

July 16, 2017
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Peace in Chaos
Community Baptist Church
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LET THE PEACE OF CHRIST RULE
Colossians 3:12-15

The NCAA Men's Basketball Rule Book consists of 135 pages of information referees and umpires are supposed to know. There is no doubt in my mind that the officials at NCAA games know the rules, especially those who referee the big games, the tournaments in March. Be that as it may, over the last couple of seasons the refereeing in the final four games has become a point of controversy. How could that happen if the best college referees in the country are in charge of those games?

Part of it is due to a simple statement in the rule book. Section 2, titled *The Officials' Authority* states in article one: "The officials shall conduct the game in accordance with the official rules and interpretations and employ the mechanics of officiating outlined in the NCAA-approved men's basketball officiating manuals." Most fans, players, and coaches would certainly agree to that. However, in Section 3, titled *Elastic Power* we find this statement: "The referee shall be empowered to make decisions on any issues arising during the official's jurisdiction that are not specifically covered in the rules."

Oh, referees are required to make some decisions based on personal interpretation. And therein does a problem lie. Throughout the season, players in each individual conference such as the ACC, the SEC, the Big Ten, the PAC 12 and so on learn what to expect in those matters of interpretation. They come to know what the referees consider to be traveling, or when it is incidental contact versus intentional contact and thus a foul. They can pretty much anticipate what constitutes a flagrant foul.

But what happens in the big games when referees from different conferences are on the floor at the same time? One referee from the ACC interprets these things differently than another referee on the floor at the same time who is from the PAC 12. Players, coaches, and fans alike get a bit frustrated. We all appeal to the "rules." Sure, but the fact remains, that it is the responsibility of the guy in the striped shirt to interpret what the rules say and mean. When he speaks, that is the end of the controversy. Whether we agree with him is irrelevant.

And we sure are glad that such is not the case in the local church. Or is it? Many people today have concluded that rules are intimidating and they stifle real life in the church. Therefore, they have concluded that the church should be governed only by rules that apply to big sins like killing each other, or stealing each other's spouses, or implying that a brother or sister is living in sin. In this opinion, just the big sins are unacceptable in the church.

But, the Bible pretty clearly points out several rules that Christ our head has given and expects to be enforced. For example, just in the context of our text—the entire chapter of Colossians 3—we discover no less than 40 rules. Are these arbitrary suggestions? Does Christ really intend for us to enforce these rules? If so, who determines what "seeking things above" (3:1) looks like? Is it possible that a conflict could develop in the local body between groups who do not agree with the interpretation of "seeking things above"? Yes. That is only one example of the kind of interpretive conflicts that disrupt the peace Christ intends for His people in His Church.

So what is the answer to the dilemma? Again, the One in the striped shirt determines the interpretation and thereby keeps the peace. The instruction of our text literally requires, "*Let the peace of Christ umpire in your hearts.*" All of the verbs in this context are plural in form and all of the pronouns are second person. It is necessary for each individual to apply the instruction of this chapter because the lesson applies to the entire church. In this case, the instruction does not tell each of us how to have peace in our hearts but instructs all of us how to maintain peace in the church. Peace comes when we yield to Christ the umpire.

We Need to be “Putting On” (vv.12-14).

And the many skeptics say, “That is just the problem with the church. The people are always ‘putting on.’ What we see on Sunday is not true because we know those church folks from living with them and working with them during the week. What they do on Sunday is just put on.”

The “putting on” is different than pretending. Putting on is a real but spiritual activity. What did Paul mean by, “*Put on then, as God’s chosen ones*” (v.12a)? Right away in the statement itself we discover that whatever this activity is, it is for those whom God has chosen. The Greek word for *put on* can describe the simple act of putting on a garment. In this case, it is a command to do something once. The activity of putting on is just like the command in Ephesian 6:11 regarding the spiritual armor that is so necessary for fighting against sin. In the case of our text, the command is to clothe ourselves with the characteristics of Christ.

Now we understand why this command has to be the kind of thing God’s chosen people do. People who are not God’s people cannot do it nor do they have a reason to do it. Again, as is often seen in the Bible, God marks out a clear distinction between His people and the rest of the people of the world. God’s chosen ones put on these characteristics. Satan hates this kind of discrimination and seeks to make the whole world believe that all distinctions are wrong. Anything that makes one person different from another is not to be tolerated in Satan’s world. The chosen people are those who God chose to be regenerated through Christ’s sacrifice before He created the world. That is an eternal distinction. God made it, we didn’t.

