

Colossians 3:12-17

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[0 : 0 0] Well, this evening we're going to look at our relationships with other Christians, whether it's within the local fellowship of which we are part or more widely. And specifically, we're going to look at the things that should characterize those relationships.

And we're going to be looking at what God has said to us in Colossians chapter 3 and verse 12 through to verse 17. And there's a challenge to us, to each of us, to look at our own hearts as we work through the various instructions which God has given to us in this passage.

Well, many years ago I came across this saying that someone shared with me, which was, to dwell above with the saints we love, be glory. But to dwell below with the saints we know, well, that's a different story. And I don't know if that's been your experience or if that was just something that this person felt compelled to share with me one Sunday. But we can all be thoughtless. The truth is that we can all cause offence to other Christians from time to time.

That sometimes we take offence when no offence was intended. We don't always care for each other as we should. We all have a tendency to sin and too quickly to follow the culture rather than God's word with the impact that follows on our relationships. And I think we feel that more in the church sometimes than we do outside because we expect more of our brothers and sisters in Christ and rightly so.

And because we are family, if there's a dislocation, if there's a tension, if there's a breach, well, that hurts in a way in which it's deeper and more significant than perhaps in any other relationships. Well, before we go to verse 12, I wanted to start with perhaps three introductory thoughts. And the first is that we are called to reflect the character of God. We see that in verse 10 of the passage we read, that we are being renewed in the image of our Creator.

[2 : 4 9] There's a passage in Romans 8 which is very familiar to us. And it starts by asking this question, who or what can separate us from the love of Christ? And there are a list of circumstances given.

And Paul concludes that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of Christ. Not any circumstances, nor any of our own behaviour can separate us. And why is that? Well, the reason that the love of Christ is because the love he has for us is not dependent upon those things.

It's dependent upon the character of Christ himself. It's dependent upon the love that God has for us. And the challenge for us, when we say that we want to reflect the image and the character of our God, is to ask how we reflect that character in relation to other Christians. What could separate another Christian from my love? Are there any circumstances that should be allowed to separate another Christian, a brother or sister in Christ from my love? Is there any behaviour on their part that could do it? Because if my character is truly reflecting the character of my Lord, then the truth is that nothing should be able to separate someone from my love, then it should be able to separate them from the love of the Lord himself. Now, this is not talking about an indulgent love any more than God's love is indulgent.

And sometimes that requires us to correct or admonish, even as it says later in this passage in Colossians 3. But we need to speak the truth in love.

This is a heart issue for us. It's an issue of my heart. If we were to go back to Colossians chapter 2 and verse 20, there's a kind of wider context going on in Colossians because some people had come into the church and they were, what verse 8 talks about, a hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. Now, part of that was a list of do's and don'ts of things which they had come up with.

[5 : 45] And that to be spiritual, you had to follow the list that they had come up with. And Paul says at the end of chapter 2 that that approach of focusing on the externals has no value in restraining what he refers to as their essential indulgence but we could broaden it out to refer to having no value as far as spiritual things are concerned.

Rather, the issue is our heart. The issue is not the externals, the issue is what's inside of us. Because out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.

In the beginning of chapter 3, he says now, you need to set your hearts and your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

And in fact, in verse 4 says, Christ is your life. So, we've got to reflect the very character of God in our relationships with each other.

And this is not an issue of the externals, it's the issue of our own hearts. Because if our hearts are right, we will relate to our brothers and sisters in Christ in the right way.

[7 : 08] The second thing I wanted to say as an introductory thought was to do with our motivation. Relating to our brothers and sisters in the right way will increase our own happiness, our own joy.

We should expect our joy to increase as we reflect God's character, as we reflect His own image. Now, that's an entirely legitimate motivation for us.

The Scriptures are full of promises of reward for those who follow faithfully what the Lord has said. In fact, if you go into Hebrews chapter 12, we even see in the motivation of Christ on the cross as to why He endured the cross.

It says, for the joy set before Him. So, when we seek the right relationship with other Christians, we can expect that to be something which is for our joy.

The third thing, just by way of introduction, is that loving our brothers and sisters is a witness. It's legitimate for people to say to us, or if not to say it, at least to think it, that if you show me your redeemed life, then I might believe in your Redeemer.

[8 : 40] There's something about the witness of the authentic Christian life lived out in front of people which becomes a witness. It's the credibility. It's the genuineness of our faith, the authenticity.

