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Love in Action

Colossians 3:12-17

Intro: In our last study (5-11), Paul instructed the Colossians to put to death those sins (vices) that characterized their former lives, lives that reflected the mindset of the pagan society from out of which they were gloriously saved. But Paul wasn't content with them discarding the outward sins that were commonplace in that world; he also insisted that they rid themselves of the vestiges of the inner, secret sins that originates in hearts that are separated from God. He used the metaphor of changing clothes, putting off the old man with his deeds (9) and putting on the new man who is constantly being renewed in the knowledge of Jesus Christ (10). This putting on is to be done by the individual Christian as they walk and live within a community of believers in which Jesus Christ is all and in all (11).

Paul will continue to use the image of dressing in the new life in our text today (12-17). Sometimes, this language of re-clothing makes some modern readers uneasy. They object that it seems to reduce Christian living to simple play-acting or, even worse, to hypocritical pretending. Like children dressing up in adult clothes, Christians dress up in the costume of the kingdom of heaven. What they fail to comprehend is: that's exactly what it is. By putting on the role and making a conscious effort to live it out, we align ourselves with the work that God is doing in our lives. What begins as a role becomes second nature, and as we continue to pursue that role, it becomes our only nature, as God works with us to make us into the image of Christ. The hypocrite strives to be something he is not, in order to make a good impression. The Christian strives to be something he is not, in order to eventually become it.

12- Paul goes on to list 5 virtues that make up the heavenly costume. These virtues are in direct contrast to the vices mentioned in 5 and 8. Before we jump into the list, it's important for us to take notice of how they are introduced. Paul addresses the Colossians as elect of God, holy and beloved or, in other words, God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, which has a familiar ring to it. The image of being chosen reminds the Colossian believers that their election comes at God's initiative, who has embraced them with unmerited favor (grace). God's love bestows value on

the elect, but the idea of election can be misunderstood if we fail to realize we've been elected for service, not for personal benefit. Christians have been chosen in Christ ([Eph 1:4](#)), who is the Chosen One ([Lk 9:35](#)) and, like Christ, we've been chosen to be something special in God's plan to benefit of the world, to serve for their spiritual welfare.

This image also takes over the terms of the Jewish identity. OT designations for Israel as elect...holy and beloved appear in the NT and include Gentile Christians. Jews and Gentiles in Christ represent what God always intended Israel to be. The language reminds the Colossians that they are full partners in the heritage of Israel, an Israel without racial or ethnic divisions. But, being God's chosen people brings with it ethical responsibilities. As those who are chosen by God, they must choose their behavior. They are now to be living advertisements of what God's grace does in human lives.

The virtues listed are similar to the fruits of the Spirit ([Gal 5:22-25](#)) and each of them characterize Jesus' life and, as such, they are vital for living a harmonious life with our fellow human beings. Each one of the qualities mentioned in this passage express themselves in relationships. A significant measure of our Christian life is found simply in how we treat people and the quality of our relationships with them. Notice: there's no mention of efficiency or cleverness, nor of diligence or industry – not that these are unimportant. But the great basic Christian virtues are those which cover human relationships.

1) tender mercies – or compassion, literally 'bowels (internal organs) of compassion'. In the ancient world, the guts were seen as the seat of emotion (a gut feeling), while the heart was the seat of reason. Tender mercies describes the ability both to feel for others and to put those feelings into action. If something's tender, it's sensitive to the touch. Paul would have them be sensitive to the slightest touch of another's misery.

2) kindness – a benevolent attitude towards others. The Greeks define it as the virtue of the man whose neighbor's good is as dear to him as his own. It goes with 3) humility – (not considered a virtue by the ancient Greeks) refers to having a realistic attitude of oneself that neither seeks a false lowliness nor demands more credit than one is due.

Humility is the parent of 4) meekness – (thinking of others rather than yourself, the ability to give way to the needs and hopes of others) and 5)

longsuffering – (patience) the ability to put up with exasperating or annoying behavior in others; it literally means long-tempered. Meekness shows how humility effects my actions towards others: I will not dominate, manipulate or coerce for my own ends, even if I have the power and ability to do so. Longsuffering shows how humility effects my reaction towards others: I won't become impatient, short tempered or filled with resentment towards the weakness, failing and sins of others. All these are qualities that go towards building up a community. They require both the grace of God and a lot of hard work!

