



The Sermon

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Colossians 3:12-14

"Living in Harmony"

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TRANSCRIPT

If you would open your Bible with me to Colossians chapter 3 we'll continue on in the study of Colossians 3, looking this morning at verses 12-14. I've had a chance, as I normally do, to get to follow what goes on here, and I often watch on Sunday evenings the service that has taken place here that morning; and so like you, my heart has been encouraged by what you've been studying as you've walked through this New Testament letter. We'll continue today as we look at these three verses at how we're to live. Follow along, if you would, Colossians 3, I'll read beginning in verse 12.

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. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." Let's pray and ask the Lord to help us as we study His Word this morning.

[Prayer] Our Father, we are thankful for the privilege to be here with these dear saints on this day. We've gathered for the purpose of studying Your Word and proclaiming Your Word in song, to pray together and to encourage one another. Now I do pray that through the work of Your Holy Spirit that what we read, and what is proclaimed from this pulpit this morning would be understood, that it would come alive within our hearts,

and that with obedience and joy we would seek to obey it. We ask it in Christ's name and for His glory. Amen. [End]

Well, as you were studying last Sunday if you were able to be here, in the preceding passage Paul is using this metaphor of "clothing." There's things that we are to put off and things that we are to put on. There's a certain way, as you looked at last Sunday, that Christians are to dress, not in fashion or wardrobe, but in character and in the way that we live. And I was thinking this week that I remember as a child when my parents were teaching me how to dress myself, it's an important part of life to learn to dress yourself. I can remember as a real little boy my mom teaching me how to tie my own shoes. I was excited to be able to do that, wanted to do it myself.

I confess to you, it was much harder than I expected it to be. It did not come that quickly to me. She would teach me, "You take the shoelaces and you draw the bunny rabbit or chase it around and wrap it around," whatever little things you come up with. Much harder than I thought it was going to be. But it's important; you don't want to be a grown man having someone else tie your shoes, you want to be able to do that yourself.

I remember very vividly I was eight years old, I was at my grandmother's house, and I told my dad who was there – my parents were there with me at my grandma's house – and I said, "I'm eight now, I think it's time I learn how to tie my own tie," because what eight-year-old doesn't need to know how to tie his own necktie, right? And so my dad took me there in the room and he got a tie out and he showed me how to do it, and I would practice and I would mess it up, and he would show me how to do, and I would practice, and little by little I knew what to do, I just had a hard time making it work. And so I asked my dad to leave and I said, "I'm just going to shut myself in the room until I know how to tie my tie perfectly," and I stayed in that room for about an hour and just practiced and practiced and practiced and did it over and over and over again, until at the age of eight I knew all the finer nuances to tying a tie.

And just a couple of weeks ago my sons were in a wedding. Both of my sons are married and on their own now, but they were both groomsmen in a wedding. And we were sitting there. They had about nine groomsmen there all in a coat and tie, and I just sat there with pride as I lean over to my wife and I said, "Honey, look at look at my sons' ties; those are the best tied ties out of all the guys on there." You just need to be able to know how to dress yourself, to be dressed appropriate for the occasion.

This is true in life. Football players wear certain jerseys so you identify whose team you're on. I wear a wedding ring and it identifies that I have a wife. Police officers are in a uniform so you know who they are and who to go to if you're in need. You go to a store, they wear a certain uniform so they can be identified if you need help. And that's the metaphor that Paul is using here in Colossians 3, that there's a proper dress for the people of God in character and in behavior.

You studied last week, if you let your eyes just kind of glance up to verse 5, there's things that we are to put to death, certain traits. Verse 8, we put away certain sins; verse 9, we put off the old self. So there's things that we're to take off, and now in verse 12, our text for today, there are things that we are to put on. So as we walk through this text, let me just give you a few words, as we do it, if you want to take notes, to help you to follow the argument and the logic behind what this text says.

First, make note of our calling, our calling, who we are as believers in Christ. That's verse 12: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved." He tells us to put these things on, what he's about to give to us later on in verse 12. There's things we take off, there's things that we are to put on. The gathering of God's people is different than the world. He tells us that because we are God's chosen ones that there's certain things we put on; we're different from the world.

