

“Above All”
Colossians 3:12-15

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. (ESV)

If you were here last week, you remember I told you that an easy way to understand the whole Book of Colossians is to really think of it as a theological episode of the television show, “What Not to Wear.” In “What Not to Wear” they take a woman who is deemed by someone to be a fashion nightmare. They write a letter to Clinton and Stacy, the hosts of the show and determine, “Yes, this woman is a fashion nightmare. We need to intervene.” They go in and tell her who she is and what she should be, and then they begin to do two things. They begin to go through her wardrobe and tell her what not to wear which in most cases is everything in her wardrobe. “You shouldn’t wear these things.” And then they take other things and say, “You should wear these things. With your personality and your body type and your hair type and all these things, certain things go with that and certain things don’t go with that.” At the end of the show the woman is always beautiful.

In the Book of Colossians Paul is basically doing the same thing. He goes in and diagnoses the Colossians. “Here’s who you are. You’re broken and alienated from Jesus because of your sin. You’re wearing very ugly clothes right now. Your own clothes are as filthy rags. But here’s the good news of the Gospel: Jesus came and when He died on the cross, He took your dirty clothes, your filthy rags and put them on Himself and gave you His robes of righteousness.” In other words, He exchanges wardrobes with you. He gives you His goodness and takes all of your badness. After that, what should you do? Paul says, “Well, here’s what you do. Here are the things you should not wear and here are the things you should wear.” Here are the things that go with that outfit Jesus has given you and here are things that don’t go with the outfit that Jesus has given you. Last week we talked about what doesn’t go with that outfit, what not to wear. Remember what Paul said, what doesn’t go with this outfit, this righteousness of Jesus, is first of all, sexual immorality and then he worked it all the way back to idolatry. Then Paul said, “The next thing that doesn’t go is anger, wrath, malice, all of these things.” He worked that all the way up to foul language. Those just don’t look right with the outfit you’re wearing if you are a Christian.

Foul language had absolutely nothing to do with cussing. Foul language, at the end of the day, at least according to Paul, is when you trash-talk other people, when you gossip about other people, when you complain about other people and don’t talk to that person. That is much worse than cussing. Am I advocating cussing? No. But what I’m telling you is that Paul said is, “That’s not your biggest problem.”

Last week you’ll remember he says, “Don’t lie to one another.” Then it culminates when he says, “Here in this place there is neither Jew nor Greek, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian or Scythian.. But all is Christ and Christ is in all.” The reason Paul is telling us that we need to put on certain clothes and take off other clothes is because the ultimate goal is not just reconciliation with God, but reconciliation with each other.

The kingdom of God is sort of like a party. In order to go to the party you have to be wearing the right clothes. Paul says, “The only way we can pull this party off and make it a success is if everyone is wearing the right clothes, and the party is going to have people from everywhere. It’s going to have Jews and Greeks, circumcised, uncircumcised, black, white, male, female. They’re all going to be in the room, and only if they are wearing the appropriate garments are things going to work. So he told us what garments won’t work in order to build community. Today he’s going to tell us what garments do and what we should put on.

We’re going to look at three things this morning. We’re going to look at the priority of grace. We’re going to look at the product of grace, and the third thing we’re going to look at is the peace of grace. Let’s look first at the priority of grace. In verse 12 Paul says,

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience (ESV)

Paul wants to tell us what we should put on – what enables community. What is the first accessory that goes with the righteousness of Christ? He says, “Put on therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved.” You can’t go anywhere until you start there. That’s the priority of grace. What is Paul saying then? He’s saying to the church the same thing he said to

Israel, by the way. The language he uses here is the same language that Moses used of Israel, and Moses used it of Israel because God had chosen them out of everyone else. A couple of things are going on here. For one, Paul is inferring that the church is now the new Israel, that the church has not necessarily replaced Israel, but the church now is Israel. Remember, there is neither Jew nor Greek here. Israel should be brought in to the extent that they trust in Jesus.

But more than that, the priority of grace is just this. In the first few words he says, “Put on then as God’s chosen ones.” Some translations say, “as God’s elect.” Paul says the basis of getting along, the basis of humility, compassion, kindness—all of these things—is grace. And the foundation of grace is just this, that God chose you, you did not choose God. There is nothing good about you that would impress God. In fact, not only did God choose you because you weren’t that great, but God chose you because of how bad you were because the worse you are the better He looks in His grace. The deeper your sin, the more magnificent is His grace when He is shown as the One who takes it on Himself and forgives it. Paul says, “As God’s chosen ones, holy (and holy in the Old Testament and here means “set apart”) God came to you. You’ll remember that every now and then I’ll say a statement like this, “God always initiates with sinners.” Have you ever heard me say that? Every week, don’t I? God always initiates. God chooses whom He will and He sets them apart for His purpose. He says, “Put on then as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved.” Beloved means that you are the object of God’s love. Why does God set His love upon you?