13- These 5 virtues inevitably lead to the action of forbearing and forgiveness. Paul's a realist in his understanding of the Church. Yes, it is the community of God's saints, but it is also a collection of people who may have nothing in common but their faith in Christ. In fact, Paul's churches contained the same rag-bag of humanity that the modern Church contains, maybe even more so. Learning mutual respect and care for others was and still is the priority for any congregation that wants to be more than just a brief weekly meeting. By bearing with and bearing up those believers who sin, we demonstrate our love for and obedience to the law of Christ. Thus, a core characteristic of the local church has to be forgiveness.

Christians are not perfect and will sin. They must be conformed to Christ in every aspect of their lives but particularly in the willingness to forgive others. Paul doesn't use the normal word for 'forgive', but one that's related to the word for 'grace', which stresses the abundant, unmerited nature of forgiveness. Forgiveness is not about being right, it's about restoring relationships. That's why Paul exhorts believers in a situation where church member may likely have a legitimate grievance against each other – they're to forgive: wipe the slate clean and move forward in Christ.

Now, this is not to imply that Paul was against discussion and the working out of problems. Many Christians make the mistake of assuming that any kind of conflict must be avoided at any cost but this is both unhealthy for the church and far from Paul's own example (confronting Peter, Corinthians, Galatians...). What we must do in those situations is keep forgiveness in front of any differences or disagreements. We can hammer out our differences, but at the end of the day, we must forgive those who offend us. Of course, the great example of this is Christ's own forgiveness of us. When the whole purpose of God was to bring us forgiveness and restoration, how

can we fail to do likewise?

14- The final and most important garment in the Christian wardrobe is love. The characteristic Christian virtue, the one that should define God's people and stamp the family likeness on the whole diverse membership of the Church, is love. Love is the source, the spring from which flows the other 5 virtues. We can't truly exhibit tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness or longsuffering without love. Love also binds the various members together. Paul now moves from the clothing analogy back to referring to the Church as a body. Like muscles and tendons, love joins the various organs together and enables them to work together towards perfection. Love binds the church community together and enables it to grow towards the completeness and unity that is its final goal, as it is made over into the image of Christ.

As with the other virtues, love is both a gift of God, growing from the experience of His grace, and an act of our will, a decision to behave that way. That is one reason why the NT writers use the relatively rare word 'agape' for love. They needed a word that could be redefined in terms of a love that was not about natural affection or attraction. No one can be commanded to fall in love or to feel affection. But they can be commanded to act in a way that is best for others. Besides, once you start acting with love towards someone, you may very well end up actually liking them! **Love** perfectly fulfills what God requires of us in relationships.

15- Alongside love stands the peace that comes from knowing God. Peace is the deep-seated sense of wholeness and well-being that is the result of a life based on the awareness of God's promise of salvation. Here, Paul's likely thinking of peace as the dominant attitude between members of the Christian congregation. Peace is to rule in the Colossians' hearts, which means the seat of their reason and will, rather than their emotions. Peace is the way they are to behave towards each other, not necessarily the way they are to feel.

An attitude of peacefulness to others is part of the Colossians' Christian calling. To be a Christian is to adopt a certain approach to others that reflects the way Jesus behaved. But Paul's phrase goes even further. The Colossians have been called into peace. The peace of Christ is seen here as more or less equivalent to salvation. It is the realm of wholeness and

well-being that is the exact opposite of the realm of darkness from which they've been called out. Peace, with God, with others and with oneself, is the characteristic of Christ's kingdom. That kingdom is the place of security and healing.

Christians are called into this realm of peace in one body, the body of Christ – the Church. The Christian calling is not an individual call (though it comes individually to each member) but a call to be part of the Christian community. At the same time it's a call to the Christian community. Those who enter the realm of Christ's peace also enter the community of the saints. Then, that community has to make real the calling to be a place of peace, of wholeness and well-being, which has been Paul's entire exhortation through this chapter.

It is appropriate that Paul's next exhortation is to be thankful. Christ's peace brings thanksgiving. Believers should be as thankful as refugees who have escaped the grim bondage of a repressive culture and have found refuge in a land of freedom and opportunity. Instead of ceaselessly seeking to approach God through religious rituals and mystical visions, the Colossians need to recognize all that they've already received. Salvation is theirs, and the new creation waits up ahead. In Christ they have all they need; in fact, they have all there is to have. Their outworking of the virtues of the kingdom in their personal and congregational life should be a happy act of thanksgiving for all that God has done for them.

