

“In with the New” Colossians 3:12 Steve Harden 1/3/21

Let's turn once more to Colossians 3. I hope the holidays have been a good time for you! I know sometimes it can be difficult, oftentimes it is good. I, personally, love the start of a new year. It's like a reset for me, a time of examination for the next chapter in life. I will admit that I am ever the optimist, and so I always look forward to the coming year with expectation and anticipation of what God has in store for the days ahead. Certainly, there is a new chapter unfolding here at Ethos. It's an exciting time for us!

Now, last week, after having been gone from Colossians for some time, we returned to Colossians 3 and we started just a two Sunday series of messages: Out with the Old and In with the New. And last week we talked about “Out with the Old.” We saw that Paul has told us to leave behind the traits of our nature that were tied to the old man, those things that were so tight and clung so closely to us in the past before we came to faith in Jesus Christ. He says, leave those behind, it's not who you are anymore. Don't be who you were, be who you are now. Out with the old. He listed several attributes that are simply incompatible with the child of God. He tells those Christians at Colossae, don't go back. Christ has redeemed you! Be who you are.

Now, today I would like to point out the new. Out with the old, but now, in with the new, and I think you'll find these much more pleasant to consider. Colossians 3, and we're going to look at one verse, and that is verse 12. Paul writes, “Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” This is the word of God. He tells us, you are now the chosen ones. God has chosen you from before the foundation of the world to be His children. You are His chosen ones. You are holy ones, those who have been set apart from the foundations of the world. You have been called out and chosen, set apart. But he also says, you are beloved, you are loved. You are loved with a love way beyond anything that you have ever been able to comprehend or understand. You are loved by God, your Father. Now, because you have been chosen, because you are holy, and because you are beloved, cherished as a child, seek out these five virtues. Seek to grow in them. My encouragement for you this first Sunday of the new year, is to desire within your own heart to pursue these five virtues, to grow in each of these five, becoming more like our Savior. And so, tonight, I just want to walk through them, and say a little about each one.

First of all, Paul says grow in compassion, the virtue of compassion, or more literally translated it's “have a heart of compassion.” Whenever the Scripture uses the word ‘heart,’ it's talking about the human personality at its deepest level. It's where you live. Compassion refers to feelings of concern and empathy for someone else. Take your eyes off of yourself and consider someone else. It is a disposition that sees someone else's needs. If you want an opposite, an opposite is self-absorption.

It was pretty radical in Paul's world; it's pretty radical in our world as well, but it was especially radical in Paul's world. The maimed, the sick, the aged, they were just discarded. It's interesting, as you look at history, at the different plagues, I don't know why that came to mind right, after 2020, but when you look at the plagues back in the ancient world, it was not a time of compassion. In the second century, an Antonine plague killed about a quarter of the Roman Empire. But what happened as this plague unfolded is that Christians would take care, not only of our own, but of the world's own. When the sick were discarded and abandoned, the Christians would come in with a heart of compassion and care for them. Again, in the fourth century in Caesarea, there was a massive plague, and everyone left the city leaving the sick and the hungry.

Everyone, except for the Christians. They stayed behind and they fed them, at the peril of their own lives. They cared for them and they buried the dead and they fed the sick and the dying.

I bring that up because a few decades later, the last pagan emperor called Julian the Apostate wrote a letter to one of his pagan priests, encouraging him to copy the Christians. See, he recognized that the Christian practice of compassion was a big reason why Christianity so exploded across the continent. Christianity expanded because of the compassion that the Christians had for all men. Listen to what he wrote, he says, “When it came about the poor were neglected and overlooked by the pagan priests. Then I think, the impious Galileans,” or the Christians, “observed this fact and devoted themselves to philanthropy. They support not only their poor but ours as well. All men see that our people lack aid from us.” See, it’s not an accident that in difficult days when people see the compassion that Christians have not only for ourselves but others, that Christianity expands. All throughout history, you see that wherever the gospel goes in terms of missions and evangelism, hospitals and schools follow in its wake. They always follow the gospel. It’s because we have a heart of compassion for others. Compassion is the first virtue that Paul uses to describe this new nature, and so the question that I ask you is, would others describe you as growing in compassion?

The second virtue that Paul lists is kindness. Kindness is a sweetness of disposition. It speaks of a good heart, treating others with respect and value. Kindness was used in the ancient world in terms of wine. Over time, wine grows mellow with age and loses its biting harsh nature. Kindness is the opposite of being harsh and biting and critical. You know, a person can be moral and upright and not be kind! They can be stern or cold or unfeeling. That’s not kindness. Kindness is a goodness of heart that is tempered by a gentle disposition. Kindness is not just being nice! The two are very different. A person who is kind may have difficult things to say to another, and they will not hesitate to say them to another. For example, a kind boss may have to fire an employee, or may have to criticize their work! But you see, the difference is in the disposition, in how they criticize. It’s the manner of how they do it. A kind person does not ridicule. A kind person does not shame or humiliate or dishonor. A kind person shows value and honor to the person that he speaks with. “Kindness,” according to Alexander Maclaren, “makes a person attractive. If you would win the world, melt it, do not hammer it.” And I love that description of a kind person. So, the question that I would ask you then is would other describe you as growing in kindness? Are you growing and developing a gentle disposition in interacting with others?

