

*Welcome*  
Colossians 3:15-17  
11/29/15  
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So what we're going to do today—it's not in the series of what Randy's been preaching on in Ezekiel. We're just taking an opportunity to go from what he's been preaching on from the word in Ezekiel, being reminded of what we are thankful for, celebrating a national holiday—I'm thankful for the national holiday. I'm thankful for pumpkin pie. I'm thankful for sweet potato soufflé. We had Cornish hens this year. It was just Kelly and I celebrating. The girls were taking a nap. So we had a good time, and I hope you did as well.

And what we have here is a celebration—a feast—a feast from the word that Paul gives us in the Book of Colossians. I really love Colossians. I don't know when the last time it was that you read it. But it may be one of my favorite letters from Paul. And here in the passage that we'll be looking at today is, what do we do with the gospel now that we are in Christ? How do we then live? A very common feature in Paul's letters. Let's talk about the gospel first, who you are in Christ, and then let's move towards what implications that has for our lives.

And in chapter three, Paul has been talking about putting off the old, putting off these vices that choke us, that distract us—these things that are actually of the flesh and contrary to the gospel—rather, let's put on these things, these virtues, these fruits of the Spirit, of what it looks like to have a life lived in Christ. And that is what we find today in these verses. And I'm going to read starting at verse twelve, but we're going to focus on verses fifteen through seventeen. So follow along with me as I read.

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 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 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. [Colossians 3:12-17, ESV]

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of God remains forever. Praise be to God. Let's pray, and let's see what God has for us from his Word today.

Father, we are grateful. We are grateful to sing these wonderful hymns, songs written, music composed, decades—sometimes hundreds and hundreds of years ago—instruments given to edify and encourage your church. Some people are moved to laughter and joy. Others are moved with tears and quietness and stillness. And you remain steadfast. Help us, Spirit, to understand your Word and apply it to our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The power of those two little words, "thank you." Hopefully you heard them a lot this week—maybe on Thursday. Maybe that has continued on with ripple effects into this day. But they're very simple words. Thank you. Sometimes they are merely just rote. It's just program language. It's protocol. We've been given a gift. We quickly know to say thank you, and we're expecting the next phrase, you're welcome, to come next. It's very programmed into our language. It's something we teach our children to

say. I don't care if you are thankful—just say it. We have to learn the words before we understand the meaning. And this is what Paul is calling us to—to thankfulness.

So the text today is an encouragement. Do you hear that? When it was read, do you hear it and take it and receive it as an encouragement to live in light of the gospel, this transaction that we have with Jesus? This transaction is not rote, something that's just given as if it was a pair of socks from grandmother at Christmas. This a gift of tremendous value. And as Randy talked about last week, it begins with the story of welcome. So whereas our gift-giving is usually, gift is given, we say thank you, and then we're told we're welcome—in the gospel, we're welcomed first. The gift is given, and we respond with thanks.

I'm new here. Some of you may be new here as well. You'll get to know me better as the years go by. But when some people are moved with great joy and excitement, I can cry. So as you've seen me hold back tears, I may cry even more as we go along, because I'm thankful. And that's how I express it. And that's what thanks is—it's an expression of gratitude. And so what we're going to talk about today with these verses is how the work of God's redemption fulfilled in Jesus Christ is a gift. And it's a gift to be received. It's a gift to be remembered. And it's a gift that invites a response. So let's look first at how we are to receive this gift.

We see just even there in the whole passage. But in fifteen, it talks about letting the peace of Christ rule your hearts—this idea of it being governed, being your rubric, being your criteria, being the basis for which you make decisions, your guide. But of course, it can't be those things unless you've received it—that you own it, you take it, you absorb it. It becomes your own. And what have we received from Jesus? Well, in short, the fulfillment of God's total salvation, beginning there even in the garden. But definitely we see it in God's deliverance of the people of Israel out of Egypt, as Rick so beautifully summarized. It's the total salvation from the Lord. It's the redemption of all things—creation, people—the whole entire universe is to be redeemed in Christ. There are too many things to say about those things. They're very vast and broad. But just to name a few that are mentioned here in this passage—we see that we receive his love. We receive his peace. We receive his identity as being a part of his body. And we receive his Word, and the Word very much being Jesus himself.

God's work of redemption is a corporate, cosmic reality that has been unfolding since the beginning, and it culminates in Jesus, in his work, and who he is as he lived a perfect life, as he died on the cross for our sins, as he was resurrected from the grave. This whole story in the totality of the gospel is this good news. And yet it also involves not only the cosmos, but it involves you and me on a personal, individual basis. It's a gift received by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus alone. This gift cannot be earned, and it's a gift that cannot be repaid.

