

Becoming full persons in Christ's community

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Date: 28 August 2022

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[0 : 00] I'm going to read the Bible. If you can turn to Colossians chapter 3. We're going to start at the beginning and go on to verse 17. If then you've been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you've died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you.

Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these, the wrath of God is coming.

In these, you too once walked when you were living in them, but now you must put them all away. Anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing you've put off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

[1 : 27] Here, there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, side-in, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all.

Put on, then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 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. And above all of these, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your heart to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

[2 : 53] Over six weeks now, we've been bouncing our series in Colossians against the cultural air we breathe.

And we've sort of summed up the cultural air we breathe in the term, therapeutic expressive individualism. It's a worthwhile term to remember because it's so pervasive in our society.

And what it is really is it's the determination that people express today to be authentic people, to be true to who they really are. And that is driven by a desire for happiness, which requires freedom to take the desires and feelings that are within me and bring them to the surface and build my identity, my meaning and purpose from those feelings with nobody daring to challenge how I want to express that good life.

One of the, perhaps the unintended consequences of that is that it has left people with a very, very deep, profound sense of entitlement.

And I don't know whether you observe that, but that's one of the things I feel myself bumping up against every day in society is this profound sense of entitlement that people are expressing.

[4 : 20] An entitlement to do whatever they believe will deliver personal happiness and fulfillment, no matter the cost to those around them. To be free from any demands, free from any demands and expectations of others.

Don't you question me in the way I live. And free to develop their own lifestyle. The way I live is good, whatever that is.

The sense of entitlement to resist all external authority. I think people mostly use their hands these days not to eat, but to give the bird to anybody who tries to exert authority over them.

Anything that challenges my self-approving, my self-governing right to this good and full life.

And I think it's particularly ugly. Even though people think that that's freedom. Now against that, we've seen in Paul's letter to the Colossians, that true authentic living, being true to yourself as a person, and being a true person, true well-being, ultimate happiness, true fulfillment, says Paul, lies in Jesus.

[5 : 45] And there we have quite a sharp divide between the cultural air we breathe and what we read and understand, and I believe, are committed to in the scriptures.

But here's a bit of a problem that arises out of that, because we can never be apart from our culture. And we'd be foolish in the extreme if we don't allow for the fact that we're constantly being tutored by our culture as we observe how people around us live their lives and what's important to them. And so almost inevitably, well actually inevitably, we will actually be part of our culture. We will take some of that therapeutic, expressive individualism into our own way of living. That's the power of culture. The question then is, how much are we shaped by our culture, and how much are we shaped by the gospel?

How much do we still look for fullness in this therapeutic, expressive individualism, this sense of entitlement? And how much do we see and find fullness and rest in that in Christ?

[7 : 08] Now, we need to be really careful not to reach for an easy answer here. And if you've got my sermon script and a number you get each week, there's an important not in there. We must not reach for a simple answer.

We must not think for a moment that we're immune to therapeutic, expressive individualism. We must not think for a moment that we automatically find our fullness in Christ.

As I say, there'll be some degree of our cultural air shaping how we think and act, both as individual Christians and, I would argue, as a community here together, a church family.

And the big question then is not if that's happening, but to recognize when it happens and how it happens, so we might have a chance to resist it as we push back into the gospel and fullness in Christ.

For example, and see what you would do with these examples. Are the examples of therapeutic, expressive individualism in our church family or in our own personal thinking?

[8 : 22] So here we go, three or four examples. Do you think that your life in Christ is a private, individual matter? And that you should be left alone in that space?

Do you think that your personal expression of faith is what matters, while engaging in a church family community like this is perhaps an optional extra? Is church something you do, providing it delivers what you want?

So if it makes you feel happy, then I'm happy to be in it. If I'm not too tired, I'm happy to be in it. If it doesn't demand anything significant of me, then I'll be in it. Or is church something you are by virtue of being a Christian?

And when you come to church, do you engage in worship because it makes you feel good?

Because you think that perhaps through doing that, then you'll get good things from God?

Or do you worship God for his own beauty and worth? Do you think that that trumps other concerns in a community such as forgiving, loving, forbearing with others, maintaining unity?

[10 : 06] So our question this morning then is, how will individual fullness in Christ be evident in community?