It's a shame that in so many churches the last number of decades there's just been this increasing desire for the church to become more and more like the world. That's the exact opposite of how it should be. The gathering of God's

people is different, because we are different. And what's the difference? It's verse 12, that we are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. The verb here, "to put these things on," is what we'd call the present imperative, meaning that we put it on and we keep putting them on. These are things that should describe our lives continually.

Let's look at what our calling is. First, he reminds us we are God's chosen ones, loved by God, chosen by God, the elect of God. And I understand that in many parts of the world and in many churches this is a hotly debated doctrine, and part of what I fear has gotten lost in our conversations about what it means to be God's chosen ones is that this is not an idea in Scripture to bring confusion, this is something to bring comfort. You ought to rest in the fact that if you know Christ is your Savior, and if you have a true relationship and you've been saved by grace through faith, that you are the chosen ones of God. And I fear sometimes, even those among us who love theology, may love to read and discuss, even debate this kind of a topic; and if we're not careful, we'll miss the comfort that it brings.

You in grace have been called by the Lord, you are His chosen ones. But we're called not only as His chosen ones, secondly, we're called to be holy, to be set apart for His use, that your life belongs to Him, that you were bought with the price, you are not your own, that we are to live a holy life as He is holy. Our life has been set apart for His use.

And third, he reminds us that you were called in love. We are His beloved. Why is it that we live life a certain way? Why is it that we would live by the highest standard we can? After all, to be a believer is absolutely to live a counter-culture life. Why would we embrace that? Here's why: because we are God's chosen ones, holy and loved by Him.

So don't be too quick to move past that, because if you don't understand our calling, you're going to miss the reason why we live a certain way. This isn't just about our strength and our energy, this is about what God has done and is doing in our lives. All of these realities – you're chosen by God, you're set apart for God, you're loved by God – all these realities have

been given to us, not earned by us. This is our calling, not our accomplishment. So we must stop and remind ourselves first and foremost that who we are is because of what Christ has done for us.

But he goes on from there, not just our calling, secondly, he's going to talk to us about our character. There's a certain character with which we live, we see it in verse 12: "We put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved." Here's how we're to live: "compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." Let's take a minute and just look at each of these words, because they're helpful of how we are to live.

First, he says, "compassionate hearts." Literally here what he says is "the bowels of mercy." He's speaking of the emotional seat of a person, that part of you that feels and feels deeply. In our world today, in our vernacular today, we would probably speak more of this as the heart than we would as the stomach. Although we can understand what he's saying, it's that part of you that feels. So if you're nervous, you might say, "My stomach's in knots." If you're anxious about something, you might say, "I've got butterflies. I've got a pit in my stomach." We would still use that kind of language. And what we're talking about is that part of us that feels, and we feel it deeply.

And so he says as believers we are to have compassionate hearts. The word's not *kardia*, it's not the word for your heart muscle. It's *splanchna*. It's that part of you that has emotion, that feels, that inside part of you, the soft, vulnerable part of you. In other words, he says, "As God's people, we are to feel deeply for each other."

Yes, we study. Yes, we want to be trained and equipped. But friends, the Christian life is not just about your mind. It includes the mind, it cannot bypass the mind, but it affects all of who we are. We're not just theological robots; we study, we learn, we worship, we sing, we pray, we disciple, and we are to feel toward each other. There is a connection, a love relationship. We're not just a bunch of students only; we are students of the Word, absolutely, but called to then take what we know and let it impact our lives

with each other. In a word, we're to be sympathetic. The things that we learn about God's Word should make us more caring with other people. We're to be tenderhearted.

So, compassionate hearts. Second, were to be people of kindness. If a compassionate heart speaks of how you feel towards somebody, kindness is that feeling put in action. It's grace in action that we treat each other a certain way. It's the opposite of what you looked at last week in verse 8. Verse 8, "Put away anger, wrath, malice, slander," and instead, "put on kindness."

I think this helps us in our evangelism as we think about sharing the gospel. Romans 2:4 says it's the kindness of God that leads us to repentance. And so when we think about grace, that grace must be put into action, and that grace in action is what we call kindness. So we speak of the gospel, we proclaim the gospel, we live the gospel, we display the gospel, and when we do, we are kind toward each other. He says that we're to have humility; it's the opposite of pride, it's the opposite of demanding our own way, it's the absence of self-exaltation. The people of God are a humble people.

