

“The Peace of Christ”
Colossians 3:12-17
November 20, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

Verse 15 is a familiar verse about the peace of Christ. **“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.”** This verse is often misinterpreted to apply to how we ought to discern the will of God. We do so, according to this misinterpretation, by seeking a feeling of peace about a certain decision. That’s not a bad principle, but it is not what this verse is talking about. Paul is talking about the peace Jesus brings to the church, uniting us into one body. We become, as we saw in the previous passage, the model home of the coming kingdom, showing the world what heaven is like. Heaven is marked by peace and the church is called to show that peace to the world. Peace is both universally desired and universally elusive. It eludes everyone outside of Christ because Jesus is the only one who knows how to bring such peace. And he calls us to let this peace that he brings rule in the church, in our families, and in all our lives.

I. The Clothing of Peace

Paul continues with the clothing metaphor he had begun back in verse 8. In that verse he spoke of the sins associated with anger, saying that they were like filthy clothes that needed to be taken off. Now he moves to the positive side of that metaphor and speaks of the new clothes we are to put on. I notice that all of these character qualities he mentions involve in one way or another relationships with people who are difficult to love. Such qualities as compassion, kindness, patience and forgiveness all assume that the other person has done something wrong that makes them difficult to love. Paul approaches this topic of peace differently than most people. The common idea is that peace will come if I can only find the right people to be in relationship with, those who will be easy to love. If I can find the right people, this thinking goes, then I can find peace in my relationships. Paul is more realistic. He seems to believe that there are no people who are easy to love, and so his solution is to become the kind of person able to love hard-to-love people. These are the qualities needed for that kind of love. Let’s look at them more carefully.

He begins with the quality of a compassionate heart. Older versions translate more literally, “bowels of mercies.” There are two words in the original, the first one referring literally to the intestines. So this first quality with which we are to clothe ourselves means to have an attitude of mercy in your gut for those who are captured by sin. It’s the attitude Jesus had when he wept for Jerusalem because of their stubborn refusal to receive him. It’s the

attitude the apostle Paul had for his fellow Jews who remained in their unbelief, saying he would rather take their place in hell than have them go to hell for their sin (Romans 9:3). The opposite of this attitude is a smug condemnation. When the Bible describes those who sin, it does so in more than one way. It describes them as guilty and responsible for their guilt, but also as victims of their own sin natures. In Galatians 6:1, Paul says, **“If anyone is caught in any transgression...”** Being a victim of sin doesn’t make one innocent of it, but it should produce in us an attitude of compassion for sinners. Is there a sinner toward whom you are feeling some anger right now? See that person as a victim of his sin nature as well as a sinner, and ask God for a heart of compassion for him or her.

Kindness is the next quality we are to put on. The Bible uses this word to describe the attitude that results in doing good to people even when they don’t deserve it. It is often used of God’s attitude toward his enemies. He is kind to them. Kindness is what prevents us from responding in kind to those who are rude and self-centered. Several years ago, the church was replacing the white picket fence in front of our building. The old one had rotted, and we needed to tear it down and build then build a new one. While it was torn down, a neighbor stopped by the church office to complain about our tearing down of this fence. She was a bit angry and upset with us because she said she had always liked this fence. She was really being rude and self-centered, believing that she had some right to tell us what to do with our own property just because of some personal preference she had. It would have been easy to respond to her in a way that tried to put her in her place. But it would not have been kind to do so. So we simply said, “Thank you for your interest. We like the picket fence too and are trying to keep it looking nice.”

Humility comes next. It means a lowliness of mind that counts others as more significant than oneself (Phil. 2:3). The humble person is easy to get along with, often centered on others and never taking offense easily. Meekness, the next quality, is simply an attitude of gentleness and courtesy toward others. The meek don’t condemn others in an attitude of self-righteousness. Then there’s patience, which Paul expands on when he says that we are to bear with one another. There is a need to bear with others because people don’t change easily or quickly. For example, suppose a woman has a husband who is not very affirming. She says to him one day, “Honey, I would like you to be more affirming of me. When you talk to me about things that are important to you, it seems to me that it is almost always about what you find wrong with me. Can you be more affirming?” Which of the following three outcomes would you say is more likely? First, the husband says, “Thank you for letting me know about that. In the future I will be more affirming.” And then he follows through on that and is never critical again. Second, he objects, “I’m not critical. I’m the most affirming person I know. I just think you’re being too sensitive.” Third, he apologizes, says he will try to do better in the future and may improve a little over the short term but continues to exhibit a critical spirit for years to come. I

think we all realize that options two or three are far more common than the first one, which points up our need to bear with one another. Change doesn't happen to any of us quickly and easily, but the changes needed are far more likely to come amidst relationships marked by this kind of patience and love.

Paul concludes this part by mentioning the quality that is head and shoulders above the others in importance. **“And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”** There will always be questions regarding how to live in peace with others. For example, when does bearing patiently with the sins of others become enabling? Where is that line exactly? How do you know when to overlook a sin and when to rebuke a sin? All such questions are to be answered with love being our guide.

II. The Gospel of Peace

One of the reasons peace is so elusive is that these qualities that bring peace to our relationships are not easy to put on. You don't become kind and loving by putting it on your to-do list for the day. Putting on these qualities is far more difficult than putting on your clothes in the morning. I would imagine that there is not a single person in this room today who doesn't want to be kind to others. But I'm just as sure that the vast majority of us are likely to exhibit a lack of kindness at some point today. That's why the words in the middle of verse 12 are so important. **“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved...”** these character qualities. Those are the same words used to describe Israel in the Old Testament. They are gospel words in that they are an announcement of what God has done for us, not what we do for God. You cannot make God choose you or love you. These are words about what we are to receive rather than what we are to achieve. In Christ, you are already chosen, holy and beloved. Receiving this is essential in learning to put on the character qualities God requires of us.