Several years ago, I received a gift. It was on a Christmas morning. Well, actually, it wasn't on a Christmas morning, but it was on a Christmas that you're celebrating with family to pretend like it's Christmas because you're traveling around. And I wasn't expecting it. It was a leather briefcase. Now, I don't know how much you, you know, get excited about that, but I was excited. I didn't cry with excitement. I was excited. I wasn't expecting it. It was something I had been looking at for quite some time, going on several years, because I couldn't afford it. This leather is durable. This leather is well-made. I could go on and on about it, but I won't. If you want to know about it, I'm more than happy to tell you about it. This company, in their craftsmanship, their tagline is, "They'll fight over it when you're dead." Their products have a hundred-year warranty.

So something of great value, of a product made with materials that are going to last that long—of course it's going to have great cost that comes with it. But unexpectedly, my brother-in-law bought me one. And something that I was going to be saving for months, even years to get, he just purchased. And he bought it. And he gave it to me. And there was nothing in the world I could have done except to receive it. I couldn't pay it back with something of equal value—you know how we sometimes do with gift-giving.

Someone gives us a gift, and so we feel guilty that, okay, I need to somehow return that gift in some way. I think Randy even talked about this a little bit, regarding hospitality, that it was a patronage. I give to you; you give back to me at a later date, and that's how we'll take care of each other. We do that, subtly, sometimes unconsciously. But there was nothing I could do to give in return of equal value. All I could do was receive it with thanks.

And you see how our thanks are positively correlated with the magnitude of the gift. Genuine thanks is closely tied to receiving a gift that we don't deserve and that we cannot repay. And of course, there's another important component. Such gifts need to meet a need. They fulfill a deep desire. And they are given out of love. My brother-in-law's gift fulfilled those criteria, and I was full of gratitude. How much more is the gospel of salvation, the gift of Jesus Christ, a gift of such magnitude given in such a small package at the birth, the coming Messiah? Have you received this gift? And in what ways has the gospel of Jesus met your needs, fulfilled your desires? Yes, the gospel makes peace between you and God. The gospel of Jesus is the means through which you have reconciliation. It's where you experience the forgiveness of your sins. And it comes with great cost. And the gospel of Jesus is where you also experience, day by day, moment by moment, his sustaining care. This Christmas season, this Advent season, may we consider what we've received from the Living God through his son Jesus.

The work of God's redemption fulfilled in Jesus Christ is also a gift to be remembered. Now, remembering is perhaps the most complicated part of this little outline, because it's kind of convoluted. It's interwoven between the others. It's experienced simultaneously. It's experienced before. It's experienced after. It really undergirds everything about a gift. We heartily give thanks upon receiving something immediate, so like a birthday gift, an unexpected note in the mail, or from John Song, unsolicited tickets to Star Wars' opening day.

But in the event of receiving that gift, it's wonderful, but the moment can become fuzzy, and we long again for the experience of receiving. So if you heard that—sometimes we can have the fullness of the gift, or we're really just appreciating the experience of receiving a gift. So, you know, it could be reduced to brain chemistry. Some of you, I'm sure, could tell me better than I could tell you. But we could reduce it to merely the firing of neurotransmitters in our brain, the moments of giving and receiving. And of course this developing body of research is helpful in understanding things like our addictions and why we crave newer, better, and bigger. Why gifts once received become old and obsolete and mundane to us. How we get trapped in the cycle where thanksgiving is merely reduced to—rather, dependent upon thrills, our adrenaline, and the flare.

So I wanted a 60-inch television, but I didn't get one, because Randy last week told me not to. At least, that's what I heard from his sermon. But I'm better for it. I'm fine with my 32-inch TV that we bought several years ago. It's fine. It's more than conducive. It meets our needs. It was purchased on a Black Friday. And I'll enjoy watching Randy's 60-inch television. I don't know if he bought one.

The point is not merely the gift. That's what I'm getting at. The point is not merely the gift—it is remembering the gift-giver. But when we extract the gift from that personal relationship with the giver, yes, we might enjoy the thrill and experience thanks—genuine thanks, even—but for that moment. And then we go so easily back to feeling like we lack, that we're empty. This perceived emptiness is moments to take inventory. There are opportunities to remember, because these are the moments that we're tempted—tempted to believe half-truths, at best—tempted to believe outright condemnations, at worst.

What do we do with those temptations? We remember. We remember by letting the Word dwell in us. In verse sixteen, Paul is connecting the peace of Christ and the word of Christ there in parallel, that the peace of Christ would govern us. It would be the thing that controls our decisions, the things that we see the world through, and then likewise let that word permeate and marinate in our hearts, richly. It's not whipped cream on a pie. It's deep, abiding marinade that makes those steaks juicy.

