

# “Let the Word of Christ Dwell in You Richly”

## The Eighth in a Series of Sermons on Colossians

*Texts: Colossians 3:12-17/Deuteronomy 7:6-11*

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Nothing feels better after working out or finishing a grimy project than to take a shower and escape out of our sweaty or dirty clothes. This image is not far from what Paul has in mind in Colossians 3:10, when he speaks of the Christian life as putting off the “old self” (what we were in Adam—enslaved to the flesh) and the putting on of a “new self” (what we are in Christ—dead to sin, but alive to God). As Paul explains, those who trust in Jesus and are united to him through faith, will die to certain conduct (sexual immorality and covetousness—which Paul calls idolatry), and will “put away” other sinful conduct, such as wrath, anger, slander, and lying. These behaviors characterize the old self and its practices. But all those united to Jesus Christ have put on a new self, so their conduct as Christians grows out of the renewal of the divine image within us (which results from regeneration). It is this new behavior, characteristic of the new self, which Paul continues to describe in Colossians 3:12-17, our text.

We are resuming our series on Paul’s letter to the Colossians, one of Paul’s “prison letters,” identified as such because they were written during that time when Paul was under house arrest in Rome, awaiting his appearance before Caesar Nero. The Colossian church had been founded several years earlier in the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor. One of the pastors from the Colossian church (Epaphras) made his way to Rome to seek advice from the apostle about a serious new challenge to the churches in the region—the so-called “Colossian Heresy.” From what we can glean from Paul’s response, this heresy was a mixture of Judaism and paganism. Adherents worshiped angels, sought visions, and practiced a rigorous form of asceticism grounded in obedience to the law of Moses.

The letter to the Colossians is Paul’s response. The apostle reminds the Colossians of the supremacy of Jesus (chapters 1 and 2)—who is the creator, sustainer, and ruler of all things. It is Jesus who has reconciled sinners with God. And it is Jesus whose death frees us from the guilt and power of sin. All believers are united to Jesus who rules and reigns over all things from the right hand of God—symbolic of Jesus’ authority and power. Furthermore, believers have been buried with Jesus and then raised with him in newness of life in their baptism (Colossians 2:11-12). Because of this union with Christ, Paul exhorts the Colossians in 3:1, *“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”*

The best way to defeat the challenge of those who seek to disqualify them from the prize earned for them by Jesus, Paul tells the Colossians, is to focus upon their union with Christ so as to gain a heavenly perspective on earthly things. In doing so, we will indeed begin to do the things Paul exhorts to the Colossians to do—we will strive to put to death sexual sin and idolatry, and we will strive to put off the sinful conduct mentioned in the previous verses. Why? Because we are united to Jesus Christ by faith and indwelt by his Holy Spirit. This is what those in union with Jesus do—fight against sin.

The doctrinal error spreading throughout the Lycus Valley was typical of Greco-Roman religion of the first century. This pagan impulse can be seen in the stress upon learning secret religious techniques and rules (the latter taken from Judaism and the commandments of God), so as to gain authority over the invisible forces of the world (spirits). Apparently, those teaching the Colossian heresy taught that the

worship of angels (mere creatures—not the creator) and the quest for visions (in an effort to gain knowledge of secret things) would give the followers of this heresy the spiritual energy needed to live a life of rigorous self-denial—avoiding certain foods, keeping Jewish feasts and holidays. All of this was done in an effort to master the sinful flesh—human lust and desire.

But as Paul has made plain throughout the first half of this letter, the sinful flesh cannot be controlled by such superficial and humanly invented means. Only through our union with Christ (in his death and resurrection) through faith, a union which is signed and sealed unto us in our baptism, is the power of sinful flesh broken and the guilt of sin removed. Since this is the case, Paul explains, “why worship angels and deny to ourselves those things (food and drink) created by Jesus for our use and enjoyment?” Self denial may have the appearance of wisdom, but can do nothing to stop sinful indulgence.

It is in this context that Paul exhorts the Colossians in verses 12-13a of chapter 3, to “*put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another.*” As we have seen throughout our time in Colossians, Paul’s imperatives (commands and exhortations to those in union with Christ) flow out of prior indicatives (statements of fact about the person and work of Jesus). Those who “put on” certain behaviors reflect the “new self,” what they have become in Jesus. These behaviors amount to the virtues of God’s chosen ones (i.e., elect believers in Jesus).

