

Accentuate the Positive

Colossians: Christ Above All

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Bible Text: Colossians 3:12-17
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Our Scripture this evening comes from Colossians 3:12-17. Colossians 3 and beginning to read at verse 12.

12 Put on therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy ones and loved ones, feelings of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, longsuffering, 13 putting up with one another and forgiving one another if anyone has cause for complaint against someone; just as also the Lord forgave you, so also you must forgive. 14 And on top of these things put on love, which binds it together perfectly. 15 And let the peace of Christ hold sway in your hearts, unto which also you were called in one body. And keep on being thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, with hymns, with Spirit-prompted songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 In all, whatever it is you do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

About 1200 BC, if you like, the times of the judges in the Old Testament period, about 1200 BC in the kingdom of Ugarit north of Israel, there was a king who was divorcing his wife, his queen, and he made a provision for his son, the crown prince: his son could go with his mother if he liked but if he did, he had to leave his clothes on the throne. Clothes were important. They signified if he left them on the throne, not only that he went with his mother, but that he renounced his right to kingship and to the throne. The clothes mattered and Paul thinks that too. He thinks clothes matter. You notice in our text in the passage even going back in the previous passage in chapter 3, verses 5 and following, that Paul speaks in this clothing imagery. You notice that he indicates in verse 8 that, "now that we're in Christ, you put off," or you set aside, "all sorts of things like anger and fury," and all that sort of thing. Then he mentions that "we have stripped off," verse 9, "the old humanity," and verse 10, "we've put on the new humanity." Then in verse 12 in our text for tonight, he uses that same verb for clothing, "Put on therefore, if you're really a part of the new humanity because you're united with Christ, then you should put on duds that are appropriate to that new humanity." Put on that kind of clothing and that's what you have here in the positive section in verses 12 to 17. This is telling us what the

new humanity he mentions in verse 10 should look like. In other words, in verses 12 to 17, Paul is saying, "If you are a Christian, this is what you should look like."

So what is that? How should a Christian look and so on? Well, the first thing that he says to us is that a likeness to Christ should depict you, verses 12 to 14. A likeness to Christ should depict you. Now, you notice that he mentions what that likeness is in verse 12, the last of the verse, and then in verse 14 as well. We should put on "feelings of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, longsuffering," and then in verse 14, he pulls it all together, he tops it off, "on top of these things put on love, which binds it together perfectly."

Now, we could go into a long discussion about these various words in the last of verse 12 and talk about some of their background and nuances of that sort of thing, but perhaps some of you remember when Dr. Thomas was teaching about sanctification in the Center Point School of Theology on Wednesday nights and a couple of times, I can't remember the particular text, there would be something like this, the long description of several characteristics and so on, and Dr. Thomas would sum it up something like this: what does God want? He wants you to be like Jesus. Now, that cuts to the chase here. You look at the last of verse 12, what's this, how are you to be depicted? What likeness are you to have as a Christian? You're to be like Jesus, that's a description of the moral character of Jesus there. That's the thrust of it.

Now, notice of whom he speaks. He says, "Put on as God's chosen ones, holy ones, loved ones." That's who you are if you're in Christ. Now, if that's who you are, he says, this, the last of verse 12, is how you should look. You should look like your Savior. Now, apparently that was the case. Apparently that's what happened in the early church. There was an Emperor Julian, he's called Julian the Apostate, of about 3, what? 3 AD, 360 so about 300 years after the New Testament, the time of Colossians and so on. The Emperor Julian was raised as a Christian but he gave up that faith and when he was emperor, he wanted to reinstitute the old paganism; he wanted to bring back the old Roman religion. But he had a complaint and this is what he said about the Christians, he said, "Atheism," now you have to understand what Julian means by atheism, he means Christian faith, alright? But this is what he complained, "Atheism has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers and through their care for the burial of the dead. It's a scandal that there's not a single Jew who is a beggar and that the godless Galileans," i.e. Christians, "the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them." What's he saying? He's saying that these Christians really do have feelings of compassion, kindness, etc. They really do act like their Savior. They imitate his likeness. And it drove him bananas.

Now, that's Julian but we know that, there are, I'm sure you might be able to find an exception here and there but you know that pagans don't build hospitals or orphanages, and you know that Marxists don't construct and support medical clinics, and you know that Jihadists don't care for leprosy patients. Who does that? Jesus people do that sort of

thing. That's what you have fleshed out in the last of verse 12, that Christ's people show that likeness.

