

Covenant Response: After Belief

series: What Is the Gospel?

Colossians 3:12-17

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This morning we continue in this advent series of responding to the covenant, which has been our theme this fall as we've looked at what the Gospel is through the perspective of the covenant. And as we've gone into these Sundays of Advent we've been looking specifically at the question: What does it mean to respond to God's covenant work, his promises, his goodness to us. And last week we looked at together the life and person of Nicodemus, as he represents what it looks like before belief. This week we pivot and we look at what does it mean after belief—what does life look like. And then next week we will finish this section of series before Christmas Day at looking at during belief. So if you have questions in your mind after today, most likely, hopefully, they will be addressed next week. So hang on as we look at together.

But you remember that last week one of the things that I highlighted about the role of Nicodemus is that Nicodemus believed because of his education, his standing, his personhood, that he had God figured out. And that in many ways he had used his religious upbringing and his studies and his knowledge as a way of keeping God at a distance, because of the framework that he had and how that affected the way he understood God, the way he took in the Word.

We're going to continue looking at that reality this morning, because once a person becomes a Christian it doesn't mean that therefore we just read the Bible and take it all on board and everything just becomes, well, a life well-lived. There are plenty of things that we as a people and as individuals—and they are varied just as there are this many people in the room—there are varied ways in which we still continue to put up a resistance to God. What might those be? What can we learn from God's Word? What does it look like to live this new life? So that's what we're looking at today, after belief.

This morning we're going to look at specifically Colossians 3:12-17. Hear now God's Word.

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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.

This is the Word of God. (Thanks be to God.) Will you pray with me. Father, you call us into relationship of believing and trusting, walking by faith, upheld by grace, because of the precious work of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose life and death and resurrection is our rescue. And for all who receive it, your Word tells us we become new. But Lord, a curious thing happened in this way—that we could perhaps recite the great framework of our faith, the great doctrines of our faith, and yet often put up a resistance against what they actually mean in the day in, day out life that we live. So will you help us to respond to the blessed covenant, the new covenant of Jesus Christ. Help us to do so this morning. And please help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So this morning we're going to look together at this reality of after belief. Specifically we're going to look at these three points that you see in your bulletin: **New Identity**, which we clearly hear described by Paul; **New Learning**, which means there's something we need to unlearn; and **New Habits**, new ways of doing things. So what does it mean to walk by faith in Jesus Christ? It means that after we believe there are things that need to change, that have changed, and that will continue to change. And these are all bound up in these things which you have laid before you, which this text points us to: **New Identity, New Learning, New Habits**.

So first let's look together at this **New Identity**. It is there for us in verse 12 very clearly. It says, "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." The irony is that many of you perhaps are familiar with these verses; perhaps even you could recite them. What's interesting is that we want to rush to what he tells us to do. But we cannot do what he's telling us to do unless we first grapple and wrestle with what he says about our new identity. And so here...if there's anything I want to say today—perhaps I just have a one point sermon. And who knows what the Holy Spirit may do; we may stop here with point one, because I believe it's point one that everything else comes from. If you miss point one, the other points are meaningless. Let me say again: If you miss point one, all of Christianity is meaningless.

So let's look at point one. Verse 12. First few words. Hear it loudly, and may you memorize it. "Put on then..." (that's not the part...this part) "...as **God's chosen ones, holy and beloved...**" This is familiar language for Paul, because in the opening of Chapter 3 he says, "If then 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. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. [Colossians 3:1-4] Again, that whole idea of identity. So what does he say regarding our identity if you are a believer. It's very clear. We'll just use the words right there from the text: "Chosen ones." Therefore it's not based on what you do, how you do it, where you are from, what you look like, how much you've read, or how little you've read. You've been chosen, not by your choice. It has happened to you.

Two: "Holy." Let me say very clearly to you: If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you are holy. You are holy because of Christ. But it's not that Christ is there in between us and God,

as if God was using Christ as a pair of sunglasses, that God sees you only through Christ. That's what I first believed. Indeed, that's what I was first taught. But the problem is it doesn't add up to the primary metaphor of Scriptures, when God says that the church is the Bride of Christ. Now husbands, do you look at your wife through a pair of sunglasses and say, *Well, you are beautiful to me only when I'm wearing the sunglasses*. No. At least that's not going to go so well. If you have done that, please see me in my office after the service. Jesus is not God's sunglasses so he can view you. Jesus has done something objectively, so that subjectively you've become a new person, declared holy. A work in progress—yes and Amen—but holy.

