

Unity & Community in the New Humanity

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[0 : 00] Well, if you would keep your Bible in front of you, open at Colossians 3, that would be just terrific. And if you're joining us for the first time, we've been in this book of Colossians, and like many of the small letters that Paul wrote in the New Testament, it divides roughly in half.

And the first half is teaching, and the second half is practical application. And it's easy as we read through these verses in Colossians 3 to forget the fact that it's not just dangerously practical, but that the Apostle Paul is trying to give us a vision of a whole new humanity through what Christ has done in his death and resurrection.

He's writing to a little church way out in the Lycus Valley in Colossae. They've been at church for about 10 years. He's never been there. And they've had a new crop of Christian teachers come in and say, look, your beginning with Jesus Christ is good as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough.

You need more. You need Jesus plus. You need Jesus plus religious exercises. You need Jesus plus our special experiences with angels. And so the first two chapters of Colossians are all about the magnificence of Jesus Christ, the absolute unparalleled supremacy of Jesus Christ and his sufficiency in all things for us.

In fact, Paul goes far enough at the end of chapter two to say that religion and rules don't scratch the surface. They don't have, they're of no help in changing us in moral transformation.

[1 : 40] He wants us to know that real change comes from communion with Jesus Christ. That's where it starts. Here's the source of our change.

Here's the source of all ethical change in our life. And you can see that from the shape of chapter three. Before the apostle even says a word about ethics or moral change, he begins in the first four verses with the resources that we have in Jesus Christ.

He tells us to seek Jesus Christ who is in heaven. Because apart from him, every ethical issue he raises from verses five onwards are impossible for us.

We just can't do them. So look back at those early verses. Just let me remind you of verses one and two. Since you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. Now, if you're new to the book of Colossians, you may think, well, that sounds a bit spacey and floaty and impractical.

[2 : 54] Actually, it's beautifully straightforward. He's simply saying we need to put first things first. Because the first step in Christian life and the first step in Christian growth is seeking Jesus Christ every day in everything I do, setting my mind and my heart on him and his work.

It's devoting myself to him. It's seeking Christ. So when I'm at home or when I'm at work, when I'm doing a project, when I'm in another dreaded Zoom meeting, my deepest commitment in that meeting or that project is to seek Jesus Christ.

Apart from this, Christianity just descends into becoming another moral system without any real power to change us. The real power to change comes from heaven, from Christ himself, who is seated at the right hand of the Father, the Lord of life and the centre of all things.

So this is where we begin. We take our cues from heaven, from Christ himself. And then from verse 5 onwards, it's clear that following Jesus Christ has a moral shape to us.

In fact, if you stand back from chapter 5 in the beginning of chapter 4, sorry, you stand back from chapter 3 in the beginning of chapter 4, there are five relationships Paul talks about.

[4 : 14] Our relationship with Jesus Christ, which is the fountain and source. Then our relationship with others in the body of Christ. Then our relationships in the family. Then our relationships at work.

And then our relationships with all those who are not part of the body of Christ. And last week, Dan covered verses 5 to 11. But it's followed so closely and so closely tied to verses 12 to 17.

They're two sides of the one coin. So look down at verse 5. Put to death, therefore. And Paul mentions a number of things that destroy our relationship with Christ.

Verse 8. Put away. And then a series of things that destroy relationships in the body of Christ. And then when we come to our passage, verses 12 and onwards, put on then compassion and kindness and humility.

In verse 14, put on love. Now, what's important about this is that God does not transform us on our own.

[5 : 13] The way he transforms us is he places us in a community of faith. When he brings us to fellowship with his son, he also brings us into a fellowship of the church, the body of Christ.

And I want to draw three implications out of the whole chapter before we dive into verses 12 to 17, which is actually what we're supposed to be doing this morning.

But I think this will set us up better so that we can look at those verses. Just three observations. Number one, Christian growth has both a negative and a positive side.

