

## **Colossians: The Incomparable Christ – Exposition of Colossians XIII**

### **Colossians 3:5-17**

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to Colossians, chapter 3. We'll begin in verse 5. You'll remember that Paul has been stressing throughout this book that believers are complete in Christ. In chapter 1 he focuses on the supremacy and the sufficiency of Christ Himself. And he says if the believer will understand who Christ is and what He has done, much of the Christian life will fall into place. In chapter 2, we saw him give warnings against five different types of false teachings that were being brought into the church at Colossae. And he warns against them as being out of accord with the truth of the supremacy of Christ, the Lordship of Christ and the sufficiency of Christ. The fact is that we have everything that we need as believers in Christ. Beginning in chapter 3, he begins to implement positively, apply positively, the truth of Christ's supremacy and sufficiency. The truth of God's gospel of grace into practical Christian living issues.

Last week in verses 1 through 8, we see the apostle apply that truth to the sphere of our own personal walk of faith. How we are as Christians. How we relate to God, how we relate to others. This week in verses 9 through 17, the apostle is going to apply that truth to our life in the local congregation. Let's begin in verse 5. It will give us context to Paul's words towards the end of the chapter.

### **Colossians 3:5-17**

*O Lord, we know that the most indispensable requisite for rightly understanding Your word is an understanding of our own sin. For Your word sheds light on our lives and reveals to us those places which are out of accord with the image of God which are out of accord with Your will for our lives. And it shows us the way of salvation, and it shows us the way of conquest of sin. If we come to the word thinking we don't need forgiveness of sins, we might as well be looking at blank sheets of paper. But when we come by the grace of the Holy Spirit realizing that we are poor sinners and we're in need of forgiveness and of instruction, then we open Your word and we find in it a fount of blessing. So by Your Spirit make this book a blessing and make us all both hearers and doers of the word, and we give You the praise and the glory, for we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.*

What does it mean to live under the rule of Christ? What does it mean? What does it mean to live under the rule of Christ? What does it mean as a Christian to acknowledge the supremacy and the sufficiency of Christ in our lives? The Colossian false teachers had their own ideas. They said, "Oh, we can offer you a fullness of experience that you have never had before." Those things included mystical experiences, special revelations, certain ritual practices that only a few exclusive people could follow and find fullness in. But the apostle Paul defines what it means to live under the rule of Christ, what it means to have fullness in Christ in a very different way. Throughout this passage before us, he is telling us what it means to live under the rule of Christ. And over and over again in each section, in verses 1 through 8 and 9 through 17, and 18 through 22 and 23 through verse 1 of chapter 4, over and over he stresses two things. To live under the rule of Christ means first to be made a new person in Christ. To be made a new creation by being united to Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. That's the first thing that it means to live under the rule of Christ. To be united to Him, and hence to have been made a new creation, he stressed in verses 1 through 8. We'll see how he will stress that today.

Secondly, it means to stop our old patterns of living, of thinking and of behaving. Those patterns which were not in accord with Christ, those patterns which were not in accord with the word of God, those patterns, which, in fact, were self-destructive. And it means to put those off, to lay them aside, and to walk in newness of life, to live in a godly way, to put off and put on, as the apostle Paul says. So to live under the rule of Christ means first to be a new creation because we're united to Christ. And secondly, it means putting off sin and putting on righteousness. That's how Paul summarizes what it means to live under the rule of Christ.

Today, we are going to see him apply those two principles to the sphere of our relationships within this congregation. The apostle Paul was writing to a local church in Colossae, and in verses 9 through 17, he is concerned that we live out what it means to be under the rule of Christ in the way we relate to one another. Before we look at that though, let me say that there are two mistakes on the market in contemporary church life in America with regard to what it means to be a Christian and what it means to live under grace, to live under the rule of Christ. On the one hand, there is the mistake of *moralism*. And it basically mistakes the message of Christianity as being *be good, be nice*. Or a little bit more forcefully, it says, "If you will be good, God will bless you." Now the problem with that message is, of course, it doesn't tell you how to be good and it mistakes the order of goodness. Because until God works in us, we are incapable of doing good, of doing righteousness, of doing justice and of being loving people. The gospel says the first step in our Christian faith is recognizing that we are incapable of being good on our own. So when people come ministering to us the message that Christianity says be good and they say nothing of the cross, nothing of atonement, nothing of grace, and they do not explain that goodness

follows the work of Christ in you, then they've changed the gospel. They have, in fact, forgotten grace. That's what all moralists do.