Fourth, this word "meekness." It's kind of a hard word in our English language to fully define. I like the way one lexicon describes or defines the term. It says that "it's the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one's self-importance." That's meekness: I'm not overly impressed with myself, I'm not overly impressed with my own preferences, I'm not overly impressed with my own self-importance, but I'm choosing to restrain those things and to put others above myself.

And it's interesting when you think of the word "meekness" in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, in Psalm 37, we see the exact same word in Psalm 37 that we see here in Colossians 3 for meekness. In Psalm 37 it says that what we are to do is to avoid being angry by waiting on the Lord, we avoid seeking revenge by trusting in the Lord, and in Psalm 37, it describes the one who lives that way as one who is meek.

So when the Bible speaks of meekness, it's not weakness, it's strength under control. Meekness is choosing to yield your life to the authority of Christ, not seeking revenge for yourself, but trusting in the Lord and waiting upon the Lord. The term also can be defined as a gentleness, which the Bible tells us in Galatians 6, "If we have a brother who is straying in sin, we're to restore them with the spirit of gentleness." First Peter 3, "When we are to defend the hope we have within us, we do it with gentleness and with respect."

So these aren't just ideas that we're supposed to study, these are ways that we are to live: compassionate hearts, we feel for each other; we are kind, grace in action; we are humble; we are meek. And then he says at the end of verse 12, "we are to be patient people," waiting for the Lord to make things right. *Makrothumia* is there a word here: *makro* meaning big, *thumos* like a thermos, something that gets hot. And the idea behind the word here is we are not to become quickly hot. That's the idea, to be patient, not easily heated, not easily made angry. If, in your life, in your relationships, you are quickly angry, if you are quickly assuming the worst in somebody, if your conversations or disagreements quickly get heated, that's the opposite of how he calls us to live. We are to be patient people.

And I want you to notice that all of these things – compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience – all of these things must be lived out among people. You can't display kindness just by yourself, and there's no reason to be humble if you're not around other sinners; these things demand that we're around people. But when you find a church that not only would preach this, but would live this, you don't want to leave. This is why there's that part of you on the Lord's Day, and maybe you can't even put it into words or put your finger right on it, but there's that part of you that you come to church and you're around each other, and you sing and you hear the Word taught and you pray, and when the service is over, there's that part of you, you think, "I just want to linger, I just want to stay. I just want to talk to these people. I just want to be around these people." Why? Because this is not the way the world lives.

What he's just described, this is the way believers live. But you know that when you go to work tomorrow, and when you go to the store tomorrow, and when you go back to school in a few weeks, this is not the way the world treats you, and there's that part of us that when we are around it, when we're with people who really believe this and get this and live this, it is just so sweet, you just don't want to leave it. This is how a church should be, that when you look around at each other you say, "That person is kind, and that man is humble, and that lady is meek, and our church is patient with each other." And to keep his metaphor, it's just like layers of clothes, one on top of the other, until the church is just dressed in a way that it reflects the character of Christ.

I like a story I heard, one man how he explained these things one time. He said, "Suppose so church is over this morning and, say, you're going to stay and linger in conversation with people here, a close friend of yours at the church has to leave to get somewhere more quickly, and about 15 minutes later your friend who left the church while you were still here talking called you, and you can hear in their voice they're distraught and concerned, and you say, 'Is everything okay?' and your friend of the church says, 'No.' I walk to my car, and as I was backing up I didn't notice the car behind me and I ran into a car that was parked, and I'm afraid I created a lot of damage."

Well instantly, we feel for them. That part of us in our heart and in our stomach, we feel for them: "Are you okay?" The first thing we ask in a car wreck: "Are you okay? Is anybody hurt?" Why? Because we feel for them. And then we're concerned, how much damage was done to their car and, "Are you going to be able to pay the repairs? Is this going to put your family in a bind? Are you able to drive your car? Do you need me to call a wrecker? Does your car need towed? Do you have a vehicle tomorrow for work? Is this going to create a hardship with you as you get your kids where they need to be?" And if it's someone you really know and care about, you may be concerned about the expenses, or maybe even what it's going to do to their insurance premiums. And why do you care about those things? Because you love people, you feel deeply for people. That's what he says.



But here's the question: What happens on that phone call after you express all your concern when your friend says to you, "And I need to let you know that the car I ran into is yours"? Now here's the question: You still focused on them, you still concerned with them, or when it impacts you, does automatically all of your concern now turn inward? Are you still concerned about their car's condition, are you still concerned about their expense, are you still concerned about how it impacts their family, or all of your thoughts now only on yourself?