If you don't begin by receiving your new identity as chosen, holy and beloved, you will run away from God instead of running to God when confronted with the requirement of putting on these qualities. And running toward God looks like coming to him in repentance and faith when we fall short of these qualities. Let me illustrate it like this. Imagine you develop a toothache and need to go to the dentist. You think to yourself, “I can't go to the dentist because my teeth are such a mess. What will he think of me? I better attempt some self-dentistry first, and then when my teeth improve I will go to him.” We don't do that because of our faith. We believe that the dentist has skills and equipment we don't possess. Further, we believe that our problem is desperate enough that help cannot be put off. Finally, we believe that the dentist is willing to help us. So we go to him, messy mouth and all, and submit to his experience and wisdom in sorting it all out.

That's how the gospel empowers us to put on these qualities. We have a big "toothache" in that we make a mess of our relationships. We believe that our problem is beyond all self-help, but that God is both able and willing to help us. So we go to him, knowing that we are his chosen, holy and beloved people. We take the mess of our lives to him, believing that he is able to sort it all out. That's the gospel. I'm struck in this passage about how frequently Paul weaves in the gospel. We can see it in the fact that thanksgiving is mentioned three times. Gratitude is a central gospel quality because it is more about receiving than achieving. Further, we see the gospel in Paul's command that we are to forgive each other "**as the Lord has forgiven you**" (v. 13). The power to forgive others lies in seeing the greatness of God's forgiveness of us.

John Perkins felt called of God to go to Mississippi to serve the church through pursuing racial justice during the civil rights era. His efforts led to his arrest. As he was in jail, he describes in his book *Let Justice Roll Down* how he was savagely beaten and kicked until he would lose consciousness. As soon as he regained consciousness, the beatings would start all over again. His inebriated guards would take turns beating and kicking him as he would lie in a pool of his own blood. It would not be hard to hate his persecutors. Here's what Perkins described happened in his own heart as he was recovering in a hospital bed:

The Spirit of God worked on me as I lay in that bed. An image formed in my mind. The image of the cross—Christ on the cross. It blotted out everything else in my mind. This Jesus knew what I had suffered. He understood. And He cared. Because He had experienced it all Himself. This Jesus, this One who had brought good news directly from God in heaven, had lived what He preached. Yet He was arrested and falsely accused. Like me, He went through an unjust trial. He also faced a lynch mob and got beaten. But even more than that, He was nailed to rough wooden planks and killed. Killed like a common criminal. At the crucial moment, it seemed to Jesus that even God Himself had deserted Him. The suffering was so great, He cried out in agony. He was dying. But when He looked at that mob who had lynched Him, He didn't hate them. He loved them. He forgave them. And He prayed God to forgive them. 'Father, forgive these people, for they don't know what they are doing.' His enemies hated. But Jesus forgave. I couldn't get away from that.... It's a profound, mysterious truth—Jesus' concept of love overpowering hate. I may not see its victory in my lifetime. But I know it's true. I know it's true, because it happened to me. On that bed, full of bruises and stitches—God made it true in me. He washed my hatred away and replaced it with a love for the white man in rural Mississippi.

III. The Worship of Peace

The last two verses of our text speak of the worship of the church. This worship both flows from peace and furthers it. A church marked by divisiveness will not be a worshiping church. Paul mentions two qualities of a

church's worship that promote peace. First, the word of Christ has a rich and extensive presence. When Paul says **"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly"** (v. 16), he is speaking of the word about Christ or the gospel. To dwell richly means that we give it a large place in our church. He summarizes this word as both teaching and admonishing or warning. And it's too big a job for any one person and is to be pursued by all. We are all to teach and admonish.

A worshipping church marked by peace will also be a singing church, **"singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God."** While it is impossible to know the distinction between these three classifications, it's not hard to get Paul's point. When the gospel brings peace to our hearts and our churches, a song arises in our hearts that is impossible to silence. We just want to sing. I want to be singing until the day I die. Singing engages a different part of the brain than other cognitive functions. Alzheimer patients who have learned the songs and hymns of the church may no longer be able even to recognize their loved ones, but can still remember the favorite hymns and songs. When the peace of Christ rules in our midst, we will be singing until the day we die.

CONCLUSION:

Let me summarize this with an application. Where is peace needed in your life? Perhaps it's your marriage or relationships in the church or your family. What will it take for you to pursue peace in those relationships? Which of these character qualities Paul mentions here do you need to put on? Is there a lack of kindness in your heart toward others, or perhaps very little compassion? Or do you need to believe the gospel in order to be able forgive others? Where do you start? There is an important relationship between the character qualities Paul mentions and believing the gospel. That relationship can be described as a feedback loop. A feedback loop is when cause A leads to effect B, and then as B happens, A is increased. You may not have thought about it this way, but the drought we are currently experiencing is an example of a feedback loop. The lack of rain has caused a decrease in soil moisture, which then kills plants or causes them to release less moisture back into the air. Less moisture in the air means less rain, which then increases the soil moisture, and the loop continues in its downward spiral until the drought is broken.

So where do you start in pursuing peace? It doesn't really matter because of this feedback loop. You could start by drinking in the wonder of the gospel by which you are God's chosen, holy and beloved child. That will empower you to pursue these character qualities that lead to peace. Or you could start by putting on these qualities. If you start there, you are going to find how dark your heart is, and it will take you to the gospel. The important thing is to get started.