The third virtue that Paul lists is humility. Humility is a virtue that speaks of our attitude toward ourselves and in ourselves. The Greeks always used humility in a negative fashion. They did not honor humility at all. They saw a humble man as a man who was weak and feeble, but not Christians. Christianity lists it as a primary virtue. Humility, rightly understood, is the absence of self-exaltation, an absence of the need for self-exaltation. There is a lack of arrogance or selfish pride in the humble man. A humble man does not need the accolades of others. He does not have to be in the spotlight. It’s not important to him. A humble man doesn’t need to have control over other people or manipulate them so that they will do what he wants them to do. In humility, there is never a suggestion of groveling or weakness or mousiness, that’s just not humility. It is simply the right view of oneself in light of who we are, God’s chosen people. Paul did not teach that we need to think poorly of ourselves, he didn’t teach that at all, and he certainly didn’t teach us to feign a false humility, that’s nauseating to me. I hate false humility. But humility is the ability to see yourself rightly in a relationship with God and others.

When looking at trying to understand and be able to communicate what humility is, there are two quotes that came to mind. The first one is from John Riskin, and he says this, he says, "I believe the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of his own power, or hesitation in speaking his opinion, but really great men have a feeling that the greatness is not in them but through them, that they could not do or be anything else than God made them." The idea of God working through you is part of being a humble man. Andrew Murray said it this way: "The humble man feels no jealousy or envy. He can praise God when others are preferred and blessed before him. He can bear to hear others praised while he is forgotten, because he has received the spirit of Jesus who pleased not Himself and who sought not His own honor. Therefore, in putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, he has put on the heart of humility." That is what Paul is encouraging us to put on and to press on and to grow in the likeness of this new man. Would others describe you as growing in humility? Do they see that you do not have to be recognized for your contributions? That you do not need to be the center of attention?

The fourth virtue to grow in is meekness. Like humility, many people see meekness as a weakness, but nothing could be further from the truth. Meekness, by those who do not understand it, has been described as laziness, has been described as mental or emotional feebleness. Some wrongly assume that a meek person fears expressing oneself forcefully or lacks the character to really be angry about anything. Some have even seen it as a tendency to compromise when you shouldn't be compromising. Others wrongly assume that meekness is just having that docile personality, just not much to it, you know? That bland personality. But none of these are true, those are all revolting to me and I think they would've been revolting to the apostle Paul. Thank God, meekness is not any of those things.

Meekness, as described in Scripture, is best defined as strength under control. In meekness, there is always an undercurrent of great strength. A meek person is a strong person under control. This term was used at times in the breaking or the taming of a wild horse. You think about a wild horse full of power and energy and strength and will and bringing all that power and strength under the purpose of one who guides that horse, that's bringing meekness to the horse. A person who is meek is in control of his mind, his attitudes, his words and his behavior. A meek person is one who acts decisively and powerfully when appropriate. A meek person can be as hard as nails when called on, but his strength is always coupled with gentleness and sensitivity. The meek man also will be willing to suffer. When others wrongly accuse him or ascribe to him wrong or sinful behavior that he did not do, he is willing to bear that falsehood without complaint. In the face of insult and criticism, the meek man will entrust himself to the hand of God and trust in His holy providence. It is a grace that is given when you accept God's dealings with you even when they don't seem to make sense, and in that acceptance one is meek. A meek man does not fight against God or contend against Him when things do not go the way that he thinks that they should.

Our example in Scripture apart from Christ is Moses. In Numbers 12 we see that he was the meekest man in all of the earth, but no one could call Moses a doormat! Right? He stood against the most powerful man in the world and told him to stop it, and to let his people go! At the same time, all of Israel was turned against Moses as well saying, 'You're causing us grief. You're causing us to work harder than we should!' He was a man alone! And yet, God called him meek. He was bold and courageous, and he cared deeply for his people. Would others describe you as growing in meekness? Would your spouse or your children describe you as

having strength under control? A willingness to allow wrongful insult without resentment or retaliation? That's meekness.

The fifth and final virtue is growing in patience. Patience is the willingness to suffer over a period of time, often a long period of time, without bitterness, despair, or anger. I think patience is seen primarily in two different ways. First of all, when you're mistreated by others. You see, the patient man is not driven to cynicism or despair or bitterness when others treat him poorly or wrongly. A patient man endures wrong without grumbling. I see it as opposite of harboring resentment and revenge. See, a patient man can remain firm and kind and gentle and meek, even when others are ungrateful and rude.