But there's another mistake on the market, too. And it's a little bit more difficult to term, we might call it *libertinism*. *Libertinism* wants to celebrate freedom in Christ but doesn't ever want to talk about duty or obedience. In fact, those two words are bad words to those who were the trumpeters of freedom in Christ. It says I am free in Christ, I have a wonderful relationship with Christ, and that means that I don't have to do anything now except what I want to do. So don't give me a list of 'do's and don'ts,' don't tell me to do this and do that, don't tell me to be obedient, don't tell me to do duty, because that's not what Christianity is about.

The first group, the moralists, forget grace. The second group, the libertines, misunderstand it because they think that freedom is freedom from obedience, instead of freedom to obedience. The freedom which Christ brings frees us from condemnation, frees us from the frustration of attempting to obey when we do not have the resources to do it on our own, but it also, the freedom that Christ brings, frees us to be what God intended us to be in the first place and what God intended us to be was his very image in righteousness, holiness, and knowledge. God intended us to reflect who He is. And if we're going to reflect who He is, we must reflect His character. And so we must avoid both of those tendencies in contemporary teaching, the tendency to call Christianity be good, be nice. That's not the gospel. On the other hand, there is the tendency to say that Christianity is not about obedience, about duty, about do's and don'ts. Oh, yes it is. I mean, if that's the case, then we're going to have to rip out a lot of the letters of the apostle Paul because in every letter he writes, in the second half of the letter he spends the whole time telling you what to do and what not to do. Does that undercut his doctrine of grace? Not at all, because if he himself told us in Romans, chapter 5, grace reigns through righteousness, is righteousness constraining our freedom? Absolutely not. Righteousness is the fruit of our freedom. It is the evidence of our freedom, and it is the blessing of our freedom. And that last thing is worth a whole series of sermons, but we don't have time for it today.

Look at what Paul does with his teaching about what it means to be living under the rule of Christ today. Two things. This passage outlines very easily. Verses 9 through 11 constitute one section. That section deals with speech. We could summarize Paul's teaching there into two words. Don't lie. Then verses 12 through 17 give us the second half of the passage. We could summarize that section in two words. Put on. Don't lie, put on. Let's look at the passage together now.

## **I. A Christian's speech must reflect his profession.**

In verse 9 the apostle Paul asserts that believers must make sure that their speech does not undercut church unity. If you notice throughout this passage, from verse 9 to 17, Paul is very concerned that church unity be realized and experienced in the life of this local congregation, and hence in the life of this local congregation. And Paul begins by saying 'do not lie' because he knows that lying, dishonesty, destructive speech will be destructive of the unity of the congregation. A friend of mine once was preaching a sermon series in the highlands of Scotland, and he met an older lady who said to him, "The older I get, the more I love the Lord's people, and the less I trust them." And sadly, many of us know what it is to be hurt by the words of the Lord's people. And the apostle Paul is saying something, it seems so simple, but it's so practical and it's so profound. He's saying, "Don't lie." You will destroy the trust that is necessary for unity of life to be experienced in a local congregation.

But he doesn't just say, "Don't lie." He gives them a basis, he gives them a rationale. He tells them how it is that they are able not to go on following the trends of their culture which did not give a great deal of emphasis on truthfulness of speech. How it was that they could live in a different way. And it's in that little phrase, "Since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices and have put on the new self." How is it that our previous conduct can change? How is it that we can move from people who have a difficult time controlling their tongues because of the sinfulness implanted in our hearts because Paul says you have died to the old self, and you have put on the new self. Because of this renovation that has occurred in your life, because you have been united in Christ, because you have been embraced by the grace of Christ, now you are able to speak in such a way that upbuilds the congregation.

Notice again Paul's order. He doesn't say if you will not lie, then you will experience newness of life. He says because you have experienced newness of life, therefore, do not lie. Notice the order. It is not, 'Do and live.' It is, 'Live and do.' It is not do this in order to have a relationship with God, do this in order to live in fellowship with Christ. It is because you are in fellowship with Christ, therefore, do this. Live and do. It's so important that we get that right. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said, "I would rather make bricks without straw than try to obey the Sermon on the Mount in my own strength." Christians are saying that our ability to obedience is based on what God has done in us and not on our own strength. Christianity is not "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" religion. It's a religion which recognizes that in and of ourselves we are weak, and we're incapable of doing what the Lord wants us to do. But by His grace, we will be transformed into what He intended us to be in the first place. And we must strive in that direction. Paul says that the new nature, the new self is being renewed in this passage.