Now, there is a certain necessity for this likeness to be exercised and that comes in verse 13. You notice he says, "putting up with one another and forgiving one another," and so on. In other words, there is a reason why you'll need to have this longsuffering, verse 12, and this gentleness and this humility and so on, because you're going to have to be putting up with one another. I know the traditional translation is "forbearing one another," it sounds so pleasant but it's just putting up with one another. That's because there are cruddy folks in Christ's fellowship and you may be one of them, and you have to put up with that. You have to exercise longsuffering. You have to exercise humility. You have to exercise restraint and patience, etc. That's why you need that likeness.

Then he goes further and he says, "forgiving one another if anyone has a cause for complaint with someone." Hm, now, that word "cause for complaint" is really like, it's not the same but it's sort of like our word that is so much in vogue now: issues. You know, someone who has a real problem with the sin of rage. You don't describe it that way, you say he has anger issues. Or if there's a six year old rebellious refractory child, you don't flip him over like you should and warm his behind up 20 degrees warmer, but you say, "Well, he has authority issues." And so on. You know, someone has a broken leg and so on, you don't say that, you say, "She has health issues." And all these issues and so on, well, that's sort of the word here only it's a little bit more than just our bland issues, it's if anyone has a cause for complaint. Someone has wronged them. And if you do, it seems to me Paul assumes that you go back to Jesus' teaching in Luke 17:3-4 and what are you to do? You don't go tell your pastor about that person, you don't go tell somebody else or a friend, you go to that person and you confront them and tell them what you see that they've done wrong and how they have wronged you and if that person repents, Luke 17:3-4, you forgive them. Forgiving one another. "If anyone has a cause for complaint against or with someone."

You say, "Oh, but you don't know what What's-his-face has done. You don't understand because you're just a preacher and you don't get down here in the dirt and the crud that I have to deal with." Oh, yeah, Paul has an answer for you, it's in the last of verse 13, "even as also the Lord forgave you, so also you must forgive." Now, when he says "the Lord" there, using it in this context, he means the Lord Jesus. As the Lord has forgiven you, so also you must forgive. Do you see what he's doing? Paul is taking you back to the cross. He's taking you back again to the likeness of Jesus. You have to forgive as Jesus forgave you. What a trump card to play. That cuts all the ground out of our crabby feet and so on here at this point. Do you understand and do you remember what it was when Christ forgave you as, just as the Lord forgave you? How? That's a big "as." How did Jesus forgive you? Oh, he forgave you freely and fully and gladly and willingly, and have you forgotten what that was like?

David Redding in his book on the parables tells of some prison warden out in the West a number of years ago who used to tell a story of a friend of his who was riding on a train and noticed that the young man sitting next to him was very low and seemingly

depressed. The young fellow confessed that he was a convict who had just been released from a distant penitentiary and his whole life had cast such a dark shadow over his whole family and they had seemed to suffer because of the shame he had brought upon them and he had had almost no contact with them since he had been in the penitentiary; there had been almost dead silence for years. He didn't know whether they were too poor or perhaps too ill or just illiterate to write him and so on, so there hadn't been much contact at all. So when he was ready to be released, he wrote a letter home and he explained that he would be on a train which passed their little farm on the outskirts of town and if they could forgive him, they were to hang a white ribbon on the old apple tree near the tracks. If it was not hanging there when he came by, he would never bother them again. Now, as the train approached the familiar haunts of his childhood and so on, he couldn't stand the suspense and he asked his new companion to switch places with him so that his companion was sitting by the window of the train and in a minute the tree came into view and his companion with eyes bright with sudden tears turned to him and whispered hoarsely as he put his hand on his knee, "It's alright, the whole tree is full of ribbons."

Now, that's the way the Lord Jesus has forgiven you: fully, freely, gladly. How then can you dare to withhold that if you are to reflect his likeness? You see, what Paul does, he takes you back to the cross. The cross is not a first stage that you leave behind in your Christian experience, the cross is the only position from which you work. There is a likeness to Christ that should depict you.

Now, second, Paul says the peace of Christ should control you. Verse 15, "And let the peace of Christ hold sway in your hearts, unto which you were also called in one body. And keep on being thankful." Now, that's an interesting verb, we've translated it "hold sway, let the peace of Christ hold sway." Originally, the verb seemed to have the idea of act as an umpire like in the games, making decisions and calling shots, etc. you might say, but lots of times it loses that original color and so on, so it comes to mean to preside over, to rule, to control, to hold sway. So let the peace of Christ control or let the peace of Christ rule or hold sway over you.