This is how the Lord calls us to live. How do you know that? Because he's about to say that "you've got to bear with one another and forgive each other." We're not talking about living this way when everything goes well, we're talking about living this way even when you're the one impacted. So, knowing who we are in Christ, he says, we need to live this way.

We could sum it up by saying in verse 12, what he's telling us to do is to love our neighbor as ourselves. We're to live like Jesus so that we reflect the one that we worship. That is our calling. That is to be our character. Third, let's look at our conduct, because ultimately, our theology has to be worked out in real life with real people. It's not enough to just watch a sermon online, or go to a Bible study, or read a book and take some notes. It's not enough to come to church, listen to a sermon and write some notes down. The reason we do that is so we can remember it in order to help us to live these things out.

We don't want to just talk about what a godly husband should do, the godly men in this church need to go home and actually live that out. We don't want to just talk about the importance of prayer or discipleship, we want to go home and spend time with people and make disciples. Well, the same thing is true here in Colossians 3. These aren't just theological words to consider, we've got to actually live these things out. And so after telling people what to wear, Paul's going to remind them of the purpose of why you're dressed that way.

In a few weeks it's going to be football season - seven Saturdays from yesterday to be exact in case anyone's counting - and when football season comes up, there are these players and they've got to put on a helmet; and if you don't have a helmet on, you can't go on the field and play. And you've got to have a chin strap, and that chin strap has to be buckled, or you can't play. You have to have shoulder pads on, and without shoulder pads, you can't play, because it's not enough to just simply say, "Here's the uniform," and put it on, you've got to get the uniform, put it on, and then go use it in the field to play. So you put on that helmet so that when you are playing the sport, your head is protected; you put on the shoulder pads, so it can absorb the wrath of the crushing tackle. The purpose is not just to get dressed up all nice, it's to be able to help you go and perform the work it's designed to do.

That's the metaphor Paul is using here. It's not just about getting dressed in the spiritual realm to look a certain way, it's so that you and I can go live real life among real people and do what God's called us to do. So, for example, in 1 Peter 5, it says, "To the elders who shepherd the flock of God among you," that that pastor is to be among the people. That's why at my congregation in Oklahoma, I don't just slip in in the last song, and then preach, and then slip out in the last song, and then I'm just mysteriously gone and I reappear the next Sunday. I've got to live my real life among the people. They need to know me, I need to know them. They need to know how I treat my wife, they need to see how I respond to people, they need to see how I interact with people, they need to see me out in the community, because it's not enough just to know some theological things, you've got to live it out. And you don't live it out just on days where it's simple and easy or convenient, you get dressed the way you're called to dress, spiritually speaking, so that you're prepared to do the hard work that you've been given to do.

My first paying job was at Braum's, I was 15. To this day the hardest job I've ever had I think was working at Braum's, and they gave me - I had to pay for it, they took out of my paycheck actually, but I'm over it - they gave me a brown hat and they gave me a brown apron to wear; that was my uniform. Well, I would soon find out it's because the work I was supposed to do at Braum's was so messy, and if I didn't have a hat and didn't have the apron, then then all the grease and all the ice cream and all the stuff you're

working with gets all over you. It wasn't just to look pretty. I assure you, it was to help you do the work.

Well, that's Paul's idea, that you put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, so that you can then go and do the work. Two things specifically in verse 13 he calls us to do. Number one, "We are to be bearing with one another." It means to hold up one another. Or you could even say to put up with one another, that we fight against divisions in the church. We are to bear with each other, we are to put up with each other.

I have to remind myself that even if you frustrate me, if we're both believers, I'm going to remind myself God chose you just like He chose me, and that God loves you just like He loves me. And if I disappoint you, you've got to give me grace by reminding yourself that God loves me just like He loves you. We bear with each other, we put up with each other, we stand up for each other, and in doing that, we prevent the church from dividing into all different groups and cliques and camps; so important.

If we don't live that way, I'll tell you what the church will become. People will begin to see the church the same way they see any other theater: "I want a better performance, I want a better experience. I don't get my way, I'll go to this church down the street. They've got a better stage show, they've got better parking; I like their start times better." We'll come up with 10,000 different reasons. We will turn the church into nothing more than a theater where we just pick and choose what we like; and if we don't get what we want, we'll just go somewhere else. That mindset has invaded the church; and we want to fight against that.

