“Apprentices of Jesus”

The Rev. Dr. Peter James
Colossians 3:12-17
The call to follow Jesus in my life came seemingly out of the blue. Years earlier, when I was in middle school, I managed somehow to become confirmed into a church without so much as understanding a single word of what was said. In high school, my church attendance slowed to a crawl. I was successful in convincing my mom that I needed more sleep. In college, my church attendance dropped like a rock, except on high holy days like Christmas and Easter.

But at age 19, the call to follow Jesus came loud and clear. I had been wondering about the purpose and direction of my life. For the first time I entertained the thought that my existential quandary of “who am I” might somehow be related to “who is God?”

I sought out people who seemed to walk with Jesus. I dusted off my confirmation Bible and commenced reading. Revelation was the first book of the Bible I ever read. I was blown away with the references to evil dragons and seven-headed beasts. Somehow I had never received the memo that Jesus is coming again. I felt woefully unprepared.

One summer evening, at a high school football stadium, I announced my intention to follow Jesus. The next morning I pinched myself. What on earth had I just done? I still looked the same and talked the same yet somehow I knew things were different. I look back on it as the single most important decision I ever made.

I don’t mean to convey that I have it all figured out. There are times when following Jesus still confounds me. I can’t always tell which way he wants me to go. I can’t explain why Jesus seems in no particular hurry to answer my desperation prayers. I’m almost embarrassed to admit there are times when following Jesus seems inconvenient. Things bother me now that used to roll off my back. Following Jesus makes a claim on the way I spend my time and money. Yes, even my money! Jesus has a curious way of challenging what I think is really important.

I claim to be one of his followers, yet there are times when I want Jesus to follow me. I want him to be at my beck and call. I want him to make things better. I want him to make my life easier and cut my problems down to size. I want him to put difficult people in their place.
So, you can see, I’m still learning what it means to follow Jesus. Isaiah had it right when he said that God’s thoughts are not my thoughts and God’s ways are not my ways (55:8). I identify with this apprenticeship image which has been our focus for the last month. We’re finishing a 30-day devotional entitled, Apprenticeship with Jesus. The author claims no other New Testament passage teaches us more about following Jesus than Colossians 3:1-17. Last Sunday, we explored the first 11 verses in the chapter. Today, our focus is verses 12-17.

Paul addresses this portion of his letter to “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved” (3:12). Whatever it means to be chosen by God (and that’s a sermon for another day), we are surely chosen for service not privilege. We’re made holy not by any good deeds on our account, but solely by God’s gracious pardon. And we are called God’s beloved people.

Beloved is an old-fashioned word. About the only time I see it used anymore is in obituary notices. Have you ever noticed how often the deceased are identified as beloved? So and so is remembered as a beloved father or mother, a beloved wife or husband. I don’t want to be a party pooper about family life, but I’ve spent considerable time around families and beloved isn’t typically the first word family members use to describe each other. Paul intentionally uses the word beloved to express how God feels about us. Despite our sins and shortcomings, we are God’s beloved people.

There are at least seven imperatives in this passage to describe what it means to be God’s beloved people. As I walk through the seven, I invite you to identify one or two imperatives for future consideration.

Imperative number one is, “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience” (3:12). Paul loves to make lists. Earlier in the chapter, he compiles two vice lists; one that focuses on sexual sins and the other which addresses matters of slanderous speech. He urges us to put off such vices much as we would old clothes in favor of a new wardrobe. The language of putting off and putting on functions as a word play on baptism. The baptized would discard their old clothes and wear white baptismal robes to symbolize their new life in Christ. Maybe you need to put off your old self and put on Christ.
Imperative number two is, “Bear with one another” (3:13). “Bear” in Greek means to show forbearance toward someone. Each of us does little things to annoy the other. We put up with one another because God puts up with us. George Washington Carver said, “…being tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving, tolerant of the weak and strong….Because some day in life you will have been all these.” Is there someone coming to mind for whom you need to exercise forbearance?

Imperative number three strikes at the heart of interpersonal relationships, “Forgive each other” (3:13). There are times when infractions go beyond mere annoyances. Our harsh words and retaliatory actions can destroy friendships and undermine family life. The forgiveness we are called to emulate is modeled by Jesus Christ, “Just as the Lord forgives you, so you must also forgive.” Since we cannot pay God back, we can only pay God’s grace forward to someone else. Is there someone in your circle of friends and family to whom you need to extend forgiveness?

Imperative number four is, “Put on love which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (3:14). Time and again, Jesus intends love to be the enduring legacy of his followers. Love functions as God’s bonding agent. Love is the superglue of Christian community. Is there someone in your life who needs your love and grace?

Imperative number five is to, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” (3:15). Those seven guys wearing striped shirts and blowing whistles in tonight’s Super Bowl game function as umpires and referees. It’s their job to make sure everybody plays by the rules. Have you ever asked Christ to referee a dispute you are having with someone else?

Imperative number six is, “Be thankful” (3:15). It’s written as a present imperative since Paul directs us to remain in a posture of thankfulness. He underscores this theme of gratitude in the next verse by urging believers to “sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to the Lord” (3:16). As near as we
can tell, the early church sang a wide variety of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. For those who pay particular attention to the type of music sung on Sunday morning, note that Paul seems much more concerned with the attitude that accompanies our singing rather than the music itself. Where do you need to express more gratitude in your life?

Imperative number seven is, “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly” (3:16). The words of Christ are recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Maybe it’s time for you to actually read one of these gospels.

So, what does this sermon have to do with my life? Let’s consider these seven imperatives collectively. To tease out their meaning, I’ve rephrased in my own words.

Surrender to Christ * Put up with EGRs * Forgive (name here) * I am third * Relax control * Improve gratitude quotient * Read the gospels

Some of us need to start at the very beginning and put on Christ. We need to surrender to Christ our very heart and will.

The second imperative, “Put up with EGRs”, acknowledges that extra grace is required to love difficult people. EGR is an acronym meaning Extra Grace Required. Maybe someone is bugging you and extra grace is needed to love them.

The third imperative, “Forgive (name here)”, requires the addition of a name that you will supply. Maybe we need to initiate a process to lead toward forgiveness. C. S. Lewis said, “Everybody thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive.” I suspect this imperative will be on many of our to-do lists this week.

I have paraphrased the fourth imperative about putting on love as, “I am third”, which is shorthand for God first, others second and myself third. Why not start an “I am third” campaign in your life this week?

The fifth imperative about letting Christ rule in our hearts requires us to “Relax control.” Some of us have the hardest time relinquishing control. But if we are going to let Christ rule we must give up control.

The sixth imperative, about thankfulness, makes a conscious decision to “Improve the gratitude quotient.” Do you need an attitude adjustment?
The seventh imperative invites us to pay particularly attention to every word Jesus utters. Why not resolve once and for all to “Read the gospels” and pattern your life accordingly?

We will keep this list posted on the screen during communion so you can lean into this exercise. Don’t slough it off as more appropriate for the person seated next to you. Don’t get wrapped around the axle that you wish so and so were here to listen to this sermon. No, you are here and there are imperatives on this list that you need to address. Ask God for strength. You are not merely accomplishing these needed changes in your own strength alone, but in the grace God supplies.