This gift is to reside deep within us. It's a filling, not just on the surface. And so it involves rehearsing and retelling and remembering and reminding, and that's what Paul's getting at here in verse sixteen—that we would do this with teaching, and that we would do this with singing. And it's wonderful that he's doing this, because he's actually addressing us as whole people. We are brains on a stick, but we also are parts. We have deep emotion, and those things are actually held together in our body. And God has made us that way. And it is beautiful. And in our fallenness, we can forget. In our fallenness, we can be distracted and desire other things that, in the moment, might seem more fulfilling than what it actually promises—or, actually, what it fulfills. And so we need each other. I love how Rick mentioned that about singing. Actually, Rick's kind of said my whole sermon this morning. Thank you.

But we are to teach one another what we are to believe and what we are to do, according to the gospel. But also this instruction of admonition is also a way of instruction that we know what not to believe and what not to do. We see Paul doing that with putting off these vices and putting on these virtues. There is Christian living that is in response to the gospel of who we are in Christ.

But we're not just merely brains on a stick, only. Our doctrine must be doxology. It's praise. It's singing. It's rejoicing. And Paul is right to encourage us to have that be not only the teaching but the word marinating with song—psalms being outright the salter. The songs, many of them are from David, but they are the songbook of the people of God, prayers put to music. Hymns—well, some people believe that Paul might be actually making distinctions between these three things, but they're really differences without distinction. But hymns, praises to God, about God, spiritual songs—all of which we have done even today in our worship service—that these things are for us to appropriate the gospel of Jesus, that we would be reminded of what he has done for us and at what cost that came and how we are to receive it, with faith and with thanks.

Paul encourages the church to be a singing church. This is where knowledge, our cognitive knowledge, meets our emotion. It stirs affection in the heart. And we can't do that by ourselves, because remembering has to be done in community. Because if you can remember by yourself, then you don't need to remember. You need other people to point to things, to bring things up again, to bring in different emphases that you haven't been thinking about or that you've neglected or that you've forgotten. Remembering is done in community. The experience of people in relationship—it shares the contributions and makes a fuller picture.

As a community, we appropriate the story of the gospel. We are people who are following Jesus. We have been delivered. We have been redeemed. We have been changed. And we are following him. We do that in community. And by remembering together, we're distributing the weight of memory in experience. Not everyone has to remember the same things at the same time. For example, some people have deep faith the same time others might have incredible doubt. Others may have encouragement while others are crippled with fear and anxiety. Others are experiencing victory and growth while others might be locked in a cycle of addiction and held captive.

So remembering, teaching, admonishing, singing—these are ways, these are means that the Lord has given us for the Word to dwell in us, between us, among us, that we are pointing people to Jesus, that we are being pointed to Jesus. That's my job, but it's also your job to encourage me and to point Jesus to me. There is too much to bear by yourself. And the beauty of the one body in harmony, clothed with the garment of love. Here in verse sixteen, we see Paul giving a corporate call to remember the gospel.

Now, with singing, of course, I mean, we have songs all through Scripture. We have Moses singing of God's deliverance. We have—well, there's tons, but I'm jumping around here. We have Moses' song. We have many songs of David. We have him with outright talking about praise and thanksgiving, but we also have him giving detailed descriptions of what he's thankful for—shouts of exclamation that he considers one day in the court of the Lord better than a thousand days anywhere else. There is a filling of our heart

when we are dwelled with the Living God, and it is a feeling and an action and a reality of gratitude for what he has done.

And even in Colossians, there's a song. Maybe you know this, maybe you don't, but if you flip over to Colossians 1, many scholars believe verses fifteen through twenty are a hymn that Paul just inserts here in his train of thought. And what I love about Colossians is that he's addressing something that is very pertinent and very relevant to our culture. We are easily bored, just like the Colossians. They were excited and titillated by what was down the street, what feasts were happening down the street, what philosophies were new and current. "They're doing those things over there, and they're saying these things over there. I know we have Jesus, but we need to do something more, something better, something bigger." And Paul is saying, "No, no, no. You're getting bored. Let me tell you—let me remind you of Jesus."

And he sings—verse fifteen, he sings about Jesus. Jesus is the image of the invisible God. He is firstborn of creation. By him and through him and for him all things were created. Jesus holds all things together. Jesus is the head of the body. Jesus is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead. Jesus is preeminent. Jesus is the fullness of God, where deity of God was pleased to dwell bodily, and through Jesus all things are reconciled, making peace by the blood of his cross. Now, that is something to sing about. And when you're bored, you need to be reminded of that.