Notice that Paul says, speaks of the primacy of the internal here. It says, "let the peace of Christ rule or hold sway in your hearts." Now, if the peace that Christ gives you holds sway and controls you internally in your hearts, then there will be a slop over to those others in the body of Christ, a peace to which you were called in one body. But if there's a peace that Christ gives you that holds sway in your heart, that will flow over into relationships with other believers and control how we act as a corporate body as well.

I told you several weeks ago about a fellow by the name of Duncan Macrae in the Free Church of Scotland back in probably the 1920s, a story that George Collins recalled from his youth. Duncan Macrae was an elder in a Free Church of Scotland congregation I think in the Scottish Highlands. They were without a minister and this was in the 20s when they had a dirth of ministers and so on, and Duncan Macrae was sort of in charge of having to keep the body together and so on, and up came a communion season and in that time, lots of times in Scotland anyway, they may only have the Lord's supper at that time maybe once a year or twice a year and it would be quite an affair. People would come

from neighboring churches and so on and others would come, other elders and ministers would come to help. There was another elder by the name of Angus Monroe who lived on the east coast of Scotland that was to come for the communion season and he showed up, he was late and this bothered Duncan Macrae. He didn't know why Angus was late there coming. Then he found out the story once Angus Monroe got there.

It seems that he had come some ten miles on his journey, now I don't know if he was going by horseback or what, probably not automobile at the time. He could have been just walking, but he had gone ten miles trying to get there on time and the tempter began to whisper to him, "What a hypocrite you are. On Friday you'll be speaking of brotherly love and forbearance as characteristics of the true Christian and yet only yesterday you quarreled with your neighbor about a peat bank." Well, he had to defend himself and he raised a question that it was the neighbor who had picked the quarrel and that he had only defended and stood up for his rights. "Rights," taunted the tempter, "and you profess to be a disciple of him who said, 'Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.'"

Well, it seemed like the enemy of his soul was determined to bring him into confusion or send him back or whatever, but Angus Monroe was going to have none of it. He turned around after he went ten miles and he went back and he sought out his estranged neighbor, he conceded to him the rights that he had so arrogantly claimed, and he begged his pardon for having spoken so sharply to him on the previous day. Since that matter was settled, he set out the next day, a day late, arrived a day late but everybody that was there at the Friday services preliminary to the communion Sunday said that Angus Monroe's address seemed to drip with heavenly dew. It was because there was a peace of Christ in his heart that he was concerned be at peace with others and that overflowed to them. Having the peace of Christ makes you seek peace with others if at all possible. "Let the peach of Christ hold sway in your hearts." The peace of Christ should control you.

Now thirdly, Paul says the word of Christ should indwell you. Verse 16, the word of Christ should indwell you. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly," and so on. Now, as you look there at verse 16, we have to look at the text and we have to make a few comments about how we're going to take the text and if you have various translations and if you compare them, you'll find that there are differences about the way the text is construed. The biblical manuscripts we have didn't have punctuation in them and so on. That's usually not a problem. You usually figure out what phrase or clause goes with what other clause, etc. It usually doesn't cause a problem but sometimes there are no commas, no semicolons, nothing like that, so it's very difficult at certain times to figure out what a writer intends, how the clauses should be connected.

I remember hearing Lehman Strauss when I was young giving an illustration of the way small things, punctuation can change meaning. He said, "Now, there's this statement, 'Woman, without her, man is nothing.'" Well, that's pretty clear. But he said, "You know," well he didn't use this word but you could have a male chauvinist come along and could change a little bit. "Woman, without her man, is nothing." Completely changes it just by the situation of the comma, the placing of the comma. So here in verse 16, it

depends how you take it. Now, if you have the New International Version, the NIV for example, don't worry about taking this down. I'm just trying to give you an example. The NIV reads verse 16 like this, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." Now, you see there that the singing etc. is an accompanying matter to the teaching and admonishing. Now, if you have the New American Standard Bible, you notice that it takes the clauses differently. Here's the NASB, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God." There the singing is a means of teaching and admonishing, that is, you're singing with psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, is the means whereby you teach and admonish one another. So it depends just how you connect the clauses.