Notice, it's not something that happened in the past and is no longer happening. He recognizes that our renovation in Christ is an on-going work. It's not finished. There's a lot more work to be done in us. That sanctification is a on-going

process. And what is its direction? Well, Paul says it's the restoration of the image. Look at his phrase. He says we are being renewed in a true knowledge, according to the image of the one who created him. In the Garden we had been created in the image of God. By Adam's sin that image was defaced, though it was not entirely erased. It was damaged, though it was not completely destroyed. And what is God doing in our salvation? He is recreating us as a new creation, restored to that moral image which he had implanted in us in the first place. And that's one reason why a believer ought to care about holiness, because that image consists in our holiness, in our godliness.

So the apostle reminds us of this transformation that God has done in us. He says, therefore, don't lie, don't destroy the unity of the fellowship by using your tongues in a destructive way. And he reminds them again that it doesn't matter what backgrounds they are from in this congregation. They can be Jews or Greeks. They can be slave or free. They can be barbarians or even Scythians, and Scythians were the lowest of the low. Even the barbarians talked bad about the Scythians. They were considered the outcasts, they were the worst people that you could possibly imagine. And the apostle Paul says, look, if there are Scythians and barbarians in this congregation who are in Christ, then Christ is their Lord and He is indwelling them, and He is recreating them in the image of God as surely as He is that converted Jew, as surely as He is that educated Greek. Paul says every one in this congregation who is in Christ is being upbuilt and is being restored in the image of Christ, and therefore we must treat all with impartiality because God is not treating them with partiality. God is doing the same work in all of them regardless of their educational level, regardless of their ethnic background, regardless of their national credentials, regardless of any other factor in their background. God is doing a work in them, and therefore we are to treat them with our lips in such a way as to build them up and to establish unity in the congregation. Notice, by the way, that Paul squarely puts unity on the back of our personal growth in righteousness. You cannot create unity amongst a people who is not personally renewed in righteousness. How can you create unity amongst people who do not reflect individually the righteous principles implanted by the grace of Christ?

## **II. Christians must put on the behavior of a new creation.**

And that leads Paul to the second section of the passage. In verse 12 where he tells us to "Put on." Here he is instructing these believers to put on the virtues or the characteristics, to put on the behavior of the new creation. Throughout the passage Paul calls the church a new creation, and he uses two images, in fact. He says you are a new Israel, and you're a new creation. And as he calls us to live like the new creation, notice again he doesn't just say do all these things and then list off compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Again, he gives them a basis. He answers the question, "How is it that I can do these things?" Paul says you can do it because of who you are. What does he say?

Look at verse 12: "You are chosen, you are holy and you are beloved." He goes back to the electing love of God, and he says, God has set His heart on you. He has chosen you, and because He has chosen you, He has called you to holiness, and He has evidenced His love for you by His choosing of you.

Isn't it interesting that Paul applies to this tiny little congregation in Colossae the same blessings which were given by God to the children of Israel in the Old Testament. They were *called God's chosen people*, and now Paul is saying to this little rag-tag group of Christians in Colossae, 'You are the chosen people of God. God has chosen you, and He has elected you for holiness of life, for service of His church, and His election of you is proof of your love. And because of who you are, because you are the chosen people, therefore, I want you to put off the old life, and I want you to put on the new life. I want you to put off the old self, lay it aside, and I want you to put on the new self. Dress yourself, clothe yourself, bathe yourself in the reality of what it is to be the new creation,' is what the apostle Paul is saying.

And he speaks of it specifically in verse 12. Five things, he says. Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Notice, friends, that these aren't five separate things. These things flow in and out of one another. They are connected to one another. They are like circles which are interlocked. They are not separate things that have nothing to do with one another, but if you have one principle in you, the others naturally flow. Let's look at them briefly.

Paul says, dress yourself, clothe yourself, put on compassion, a heart of compassion. That compassion refers to that yearning with deep affection which we saw so frequently evidenced in the life of Christ, our Savior. He comes across the sea. He's tired. He's seeking a place to retreat and pray. He has good motives. He desires to pray with the heavenly Father. He is met on the other side of the sea by a great crowd. His disciples want Him to turn them away, but we are told that He felt a compassion for them. And in that context, He denies Himself, and He feeds the five thousand. What would have happened if our Lord had said 'No, I've got to have My quiet time'? The compassion of the Lord, the compassion of the Lord is our model. And Paul says you be that way to one another in the life of the church.

Notice that kindness is connected to this. It flows out of it. Kindness referring to that goodness of heart surely connected with that yearning of affection, that compassion of which He has previously spoken. He says you put on kindness as well. St. Augustine, the great church father, was not always a saint by any stretch. Much of his adult life he spent in behavior which we would hardly condone. And his friends talked him into going to Rome and then on to Milan to hear the greatest orator in the church, a man named Ambrose, who was the Bishop in the city of Milan. When Augustine first went, he said that Ambrose's preaching really didn't impress him that much. In fact, he said if this is the best the church has to offer, the church doesn't have very many good orators. But he

also said that Ambrose's kindness to him was such that it overcame his lack of estimation of his preaching ability. And it was Ambrose's kindnesses to Augustine that led Augustine to listen to his preaching, even after his friends had long gotten bored and gone back to Rome. And of course that led to Augustine's conversion to Christ. Kindness, Paul says, is something that you are to put on.