Because it is God’s choice, being clothed with Christ’s character is not something the natural person of the world desires to do nor is it something he or she can do. The stark difference is described in the opening verses of this chapter. *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).

In these verses, we learn that God has situated the hearts of His chosen people in the heavenly environment, not the passing earth’s environment. Therefore, we seek heavenly kind of living. We set our minds on heavenly truths and realities not earthly stuff because we have died to self, having been hidden in Christ. We live for the day when Christ will take us to Himself. That kind of life is going to appear to be unique against the backdrop of the normal world.

Therefore, we can conclude that “putting on” is an activity for people who are unique. Indeed, the two word description at the end of verse twelve makes it quite clear that we are unique. Words like *holy and beloved* (v.12b) never apply to normal people in the world. We are holy because God has set us apart from the condemned world for His own purposes and glory. That being true, we are obviously beloved. What value can we place on being the objects of God’s unconditional love?

An important question to ask at this point is, “What kind of lives do holy and beloved people live?” Let’s draw our attention to the word “*then*” as in “*Put on then . . .*” which introduces a summary of the preceding teaching. We are unique because we are new creations, holy and beloved people, living in old bodies. We do not live in old bodies in the sense of age, but old in the sense of bodies that are subject to sinful temptation. Therefore, though uniquely God’s people, we still deal with the weakness of the flesh.

That is why the lifestyle God desires for us is so plainly, bluntly described in verses five through ten. *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 you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and 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”* (Colossians 3:5-10). Those are definitely sins with which we are familiar. They make up a lifestyle lived by people who are not born again, who cannot help but sin. It is the character of the old self.

But according to verses nine and ten, God’s unique, chosen people have already put off that old self. *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 (9b-10). Okay, how do we explain the fact that born again people have already put off the **old self**, have already put on the **new self**, but still need to keep dealing with the old?

In “standing” before God, the old self is done, gone, put away. At the moment of salvation, the old self is killed and God creates a new creation. *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).* “New creation” is our condition as we stand before God – what He sees as He looks at us. However, because we live in a sinful world, in a body plagued by sin and weakness, we must work at living out the reality of that past action. We must continually remind ourselves that we have put off the old self and been clothed with the new.

That requires that we continually “mortify the flesh” (a good puritan term). It is the term Paul used in the KJV: *For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live” (Romans 8:13 KJV).* To mortify is to put to death. It is the same word as used in Colossians 3:5: *Put to death therefore what is earthly in you.* In the Roman’s passage, “put to death” is present tense which requires an ongoing practice. So having already put off the old self (at salvation), and at the same time having put on the new self (at salvation), we are presently taking on new character as we are conforming to the image of our Creator. We are learning to be what we are.

There have been many great stories written with a storyline similar to *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. You are no doubt familiar with Frances Hodgson Burnett’s story about the single mother who, with her little son Cedric, lived in poverty in 19th century New York. But in England, unknown to the family, lived Cedric’s grandfather, the Earl of Dorincourt. He desired for his grandson to be educated as an aristocrat and arranged to bring about that goal. It is a story about a little, poverty-stricken boy growing and learning to be the aristocrat he really was.

That is the story of God’s chosen people who He saves from the poverty of sin, but who also need to learn to live like the King of kings of whose family we are a part. In that process of learning, we

are also putting on the character of Christ. These traits contrast with the traits of human nature we put off. The newly created child of God is clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Therefore, we have put on His characteristics.

Life for the Christian is learning how to make these things work. Things like *compassion, 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 (vv.12b-13).* Compassion and kindness is the attitude we are learning to exercise toward others (we like Christ have pity on others). Humility and meekness is the attitude we are developing toward ourselves (we, like Paul, see ourselves as the chief of sinners). Patience and bearing with one another is the attitude we are practicing as we deal with foolishness, or unkindness, or slander, or just plain sinfulness in others. And when we have a legitimate complaint against someone, we learn to forgive just like Christ forgives us.

A most wonderful truth is that Jesus forgives our sins. A sad reality is that people who call themselves Christians don’t. Jesus pointed out that they don’t forgive because they are really not Christians. Having told the story about the unforgiving servant, Jesus described the master’s response and then made application to us. *“And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:34-35).* The key is for you to act toward others as Christ acts toward you.

Therefore, the overriding trait has to be love. *And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony (v.14).* Jesus Christ is compassionate, kind, humble, meek, patient toward us, bears with us, and forgives us because He loves us. We must be clothed with Christ’s love because only through it are we able to practice these traits. Real love desires the best for its recipient. Love does not allow the traits of Christ to get out of balance. That is, love doesn’t overlook sin because it is compassionate, kind, merciful, and the other traits of Christ. Rather, love desires to deal with sin so that it can be confessed and forgiven. Love maintains the harmony of Christ’s characteristics.