Now, I'm not a good singer, so I'm not going to sing to you, but I hope you are good singers and sing to me, because I easily get bored. But when I see and I'm reminded of the full salvation of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ, I see it as a gift, and that gift also invites a response. Now, you probably are hearing the circularity in what I've been saying. I've already kind of mentioned it. These are all interwoven together. You can't really tease them apart. Receiving usually precedes responding. All of these things cultivate a fuller fondness of the things that you are remembering.

Now, in verse seventeen, Paul is not getting too much down in the weeds. He's not prescriptive here. He's not giving details on how we should be giving thanks. What he's focusing on is that it would be a marked reality of our hearts, that it would be our habit, that it would be our attitude, it would be the thing that we are known for—thankfulness—that all of these things, even earlier in verse twelve, these things are gifts. They're fruits born in you by the power of the Holy Spirit, and they multiply in abundance. Thankfulness begets more thankfulness.

Now, with that idea, it's also easy for the recent research to reduce gift-giving and receiving, those kinds of things, reduce them to merely "because it will make you happier, you should give. You should be thankful because it will actually improve your life. You'll be healthier. You should be thankful. People will like you. You should be thankful." And all of these things are actually boiled down to, "Being thankful is a benefit to you only—your health and your brand." And any altruism is just byproducts. They don't actually have any significant or lasting value. They're just good things, but how it really matters is how it affects you.

But the thankfulness that Paul is calling the Colossians—and the Word then is calling us today, Columbia Presbyterian Church and churches throughout the world and throughout all time—Christians are to be thankful because it is under girding and is part of our worship. It's our worship of the Living God. And we see that in Romans 12:1-2, that in response to the mercies of God, we are to have our lives as living sacrifices to God, not because we can repay him, not because we deserved it, but because he is merciful and he has given himself, he has dwelt among us. That is the Christmas story—Emanuel, God with us.

Do not give thanks to God for what you have, as if to say, "God, I'm grateful that I have all this stuff. Thank you." Rather, give thanks to God for what you have been given in Christ. And in Christ, that is the root of all of our thankfulness. All of our thanksgiving, all of our thanks, all of our gratitude is rooted in Christ.

Now, I want to close with this. I don't normally do this—bring books up here to read. I don't think reading a book in front of people is always the most enjoyable thing. But I do want to share this, and I don't want to mess it up. So the first hymn we sang, "Now Thank We All Our God"—does anybody know anything about that hymn? It was written by Martin Rinkart. Now, I'm reading from this book called *Then Sings My Soul: 150 of the World's Greatest Hymn Stories*. Remember, a hymn has a hymn writer, and a hymn writer has been impacted, has been shaped, by the very words that he's singing—not because they're coming out of their own strength or out of their own ability or their own knowledge, but they have been impacted from Christ as well. And here's one such hymn. Martin Rinkart was a Lutheran pastor in the little village of Eilenburg Saxony. He lived around 1586 to 1649. I'm not quite sure when the hymn was actually written. But this Lutheran pastor was serving, and it was just before the 30-year war was raging throughout Germany.

Floods of refugees streamed into the walled city of Eilenberg. It was the most desperate of times. The Swedish army encompassed the city gates, and inside the walls there was nothing but plague, famine, and fear. Eight hundred homes were destroyed, and people began dying in increasing numbers. There was a tremendous strain on the pastors, who expended all their strength in preaching the gospel, caring for the sick and dying, and burying the dead. One after another, the pastors themselves took ill and perished until at last only Martin Rinkart was left. Some days he conducted as many as fifty funerals. Finally the Swedes demanded a huge ransom. It was Martin Rinkart who left the safety of the city walls to negotiate with the enemy, and he did it with such courage and faith that there was soon a conclusion of hostilities, and the period of suffering ended. Rinkart, knowing there is no healing without thanksgiving, composed this hymn for the survivors of Eilenberg:

Now thank we all our God,  
with heart and hands and voices,  
who wondrous things hath done,  
in whom his world rejoices.

How much more does the Christmas story tell a picture of God leaving his courts above and residing with the people of the earth to pay a ransom? And that's the beauty of Christmas. It's not just baby Jesus, but it's also bleeding Jesus, and it's resurrected Jesus. This is our hope. Our hope is in the gospel of Jesus. May we receive this good gift. May we remember it. May we also remind each other. And may we respond with faith, with belief, with thanks. Thanks be to God through Jesus. And let us pray.

Our Father in heaven, our Savior at your right hand, and your Spirit which you give to us—we give you praise. We are full of gratitude for what you have done and what you are doing in your church and in your world. And Lord, may we be full of your Word. May it saturate our minds and our hearts. May it be the very power to do and to act and to love. May we be people who are marked by thanks. May we be people who are singing and loving, full of hope in our Savior, Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.