As Paul explains in the opening chapter of his circular letter to the Ephesians, written about the same time as Colossians, all those who are believers in Jesus, have been chosen by God before the foundation of the earth to be the recipients of God’s favor in Christ. This includes the believers in Colossae. The reason for God’s choice to save some and leave others in their sin is never revealed to us. We can say that whatever reason God has for saving his elect, it is found in God’s own inscrutable will, and not in anything good, holy, or lovable in those whom he chooses (who are seen as sinful and rebellious creatures in the divine mind when chosen for salvation). As we saw in our Old Testament lesson, from Deuteronomy 7:6-11, God chose Israel simply because YHWH loved Israel (no other reason is given—except reasons why we would expect God not to choose Israel). He will keep his promise to Abraham to make this people a great nation with countless descendants. Much as Paul states here, this passage from Deuteronomy also tells us that YHWH’s people will keep his commandments. Because God loves his chosen people and he keeps his promises, he will rescue Israel from bondage in Egypt.

Likewise, God has chosen the Colossian believers to be his own people, and then sent Jesus to accomplish all things necessary for their salvation. He will defeat the flesh (which held them in bondage, much like the Pharaoh held Israel in bondage while in Egypt). He will also lead them to the land of promise (i.e., heaven, where Christ is at the Father’s right hand). But the parallel between the elect Colossians believers and Old Testament Israel breaks down at this point since, those chosen in Christ are not tied to one ethnicity or nationality (Israel). Those chosen by God in Christ form a new community (the church) who are members of the body of Christ. They are not divided by the things typical of our old selves (nor of Israel). In the new covenant, God has chosen to save both Jews and Greeks, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian (a non-Greek Gentile), Scythians (from Scythia—in the east, but essentially a pagan), slave and free (no regard of status).

Once again, the indicative (those things God has done for us in Jesus Christ—his death and resurrection), precedes the imperatives. In this case, the indicative is divine election. Because God has chosen his people to receive the benefits of salvation (the indicative), they are to “put on” the conduct spelled out in the rest of the verse, very much like someone whose dirty clothes have been removed from them, and

they are washed clean, and then put on fresh new clothes. Only it is not clothing we put on, but Christ. In fact, Paul uses this very metaphor in Galatians 3:27—“*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*” Since the Colossians too have put on Christ, those clothed with Christ should manifest the qualities of their creator-redeemer.

To emphasize what Paul has said previously in this letter, Christians have a new identity—a new self. No longer bound by those things which formerly separated Jew from Gentile (i.e., circumcision), these “new” selves together comprise a new Israel,<sup>1</sup> a new people of God, called out of the bondage of the flesh (Egypt) to become pilgrims on their way to the heavenly city (where Christ is—at the Father’s right hand). This is why Christians are to focus on Christ at the Father’s right hand. Because they were chosen by God, the merits of Jesus have been applied to them through their union with Christ, so they are described by Paul as *holy* (in their conduct) and *beloved* (their status before God). What does our conduct look like after we have put on Christ? How are we to act toward others? Like we did when still pagans and dead in our sin? Of course not.

Rather, the Colossians are to be compassionate toward others—literally in the Greek, we are to have “bowels of compassion,” which arises from the fact that throughout the ancient world, the bowels were thought to be the seat of our emotions.<sup>2</sup> Apparently (and perhaps with good reason) the ESV translators added the word “hearts,” because that sounds so much better to modern readers than have “compassionate intestines.” In any case, Christians are to be compassionate people who care about the plight of others. As Mark tells us (6:34), Jesus “*went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on [the people], because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*” Since our new selves have been created in Christ’s image, we are to reflect this image in how we treat others—with compassion.

Paul continues. We are to be kind. This is one the fruits of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22. Once again, this attitude was apparent in Jesus’ public ministry. In Luke 6:35, Jesus tells his disciples, “*love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.*” As Paul told the Christians in Rome (11:22), this is no small thing. “*Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.*” Once again, the new self is to reflect the renewed image within us. We are to be kind to others because God has been kind to us.

Next on the list is humility. Humility means valuing others above yourself. As we will see momentarily, humility is a by-product of Paul’s doctrine of election. It is important to realize that humility was not in any sense regarded as a virtue in the Greco-Roman world. Humility was associated with servility or cowardice. Christian humility grows out of the Old Testament—Micah 6:8 comes to mind. “*He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” Of course, the supreme example of humility is that of Jesus, who, as Paul told the Philippians (2:5-7), “*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.*”

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<sup>1</sup> Moo, Colossians, 275.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce, Colossians, 153.

If the Colossian Christians just happened to be smarter, better, more righteous, nicer looking, of higher social standing, and richer than those who embraced the Colossian Heresy, then they would have something about which to boast, a reason *why* God chosen *them*. But those in Colossae who have come to faith in Jesus and embrace humility as a virtue, are people who were dead in sin and enslaved to the sinful nature. They were not chosen by God because God saw something virtuous in them which inclined him to chose them and not another. Rather, they were chosen by God because God chooses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise (1 Corinthians 1:27). If you presently believe in Jesus, you are indeed numbered among God's elect. But if you are numbered among God's elect, then it is because you are one of the foolish things chosen as a vessel for God to demonstrate his mercy and show forth his glory. Since this is true of us, humility not pride is our only option! We have nothing to boast about except God's mercy toward us. It is foolish to boast about something we do not have.