So last week, verses 5 to 8 are primarily the negative side. How grateful I am to Dan for handling that last week. These are things we have to put away, put to death, have nothing to do with.

They're like a dirty shirt. We need to take them off. And they include, verse 5, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness, which is idolatry. They include, verse 8, anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk from your mouth.

[6 : 21] These are not random things that Paul's saying are naughty. He's saying these come out of who Christ is. You have to put them off. But from verse 12 onward, it's entirely positive. You see, put on compassion, kindness, humility, put on love, let the peace of Christ rule.

And my simple point is this, that Christian growth is both negative and positive. We cannot make progress without putting certain things to death. We cannot make progress unless we put certain things on.

And many of us, I think, think about spiritual growth and Christian growth entirely negatively. You know, we've got to put off more things.

We've got to stop doing things. And I think I would say at the grand old age that I have reached, that less than half of Christian growth is putting off. Much more is putting on.

So imagine trying to deal with anger and slander and evil thoughts without putting on compassion and kindness. You just can't do it. Or imagine trying to put on thankfulness and generosity without putting off greed and covetousness.

[7 : 32] Or imagine trying to stop idolatry in your heart without worshipping Christ in all things. It just doesn't work. So Christian growth is both negative and positive.

And we'll go through the positives today if I ever get there. My second point is this. It is indwelling sin. So even after we have died and been raised with Christ and are seated with him in heaven now, we still struggle, all believers struggle with indwelling sin.

We've come to fullness in Jesus Christ, but we are still capable of deep sinfulness. Because the thing about indwelling sin is that it lasts in us until we die.

And all the religious exercises and all the religious experiences that we can add to Jesus Christ just don't touch indwelling sin. Christ alone forgives ongoingly.

Christ alone renews ongoingly. Christ alone gives us the desires and the power to serve him and continue to walk in his likeness.

[8 : 43] And that's the second point. And my third point is this. That the apostle is giving us a vision of the new humanity. When we come into the relationship with Christ, it means coming into a living relationship with Christ's chosen people.

And the basis of our moral change is that we are part of the new creation, the new humanity in Christ Jesus. And that means that God himself is at work in us, renewing us together.

And that's the point of verses 9 to 11. He is not talking about us as individuals, but as part of two different humanities.

If you cast your eyes down there, you see in verse 9 and verse 10 these words, old self, new self. Old self is not my individual nature.

It is the old humanity that I used to belong to until I died in Christ. My new self is not just my individual new nature.

[9 : 46] It is the new humanity, the new identity given to me by Jesus Christ among the people of God from heaven. It's an echo of chapter 1. Do you remember where Paul says we've been delivered from the domain of darkness, transferred to the kingdom of his beloved son?

It's an entirely new realm of existence with other people. And the most remarkable thing he says about our new humanity is in verse 10. He says, it is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

It's being renewed, which means God is doing it and it's ongoing constantly. So as we seek to put into practice the moral shape of the Christian life, God himself is changing and renewing us and remaking us to be like Jesus Christ.

That's why he finishes that section with verse 11. Here, he says, here in the new humanity, there is not Greek or Jew, circumcised, uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave free, but Christ is all, as we learned in chapter 1, and in all, Christ in us, the hope of glory.

So, now we're in a much better place to look at verses 12 to 17, to the positive picture of practical community life in the church, the practical picture of the new humanity which struggles with indwelling sin.

[11 : 16] So, if verses 5 to 11 tell us that one of the key marks of the new humanity is purity, verses 12 to 17 tell us there are two more marks of the new humanity, Christian community and Christian unity.

Christian community verses 12 to 14 and Christian unity 15 to 16. However, before we go there, I've got one more thing to say. I think this is the longest introduction I've ever had to a sermon.

There are two things in our lives right now that make these wonderful verses very challenging for us. Not impossible, but very demanding. The first is COVID.

We've spent the greater part of this year, and likely next year, having to avoid one another. We've added degrees of separation from each other.