Let me give you a hint why He sets His love upon you. Let me read to you the same language as you see in Deuteronomy chapter 7. This is Moses talking to Israel. He says,

⁶ “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷ It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸ but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (ESV)

Why did God choose Israel? It wasn’t because they were the greatest of nations, it was because they were the smallest. It wasn’t because they had the biggest and best of everything, it was because they had nothing. Why? Because the Lord loved them. The question is, “Why did the Lord choose you? Why does the Lord draw you or me in? Is it because of how good you are?” It’s not. It’s because He has chosen to love you. That’s the foundation of grace. That’s the priority of grace. Without that all the rest of it doesn’t make sense because if you understand that you’ve come to the table with nothing, that you brought nothing, and that the only reason you have a relationship with God (assuming you do) is because God saw fit to come to you and open your eyes and draw you unto Himself. How could there be any room for pride in that? How could there be any room for dissension? Paul says that that’s who you are. You should look this way. How could you not? You should have compassion and be kind and everything else. How could you not?

I know I’ve told you this story before. What’s interesting to me is that Presbyterians are the ones who historically have embraced this more than anyone else. You might have heard the language of “reformed theology.” Reformed in my theology” means is that you believe that God initiates with sinners, that you had brought nothing to the table. This is everything that I preach each week. Presbyterians have historically been the ones who champion that. And yet Presbyterians have historically been the ones who have been the least compassionate, least meek, least gentle. Why? How can you be the ones who champion a certain theology and yet, on the other hand, embody what is the opposite of what the byproduct should be? The answer is because oftentimes we know our theology, but we don’t experience it. Have you experienced the grace of God? If you experience God’s grace rather than just know it, it changes your life. It’s sort of like the difference between knowing the words of a song and knowing the music. Do you know the music of the Gospel?

It reminded me of this story as I was thinking about it this morning. When I was in seminary I was working for a Presbyterian church, and the pastors of a very charismatic denomination began taking a few classes with R. C. Sproul. One thing led to another and all of a sudden they understood grace. They understood that they were totally unable to come to Jesus in and of themselves, and that God had chosen and initiated. And it changed everything. I remember these pastors having a meeting with my pastors. I was an intern so I got to be in the room. They were talking about issues of worship. At one point the head guy from the charismatic side said, “Given what you guys know about your theology how could you not dance in worship? You guys don’t even raise your hands. Is it not even important enough? If you really understand what this means how could you not be excited?” That’s the point here. The context isn’t worship but the context rather is compassion, humility, meekness, and gentleness. Given what you know of your theology how could you not be compassionate and meek and gentle? If you’re a Christian you’re almost saying by claiming to be a Christian that you have

actually experienced those things that Paul is admonishing you to live out. If you're a Christian, what that means is that you've experienced the compassion of God. The King James translates it literally. It means, "bowels of mercy." God has shown compassion on you. You've experienced the humility of God as you see Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, become a man and be obedient even to death on a cross. You see the gentleness and meekness of Jesus as He gently calls you and says, "Please come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." If you are not a Christian here today, that is yours for the taking. Would you take it?

The next place Paul goes from the priority of grace is basically the product or the byproducts of grace. It's really interesting what the byproducts of grace are. If you understand that it's God who chose you and you didn't choose Him then you're now compassionate and meek and gentle. What does that look like in the life of the church? Notice what Paul says.

¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (ESV)

This surprised me this week when I was studying this. When Paul says, "bearing with one another," that means in Greek something like "a grudging acceptance of someone's differences." What's Paul's point here? The beautiful thing about the Bible is that it's realistic. Paul says, "The first outworking of grace is that you're able to bear with, you're able to grudgingly accept things about someone else that bother you. You're not willing to vilify them or break community." Or are you? It's interesting, a lot of people leave churches because they're unwilling to bear with this person or that person or the pastor or the elders or something. Paul says the first outworking, the first byproduct of grace is that you're able to bear with people who are different than you. Why? Because if you really understand grace you know that that person is not the only one with issues, that you have your own issues. Inasmuch as the other person bothers you, what grace says is, "Tommy, you like woodworking?" "Yeah." "Got a log for you to work on. It's in your eye, dude." Jesus said, "Take the log out of your own eye before you take the splinter out of someone else's." Paul says, "Grudgingly bear with other people who are different."

I remember the best marriage advice that Judy and I got was from a guy named Ron Brown. He was a campus minister. I think he took us both separately and said to us, "Tommy, Judy, what I want you to do before you really jump into this, is to think of three things that you can't stand about the other person. Ask yourself, 'If these three things never change, am I going to be able to live with them for the rest of my life? Do I still want to go through with the marriage?'" Why did he ask that question? It's because all of us have issues and they may or may not get better over the course of our life. And even if they do get better over the course of our life they may not get that much better. I felt sorry for Judy during that time because she had such a hard time coming up with three. [laughter] Actually, I felt bad for her that she had such a hard time narrowing it down to three. But the point is if you really understand grace you realize that other people need it as much as you do.