I think something akin to what the New American Standard Version has there is the better view. It meshes, for one thing, with what Paul says in Ephesians 5:19, a similar passage which heads your worship order tonight, and so it meshes with that and so I take it in the way we read it originally. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, with hymns, with Spirit-prompted songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Now, as you look at that and as you look at the last part of verse 16, what's to characterize this singing and so on? Well, for one thing, thankfulness. Singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. It's to be grateful and you notice, by the way, that verses 15, 16 and 17 all close or have in them some reference to thankfulness, so the singing is to be thankful. The second thing is, that it is to be sincere, "with thankfulness in your hearts to God." And it's to be instructive. The singing and so on, is to be a part of the teaching and admonishing of one another. It's not the only means of teaching and admonishing one another, it's not saying that, but it is saying that you do teach and admonish one another with what you sing etc.

Now, that calls for discernment so the singing is to be instructive, among other things, and that calls for discernment. You notice that Paul says here "in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another." In all wisdom, so you have to exercise discernment about this. Now, how would this be? How would your singing etc. teach and admonish? Well, we might look just at the epistle to the Colossians. Now please understand, I'm not one of those, I know there are people that see early Christian hymns behind a lot of New Testament bushes and I'm not one of those types, but there are certain signs that chapter 1, verses 15 to 20, may well have been an early Christian hymn. Paul may have authored it himself. Paul may have taken it over. Paul may have adapted it. Blah, blah, blah, who knows for sure. But if you look even in some of your translations, chapter 1, verses 15 to 20, may be set out in kind of poetic form because it has hymnic elements about it that would lend itself to being, you might say, sung or chanted.

So that would be one component that could be sung as teaching and admonishing one another about the character and nature of Christ and so on. You can also take, and please understand, I'm not saying that these were set hymnic pieces, but you could take chapter 1, verses 21 to 23, you could set it out in separate clauses or phrases and you could see

that it could be a rhythmic chant. I don't mean that it's set to rhyme or something like that with a neat little tune to it, but you could take chapter 1, verses 21 to 23, of the work of the cross, and you could put it in separate clauses and it could be a rhythmic chant that people could chant and reinforce the truth of the work of Christ and the cross. You could put chapter 2, verses 6 and 7, down as a little essence of the Christian life. You could take chapter 3, verses 1 to 4, and you could divide it up into separate clauses and it would fit very nicely as a kind of a rhythmic chant. I'm not saying that they necessarily did that, I'm just saying that don't necessarily think that you have to go far afield to find the stuff that you need to sing or whatever and to teach and admonish one another. Some of it is right there very possibly in the biblical text. But we do have, don't we, hymns and psalms etc., we do have a repertoire, don't we, by which we can expand on that in our singing in the congregation of Christ and you have to do it though in all wisdom.

It does require discernment, doesn't it? Why do I say that? Well, because there are some things that shouldn't be sung. A very popular hymn at least in older days and so on, "I come to the garden alone," and you remember the way that refrain goes, "And he walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own. And the joy we share as we tarry there," who is "we"? Well, the writer, the singer and Jesus. "The joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known." You can't sing that. If you have a congregation singing that, almost everybody there is clearly lying. No, you don't want to sing. I know it's a smaltzy kind of hymn and it's almost a me and Jesus type hymn there. There are certain things that bother me about it but it really doesn't bother me so much as that claim.

And you might say, "Well, isn't there such a thing as poetic license?" Well, yes, I think there is. It's a fine hymn even though he turned Roman Catholic, "Crown him with many crowns." That one part that says, "Around his pierced feet, fair flowers of paradise extend their fragrance ever sweet." I'm not sure I know what that means but I'm willing to grant him poetic license, alright? But that's something different than blatant untruth, to claim that nobody else but Jesus and myself has known joy like that. Well, we shouldn't be singing stuff like that. If you have that as a selection in your funeral service plan, I beg you to cut it out. There's a reason why that hymn is not in the blue hymnal. There's a reason why that hymn is not in the red hymn book. It's a bad hymn. You shouldn't be singing it.