These truths lead up to the great command about the peace of Christ. To many people they sound like a list of rules. Not wanting to be branded as Pharisees and rule-keepers, many professing Christians avoid rules like a plague. But then these same people wonder why they really do not experience the peace of Christ in their assemblies. Identifying sin, dealing with sin, forgiving sin, and seeking to grow in the character of Christ is foundational to allowing His peace to rule.

We Need to Let Christ's Peace Rule (v.15).

The command is clear: *And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts (v.15a)*. The peace of Christ is the issue. What is that? We have learned some important truths about the peace of Christ in our study so far. We learned that the peace of Christ is the peace with God that comes through Christ. God promised us, *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1)*. When we express faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins, God declares that we are justified. The result is peace with God. Peace with God was humanity's original condition in the Garden of Eden. It is not gained in any other way.

The peace of Christ is also the peace that Christ gives when we are knowing Him through His word. Jesus promised, *"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33). In this statement, we learn that Christ has given us His word. Through knowing His word, we experience His peace.

Third, the peace of Christ is the very character of Christ that we learn through intimate fellowship with Him. Jesus said He came *"to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace"* (Luke 1:79). We who know this peace, who have received this peace, who experience this peace are supposed to respond to it in a corporate setting. The peace of Christ is the calm assurance that comes from knowing Him intimately, walking in fellowship with Him as we meet Him in His word.

The individual is responsible to let Christ's peace rule. What does it mean to let this peace rule? The word for rule means to judge, preside, decide or control. That is why it is often translated, "umpire."

So why don't we just demand that everyone obey God's word? Simple obedience would be nice and no doubt works in a perfect world. But what do we do when there are differences of opinions? Paul illustrated many such differences that are not clearly right or wrong within the requirements of Scripture. He dealt with differences regarding the eating meat offered to idols, the question of whether to marry or not to marry, how and when to exercise spiritual gifts and which gifts to exercise, or even the keeping of various holidays. These are all areas where differences of opinions can exist within the boundary of God's will.

And then there is the question of extent of obedience. Are you as humble, or kind, or compassionate, etc. as you could be? And those were not just first century issues. This is the kind of thing that causes disagreements all the time in the modern church. Besides those issues, in modern days we have to deal with questions like whether it is more spiritual to have pews or chairs. Should we use hymn books or power point? Should all men wear coats and ties? Should the rule be for Sunday morning or also Sunday evening and Wednesday evening? And should we even meet on Sunday evening or Wednesday evening? Should we build a new building or not? Should we use the name Baptist? How should we handle these debatable issues?

Letting the peace of Christ **rule** is how verse thirteen works. We must be *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 (v.13)*. How? Let the peace of Christ be the umpire in the matters.

Letting the peace of Christ rule begins with each person. We each are responsible to let the peace of Christ umpire these kinds of questions. Generally it is not a question of knowing or not knowing rules. It is how to apply the rules in my life in the 21st century.

Ultimately the command applies to the whole church. The rules about putting off the old self and putting on the new self are clear enough. And as we interact with other people who are at varying levels of dealing with old self/new self, we must depend on the peace of Christ to make the call. Sin breaks the process, ignores Christ's ruling, makes it impossible on some level for the assembly as a whole to experience the ruling of Christ's peace.

This is what Christ expects. Living in Christ's peace is our calling. Let the peace of Christ rule *to which indeed you were called in one body (v.15b)*. The Church is Christ's body to which we are called. Each local church is an expression of that body. Community Baptist Church ought to demonstrate the nature of Christ calling His people together. That requires letting His peace rule in the difficult decisions.

Being thankful should be the expected result (v.15c). Thankfulness is mentioned seven times in this letter to a local church (1:3,12; 2:7; 3:15,16,17; 4:2). That is quite a contrast with the default mode for fallen humanity which is selfishness which is never truly thankful. The default mode is criticism, fault finding, and faulty judging. Few people in the history of the human race have had more reasons to be thankful than we have.

Christ calls His chosen people to work together in local assemblies. We are people who He has forgiven, regenerated, seated with Him in heavenly environments. We are distinct from the unsaved people of the world. Therefore, we are people who have put off the old self of sin. We have put on the new self of Christ's characteristics. But we are still learning about his new life. In that learning environment, we must be careful to let the peace of Christ be the umpire. Our flesh will often disagree with the "Umpire's" call. But we must submit to His call because not only does this umpire always know what is best, but it will prove to be best for us.