And he goes further: “Beloved.” Beloved. Anyone who's been to a wedding—and if you've ever presided over a wedding, as I have—there is nothing that beats the moment when the bride walks into the sanctuary or to the place where the wedding takes place and her groom sees her for the first time. And then at the end as I announce the benediction and I introduce to the world for the first time husband and wife, the joy that is leaping off of them is just...it's palpable. It's something you experience. It is truly beautiful. Do you know that's precisely the Father's perspective on you this morning? As joyful and as happy as a human woman and man married together on that day can be. Do you know that heaven echoes with the joys and celebration over God's children—because he loves you.

Now why do I press this point? It's because it is bound up in your identity. And how you understand who you are in Christ, in the Father, enabled by the Holy Spirit, empowered by grace, affects the way you live. But we can know all of these facts and yet not get it because our primary frame has not changed. We keep trying to fit the truths of the Gospel into an old frame, a frame that. . . *Well I'm just a sinner. God is after me. I keep failing*. That's the beauty of love, of Divine Love. Yes, we do fail, but God doesn't see us as failures. God loves you. You are holy. You are made new.

A colleague friend of mine, Dr. Chuck DeGroat writes on this, as he practices pastoral counseling professionally, as he teaches pastoral theology at one of the nation's seminaries. And he wrote this as a reformed pastor and as a counselor. He says,

I do sometimes wonder if we're [that is, those within the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition], I do sometimes wonder if we're so afraid of ennobling humanity, that we choose a perverted form of Calvinism, a neo-Puritan worm-ology which defines us first and foremost as depraved rather than dignified. We often start at Genesis 3 rather than at Genesis 1. I do sometimes wonder if our theological tipping of the scales to depravity is more a product of our psychology. This is purely anecdotal, I realize, but having counseled many, many Reformed pastors and leaders and congregants in the last fifteen years or so, I find us to be, by far, the most guilt- and shame-based demographic I see.

I saw a pastor some time ago who was buried in guilt and shame. His mantra that he constantly repeated to me was, “I am far worse than I think I am. God is far greater.” He constantly reminded me of how much he needed the gospel. I never understood what

he meant by gospel, until I asked him at one point, "Can you see that God smiles at you, embraces you, and calls you his son?"

"No, no, no," he retorted. "God cannot look upon me. He can only look upon Christ who covers me. That is the gospel."

To which my friend responded,

"If that is the gospel, that is not good news." So I began to channel John Calvin for him. "You are God's image bearer, God's beloved. He sent Christ to welcome you home. God puts the ring on your finger and the robe on your back and throws a party for your homecoming." He never returned to my office for counseling again. I suspect he considered me somewhere outside his orthodoxy.

And so he says,

If Calvin can hold the tension of dignity and depravity, can you? Can you believe that God is smiling at you? Can you believe that without minimizing the mess that you are, Christ actually says of you, "You're mine."

So he says,

Dear Calvinist, you are not as bad as you think you are. You are a dignity-bearing, royal ambassador who has been chosen and sent to call others to their deepest vocation. Along the way you've taken a hundred detours like lost sheep, but God keeps coming for you, sending Jesus to redirect your way, sending the Spirit to eliminate your path. Stop defining yourself by your stumbling, and start defining yourself by your deepest identity. God paid an awfully big price to make his welcome crystal clear to you. Now receive it. There is a feast waiting.

That is really good news. It neither diminishes depravity and the reality of our sin and our broken world, but it doesn't allow that to be the core identity. The dignity and beauty and the power of the gospel is the Lord looks upon his people and he says you are mine. You are beautiful and I love you. And out of that, that identity, comes everything else. Everything else is in response to that, enabled by grace, empowered by the Spirit, because of the work of Christ.

After we believe, we've been made new, so Paul says, "Put on then. . ." Now we get to look at what the learning is. It's the **New Learning**. It's difficult learning. And I thought, OK, what would be a way to point out what he's talking about here when he says, "Put on then, compassionate hearts and kindness and humility, meekness and patience and bearing with one another." And then verse 14 actually says, "And above all these virtues put on love." So he's telling us to do a number of things. There is some serious new learning here, so how to preach through that? Well, I couldn't find a better way to do it than from another friend of mine, Jamie Smith, who used this as the best illustration. So I've prepared a video for you from You Tube and this is the

gentleman who has a You Tube channel called “Smarter Every Day.” And so he is an engineer who has a number of friends who are welders and also engineers, and they built something for him that blew his mind. So here's a minute and twenty-eight seconds of this video.