In this community, in our church family? Well, into Colossians 3 then, verses 1 to 4 of Colossians 3 is a bridge. So a bridge summarizes what's already been explained about fullness of life in Christ, which then becomes also the launch pad for application into specific areas and circumstances of life.

And this morning we're looking particularly in the application of the community. Look at verses 1. And you'll see how the summary thing, the ESV has if then, but just as well or even better to call it since then.

Since then, because of what's all been said at the minute, since then you've been raised with Christ. Look at verse 3. Since then you have died with Christ.

Since then your life is hidden with Christ. Verse 4. Since Christ, who is your life? Very, very strong summary statements.

[11 : 21] Christ is your life. Not just a part of your life as a Christian. Christ is your life. He's the entirety. He's the fullness or the completeness of life.

Put it in other words. As we've seen over recent weeks, we are inseparably connected forever to God through Jesus. And the word there in chapter 3, the picture there is hidden. Your life is hidden with Christ in God. Now that's the word that means that we're so sort of enfolded into Jesus.

We're so embedded into Jesus that the distinction blurs. And we can say that we're so deeply held, so closely held by Jesus that my life is his life.

His life is my life. Christ is our life. Christ is our life. And when Christ, who is our life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

[12:27] So, Jesus is our life individually. Because we must be saved individually.

Renewed individually. So, it is right that each believer may say, I am in Christ. I say that to you this morning.

I am in Christ. With the guarantee that I experience the sufficiency of Jesus' work for me as a Savior. I may also say as a believer that Christ is in me.

With the guarantee that I receive and enjoy all the benefits and blessings of being united with him as Lord. We've seen that over the last few weeks. Using the picture from last Sunday.

Listen up, boys. Using the picture from last Sunday. Our bucket individually is absolutely full. With the fullness of life that only Jesus can deliver.

[13:32] So, as it says in Colossians 3, 1-4. As it commands us. It's appropriate then that we set our bearings.

Set your mind on. Set your bearings by. Set your bearings daily according to this heavenly reality. Of our fullness of life in Christ.

Shaping our lives as a daily practice. Based on the source of life. The source of our life in heaven. The Lord Jesus. But there's more. We must also go on to say that Jesus is our life in community. Salvation in Jesus is always more than personal or individual.

Now, that's a point I don't think we've got as Christians. Or we deliberately ignore maybe that. Is actually of itself expressive individualism. Salvation is always more than personal.

[14:41] It is right and proper for me to say that I am saved into an individual relationship of faith. And into a personal walk with Jesus. That is right. It is wrong, however, if I go from there to think about salvation individualistically.

Jesus knows nothing of solitary believers. Individualistic believers.

God's salvation plan. God's salvation plan. You see it right through the scriptures. God's salvation plan was always to save his people into new community.

Resurrection community. The church. God's salvation plan. This is Paul's emphasis too. He, so for all you English Nazis out there, you just have to, your ears will jar.

But that's why the word use that's common speak these days is such a good word. Or if you want to be Southern American, y'all. It picks up a deficiency in English grammar.

[15:48] Because all the words that Paul uses throughout Colossians and most of his letters are plural. You plural. You plural. Use. When Paul addresses the church, writes the church at Colossae, he wants the community as a whole to understand that Christ is their collective life as he is their individual life.

He expects them to express fullness in Christ in community. Shaping their community life or church culture according to the gospel.

And that's what we are. As we live out what we believe the gospel is, then we create a culture. We adopt a culture and we develop a culture. We have a culture here in our church.

And we'll ask the question later on. What is that culture in essence? Paul wants them to express and live out a culture, display a culture that's in line with the heavenly reality of being God's resurrection community.

Set your mind on things above. Where you will be home with Christ in heaven as the church, praising and glorifying and living proper, full lives under the Lord Jesus.

[17:26] Well, make that reality the very thing that drives and shapes life now in community. As a microcosm of heaven on earth. Paul also uses body language to describe their life in community.

If you turn back to chapter 1 verse 17 and verse 18, we're told there in that section about the preeminence of Jesus. Jesus is the one who holds or binds everything together in God's world.

And then immediately it launches on to give an example. The primary example of Jesus binding and making everything together. His body, the church.

That's the first cab of the rank. When we talk about what Jesus binds and brings together in himself. And if you look at chapter 2 verse 19.

