachers! Not all believers may teach in a classroom or preach from a pulpit, but if the word of Christ dwells richly among us, all believers can teach, which means sharing Christian truth with one another. And we all can admonish, or warn against wandering from the gospel way. As the word of Christ dwells richly among us, we will also be growing in the wisdom needed to offer that teaching and admonition with proper care, tact, and responsibility.

The second way we will know that the word of Christ is dwelling richly among us is through **singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God with gratitude in our hearts.** Just to be clear: Singing hymns and praise songs. Out loud. In worship. Is evidence of and an expression of the word of Christ dwelling richly in us and among us. (So I'll be listening on our final hymn....)

The last practical task that Paul gives us is a total mic drop: "**Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**" Here Paul is saying that, both in the church and beyond, let the totality of how you engage life always be fully aligned with Christ. Paul is anticipating that day when Christian virtue becomes settled disposition and we fully become who we already are in Christ.

What an amazing vision of the church Paul gives us here! Where else in our lives, besides perhaps with our family, are we invited and challenged to cultivate compassion, kindness, love, humility,

⁴ You can read more about Corrie's account of these events here: <https://guideposts.org/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-forgiveness/>.

meekness and patience? To actively practice forbearance, forgiveness, thankfulness, and peacemaking? The power and potential of the church is unique in the world!

So, before we leave this rich passage, I want to encourage you to **think about taking just one step towards applying this unique vision to your own Christian discipleship**. In conversation with God, **choose one virtue** where there is room for you to grow. **Consider Christ’s example** – how do you see him exemplifying that virtue in Scripture? And then **consider one specific action** you can take to practice that virtue within the Body of Christ on a regular basis.

In kindness, you might commit to introducing yourself every Sunday to folks you don’t yet know. In compassion, you might check in regularly with someone who is going through a hard time. In humility, you might share with a trusted brother or sister a struggle that you are experiencing and ask them to pray with you and for you.

Or maybe your action is one of those that Paul gives us here. Maybe there is someone you need to forgive. Maybe you decide to participate in the richness of the word of Christ by singing more wholeheartedly or joining the choir next September. Just one small step. One specific commitment. One shabby little offering from a willing heart. That is all the Spirit of God needs to continue the work of transformation within and among us, giving us the grace as the Body of Christ to become more fully who we already are in Christ. Amen.



The Next Step:

A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

1. Read Colossians 3:12-17 again. What catches your attention?
2. Christ is the perfect expression of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and love. Choose one (or more) of these virtues and contemplate together how you see this quality on display in

Christ. In light of your contemplation, how are you moved to respond to Christ?

3. Choose one of the virtues from question 2. What sort of specific actions, practices and words can you think of that would allow you to incarnate this attribute more fully in your personal discipleship and in the life of our congregation?
4. Recalling the definition of humility as “an honest acknowledgement and assessment of our strengths and weaknesses,” take some time to share with one another some of your God-given strengths, spiritual gifts, and talents, as well as one weakness, bad habit or place of temptation. Take time to pray, rejoicing in one another’s strengths and asking for the Spirit’s help with each one’s weakness.
5. If you had to give a definition of the Church based solely on Colossians 3:12-17, what would you say? “The Church is....”
6. In what ways does your definition of the church in question 5 match or not match your own experiences in the local church? Here at Faith, how do you see yourself actively sharing in the dynamic, mutual, fully engaged Christian life in community that is on display in Colossians 3:12-17? Any “room for improvement”?
7. How is the Holy Spirit trying to get your attention here, and how will you respond?



Table to Table:

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What sorts of things did Jesus say and do to help us understand that he loves us? What sorts of things can we say and do to help love each other better?