Every true biblical church has to fight hard against that, and the way that we do it is by doing the very things he tells us here: "Remind yourself of who you are in Christ, love each other a certain way, including" – verse 13 – "bearing with each other." Then he gives us a second specific way that we are to conduct ourselves: "and if one has a complaint against another, then we are to be forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive." It means we don't seek retribution, we're quick to forgive. In

fact, the language here is quite instructive for us. The pronouns are indefinite pronouns, meaning the details are unspecified. This isn't just one particular application for this, but anytime that there is a problem or there's a complaint against one another, we are to be quick to forgive. And the wording helps us, because the word used here for "complaint" gives us the idea that it's a legitimate complaint. In other words, if someone in the church legitimately has a reason to be upset about something, what do we do then? We want to be quick to forgive.

And you say, "But they said something about me that really hurt." Well we stop and remind ourselves, we do this because we were first loved by God. And we say, "But if I forgive them, they may hurt me again." They may; but we remind ourselves that we were called to be compassionate and kind and humble.

Then you say, "But they said something about me that wasn't true." Well, that's not good, they shouldn't do that. But when people seek restoration, let it be true in the family of God that we are quick to forgive; otherwise, the standard for our actions becomes simply our own name, which is a dangerous way to live, which is why in context he begins this passage by saying, "Remember you are God's chosen ones. Remember that you are set apart for His use, and that He has loved you." You're never going to be asked to forgive someone more than what God has already forgiven you for.

With that in mind, he says, "We are to forgive each other." And keep looking here in verse 13. There's a short little English word that's I think very instructive for us here: "forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you, as the Lord has forgiven you," *kathos*, as. It speaks to the proportion of something, or to the degree of something. "Forgive each other in proportion to what you've been forgiven. Forgive each other to the degree of which you've been forgiven. And you think about how the Lord has forgiven you, let that be your standard of how you forgive each other."

So we ask ourselves, "How has the Lord forgiven us?" Well, He's forgiven us freely, He's forgiven us fully, He's forgiven us willingly. "As He's

forgiven you, let that be the way you forgive each other." This is how a godly marriage works. You take a sinful man, you take a sinful woman, you put them in a 1,500 square-foot house, you're going to have conflict, right, it's the way it works. But as the Lord has forgiven you, forgive them.

This is the way roommates in college survive a semester. As a believer, you say, "You know what; my roommate frustrated me; my roommate was unkind; my roommate, they weren't very thoughtful. But as the Lord has forgiven me, that's my standard for forgiving somebody else." This is how the church lives in a place of peace and joy, by being quick to forgive, as the Lord has forgiven us - freely, fully, willingly.

If this church ever forgets that, what this church will become is a place so divided. You may agree in your doctrine, but you won't have relationships with each other; and at that point, it ceases to be a New Testament church. Every true church must make sure they never drift from this. The Bible wouldn't talk about bearing with each other and forgiving each other if you're living your life in isolation. The reason we're called to these things is because we're supposed to live our lives together in friendship, in community and relationships. But when you do that, people have a way of hurting you; it's just true. So you've got two choices: you withdraw from people, or you become quick to forgive. It's that simple. And Scripture says if we're going to be compassionate, kind, humble, meek, and, patient it's going to be because we are quick to forgive, as the Lord has forgiven us.

Let me show you one last thing, that's our covering. What is it that covers us, that that wraps itself around us? That's verse 14: "Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." This is a love that is uniquely and distinctly Christian love.

Now there is some discussion among scholars of how to best understand the first part of verse 14, "And above all, put on love." New American Standard takes it to be, "Beyond all these things, put on love." Christian Standard says it's, "Above all things." NET Bible says, "To the others, add these." I'm in agreement with those who take this verse to best understand it this

way, that over all of these other clothes, put on love. I think that keeps with the metaphor he's using from verse 5 down to this part, I think it's in keeping with his language of verse 12 of what we're to put on, and that over all of that, we are to put on the garment of love. It's as if he's saying, "You put on your shoes and your pants and your belt and your shirt and your tie, but if you're wearing a suit, what is it that covers all of it? It's the coat. You put the coat, the jacket so to speak, over all of it." It's not that the other things are important, it's just that it's incomplete without the coat. You wrap yourself, you cover yourself, above and over all of these things, you put on love, it says in the verse, because it's what binds everything together in perfect harmony.