We looked at this week, last week. Jesus is the head. And the head, organically connected to the body, is what gives the body life. And we said last week that Jesus was the ligament that actually holds the bones and the parts of the body together and gives it structural integrity.

[18:39] It's a community. It's a community. It's a corporate picture. We are the body. Connected to the head.

Individual, yes. But not individualistic. We can't be individualistic in a body. This doesn't make any sense to try and do it. And we're told there in chapter 2 verse 19.

That growth from God, therefore, happens in community. Now I don't think that's something we think about very often.

That our growth and maturing in Christ happens in community. In this community. And it's the same idea then.

We've already seen it in chapter 3 verses 1 to 4. True spiritual maturity is achieved through vibrant and close connection with their head, our head, the Lord Jesus, and living in the light of that reality in this salvation community.

[19:50] Paul also speaks of servants and fellow servants to describe the reality of salvation community. Now this is one you could probably argue with. I've raised a few times a staff meeting and each time it hasn't got very much of a guarantee.

But I'm going to try it anyway this morning. Feel free to reject it if you want to. I think it's really interesting that in chapter 1 verse 1, Paul introduces himself as apostolos.

He's an apostle. That's his formal title. That's his formal commission from the Lord Jesus. But within the body of the letter, whenever he is interacting with other Christians here in Colossae, he always uses the term servant.

which brings him down to the level of others. And we'll see, I'll want to try and demonstrate that connection to you.

In 1 chapter 23, sorry, chapter 1 verse 23, Paul says that, which has been claimed, they're talking about the gospel, which has been claimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul became a minister.

[20:59] That's the word servant. And then he goes on in verse 25 to make a connection, a seamless connection, a servant of Christ. Paul's a servant of Christ, which means, verse 25, he becomes a servant of the Colossian church.

And if you go back to chapter 1, he talks about being a fellow servant with Epaphras, who brought the gospel and was responsible for these guys being converted. And, so putting that together, Paul says, to be, for him to be a Christian is to be a servant of Christ, is to be a servant of his body, the church, is to be a fellow servant with everybody else in the church.

And if you follow through in chapter 4, you'll see that servant, fellow servant language used heaps. Friends, putting it all together, here's the point.

Church is not something we do, especially not as we feel like it. Church is something we are by virtue of being united with Christ.

Christ. And here's a thing I want you to take away with you today. Gospel doctrine, experienced personally, ought always to produce gospel culture in community.

[22:39] Friends, to go back to the bucket illustration, your bucket of fullness is not simply contained to you in some individualistic way.

Your bucket of fullness actually overflows through you into fullness in this community. A community of saved people.

Why? So that together we might enjoy fullness in Christ. And we will do that together, I would argue, in a way that we cannot actually do it individually.

Because that's the way Jesus has set it up. And all of that is a launch pad for verses 5 to 17.

And so you'll see how this sort of flows on from there. As a family unit, as a community of saved people, you or y'all should be struggling together to express fullness in Christ.

[23:59] That's essentially Paul's point as he moves forward. Now, verses 5 to 11, Paul says that means getting rid of everything on anything which is at odds with your new identity, your fullness in Christ.

Your new orientation to Christ. get rid of it. Again, the bucket illustration. If the bucket is full with all the fullness of deity, if the bucket is full of the character of God through Jesus and grace and mercy, when it overflows into the local church community, what would you expect?

You wouldn't expect a pile of stuff like you just dipped into a sullage pit. No, it will overflow with the character of Christ, with grace and mercy.

the fullness of deity. So we've got to get rid of anything that's inconsistent with that, that's incongruous with that.

And so we could spend hours working through each of these words. There's such dense words, such intense stuff in here, but I'm just going to slide across the top and try and lift it up and summarize it.

[25 : 26] verses 5 and 6. I'll read them and then I'll just make a summary comment. Here we go.

Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you. And then there's a list of sexual vices, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness, which is idolatry.

on account of these, the wrath of God is coming. As a community, we've got to say no to selfish expressions of sexuality.

Our world says, I am a sexual being. I can only be authentic and true to myself and complete in myself when I'm free to express my sexual desires, whatever they may manifest as, when I'm free to express my sexual desires and use others around me for my satisfaction, no matter the cost to them.

That's essentially what our world says. God says, that's got no place among my people. Verses 7 and 8.

[26 : 50] In these you too once worked, when you were living in them, but now you must put them all away. Anger, wrath, malice, slander, seen talk from your mouth.

