

The Space Between Us

Week 4: Keeping the Gap Closed

Colossians 3:1-14

There's a scene in Luke 9 that's always fascinated me. Jesus knows that the cross is in his future and the time is getting close. And, instead of running from it, or trying to avoid it, Luke 9:51 says that "Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." The phrase literally means that Jesus turned his face towards Jerusalem. He set his eyes on the cross that awaited him, and nothing was going to get in his way or distract him from the mission he came to accomplish.

But, from where he was currently standing, setting his face towards Jerusalem meant going through Samaria, and the village he had to go through to get there wouldn't even let him enter. There was a lot of friction between the Jews and the Samaritans. Not a lot of love between them, and so this group of Samaritans weren't interested in a group of Jews passing through their town. The gap that existed between these two groups was made even wider.

Two of the disciples with Jesus were James and his brother John. They had the nickname "Sons of Thunder" and they lived up to it. When they found out these Samaritans weren't going to let them through, they were like, "Hey Jesus, want us to call down fire from Heaven and light this place up?"

And Jesus is like, "What?! No! We'll just go around!" I imagine him thinking, "haven't you learned anything from me about loving your enemies or turning the other cheek? Forgiveness?" James and John are just kind of operating under what they've always known. When the prophet Elijah faced something similar, that's what he did, so they're probably thinking if it was good for Elijah, it's good for us! But Jesus had introduced a new way of handling the gaps that form between us and it definitely didn't look like calling down fire from Heaven!

I think, in a way, this scene in Luke 9 serves as a window into our world, doesn't it? We live in a culture that resembles James and John a whole lot more than Jesus. People get fired up at the slightest offense. It seems like most people walk around with this undercurrent of anger and rage and it doesn't take much for it to boil over and come spewing out. We see James and John all over our country and our world.

But, Luke 9 is not just a window into the world around us, it's also a mirror in which we see ourselves. I think all of us have a little James and John in us, don't we? We're usually **slow to listen** and quick to speak and quick to become angry instead of **quick to listen** and slow to speak and become angry like James 1:19 instructs us.

That same undercurrent of anger and rage can live in us, too, and often times it comes spewing out onto those around us, creating hurt and pain and gaps in our relationships that require confession and repentance and forgiveness. All the things we've been talking about in this series on healthy relationships and how to find reconciliation.

And so, the question that I have when I read a text like Luke 9 is, how can I be more like Jesus and less like James and John? When something happens that creates space between us, how can I respond in love and grace instead of fire and anger? I think it comes down to what we focus on. James and John had their eyes fixed on the offense in front of them, Jesus had his eyes fixed on the cross.

When our eyes are fixed on the cross, our perspective starts to change. When we fix our eyes on Jesus, we find the freedom to confess how we've hurt others by our actions. We find the confidence to seek their forgiveness because the cross shows us that we are fully known AND fully loved. We don't have to hide.

When we fix our eyes on Jesus, we find the ability to forgive because the cross reminds us of how much we've been forgiven. All of this comes from the Gospel working in us and through us. Taking what Jesus has done for us and allowing it to shape and influence how we live and treat others. I said at the beginning of this series that the Gospel gives us the power to close the space between us...and what we'll see today is that it also gives us the ability to...keep it closed.

So, that's what we're looking at today. If you have a Bible, or a Bible app you like to use, turn with me to Colossians 3. Today, we're going to see how the Gospel helps us keep the gaps closed with others and how we can nurture and foster healthy relationships...and hopefully how we stop always being on the verge of calling down fire from Heaven on others!

In Colossians 3, Paul reminds followers of Jesus that their lives have been transformed by his life, death, and resurrection and that transformation should be seen in how they live and act and love others. He tells them that, they're in Christ now, they should start dressing like it. But, this isn't a passage about the clothes we wear or our fashion choices. Paul is saying, Let the newness of life happening inside of you be reflected outside of you. Those of us who are followers of Christ ought to cloth ourselves with the character of Christ. And, it all starts with what we fix our focus on.