The key word this year has not been harmony, unity and togetherness, but distance, separation, disconnection, keeping away from each other. And the experts are now recognising the harm of distancing, even though it is necessary.

[12 : 26] Not just economic, personal, social and psychological, but we say there's a spiritual danger and harm in this as well. Because we're made for communion with Christ and communion and community with each other, the local church has been put in place by God as a small picture of the new humanity, where we are to live out the love of Christ in front of the world.

And most of chapter 3 verses 12 to 17 assumes that we're meeting together, that we're having at least as much contact with each other, where we get on each other's nerves and have to practise forgiveness.

We don't get that chance right now. And I think part of our collective grief as believers, it's a spiritual grief, is that our normal sources of growing and gathering and serving each other have all but disappeared.

And it takes extra effort and intentionality for us to love one another and to serve one another. That's the first thing that makes it challenging, these verses. The second thing, of course, is individualism.

I think it's harder and harder for us to understand this passage, let alone put it into practice. We have been raised and coached and marinated in individualism.

[13 : 49] Our imaginations are so colonised by individualism, it's hard for us to imagine a healthy alternative. That's what we're made for and that is what we long for, community together in Christ.

And as we know, individualism has served us very poorly during COVID time, removing us from community. It has masked the healing touch of others and we've shriveled because of it.

And so we need God's power to change us. We need the encouragement and energy of the Holy Spirit, which is exactly where the apostle begins, verse 12. So now we finally get to the verses that we're supposed to look at this morning.

And the first point is verses 12 to 14. This is the first mark of the new humanity. It is Christian community. Look at verse 12.

Now the reason the apostle starts where he does is he recognises that these things, compassion and kindness, take the power of God.

[15 : 05] The Bible never says be nice because it's nice to be nice to each other. He's saying, no, no, no. You are the ones whom God takes pleasure in calling to himself.

God takes pleasure in giving us the privilege of being part of his family. And he's assuring us of God's full acceptance and his free grace that nothing is lacking.

He says to these new Christians in Colossae, God chose you. He set you apart for himself. He's loved you dearly. And the way that shows itself is in these five qualities in verse 12.

Compassionate hearts. Just as we have been dearly loved, we are meant to love, dearly love others in the local church. Not generally, but specifically. The way God renews us in the image of Jesus Christ is not so much as individuals, but in fellowship with his people seeking to make a Christian community.

Kindness and humility and meekness and patience. These are all Christian qualities. In fact, they're all Christ's qualities. Seeking to build others up. Seeking to serve others.

[16 : 14] Being sensitive to their needs. Making choices that put other people above yourself. This is what makes Christian community. You say, ah, yes, but what about indwelling sin?

Christians can be just as nasty, spiteful and vicious as anyone else. And to our great shame, it's often Christian leaders who are the worst offenders. That's why we have to hold verse 12 and verse 13 together.

See, he goes on with this lovely picture of kindness and compassion. And then he says, bearing with one another. We do need kindness and gentleness and patience and humility because there will be grievances.

There will be wrongs and aggravations and exasperating behavior. And the Apostle Paul says that when someone sins against you in the body, we are to forgive them.

I know this is difficult. But this is what forgiveness means. Forgiveness means we do not take revenge on others who sin against us. We do not treat them as they mistreat us.

[17 : 32] We do not hold their sin against them. In fact, we determine to do them good, not evil. We extend the peace of Christ to them.

This does not mean ignoring what the person has done. It doesn't mean excusing the person for what they've done. It doesn't mean being self-righteous because you've let it go.

It means dealing with it, but first forgiving. And when the Apostle uses the word forgive here, it's not the usual word for just cancelling a debt someone owes me.

It's from the little word grace. So this is forgiveness when it's not deserved, but it's freely offered. And the great surprise is that we are to forgive as the Lord has forgiven us, not just because he's forgiven us, but in the same way that he forgave us.

No grudges held. No hurt revenged. No ongoing bitterness or resentment in the Christian body. This is far more than just putting up with each other.