Those are all statements of manipulation and exploitation. And Paul says, we've got to say no to manipulation and exploitation.

Again, our world says, I can only be happy and fulfilled when my desires, my cravings are met to my satisfaction. And this gives me the right to manipulate, to exploit, to consume, to control people around me in the pursuit of my own happiness and fulfillment.

Paul says, that's got no place in a resurrection community. Verses 9 and 10.

Do not lie to one another, saying that you have put off the old self with its practices and put on the new self which has been renewed in the knowledge after the image of its creator.

[28 : 12] Say no to any thought that the end justifies the means. See, again, our world says to us, happiness and validation is so important that I'm prepared to, I'm entitled to manipulate truth to my own advantage.

Even if it means telling bold-faced lies when necessary. Truth's relative. truth will trump your truth in the pursuit of my happiness.

That's what our world says to us. Paul says no. In community, the resurrection community has got to deal with truth. Got to be known for truth.

Get rid of such thinking. In verse 11, I pondered this one a fair while but I think this might be okay. Paul says, here there's not Greek and Jews circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all.

Say no to evaluating people according to the world's categories. See, our world says, I need to be on top of the pile.

[29 : 38] Whatever pile that is I'm operating in, I need to be the top of it. It might be a racial pile, it might be a political pile, it might be an economic pile, it might be an intellectual pile, it might even be a spiritual pile.

Well, I need to be on top of it and the way to be on top of it is to knock other people down. I build myself up by knocking other people down. And so we pull out the racial card, we pull out the economic card, we pull out the whatever card it is, the super spiritual card.

Paul says, no, there's no place for that in the resurrection community. And then he goes on to verse 12 to 17 to talk about putting on, to put on or to be shaped by things that we already have.

So the word there is like clothing, so it's putting on a jacket. You already have the jacket that's there. All you need to do is put it on, is Paul's point. We already have all these graces in Christ.

That's what it is to be renewed in Christ. We just need to embrace them. We just need to put them on. We need to be shaped by them. And the more we get rid of these things that have no place in

Christ's community, the more we'll be seen to be dressed.

[31 : 02] in the things that should adorn us as Christ's community. Verses 12 to 17. We don't need to create them.

We simply need to embrace them. And here again, that connection is lovely. That gospel doctrine ought always and easily overflow into gospel culture.

Our bucket is full of the fullness of deity in Christ. the other flood will be gospel culture. Rich gospel culture, a culture of grace.

The gospel doctrine of grace, gospel culture of grace in all its richness in our community, our church. What will this gospel culture look like?

Well, again, we could spend weeks on these individual characteristics here. But I think I can just summarize it by saying, what will gospel culture look like? It will look like Jesus.

[32 : 10] It will smell with a savor of Jesus. Jesus. It will speak like Jesus. It will absorb hurts and grievances and offense like Jesus.

It will forbear with others' failures like Jesus. Gospel categories, gospel culture.

Let's jump through these fairly quickly. Verses 12, 13, and 14.

Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. There you go. There's the orientation thing again. That's what you are. You're now God's chosen ones, holy and beloved.

Beloved. compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another.

[33 : 21] And if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive.

see, all these gospel categories have been modeled strongly to us by Jesus.

And that's what we need to make these commands work. Commands will never be enough.

Forgiveness and forbearing and kindness and patience, all these things are hard.

Simply be commanded to do them will never work for us. But when we have gospel categories modeled to us by Jesus, when we realize that we're holy and beloved, chosen children, then we're in a zone.

The heavenly reality will enable us to do the hard work here of being Christ's community. and it will be expressed in offering radical forgiveness, gospel reconciliation.

[34 : 44] Now, what does gospel reconciliation and peace do in the body? Well, gospel forgiveness and reconciliation resets the relationship. relationship. And it does so at great cost to self.

That's the model of Jesus. It also commits never to use that offense against the person in future relationship. And my friends, that's how each of us individually has been forgiven.

That's what it is to understand and live in grace. And add to that being other person centered.

Being servant hearted. Bearing with one another's failures as I've already said. Loving strongly while speaking truth. Being committed to the best interests of those around us.

Regardless of personal cost in that. That's the model of Jesus. And when we talk about forgiveness, gospel forgiveness, it will be so different from cultural forgiveness.