Next on the list is gentleness, which simply means that someone is not overly impressed with one's self importance.<sup>3</sup> This too reflects the ministry of Jesus, who exhorts his disciples in Matthew 11:29, "*take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*" The ESV adds the word "meekness" in an effort to elaborate upon the term "gentleness."

The next virtue is patience, an attitude which Scripture describes as that of the Father and Jesus toward sinners as in passages such as Romans 2:4, "*or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*" or the comment in 2 Peter 3:15, "*count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him.*" Again, Paul's point is that Christians should reflect the divine image in which they are being renewed. As the Father and his Son have been patient with sinners, so too we are to be patient with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

At this point, we need to understand that Paul is not exhorting us to "do what Jesus would do" (along the lines of WWJD). This misguided emphasis is based upon a misunderstanding (actually a confusion) of the relationship between the indicative (gospel) and imperative (law). For those pushing the WWJD motif, being a Christian is not believing certain things about Jesus' person and work, but rather doing what Jesus did. But even Mormons and all sorts of other religions practice the art of "imitating" Jesus.

Paul has made the point that those chosen by God (the recipients of the saving merits of Christ) have died to sin, and have been made alive with Christ. The old self has died, a new self emerges. This new self desires to put off the dirty clothes (to use Paul's metaphor)—the sins enumerated by Paul. We have died to sexual immorality and idolatry. We also desire to put off anger, rage, lying, and malice. We are to put on (like clean clothes) compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. We do this not by striving to imitate Jesus to earn his favor—"what would Jesus do?" We do this by learning to focus upon our earthly struggles from a heavenly perspective. Paul has just told the Colossians, "*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.*" We imitate Jesus not to become Christians, but because we are new selves, regenerate, chosen by God, renewed in his image.

After spelling out a series of virtues, Paul shifts his focus to the attitude of God's people toward one another—especially when Colossian heretics may have disrupted the peace within the congregation. At the end of verse 12, he speaks of "*bearing with one another, and, if one has a complaint against another,*

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<sup>3</sup> Moo, Colossians, 278,

*forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*” All those chosen by God, buried and raised with Christ, united to him, and made new selves, will demonstrate this to be the case by leaving behind those attitudes which focus upon self-interest and putting oneself ahead of others. Members of the new Israel are to bear each other’s burdens. We do this especially by forgiving those who have wronged us, and by not keeping lists of their specific offenses against us. The principle Jesus taught in the gospels is continuous forgiveness (seventy times seven) and it is to be reflected among his people.

One of the surest proofs that we remain sinful (by habit) even after we become new selves who are striving to put on Christ, and striving to put to death and put off certain sins, is the difficulty we have forgiving others. Paul exhorts us to focus upon Christ at the right hand of the Father, in part, because of the necessity of forgiving others. Jesus died for our sins. Paul has told us that the list of our trespasses was nailed to the cross when Jesus suffered and died for us. When we realize that Jesus removed the list of sins we have committed, and when we focus upon Jesus’ work on our behalf, we ought realize that his death was not only for me, but for all of God’s people. As we consider this, then it becomes easier to forgive. If God forgives me—when I am so unworthy of it—how can I keep of list of the sins of those who have wronged me. Because the Lord as forgiven us, we, in turn, must forgive others. Those who receive grace ought to be able to extend it to others.

This is never easy—and forgiving someone does not negate a need for repentance and making things right. But it does mean that as Christ removed my list of sins and has forgiven me, my new self must strive to do the same toward others. This is what Paul is getting at when he exhorts the Colossians in verse 14, *“and above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”* This parallels Paul’s comment in Ephesians 4:3; that we be *“eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”* It is love—the chief Christian virtue and the fulfillment of the law which produces the kind of bond Paul is describing. Since spiritual principles, more rules and regulations, and vigorous self-denial, cannot produce such love, it can only come by focusing upon Christ’s love for us—the chief sign of which is the cross. The great irony is the harder we try to love others, often times the more unloving we become. The love of which Paul is speaking arises within us as we reflect upon Jesus’ love for us, his people. This will bind us together as sinews connect muscle to bone (the meaning behind the Greek word *syndesmos*). This is the mind-set (attitude) which makes it easier to forgive and settle complaints.

It is only natural to think that the solution to human problems and division is more rules, or learning secret principles. Again, this has the appearance of wisdom to those who do not have the mind of Christ. But man-made rules cannot create love. They do just the opposite as any who has been in a legalistic church knows. This is why the Colossian Heresy and those teaching it have such a deadly effect upon the churches. They claim to have discovered the better way. But they have only gotten themselves lost in a maze of rules and secrets. When they insist that they have the truth and try to impose their practices on the churches, they draw us away from focusing upon Jesus at the Father’s right hand, and direct us back to things destined to perish. This kills the kind of love Paul is describing like some crushing a lit cigarette with their heel.