I think there's two ways to rightly understand this one is that love is what binds all these other virtues together – the compassionate heart, the kindness, the humility, the meekness, the patience. Love is what binds that together. And then, secondly, love is what binds us to each other. That's so important.

If you try to be compassionate and kind and humble and meek without love, then all you're going to do your whole life is try to force yourself to do something you don't really want to do in the first place. But when it's motivated by true Christlike love, that holds us together, that covers over all of us. And as one author put it, that love is the ligament that binds believer to believer here in the body of Christ. That's what unites us.

First, it's God's love for us; that's verse 12. Second, it's our love for Him. And then, third, it's our love for each other that flows out of that. And love holds us, binds us, knits us all together, so that we are held together in perfect harmony.

So if you've ever come to this church on the Lord's Day and the service is over, and you've sung these great hymns about Christ, and you've heard preaching that exalts Christ, and you've talked with your friends, and hugged each other and encourage each other, and there's that part of you that just thinks to yourself, "I don't really know what it is, I just don't even

want to leave. I don't even want to think about school tomorrow and work tomorrow. I don't want to think about what I have to do this week. There's just a part of me that just wants to stay and be here with God's people." This is why, because we're united together in love.

God has loved us, and we love Him, and that our love for each other is what knits us, unites us together, so that we are in perfect harmony. And we are a bunch of sinners, a bunch of imperfect people, and yet in the body of Christ, there is such joy and such unity and such peace, so much that we wish we could just stay here forever. Why is that? It's because of unique, distinct Christian love that binds everything together.

So I said a moment ago, in a few weeks it's going to be football season; and if you're like me and you look forward to that time of year, you're going to turn the TV on, and there's going to be 22 men on the screen, 11 in one color, 11 in the other color. And it's a new season, so I've got to get out my roster and memorize names and numbers, and cheer for people I've never met, that I'll never know. And number 92, if he's wearing the jersey I cheer for, I want him to do well. 92 on the other color jersey, I don't want to do well. I don't know either guy. How do I know who to cheer for? How do I know who I'm with? One way: What are they dress like? That's how I know who's on my team. Or are they wearing my colors?

Well, in a much more important way, that's what Paul says for the people of God. We are to know who we belong to by what we wear; not fashion and wardrobe, but calling and character and conduct, that people should see from the way that we live that we belong to Christ. This is how we love our neighbor as ourself. This is how we keep peace in the home. This is how we keep unity in the church, by being people who live like Christ, who reflect the one that we worship.

And so as you just scan again one last time this brief text, remind yourself that you are God's chosen ones, that you have been set apart for Him, that you are loved by Him. That calling now is displayed in your character. And so you're compassionate, and you're kind, you're humble, your meek, and

your patient, so that your conduct is lived out in real life, where you bear with one another, and you are quick to forgive each other.

But in closing, I do want to draw your attention to one last thing. It would be easy for us to miss this. In all of this talk about how we're to live and what we're to put on, and how we're to forgive, all these really helpful words here that should describe our life, I want to make sure you don't miss something very obvious as we close this morning, and that is that we can do all of this because the Lord has forgiven you. If you're a believer, don't miss that truth today, that you are loved by God and forgiven by God.

It would be possible to look at a text like this and to feel so much conviction because we should live a different way, because we should be more humble, we should be more quick to forgive. And if the Holy Spirit convicts you of those sins, I encourage you to respond in obedience to Him. But I just don't want you to miss the obvious truth here, that as God's children, He has forgiven us. Rest in that truth. Be encouraged by being reminded of the truth of the cross, that Jesus is a Savior, is a Redeemer, and He has forgiven you.

Reminds me of a story that I've read in a couple of different places through the years of a young man who went wayward, committed a number of crimes, was charged and eventually convicted, sentenced to prison because of his crimes. His father let his son know how much shame the action of the son had brought upon the family. That relationship was essentially broken. The son goes to prison, serves his time, and during that time the family doesn't come to visit him, and during that time he doesn't receive any letters. But he knows that his family has grown up, a pretty poor and uneducated family, and so his hope was that they didn't come to visit, because they didn't have money to travel. His hope was that they didn't write letters, because they just weren't very skilled at reading and writing.