Look at our text with me. Colossians 3, starting in verse 1...(READ vs. 1-4)

That phrase that Paul uses twice here, "Set your hearts" and "set your minds" it means to desire something and strive for it. It's like saying, "I've got my heart set on that new grill this Spring" or, "I've got my mind set on that vacation this summer!" Paul takes that image and says, *Since you've been raised to new life through faith in Jesus, set your heart, set your desire, on the things of Jesus. Strive to reflect his attitude and actions in all things. Desire him above all other desires.*

Are other desires bad? Not at all! But our desire for Christ and life with him trumps all else. Including our desire for revenge, or to hold a grudge, or to get even, or to hide from how we've hurt someone.

And, this new desire is born out of our union with Christ. When we put our faith in Jesus, we identify and participate in his death, burial, and resurrection through baptism. We die to our old selves, our old ways of living and acting and treating others, we die to all of that and are born into new life in Christ. We live with him and for him until the day he returns or calls us home.

And this union with Christ, as we set our hearts and minds on him, it has some really practical implications in our life. Verse 5...(READ vs. 5-10)

Paul's saying, *let the new life in you, through union with Christ, work itself out in your thoughts, your actions, and your relationships.* Let what Christ is doing in you flow out of you in the way you live and love others.

One of the ways we do that is by putting to death our old selves. Paul says in Galatians 2:20 that we crucify it with Christ so it's no longer I who lives, but Christ in me. And, Paul is serious about this. That phrase "put to death" in verse 5 literally means to "utterly slay." There's a sense of urgency in Paul's words to put to death the thoughts and actions of who we were before Christ so we can live as the people he is shaping us to be.

And, this new life comes with some new clothes, but first, we have to take the old stuff off. That's what it means in verse 8 with Paul says, "Rid yourselves..." It's taking off the old, dirty, stinky clothes you WERE wearing. Things like anger, rage, gossip, a mean disposition towards others.

He says, "Get rid of filthy language from your lips." We read that through the lenses of our 21st century moralism and think he's talking about cussing. But I don't think Paul has George Carlin's list of 7 words you can't say in his mind when he writes this. The word he uses is more about abusive language towards others. In other words, Paul is condemning verbal abuse and says it has NO place in the life of someone who follows Jesus.

So, Paul pleads with us to take all of that off and put on the new clothes that Jesus gives us to wear. Clothes of his goodness and righteousness and grace. Clothes that bind us together as brothers and sisters in Christ, not matter what differences we have. Look at verse 11...(READ)

When Paul says, "Here" he means in this new mindset and way of living. In this new self that is made alive in Christ, clothed in his righteousness, with a heart and a mind set on him, we see each other the way God sees us. There's beauty in the distinctions and differences between us.

I've been reminded of that again over the past few weeks as we've celebrated Black History Month. There is beauty in our diversity, but there's nothing that should divide us. And if we put up those barriers, then we do so acting out of character of who Christ has called us to be.

One of my closest friends is a guy named David Lee. He's the lead minister at Clear Creek Christian Church. Back in the Fall, David was diagnosed with Lymphoma. His prognosis was

good, but in December, he took a turn and needed to start chemotherapy and receive these injections to fight it off. In addition to that, David's dad passed away just a few weeks ago, so this amazing man who loves Jesus and serves his church so well, is going through a pretty hard time.

On Wednesday morning, there was a group of about 20 pastors from the area that got together to pray over David and his family. And, there were so many differences in that room that could have divided us. Could have created gaps between us. There was a wide array of theological beliefs and convictions, different races and ethnicities, ages and experiences. But, of all the things that ***could have*** divided us, the one thing that united us was so much stronger. Our faith in Jesus and the image of the Creator on us.

When we put to death our old selves and take off the attitudes and actions we used to wear, God gives us a new outfit. And they're not clothes of uniformity, they're clothes of unity. Unity around Christ who ***is all*** and is ***in all***.

And, we need these new clothes. Mark Twain once said, "Clothes make the man. Naked people have little to no impact on society!"