Humility is the third thing. That spirit of lowliness which is based on a proper self-understanding. You put on humility. You are characterized by humility. Cornelius, the Centurion, was a humble man. He said, "O Peter, I'm not even worthy for you to come to my house." The Syrophoenician woman, the Canaanite woman, she was a humble woman. When the Lord said, "It is not appropriate to give the dogs the children's food." She said, "O, but Lord, even the dogs eat the scraps from their master's table." That is humility. The Cornelius type of humility. The Canaanite woman's humility. The Publican's humility when he said, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." That type of humility, Paul says, that ought to characterize our dealings with one another in the life of the congregation.

Gentleness, he says, certainly again connected with our humility is the next thing that we are to put on. We're to have a consideration for others, and a willingness to forgo our own rights. Moses was called the meekest man on earth. How often was his leadership challenged? And never did he defend himself, but he waited for the Lord to defend him. David was a meek man. How often was his position as the chosen instrument of the Lord challenged, and yet he allowed the Lord to defend him. And he forwent his own rights.

Patience, Paul says. Patience. Forbearance with wrongs done to you. That forgiving spirit which reflects God. God Himself is slow to anger, the Scripture says. In other words, He doesn't condemn us when He could condemn us if He wanted to condemn us then. God forbears. He's slow to anger. He gives us time to repent. He doesn't speak a word of rebuke and correction and condemnation every time we sin. Ever wonder how the gospels would have sounded if Jesus had spoken a word of correction every time His disciples sinned? "John, stop that. Peter, that's wrong. Matthew, you're absolutely out of line." See, the whole gospel would be filled with the Lord's rebukes. But the Lord forbore with the disciples. He showed forbearance, and Paul says we are to show forbearance.

We can't look specifically at the other things that Paul says in the passage. But these are such good things for Presbyterians to meditate on. Paul says if you want a life of unity in the congregation, these are the things which are going to have to characterize your dealings with one another. How easy it is to speak of these things in the abstract, but how difficult it is to be compassionate to a person who hasn't shown you compassion. To be forbearing with a person who has not been in the least forbearing or forgiving of your own sins.

And it isn't a mistake, is it, that in verse 13 Paul pulls it together and he specifically says 'forebear and forgive one another.' It's so encouraging to me

that Paul doesn't see this local congregation of Colossian Christians as sort of an outpost of heaven on earth where everyone is perfect. He knows that the only way these people will ever get along with one another is that they are forbearing and they are forgiving and they are kind, and they are compassionate, and if they're humble, and if they're meek, and if they're patient, because otherwise they could have killed one another. The apostle Paul knows that these principles must be in place because there are so many sins and faults in each of us. And he calls us to put off the sin and put on the newness of self.

And let me say very quickly that Paul's idea of a new self doesn't mean that your personality is evacuated, and that you become some sort of zombie filled by the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul means that, in fact, your personality and your humanity is heightened as it is restored in the image of God, as you walk in newness of life, as you put off old behavior, old attitudes, old thoughts and as you live in accordance with the principle that God has implanted in you, the principle of grace, the principle of the new creation - that's only found, my friends, by grace. Only when you've met Christ, and you've renounced your own efforts because you see how useless and how sinful they are, and you've trusted on Christ, only then can you experience the type of strength that Paul knows is necessary for a person to live like this.

As we close, let me just say, don't you want elders like this? As you vote today, don't you want elders that have these types of characteristics. Think about it as you write down your election for those who are going to lead us into a new millennium, should the Lord tarry. And let me ask you this: Do you want to be like this? As you look at this glorious vision of what it means to be the new creation, do you want to be like it? Do you recognize, "Well, I'm not this, but I want to be that." Is your heart drawn to it? If it's not today, friends, pray that God would do a work in your heart so that your desires would be to look like what the Lord has said in His word that believers ought to look like. And if you do want to be like this, and yet you sense your weakness, then you're right where God wants you. Because it's only when you're reliant upon the work of the Spirit in your life that you're ready to take the first step down the road in being a person of kindness, compassion, humility, patience, and gentleness. May the Lord bless His word. Let us look to Him in prayer.

*Our Lord we recognize our inability to do what is right, apart from the grace of Christ. And so work in us a renewed obedience because of the new creation, because of our union with Christ and we'll give You the praise and the glory, for we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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