Then Paul does something interesting because he addresses conflict here, and Paul gives a different option for conflict than Jesus does. What Jesus said, "If you have something against your brother, what should you do? Go tell him. Go confront your brother and if he repents you've won him and if he doesn't, then take two more and tell him again. If he doesn't repent then take the whole church and tell him again and if he doesn't repent then have nothing to do with him." Paul gives another option. Both of them are appropriate, by the way. Paul's option is one that we almost never think of because it's right there in front of our face. Notice what he says.

¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you (ESV)

Is that a novel concept or what? If you've a complaint against someone else, forgive it. Those of you who have kids, tell your child, "Johnny, you need to forgive your sister." Well, if Johnny has no reason to forgive, why would he? But Paul does something here. He says, "Forgive just as the Lord has forgiven you." What does forgiveness mean? Forgiveness means to pay someone else's bill. Paul is admonishing us here. He says, "If you really understand grace you're willing to pay someone else's bill. They've offended you and instead of exacting justice from them, instead of exacting their pound of flesh, what you say is, "I will pay that bill. I'm going to eat it this time." What enables you to do that is the cross. You look at the cross and say, "At the cross Jesus paid my bill. If Jesus paid my bill how can I not pay this small bill? If Jesus paid everything for me, how can I not give a pittance to overlook this complaint?" It's amazing to me if you look at I Corinthians chapter 6 where Paul is addressing lawsuits among believers, and you get the sense that the whole church is just in a tizzy and wrapped around the axle and basically having lawsuits against one another. They're hiring secular lawyers, if you will, and they're going crazy. Paul gives them this advice in the form of a question. "Why not be wronged? Is the whole church's

health, is the whole church's fitness worth the fact of your being right?" Do you know how many people have been killed just so one person can be right? And at the end of the day people say, "You're right" and you've lost everything.

It reminded me of the movie, "Flash of Genius." Have It was just out. It was Greg Kinnear, and it was about the guy who invented windshield wipers. The movie was billed as this underdog story where the little guy takes on the big guy and wins. I watched it and it was one of the most depressing things I've ever seen in my life because the little guy, Greg Kinnear, did take on the big guy—the Ford Motor Company—for about 20 years and at the end of it, the little guy won the lawsuit and in the process of winning the lawsuit. But he lost his wife, he lost his children, he lost his friends, he lost everything he had just to be able to say, "I was right." The point here that Paul would say is that sometimes it's wrong to be right. Sometimes you must simply forgive. If you're a human being and you're sitting in this room and you have family members and friends, you need to hear that. Sometimes it is wrong to be right. That's the product of grace.

How do you do that? What's the peace of grace? Let me finish up with this.

¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. (ESV)

Paul says, "And above all put on love which binds everything together." Last week we looked at the fact that you can't break commandments two through ten without also breaking the first commandment, to have no other gods than God. In the same way here Paul says, "You can't obey any of these admonitions to be compassionate, loving, forgiving, and all these unless you actually obey the greatest commandment which is to love the Lord your God, to love your neighbor as yourself. All these things, love binds them all together." The language there is like a huge belt, or as I thought of it this morning, have you ever seen the television commercial for the "Snuggie"? It says, "Trouble using the remote control? Trouble answering your phone? Get the Snuggie." The Snuggie is a blanket that covers everything but you can put your arms through it and still work and move with it on. That's what love is. Love is the Snuggie that covers everything but as it covers everything it enables you to do what you need to do, namely to be at peace with one another. He says, "Let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts."

He's not talking about the "peace which passes all understanding" which you see in Philippians. He literally means the peace which Christ achieved to rule in your hearts. Or let the peace that Christ achieved be the umpire. Let's say you're having a conflict with another member in the church and you sit down to talk about this conflict. Before you talk about the conflict you look to the umpire and the umpire is the peace which Christ has achieved. You look again to the cross because at the cross what you see is the hostility between God and man being paid for. Christ has achieved peace there. Christ has achieved reconciliation there. The peace of Christ is now the umpire for every other conflict that you have. You were completely alienated and hostile to God and Jesus came and died on your behalf and now you sit across from someone else and you're going to confront them about the fact that they sat in your pew last weekend. There's nothing more frustrating than someone else sitting in your pew. I know that. I used to sit there. But you sit across from them and before you lay into them about sitting in your pew, you look up at the cross, the peace that Christ has accomplished, is the umpire of this game. When you look at the umpire you know what it makes me think? "I don't even need to play the game." When you look at the umpire you should be saying, "You win because of what Jesus has done for me." Unless you understand that, you can't have peace with other people.

The last thing Paul says here sounds like he's talking to children. He says, "And be thankful." He just sort of throws it in there. Be thankful. Really he's bringing things full circle because thankfulness is basically appreciation for something you couldn't provide for yourself. If you understand that what Jesus has given you you couldn't provide for yourself, it will change the way you interact with every person every single day of your life. Think about that.