But then we run onto other things, for example, there is a second stanza of a hymn that goes like this: not a shadow can rise, not a cloud in the skies, but his smile quickly drives it away. Not a doubt nor a fear, not a sigh nor a tear can abide while we trust and obey. Do you really believe that? Are you going to sing that? I think the writer of Psalm 88 and a lot of other folks would find that most discouraging. Really? Not a doubt nor a fear, not a sigh nor a tear can abide while we trust and obey? Oh, I'd much rather, I know it's a Presbyterian minister that wrote that but he should have known better. It's not that the whole hymn is so bad but that second stanza, I don't want to sing that. I would rather go to Charlotte Eliot, I would rather sing, "Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt. Fighting and fears within, without. O Lamb of God, I come. I come." You know that she did not write that as an evangelistic invitation hymn. Charlotte

Eliot wrote that because she was struggling with assurance. But that strikes nearer the truth. There's one stanza we shouldn't be singing.

Of course, you know, we have the gamut, don't you? You might have screens up, right, and the words are projected. There's a word up there, Jesus, and in parenthesis it says, "Repeat four times." So you do that and then a little bit more and it's Jesus again and it says, "Repeat six times," and so on. I really have a problem with that. You can sing Jesus 17 times but after about the fifth time, earnestness begins to be vain repetition and it's hard to keep sincerity up to snuff. It doesn't matter if the guy with the electric guitar and the amplifier up front has his eyes intensely closed and seeming to be in great devotion. It's hard for the masses of the saints to keep pace with that. "In all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another."

So what does Paul say here? Well, he tells us that part of the way the word of Christ dwells in us is through what we sing and that what we sing has a two-fold direction: on the one hand, it's with thankfulness to God. Number 53, "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation." And on the other hand, it has to do with one another, teaching and admonishing one another, and so you might have a hymn like, "What a friend we have in Jesus." Or you might have a hymn like, "Give to the winds your fears, hope and be unafraid. God hears your sighs and counts your tears. God, so lift up your head." The word of Christ should dwell in you through what you sing in all wisdom.

Now, then fourthly, Paul says to us the name of Christ should direct you. Verse 17, the name of Christ should direct you. He says, "In all, whatever you should do or whatever you do in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Now, this is clearly a summarizing, gathering up, comprehensive type of statement. You know, it has all whatever you do, do all and so on, so he's kind of pulling things together and, Lord willing, we'll have more to say about verse 17 next Lord's day evening. But for right now, you recognize its summarizing character. But notice, what does it mean to do something in the name of the Lord Jesus? Do it in the name of the Lord Jesus? Do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus? It seems that it means to do it under his authority and seeking his approval. That seems to be the idea.

Let me give you, maybe somebody might clarify it just a bit. One of our former students at RTS is an Air Force Chaplain and a few years ago, he sent one of his newsletters and in it he had a reference to a woman by the name of Cynthia B. who told of her husband's giving her a power of attorney and she got nearly unlimited decision making power to include purchasing real estate, making charitable contributions, and even voting. Anything that could be done legally by a signature, Mrs. B. would now have the power to do in his place. My hunch is that he was in the military and this was a necessary arrangement. So what do you do when you have such power of attorney? Do you run up a person's credit? Do you squirrel money away for yourself? Do you make lucrative deals? And of course, she said no. Every time she said, "I signed legally binding documents for him, I asked, 'Is this what he would want? Would he approve of this decision I am making in his name?'" You do something in the name of the Lord Jesus, you do it under his authority and you do it seeking his approval.

Now, that's very general. That's not very specific. That doesn't touch a particular situation. That's a kind of a broad affair, isn't it? But sometimes something that's broad like that is more helpful than something that's particular. That's sort of like John W. who tells of a Polish prince, who knows when, but years and years ago. A Polish prince, he said, who used to carry about in his coat a picture of his father and it was his custom every so often to take out the picture of his father and to look at it and then to say, "Let me do nothing unbecoming to so excellent a father." Sometimes you don't need to have particular direction, sometimes just that principle keeps you on the right track. Let me do nothing unbecoming to so excellent a Savior. Let the name of Christ direct you.

So you have in Colossians 3 and verses 5 to 11 the negative side. We talked about that as negative newness. Paul begins there with, "Put to death therefore. You need to be Christian killers." And then he talks about setting aside and stripping off the old humanity so there's a certain newness that consists of a negative side, things that you get rid of, that you set aside. But then there's a positive side and that's in verses 12 to 17 here and Paul is saying that you're part of the new humanity. You need to dress up this new humanity in new duds. If you're God's chosen ones, his holy ones, his loved ones, then this is what you should look like.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, grant then that our lives would show evidence of your power. Grant that we would be a credit to your name. Grant, O Lord, that we would be a tribute to your sufferings. Amen.