The time came when he was going to be set free. He had served his sentence, and he found out that he was just a couple of weeks away from being released. And so he asked the guard if he could have some pen and



paper, and he wrote a letter to his father apologizing for his crime, apologizing for the shame that he had brought up on the family name. He said, "I have nowhere or else to turn. I'm about to be released. I have no home, I have nowhere to go." He said, "I don't know if you would welcome me back, I don't know if you would forgive me, but they're going to put me on a train when I leave the prison, and I've got to get off somewhere and make that my new home."

And the son knew that at the family farm close by where the train would go by there was an apple tree, and he said to the father, "If you have it in your heart to forgive me, would you take a single white ribbon and tie it on the apple tree, and when the train goes by, if I see that ribbon, I'll know that I'm forgiven, I'll know that I'm welcome home. If you can't forgive me, I understand, and if I don't see a ribbon, I'll just know that I'm not welcome home, and I'll just get off at a different stop and try to build my life somewhere else."

The day comes, and the man is released from prison. He gets on the train, and he's seated there at the window seat, and there's a person sitting beside him on the aisle, and that person sees that the man is very nervous and very jittery, and finally inquires, "What's going on?" And the broken man, who is now the ex-convict, says, "I've been in prison for all this time for crimes that I committed, and I'm so ashamed," and the man tells the ones that he beside him the arrangement he made with his father in the letter. He said, "In just a couple of miles we're going to be at my dad's farm, and I'm looking at the apple tree, and if I see a single white ribbon, I'm forgiven, I'm welcome home; if it's not there, I've got nowhere to go."

The man was so overcome with nervousness and angst he couldn't even look out the window anymore, so the one sitting beside him offered to trade seats and said, "I'll look out the window if you'll tell me when we're coming up to the farm. I'll look and see if there's a ribbon on the tree." And so they made that exchange. The ex-convict then said, "We're right now at the place, we're coming up to the farm. The next tree you see is my dad's apple tree; this is the one." And the son couldn't even stand to look, he just buried

his head. And as they drove by, the train began to make its stop, and the son was trying to decide whether I'm going to get off this stop or not.

The friend sitting by the window grabbed his arm, and the son said, "Tell me, is there a single ribbon on the apple tree?" And the one looking out the window said, "No, there's not a single ribbon on the apple tree." And the man bowed his head again, knowing that that meant he had no home. But the one looking out said, "There's not a single ribbon. I've got to tell you, there are hundreds of ribbons tied all over the tree." And the son knew what that meant. He said, "That means my dad forgives me, and I'm welcome at his home."

My brothers and sisters, while you try to navigate life and live a certain way, don't forget this, that you as Christians are loved by your Father, forgiven of your sin, and welcomed at His table. Now knowing what you've been forgiven of, and how deeply you've been loved, now go; and as He's forgiven you, love and forgive each other. And when you find a body of believers who really will live like that, you'll never want to leave, because that's the New Testament church in action.

And if you're here this morning and you don't know the love of Christ, you've never had your sin forgiven, I want to encourage you to know that this is your day. The Bible teaches us that we are all sinners. All of us have fallen short of His glory. But God in love put forth His Son Jesus Christ, that on the cross Christ took our sin upon Himself. But the wrath of God was poured out on His Son, that the righteousness of Christ could be given to you, and that those who by faith believe in His name shall be saved, not by their works, not by their achievements, but only by grace through faith. And if you wonder today, "Will the Lord forgive me? Does the Lord love me? Am I welcomed at His table?" the Bible says this, that God demonstrated His love in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. If this day you would repent of your sin and call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, you shall be saved. Let the love of Christ bind your heart to His and your heart to each other, and let it be the way we live every single day.

[Prayer] Our Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and pray that You would help us to believe it, and to live by it. May You protect this dear church, this dear congregation. Protect the unity, protect the joy, protect the love that they feel for You and for each other. We pray that we would live these truths out in our homes, in our jobs, with friends, with family, in the church, that it would be Your love that You have given to us that would change everything about us, and that love would cover over us as a garment, binding and holding all things together, Your love for us, our love for You, displayed by our love for each other in action, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. [End]

What a blessing to be with you. What an honor to open God's Word for you and with you. I pray that you are blessed and encouraged today. And as we leave this place, let's put these truths into action for the glory of the name of Jesus Christ. God bless you.