And in fact, the Lord said in John chapter 13, as I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

So, we're called to reflect the character of God in our relationships with each other. There are promises in the Scripture of blessing and of happiness and reward when we're faithful to what the Lord has called us.

And thirdly, there's a motivation in the witness that flows from that. Well, let's turn to chapter 3 and verse 12, because it seems to me that this speaks to our collective life with our brothers and sisters in Christ, our family relationships.

In verse 12, there's a reference to as God's chosen people. In verse 13, each other, one another. In verse 15, it refers to as members of one body.

[10 : 02] And in verse 16, there's a one another again. So, this is talking about our collective life together. And there are various things, and we'll work through some of them, that we're called to clothe ourselves with.

These things are to so characterize us that when people look at us, these are the things that they see.

Now, you can imagine if you've ever watched Crime Watch, or if there's a description of someone who the police are trying to catch, and they'll have a description of what they were wearing.

If someone was going to describe you, how would they describe you? Would they describe you in the ways, or with the characteristics, with which this passage calls us to clothe ourselves with?

This is how we are to fulfill the command in verse 10, that we might be renewed in knowledge in the image of our Creator.

[11 : 16] And these virtues will be overlapping in the sense you start defining one by reference to the other. So, let's look at the first of these, for we are to clothe ourselves, first of all, with compassion.

Now, there are two Greek words being used that are translated compassion here. One is for compassion, or mercy, or sympathy. But the other intensifies it because it refers to our insides, to our heart, and it's therefore this intensity of a heartfelt compassion, or a deeply felt compassion.

So, the question is, how do we develop compassion? How do we clothe ourselves with compassion? And I think there are certain practical things that we can do about getting to know each other.

It's difficult to feel compassion for people that you don't know. About creating opportunities that we might know each other better. That we might listen to each other.

Not just hear each other, but to listen. To understand what's on someone else's heart. How they're feeling. Their struggles, their difficulties, their sadnesses, their joys.

[12 : 44] To be genuinely interested in each other. And to have the integrity to keep confidential what might be shared with us.

That people might be encouraged to share with us. Not just on a superficial level, but how they actually feel. The truth is that there are many in churches who feel lonely, and who feel marginalized, and who feel that people don't care.

And the Lord calls us to clothe ourselves with compassion, and to take the practical steps necessary to develop that in our own hearts.

The second thing that we're called to develop, or to clothe ourselves with, is kindness. To be concerned about another's good.

To take action, to follow through on the compassion. Perhaps a good illustration of that would be the parable of the Good Samaritan. Of someone who went beyond what was expected.

[14 : 00] In fact, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, hardly anything was expected of him in the culture of the day. But he went far and away beyond what was expected. And there's a challenge to our own hearts in that.

Proverbs 12, 25 says, An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up. It's quite sobering to think you, even a kind word can cheer someone up who is anxious and worn down and to share and carry each other's burdens, as indeed we are called to do.

So we are called by God to clothe ourselves with compassion and with kindness. And also to clothe ourselves with humility. The truth is we have a tendency, we all have a tendency to be proud or to be boastful, to be seen by others as important.

And the Lord addressed that, didn't he, in the Sermon on the Mount when he talked about giving to the poor and praying and fasting to be seen by others. Proverbs 11 says, When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom.

And so our motivation to humility is that scriptures describe humility as a wise way to live.

[15 : 41] We want to live lives which are wise and not foolish. And the second motivation to humility comes from the promises that scriptures give on the way in which God will bless those who are humble.

Proverbs 3 specifically says that God gives grace to the humble. And Psalm 147 says the Lord sustains the humble. So there's a motivation for us to humility not just because of the way in which the scriptures describe that as a wise way of approaching, a wise way of living and of relating to each other, but specific promises in the scripture of the blessing of God.

So how do we relate to each other in a way which is humble? Well there may be acts of kindness that no one else will see.

Giving to the needy but of general application. Jesus said that when your father sees what is done in secret he will reward you.

Perhaps it's doing something which is viewed as unimportant or not particularly spiritual or that anyone could do.

[17 : 08] Perhaps it's doing something which is visible and important and doing it in the right way. And there's a place for I think reminding ourselves that whatever gifts or abilities that we have these are all things that we've received from our God and he expects us to steward them and the truth is that there is nothing that we have received, nothing that we have, that we have not received from God and if we have received it from God how can we boast as though we did not?

1 Corinthians 4 So we're called to clothe ourselves with compassion and with kindness and humility.

We're also called to clothe ourselves with gentleness. Now if you're to try and define gentleness you'd probably end up using the words humility and patience because these things are overlapping.