[18 : 45] It's far more than just doing no harm. And what binds these five virtues of compassion and kindness together is love. We are to put on love because we have been dearly loved and because this is how God renews us in the image of Christ.

And this is what makes for Christian community. And that's the first mark in these verses of this new humanity, Christian community. The second mark in verses 15 to 16 is Christian unity.

And you can see from the way the verses read that they're different from verses 12 to 14. Instead of put on various good things, the apostle gives us pictures, two pictures, of two wonderful gifts that God has given us, the peace of Christ and the word of Christ and what we are to do with them.

Verse 15. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts to which you indeed were called in one body and be thankful.

Now this verse is usually taken individually as though it's about my inner peace making some decision. And sometimes in the Bible the peace of Christ is inner peace. Sometimes it's peace with God.

[19 : 58] Here it is not inner peace. It is not peace with God. It is the peace that Christ gives to his body, the church. It's about unity and concord and harmony.

The apostle is saying, let the peace which Christ has given to the community rule all your hearts together. It's not the peace in your heart that should rule.

It's the peace of the community that should rule in your heart. What should control our decisions in the body of Christ are not my personal preferences or how I feel necessarily or what serves me and my needs, but what makes for unity and harmony in the congregation.

You see, we must never take unity for granted. It's a very precious gift of Christ, but it has to be fostered and demonstrated and protected and practiced.

And there are often disagreements in a church community. We have to have disagreements. We're so different. We see things differently, different backgrounds, tastes. And some of these differences can be even painful. However, unless the truth of the gospel is under threat, division is normally sinful.

[21 : 07] Because we have been called to one body, which means we are called to belong to people whom God has chosen, but we might not choose. And the peace which Christ gives to his body is this unity.

And this has to rule our decisions and our actions together. And then we come finally to the word of Christ, verse 16. It's a lovely little window into early Christian corporate worship.

In the New Testament times. The Apostle Paul says, 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 we should probably take a couple of weeks on this verse. It's full of implications for us. But let me just make two comments on verse 16. And the first is this, that the word of Christ is central to Christian gatherings.

The word of Christ, the gospel of God, the preaching of scriptures are meant to deeply and richly take its home in our corporate life.

[22 : 20] To dwell amongst us abundantly, overwhelmingly richly. And since faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ, the most faith building, trust enriching thing we can do is to have our worship shaped by and centered on the word of God.

John Owen, who is the greatest Puritan, wrote, That Jesus stands among us in the preaching, calling us, inviting us, encouraging us to come to him.

Let me quote from him. He says, That's the first comment.

The word of God has to be central in our gatherings. And the second comment is, did you notice the reference to singing? One of the main ways that the word of Christ is to dwell richly among us is in singing.

That means that music, the music ministry, is part of the ministry of the word. We sing not so much to express ourselves as to build others up.

[23 : 38] We sing to each other with thanksgiving in our hearts to God as a way of promoting unity and community and building others up in their faith. Which means that what is important is not what you get out of it, but much more what you put into it for the sake of others in the body.

Notice two, please, and I don't particularly want to stir the hornet's nest much on this, but there are three different kinds of music styles there in Colossae. Paul mentions psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

This is the early 60s AD. Three different music styles. And that tells us there's no one right music style. So music in worship is not to create a mood.

It's not to cultivate a certain clientele. Well, it is to give voice to our praise and to our lament, but it's to teach the word of God to each other. It's not just for emotion or atmosphere.

It is a way to bring the word of God to others so that it will richly dwell among us. And this too is part of church life as God intends it. This too is part of the anticipation of the new humanity where Jesus is seen.

[24 : 51] I'll finish very quickly with this wonderful final verse, which has become our memory verse, verse 17. Whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

He reminds us, he goes back to where he started, that our highest priority in all things is seeking the glory of Jesus Christ. Putting to death those things that don't please him, putting on those things that do please him.

And as God renews us into the image of Jesus Christ, our highest priority is to do all things in his name, to seek him in everything we do. Amen.