True to form, Paul’s next imperative flows from the indicative. He tells the Colossians, *“and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.”* To let the peace of Christ rule (the imperative) we must first possess the indicative (Christ’s rule in our heart). Indeed Christ does rule in our heart by virtue of the indwelling Holy Spirit and our union with him. We are called through the preaching of the gospel (the message of Christ and him crucified) into the body of Christ. Therefore, Paul has not only mentioned election (those whom God has chosen to save), he has also

mentioned the means through which the elect will be saved—being “called” through the gospel. God’s chosen ones are called to be members of one body (Christ’s). Those who arrive and teach heresy are like cancer cells forming in the human body. They only bring destruction.

When considering what Jesus has done for his people in conquering death and the grave, granting them new life and union with him, Paul simply says, “*and be thankful.*” One of the chief ways we can be thankful is spelled out in verse 16. “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*” We show thankfulness (gratitude) when we let the Word of God dwell in us richly through hearing the gospel preached, by reading, studying, and meditating on Scripture. The teaching to which we must be devoted is not the rules of men (Pharisaical Judaism), philosophy and knowledge (so-called) or the inventions of men—all of which were present in the Colossian heresy. We are to be devoted to the words of Jesus—the subject of all the Bible from Genesis to Revelation—and to let his word dwell in us “richly” (that is, deep within us). God’s people are to be devoted students and hearers of God’s word. Scripture gives us a complete catalogue of the new clothes we are to put on.

Christ’s word is the basis for all truly Christian teaching, both in doctrine (the things we must believe) and in life (as we put off our old selves and put on Christ). We admonish each other not from anger and pride (as with the pagans), but with wisdom—which is revealed to us in God’s word. We are to worship too from the Scriptures, singing from the Psalter (which is why Reformed churches are Psalm singers), singing hymns (probably the Christ hymns we find throughout the New Testament, and spiritual songs (which may be prompted by the Holy Spirit, i.e., songs which reflect the theology and teaching of Scripture).<sup>4</sup> It is clear from Paul’s instructions that the apostolic church’s worship was directly tied to the singing of Psalms, Scriptural hymns, and Spirit-given songs. We know from the post-apostolic period that Christians sang antiphonal songs to Christ. The Roman official Pliny reported to the emperor Trajan in a letter dated 112 A.D., that he one Christian he observed in worship “sang to God in the presence of others from what he knows of the holy scriptures, or from his own heart.”<sup>5</sup> Apostolic worship was grounded in Scripture—preached, studied, and sung. So too should ours.

The final exhortation in this section points to the basic attitude that the new self is to adopt as a follower of Jesus. “*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*” Notice that Paul does not give us an exact or precise list of rules to follow or things to avoid doing—like those of the Colossian heresy. Nor does he give us a series of helpful tips for practical Christian living. Rather, Paul leaves this to each believer who is being formed into Christ’s image as a new self. To paraphrase Augustine, “love God and do as you wish. But is what you wish consistent with your love for God?” The answer as to what to do nor not do is found in God’s word—not in the form of a specific command—“when this happens, do that.” Or when that happens, “do not do that.” Rather, Paul exhorts us to ask ourselves in every situation whether our conduct is consistent with the word of God which dwells in us richly, the same Word which we study and we sing. We must ask, is this act going to stain the new clothes given me by Christ? Will this act bring the Father glory? Can I do this, and then give thanks to God for the outcome?

We are united to Jesus through faith, in a bond established by the Holy Spirit. Our minds are to be set on

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce, Colossians, 158-159. Moo, Colossians, 290.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce, Colossians, 158-159.

things above, not things on earth. So, whatever we do, we do it in Christ's name and for his glory, constantly giving thanks to the Father for all that we have in Christ. When we wore the clothes of Adam (the figs leaves of our own cutting), they stunk from self-centered sinful acts. But these filthy rags which we inherited from Adam, have been taken from us, our filth has been washed away through Christ's shed blood, and then sealed to us in our baptism. We've been given the spotless new clothes of Jesus' perfect righteousness. Do we really want to go back and roll in the mud and stench from which we've been delivered? Or do we strive to keep our new clothing as nice, clean, and presentable as possible? The surest way to do the latter is to "*let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.*"

Beloved, as Paul reminds us, it is the kindness, gentleness, and mercy of the Father toward us in Jesus Christ which brought us to faith, and which we now model toward each other and our neighbor. This will happen when we focus upon Jesus at the right hand of the Father and let his word dwell richly in us.