[35 : 58] Forgiveness is a big thing in our society these days. But it's always self-interested forgiveness. It's always a given, I will forgive because it makes me feel better about myself.

It doesn't actually matter if I resume relationship, full relationship with a person. No, it's just something I do. It makes me feel better about myself. Or it allows me to take control back of the situation.

It stops them from hurting me more. I cut myself off from negative people, negative vibes. It's not the gospel forgiveness that Jesus models and we've experienced.

Forgiveness at great cost himself. Verse 16. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

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

[37 : 14] Well, so many words in there, but again, we're just to be steeped in God's word. So steeped, so familiar with God's word that actually shapes our concerns for one another.

It shapes our interactions with one another. Rather than being driven by our personal hurts, our personal desires, our personal grievances, righteousness.

And all of that is in the context of thanks, thankfulness. Verse 17. Very similar thing when it all boils down. Being as Christ to one another in all these ways, being as Christ to one another is the

greatest expression of thankfulness that we as individual Christians can show.

Because it shows an understanding of what I personally have experienced in Christ. Being as Christ to one another is the greatest expression of worship.

Being as Christ to one another is the greatest expression of authentic Christian living, authentic living of any sort. Friends, this is what gospel culture looks like.

[38 : 46] And then we move to a very simple question, but perhaps a challenging question. Is this what our church culture looks like? And are you on a weekly, daily basis so engaged in the community that you are helping build a gospel culture in our church as opposed to building something else that's just not fitting?

Allah, verses 5 to 11. Amen. Are these the attitudes and actions which overflow in you because of fullness in Christ?

If they're not, then again, we're breaking something that should be together. We've got gospel doctrine, we're talking the talk, but not walking the walk of gospel culture.

I just want to conclude with the question we've asked each week in this series, and that is what will keep us from experiencing and modelling fullness in community, our resurrection community, in our church family unit?

Well, at risk of there's always a thing about landing sermons, but I'm just going to stop. So I may seem to be abrupt, probably seem to be a bit eorish, a bit negative, but I just want to end by listing four things I've already mentioned in the body of my talk here this morning, and I want to list them just for emphasis, because there are four things that will rob us of fullness as a community of Christ's people.

[40 : 31] One, continuing to be therapeutic, expressive individualists, rather than Christ-filled, expressive individuals and community.

if you hear the way I'm trying to play the two terms off against each other. See, each of us needs to work hard, each of us individually and together we need to work hard to understand how our world continues to influence us and our thinking and our actions, and where those influences are coming. Only then will we have any chance of resisting. But until we do the hard work of analysis, we won't see anything to resist. Number two, continuing to think that church is something we do, an optional extra when it suits me or makes me feel happy, rather than understanding that church is what I am in Christ.

A fundamental expression of being united with Christ. Number three, seeing two when we ought only to see one.

Gospel doctrine, gospel culture. See, churches are very, very skewed, I think, to protecting gospel doctrine, especially the churches that we are part of and associate with.

[42 : 11] They're very skewed to protecting gospel doctrine, and that's important. But ultimately, protecting gospel doctrine, if it doesn't flow through into gospel culture, is just intellectualism.

And vice versa. Some churches are skewed to promoting gospel culture and the vibe and the relationship. relationship. But if that's promoted at the expense of gospel truth, then all you have is sentimentalism.

These are not options, gospel doctrine, gospel culture. These are two sides of one coin. number four.

Trying to be the church without Christ-full gospel categories to shape our interactions with one another. In other words, if we try and be the church without a deep commitment to truthing, loving, forbearing, forgiving, reconciling, encouraging one another, then, as I understand this passage, if we try and do that, then we will not have a distinctive.

We might be passionate, we might be serious minded, but we won't be distinctive. And if we're not distinctive, then we'll bring shame to our Lord, not honor.

[44 : 02] Join me in prayer. Lord, these words, as we always find when we dig into your word, these words are very challenging.

Lord, help us to do the hard work, and in lots of ways, the scary work of analyzing what culture we do exude individually and as a church family.

Help us to see the difference, Lord, between sprouting gospel doctrine and not actually expressing that in gospel culture.

Lord, help us to hear your word. Help us to have that passionate desire to grow together in community. Help us to be a distinctive community so that, Lord, when people come among us, they

might really see something authentic and compelling and satisfying.
In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
[45 : 27] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.