Our Heavenly Father doesn't just tell us to take off the old stuff, he gives us new clothes to wear that reflect the attitude and actions of Jesus and the person whose heart and mind are fixed on him. Look at verse 12...(READ vs. 12-14)

I read these verses and I can't think of better words to describe Jesus. Jesus was compassionate and kind. He was humble and gentle, patient, forgiving and loving. These are the qualities of Jesus that led him to turn his face towards Jerusalem that day. To fix his eyes on the cross. By grace, we have received these things from Jesus and by grace, we get to live them out. We get to live lives that are marked by that same compassion and kindness. That same humility and gentles, patience, forgiveness, and love.

These are the new clothes God has given us to wear. They are the qualities that God is forming in us through Christ. And what God is doing IN us has very real implications in our relationships with others, including when there is a gap created by our actions or the actions of others.

It's the virtue of love and compassion and humility that compels us to confess and seek forgiveness when we know our actions have caused pain instead of hiding from it or sweeping it underneath the rug.

It's love and kindness and humility that gives us the courage to forgive when we've been hurt. Which, if you missed Allen's sermon from last week, PLEASE go back and listen to it. It is the best sermon on forgiveness I've ever heard and has had ripple effects through our church family this week. It's the example of our Heavenly Father that shows us we can forgive even when we feel like we can't.

When these things come together, we're able to experience true reconciliation. We're able to close those spaces that form between us and keep them closed.

So, in our lives...when there is a gap created in a relationship, when someone has hurt you or offended you, how can you respond more like Jesus and less like James and John? How can you respond with more love and less, "let's burn this place to the ground?"

Two things as we wrap up today. First, **Change your clothes.** God has provided them, you just need to put them on. In verse 12, when Paul says, "Clothe yourselves," the verb tense indicates this is something we're responsible for. In other words, God's not going to dress us. He'll provide the clothes, but we've got to dress ourselves. It takes some intentionality on our part.

Like, I don't look at what I'm wearing right now and think "Whoa! How did this get on me?" Around 6am, I stood at my closet, picked this out, and put it on. For good or for bad, *this* was an intentional decision on my part!

God does his part in changing our hearts, but in faith, we put on compassion and kindness and forgiveness and love. We don't passively sit back like infants waiting to be dressed. We put on these new clothes that God has given us to wear and start living out who He's made us to be in Christ.

And Romans 12 paints a beautiful picture of what we look like and how we act when we wear these new digs. Look at it with me on the screen. Paul writes...(READ Rom. 12:9-21 MSG)

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

How do we keep the gaps closed in our relationships? By clothing ourselves with Christ. Taking on his attitude and actions. Setting our hearts and minds on him so we can live and love like him. And that happens when you **Change your focus.**

In Luke 9, Jesus was focused on the cross. He set his face towards it and didn't get caught up in things that didn't matter or kept him from his ultimate goal.

When we focus on the cross, when we set our hearts and minds on Jesus and the union we have with him, when we turn our eyes upon Jesus, as the hymn goes, the things of this world, the problems, the offenses, the anger and pride, grows strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.

The cross changes how we look at ourselves and others and when we focus on the grace we've received from it, we find that we're able to extend that grace to ourselves and others. We're able to confess and forgive and reconcile our relationships.

So, as we wrap up today, what clothes are you wearing? Do you find that your life is marked by anger and rage and your relationships are suffering because of it? Are you harboring resentment and division that you just can't seem to let go of? Or is your pride keeping you from confessing how you've hurt someone and the space between you and that person just keeps getting wider and wider?

If you're already a follower of Jesus, maybe today is the day you take off the old and put on the new. Today is the day you start letting what God is doing inside of you be reflected outside of you in the way you live and love others, and with compassion and humility and love and kindness, you extend grace and forgiveness to someone, or you make that call and ask for it from the person you've hurt.

Or, if you're here today, and you've never made the decision to start following Jesus, let today be that day for you. Jesus is offering you new life and a fresh start, and it starts when you put your faith in him. When you die to your old self in baptism and take on his life. If you're ready to take that step, we're ready to walk alongside of you.