16- The peace of Christ rules where the word of Christ dwells. Paul's call to thanksgiving in 15b forms a bridge into a new area of teaching, as he turns his attention to the worship at Colosse. His first concern is with the gospel they have received. This is the word of Christ: the teaching about Him, which must dwell among the whole community. The word of Christ has come to them and it has borne much fruit (**1:5-6**), but it must continue to do so, dwelling in them richly; that is, bringing more blessings and gifts as it continues to take an ever strengthening grip on their lives.

As they grow in their understanding of Christ, they will have more insights to share among themselves, both in teaching and in admonition. The job of teaching and putting each other on to the right path is the work of the entire congregation, not just the designated teachers and pastors. Such a task must be exercised in wisdom; knowing when to impart new insights and

how to offer correction in a way that is both helpful and loving rather than destructive and domineering.

Significantly, Paul sees teaching and admonition as coming through the medium of worship. It's very likely that the meetings in Colosse contained elements of biblical exposition (teaching) and preaching, as well as prophecy and other forms of inspired speech. But these were the exclusive responsibilities of individuals with those particular gifts. But, the way in which everyone would be able to impart their share of teaching was through the medium of praise and thanksgiving, and particularly by their contribution and participation in singing these things. As they expressed their gratitude to God in songs of praise, those very songs would be a vehicle of teaching.

Paul says teaching and admonishing occurs in the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Any attempt at formulating a distinction between these 3 words is merely guesswork, since we have no direct evidence on this. More likely, the variety suggests that God delights in creative, spontaneous worship. The emphasis here being more on variety than on strict categories. Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs are to be sung to God as the expression of thanksgiving that springs from a heart that is set on Him. In fact, the majority of the Psalms are a result of the psalmist's pursuit and discovery of God in their own personal life situations. David (and others) could write songs of praise, worship and thanksgiving because he was a man after God's own heart.

At the same time, the content of those songs, the way they are introduced into worship, and their suitability to a particular occasion cannot help but impart understanding. As often as possible, I try to have some of the songs we sing in worship reflect or declare truths that align with the message for that day. But sometimes, more than I care to admit, it doesn't happen because of me but in spite of me. There are times that I don't recognize the correlation between a certain worship song and the message until we are practicing it that morning. "Hey, that really goes with today's study!" Which only goes to show that the Lord is always at work, even when we're not up to par.

17- This verse now carries us into the next section of Paul's practical advice for Christian living (3:18-4:1). It prepares us for this next set of instructions, which mentions the Lord 7 times. If worship is the expression of Christian

gratitude to God, it's also the foundation of all Christian life. Thus, just as songs of praise and thanksgiving mark the Christian assembly, so an attitude of thanksgiving should run through all that Christians do or say. Their lives are to be lived for Christ, which means anything that is done is done as an offering to Him. Daily tasks, even the most menial, can and should be acts of worship, offered in the first place to God. This is the basic idea behind Paul's exhortation to do everything in the name of Christ.

How does this play out in our daily living? In 2 ways: the 1st is to recognize that all the world belongs to God and exists to give Him glory. That means God is glorified simply by the normal processes of nature, by the normal daily life of human beings. If God's presence pervades His creation, He is present in all things and at all times, even in whatever menial task you may be required to do. When God's presence is recognized and acknowledged (even subconsciously), then it is fair to say worship and prayer are taking place. Not, of course, in the focused way of a regular church service, but simply by the fact that the job is well done, as part of a life that is dedicated to God.

The 2nd aspect is a moral one. To do something in the name of Christ is to do something that is in accordance with His will and character. So, if the appliance you need is available at a really low price because it "fell out the back of a truck" or was made by coerced slave labor, then buying them, in the knowledge that a crime or abuse is being aided and abetted, is hardly an act of worship that glorifies God. Thus the awareness of God and a spirit of thankfulness in daily life, provide a necessary moral check on a Christian's actions. Again, it doesn't always need to be a conscious act. Simply forming the habit of doing what's right is part of the daily process of self-offering and worship that glorifies God in the acts of His people.

Like all worship, this daily offering of thanks is made to God through Jesus Christ. This common formula expresses the reality of Christian life and worship. It is aimed towards God, and the way to God is always and only through Christ, who forms the bridge between humanity and God, and who, by His incarnation, death and resurrection, permanently opens the way from the fallen human world into the presence of the Creator and Father.

One thing Paul doesn't say is that either daily life is a substitute for formal worship or vice versa. He would be shocked at today's common view that

‘you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian’. Daily life can be worship because it is lived in the light of that conscious and formal self-offering which is the Church’s worship. And ‘Sunday worship’ is meaningful because we go out from it to put into practice what our hearts and minds have both learned and taught. 😊