[Audio from the video] Hey it's me, Destin. Welcome back to Smarter Every Day. You've heard people say it's just like riding a bike, meaning it's really easy and you can't forget how to do it. Right? But I did something. I did something that damaged my mind. It happened on the streets of Amsterdam, and I got really scared, honestly. I can't ride a bike like you can anymore. Before I show you the video, what happened, I need to tell you the back story. Like many six year olds with a MacGyver mullet, I learned how to ride a bike when I was really young. I had learned a life skill, and I was really proud of it. Everything changed, though, when my friend Barney called me twenty five years later. Where I work the welders are geniuses and they like to play jokes on the engineers. He had a challenge for me. He had built a special bicycle and he wanted me to try to ride it. He had only changed one thing. When you turn the handle bar to the left, the wheel goes to the right. When you turn it to the right, the wheel goes to the left. I thought this would be easy. So I hopped on the bike, ready to demonstrate how quickly I could conquer this. *And here he is, ladies and gentleman, Mr. Destin Sandlin, first attempt riding the bicycle.*

I couldn't do it. You can see that I'm laughing, but I'm actually really frustrated. In this moment I had a really deep revelation. My thinking was in a rut. This bike revealed a very deep truth to me. I had the knowledge of how to operate the bike, but I did not have the understanding. Therefore knowledge is not understanding.

Thank you. So here's what happened. It took him eight months to learn how to ride that bike, but then something really weird happened. He went on a trip to Amsterdam. And while on that trip one of the people who is a subscriber to his You Tube channel met him at a prescribed place and gave him a regular bicycle. Guess what? He couldn't ride it. And he realized something about what happens when we learn. It creates—and this is the first part of the new learning—it's recognizing the very deep ruts that we already come to Christ with. And we have these very deep ruts of learning that almost become subconscious, much like how he had learned how to ride a bike. Now when forced to try very different kind of bike, he couldn't do it. And so it took him eight months, and by the time he got there he then realized he couldn't ride a regular bike. And then it took him almost thirty minutes to actually get somewhat stable on a regular bicycle. But now he regularly rides the backwards bicycle, as he calls it. And it betrays something that he learned, and that is you can have knowledge, but it doesn't mean understanding, as he says.

The same is the case with everything which Paul is telling us with regard to the new learning that must happen. First, it's the recognition of the deep ruts. So when he says, for example, that we are to be putting on and to practice compassion, “kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another, and, if one has a complaint against one another, forgive each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” All that he tells us to do,

that flows out of this new identity, is a form of new learning, because he tells us that above all these virtues, put on love. Meaning everything he just pointed to, including love, are virtues. Meaning they are habits to be practiced. But that means that to learn these new practices means we un-learn and deal with the old ruts in our lives. Paul refers to it in the verses prior to these when he talks about. . . He says, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these—[now listen to this]—in these you too once walked when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free; but Christ is all, and in all." [Colossians 3:5-11].

So what he's pointing out is the reality that our old ways of living were things that we actually walked in. They were, as he calls them, old practices. Meaning we have—depending on when you came to Christ—we have a lot of deep ruts. And so knowing these things doesn't mean we understand them. They can only be understood as we practice them. And that's the other part of the new learning. It's not just understanding that we have deep roots that we have to unlearn, it's that we have the difficult work of the new learning. And it is this. This is not a mindset that he's calling us to here. These are actual things that we can practice. Because when he points to these things: i.e., anger, malice, wrath, slander, obscene talk, lying—and with its practices and putting on all the practices of the old self, these were all things that we actually did. And much like learning to ride a bicycle, the more that we do them, the more they become like second nature. They become the framework in which we understand the world and the way we act within relationships, whether they're in the church or outside the church. And so we ought to—as he tells us, as those who've been made new in Christ—find ways in which we can practice compassion or kindness and humility.

Now some of you, as you've just celebrated Thanksgiving, have a practice where everybody goes around and everybody has three things that they're thankful for—or whatever, put the number on it. And you do this every year. Now on one level it might seem sort of pedantic or stilted, but it's incredibly important because it's becoming a new way of doing things. Now the question is, what if we thought of the same thing in regard to the ways in which we're to put on the new self? If we began thinking—just picking one—what would it look like for me to act out and to practice compassion this week. Perhaps there are three people—I could specifically pray that I could do something that shows compassion. Or really getting down into the deep sauce. Are there people that I need to go to, to ask for forgiveness? Are there people that I need to go back to the Lord and say, I said I forgave them, but I'm still harboring bitterness. What does it look like to practice forgiveness? It is forgiving. It is asking for forgiveness.

And the same goes along each way. And in this time of year who of us doesn't struggle with the reality of patience. Right? Everybody's on the roads. Everybody is going to where we want to be. Why is that? What would it look like for us to just take one thing. What is one way that

today or tomorrow I could begin to say, I have been displaying impatience, and ask your family or someone who's close to you, "Have I been impatient lately?" And what would it look like to practice the opposite. Again, I want to be this explicit, because it isn't just knowing the verses. It isn't just understanding what a Christian ought to be that suddenly makes us so. It is a matter of new learning, of understanding what our old ruts are, and by God's grace and Spirit, practicing new ways of living, so that new ruts are formed.