It's not weakness there's a strength of character required for gentleness. It's as we're the opposite of a harshness or an aggressive nature.

Now there will be exceptional circumstances where which requires us to be robust. We can think of situations in the Gospels where the Lord had to be very direct in the way in which he dealt with the Pharisees or his actions in the temple.

[18 : 46] We can think of situations where for example Paul opposed Peter to his face because he was clearly in the wrong. These are exceptional things and even in those circumstances we are called to speak of.

So our approach with each other has to be a gentle approach and it has to be an approach which is characterized by patience.

And one of the things that struck me as I was looking through this was the number of times that the Scriptures call these things wise and calls us to live this way because that is the way of wisdom.

In relation to patience, Proverbs 14, 29 and 19, 11, gives us patience and that in contrast being quick-tempered or reacting to an offense is folly.

It was a very helpful passage in Ecclesiastes chapter 7, verses 8 and 9 where some of contrasts are being drawn out.

[19 : 56] It says there, patience is better than pride. Do not quickly, do not be quickly provoked in your spirit for anger resides in the lap of fools.

It is better than pride. Now, if I think I'm more important than someone or if I think that my preferences are more valid than someone else's, then that pride can lead me to be impatient with other people.

And yet the Scriptures say that patience is better than pride and patience is a mark of wisdom. For anger resides in the lap of fools.

Often people use anger to try and manipulate people and circumstances to get their own way. The Scriptures call that residing in the lap of fools.

Patience is better than imposing yourselves on others, better in God's eyes. Proverbs 16, better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.

[21 : 18] In other words, self-control is better than the ability to control others, and strength of character than physical strength. life. So, there's a motivation to patience in wisdom and in things which are better, a better way, a better character as far as God is concerned.

There's a motivation to patience in the fact that patience, just purely from a pragmatic perspective, that patience works. in Proverbs 25, it says, through patience, a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.

So, as we're dealing with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, if there's something to be said, saying it in a patient way often creates a response where people listen to us and are open to consider what we have to say.

Conversely, if you just think on situations where people have been aggressive as to what happens, the defenses come up and people stop listening, and at that point, the opportunity to persuade has gone.

So, it's not just a wise way of approaching and a better way as far as God is concerned. It's also a way which produces a better result.

[22 : 53] A gentle answer turns away wrath, and a patient man calms a quarrel. And there's real danger in our relationships when we lack patience.

Proverbs 17 says that starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam. Now, that's just such a helpful illustration for us. Something very small, almost something inconsequential, and it grows and it develops out of all proportion to the original conversation, the original offense, the original matter.

And it can devastate relationships, and as a completely out of proportion, and bigger and bigger and bigger in the effect. Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam.

Where an offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city, Proverbs 18. And again, if you think about that as an analogy, about the barriers to fellowship that can arise when someone is offended, that can last for years, that can destroy relationships.

So, for our part, we need to be willing to forgive those who offend us. And if someone has something against us, the Lord said that we are to take the initiative.

[24 : 33] Even if someone has something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar first, go and be reconciled, then come back.

And even in that, the priority and the urgency that the Lord himself commands us to restore a breach in fellowship is something that we need to take seriously.

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. We are to forgive each other, and we are to seek peace.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body, you were called to peace. Now, I think the peace that Paul is referring to here is less about the sort of inner peace of freedom from anxiety, but the peace and the unity between Christians as members of one body.

Because we are one body, when there is a lack of peace, we suffer. Even when it, you know, we may not be the one to cause it, maybe we will be the one who causes it, but we suffer when there is a lack of peace in the body.

[26 : 07] Again, that doesn't mean that things don't need to be addressed. Sometimes things need to be addressed in order for there to be peace. But that should be our goal and our object.

We are to forgive one another. We are to love one another. We are called to peace. We are called to teach and admonish one another. We are called to have a spirit of gratitude and thankfulness to God, even thankfulness for each other.

So in conclusion, how do we do that? You know, when we list all of these things and we examine our own hearts, is it not the case that we fall short of all of these things?

And could be tempted to almost a despair as to whether we could fully live out what the Lord says the Lord commands us.

And at that point, we should remind ourselves and encourage us by what Peter says in 2 Peter, because there he says, his divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness.

[27 : 28] So we have God's part to give us the desire to follow what he has called us to do and the ability to live it out, and our part to make every effort to add to our faith the things which we are called to live out in his word.

So that the truth of our lives may reflect verse 17, and whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Amen. Amen. Amen.