So, first of all, when mistreated by others, but patience as well comes into play when you're waiting on God, when there are those things that you have pled with Him for a long period of time and He hasn't answered your prayer. When you have seen no results, and you continue to pray, and God remains silent. When you are waiting on God and you don't know why He waits so long, patience is needed. I can imagine Paul asked, 'Why?' when he was languishing in prison for all those years. Joseph must have asked 'Why?' after all the suffering he had to endure. Think about Abraham waiting 25 years for the promise of God for a son. What about Moses? Those years in Midian, and then again in the wilderness, followed by a stubborn people. I'm reminded again that God's timing is not my timing. It's almost never my timing.

We see though, from these four examples, that God was still at work. He was still active, even when we couldn't see it, even when those people could not see it at all, and I'm reminded that God is still active in your life and in mine when we pray and we pray and we pray and it seems like He is silent. A patient person knows that God is still at work and that He's still active even though we can't see what He is doing. Would your family say that you are growing in patience? When your prayers are not answered, do you wait patiently without becoming bitter and angry with God?

Five virtues, five characteristics of a child of God: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. But I want to close out our service tonight by looking at how do we grow in these virtues? You know, it's one thing to paint these great and glorious virtues out there and say, okay, go for it! Paul didn't just say that, he says, 'This is how you grow.' I want to refer you back to verse 10, if you still have your Bibles open, in verse 10, let me suggest three principles. The first principle is that growth is a process. In verse 10, Paul writes, "having put on the new self which is being renewed," being renewed.

It's important to understand the difference between justification and sanctification. Two theological words, right? It's so important to understand. Justification is that moment in time, that once for all declaration when God declared that you were forgiven, that you were redeemed. If you want to use the evangelical word, when you were 'saved.' That moment in time, it's a once for all action, you became a child of God. But sanctification, on the other hand, is that growth that happens because you are now a child of God. Justification is a one-time act with ongoing results. Those ongoing results are the growth that you and I see in our lives as we grow to be like Jesus, but it's a process! You don't automatically, magically become like Christ. It takes time and effort. Growth is a process. It's incremental and I think I can say it is never instantaneous! It's always incremental. It's always three steps forward and two steps back and so, we mustn't be discouraged! Don't be discouraged that you're not the man or the woman that you want to be! God has put that deep desire within your heart, and praise Him for that, and take the next step! It's a process continually putting off the characteristics of the old man and putting on the characteristics of the new, so, the first principle is that it's a process.

The second principle of growth is that it's developed by knowledge. Verse 10, "having been renewed in knowledge." The path toward growth is always accompanied by greater knowledge. Ignorance is the enemy of life altering change in your life! There is more than knowledge in the Christian life, but there is not less. So, what is the knowledge that changes us? Well, it's the knowledge of God most accurately seen in the face of Christ. That is what changes us. So, how does that change us? It's because we ask ourselves the question that I say over and over again, what is true? What is true about God? What is true about me in light of the gospel? What is true? I was a sinner without hope! In and of myself I had no hope, but Jesus came, and He died for sinners just like me! And so, in faith I trusted that His death was sufficient to make me right with Him and I am free from the penalty of my sin. I am now a new man! I have to know that! I can have hope, because I'm not the man I was before. I'm not who I was once! When I began to understand the vast implications of the gospel, about who God is and who Jesus is and who I am, it changed me! I began to see all of life through the gospel of Jesus Christ. So, I ever seek to know my God more. I read and I think, and I pray. And somehow, in the midst of finding out who God is, I change! It may be imperceptible, but it still occurs.

So, the first principle is growth is a process, secondly, growth is developed by knowledge, but thirdly, growth results in us becoming more like Jesus. That's exciting! Spiritual growth is not about being a better me; it's about being like Jesus! I don't want to be a better me; I want to be like him! That is key! Jesus is the epitome of all these virtues. Think with me. Think about compassion! In Matthew 15, Jesus saw the crowds. They'd been with Him for three days and they were hungry, and Matthew says, He had compassion on them. So, He had them sit down and He fed 4,000 people with loaves and fish. Jesus was full of compassion. Kindness. In Matthew 11, Jesus said, "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." He is kind.

He is humble. Think with me about Philippians 2, when Paul writes, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." There is no greater definition of humility than Jesus as given in Philippians 2. What about meekness? Well, Paul describes Jesus in 2 Corinthians 10, as meek and gentle. He certainly meets our description of strength under control, does He not? Jesus submitted Himself to the will of God, even though it meant incredible pain and humiliation and death. He was a meek man. He was ever submissive. He never resisted or disputed the will of God for Himself. Our example of all these virtues is Jesus. He was patient. In 1 Timothy 1:16, "I received mercy for this reason, that in me as foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life." Jesus is our example! He is the one we're growing up into. It's not about being a better me; it's about being like Him.

My friends, you see, being a believer, a follower in Jesus Christ, involves change. It involves development and growth. It is so much more than just wanting to go to heaven, and not wanting to go to hell. It involves your whole life, your motives, your attitudes, your actions, your behavior. It's all inclusive. Following Jesus is a life of growth. My encouragement to you in this new year is to commit to that growth, to yearn for that growth, to ask for the Holy Spirit to grant

you that growth in compassion, in kindness, in meekness, in humility, and in patience. May we all together put off the old and put on the new. Let's pray.