But finally we see here not only just new learning, but also, OK, **New Habits**. That is, when he says here, "And above all these put on love, which binds them together in perfect harmony. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, [Now here he is speaking to the church], to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful." And then he says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing songs, hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. "And," he says, "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

So this idea of new habits. What are the habits, beyond some of these practices—what are some habits that these practices fall into? How do we put ourselves in the way? Well, it assumes two things which we must establish always at the beginning, and that is, these are established by God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three are actively involved in the life of the Christian, enabling us to do these things. Indeed, God's presence with you, by his promise, through his Spirit—if you are a believer—is more a part of your being than a mother carrying a child in her womb. It is that much part of who you are. If you have received the Spirit, God's Spirit is active and working in you, and we do these things by him, and we do things by God's grace alone. Assuming those realities, we are called, then, as the Church of Jesus Christ, individually and corporately, to practice such things as he's already hinted at, through what Paul has already written.

One: Scripture. That is, bathing ourselves in Scripture. Enjoying scripture, not for its study of scripture, but just the reading of it, the enjoyment of it.

Two: Remembering and actually recalling the stories that the Scriptures declare, the stories of the struggles of Job or Moses or Jeremiah or John the Baptist or Paul.

Thirdly: Examples. And that is what Paul tells us, that we ought to follow him. We look for those in Scripture that are examples to us in the life of belief. Not that we are merely trying to be like them, but we want to be inspired by their example, because they lead us to greater experience of grace in Christ, because, as Paul said, that was his goal. Jesus himself said that we ought to follow in his example. We want to look for these examples in Scripture.

Community is talked about here. Community as we sing songs to one another, as we do each Sunday morning. Or as we do so in our community groups. We practice living in community, that these things are not an end in and of themselves. We don't just learn scripture for learning Scripture's sake. No, we learn Scripture for the sake of enjoyment of God. We learn these

stories not just so that we know them; we learn them so that we can encourage one another with them in community. That we pray for each other and seek to encourage one another as examples of faith in one another's lives. As iron sharpens iron, these things are practiced in community.

And then finally, all the practices that happen in regard to the Christian faith: of prayer, of worship, of celebrating the sacraments.

Now all of these may seem plain and simple, but let me repeat them. These new habits, literal habits of Scripture, stories, examples, community, and the practices of the church—or what we call the means of grace—prayer, the Word, and the sacraments—these things form what ought to be the habit of the believer and of the church. Because, as Paul says, we no longer have our old selves, but we're putting on the new selves. When he tells us to put on the new self, that is an ongoing activity. It isn't something that happened back at the place of conversion and therefore we're done. No, it's the continual putting on of these things.

Because as I've said before, that Christ came, as we celebrate in Advent, not merely to provide forgiveness, but to make a new people who live new lives. That after belief becomes a whole new way of learning to be human. Indeed, to see God our Father, the Redeemer Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit. That more and more empowered by them, we are increasingly growing as we reflect the original, the one who has created us and the original intent of what it means to live with dignity as those who bear the image of God. Jesus came, as C.S. Lewis said, not just to make a nice people, but a new people.

Now next week we're going to look at "During Belief." How hard all of this is. But it ought not to keep us from this reality of who we are—if you are a believer—who we are in Christ and what difference that makes. So dear Christian, I say to you, through Christ alone you are new. And he's given you grace and the Spirit to live a whole new life, to reflect his glory.

If you are not a believer this morning, everything I've just said is as important to you as an invitation as to anyone who's been walking with Christ for years and years. God invites you, through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to experience a love that is so deep and so powerful it changes who you are. It will change you from the inside out. And he will make you glorious, as he enable you—not to walk in these old ways, which really are just ruts that lead to nowhere—and he gives you a whole new way of living. But to know this: His eyes towards you this morning are not hatred. They're eyes of welcome. Come, sinner, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. If you are not a believer, and you're tired and you are weary, I invite you to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ this morning and to know that you are beloved, you are made holy, and the eyes of the Father say, 'Welcome Home.'

And Christian, if you've forgotten these truths, may the Lord renew them in your heart. And in this Advent season celebrate that God went to a great deal of trouble to make us new. Amen? Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for your Word. We thank you for the power of your Holy Spirit. We thank you for the great truths of our faith. Now Lord, help us, we pray, to receive what Christ has done for us. And I pray, Lord, that we would recognize our new identity in Christ. Yes, we are sinners, but we are made new. Now will you enable us by your Spirit, by your grace, to walk in new ways of life, as a new people for your glory, that you might be praised. In Jesus' name. Amen.