



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Remember Who You Are

Colossians 3.12-13

David Anguish

Introduction

As a teen, you may have heard a reminder similar to one I often heard as I left the house to go out for an evening: “Now, remember who you are.”

My dad was not worried I would forget my identity. He wanted to stress my *behavior*, reminding me that there was a standard I was to live up to, one that reflected well on our family name. So why didn’t he say, “Now remember what you should do”? Because he understood that there is something about remembering who we are that helps us remember what we should do.

In putting the practical instructions that comprise the latter sections of several of his letters at the end, Paul showed that he understood this principle (cf. Rom 12-15; Eph 4-6; Col 3-4). He expected his readers to read and understand something about who they were as Christ-followers *before* they tried to behave in a manner that exhibited the Christian life. Our text, which comes from one of those practical sections, illustrates the method Paul employed.

Who We Are ... (3.12a)

Since we are beginning in the middle of a longer text (3.1-4.6), we need some perspective before we begin to examine 3.12-13. First, we should recall that everything in the latter part of this letter looks back to Jesus’s nature and work as described in chapters 1-2. Specifically, Paul aims to show that Christ’s all-sufficiency (1.15-23) renders the heresy the Colossians were facing of no consequence (2.6-23).

Having established that premise, in 3.1-4, Paul begins his practical advice about the significance of the supremacy of Christ (see the phrase “if then” [Εἰ οὖν; *Ei oun*] in 3.1). He recalls the Colossians’ solidarity with Christ in dying and rising to establish the priority for their lives.

He follows that statement of principle in 3.5-17. Verses 5-9 further develop the dying side of the dying-and-rising process to enumerate specific attitudes and behaviors that needed to be removed from their lives. Verses 12-17 mirror verses 5-9, showing what resurrection life should be by specifying things that need to be “put on” when we accept the right priority for our lives.

Verses 10-11 form a bridge between the things we should put to death and those we should put on, moving beyond the statement of the principle “to the wholeness of its effect, the putting on of a completely fresh personality.”¹

Notice that, even as he begins to talk about what they should put on, Paul reminds them who they were. Using two plural adjectives and a plural verb, he says they were “chosen” (ἐκλεκτός; *eklektos*), “holy” (ἅγιος; *hagios*), and “beloved” (ἀγαπάω; *agapaō*) (v. 12). All three words had a rich heritage in ancient Israel. The fundamental feature of Israel’s self-perception was that they were chosen by God. As his chosen people, they were called to be holy, imitating the separateness of God’s nature and character. They are also considered beloved, that is, especially esteemed by God. In Deuteronomy 7, the terms are used together to accentuate the special nature of their covenant relationship with God.

⁶ “For you are a people *holy* to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has *chosen* you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷ It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his *love* on you and *chose* you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸ but it is because the LORD *loves* you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (vv. 6-8).

We should underscore the importance of these terms in the Colossian context. A community of people with a significant Gentile membership “were being invited to consider themselves full participants in the people and heritage of Israel” (Dunn, 228); in other words, they were to see themselves as the new-age embodiment of “God’s true Israel.”² As such, it was incumbent on them to become students of the old covenant in order to understand their heritage and the foundations for the principles by which they were to live. Furthermore, they were to understand at the outset that how they were to behave could not be separated from who they were.³

... *Should Lead Us to Be Like ... (3.12b)*

In addition to the emphasis of the words *chosen*, *holy*, and *beloved*, we also note that even when he begins to list specific things we are to “put on,” Paul continues to stress the idea of identity. The five terms he uses are not just moral deeds, they embody the character of Christ.

First, he says Jesus-followers are to be people with “compassionate hearts” (σπλάγχνα οἰκτιρμοῦ; *splangchna oiktirmou*). The KJV’s “bowels of mercy” calls attention to the fact that in antiquity the terms referred to the place “where the seat of emotions was thought to be located” (Dunn, 228).⁴ The term for entrails (*splangchna*) denotes something that is deeply felt. Linking it with mercy or pity (*oiktirmou*), a trait of God himself (cf. Rom 12.1; 2 Cor 1.3), strengthens the emotional idea. The phrase thus refers to “a deep sensitivity to the needs and sorrows of others” that expresses the “sympathy with others that affects one’s innermost being” (Wright, 141).

Second, we are to be a people who show “kindness” (χρηστότης; *chrēstotēs*). Again, this is a term associated with God’s goodness (Rom 2.4) and thus it is expected by those who are created in his image (Col 3.10). We should also appreciate that it is a relationship word, “the art of being a dear’, as Lord Hailsham once paraphrased the Latin *caritas*” (Wright, 142).

Third, we should be a people of “humility” (ταπεινοφροσύνη; *tapeinophrosynē*) (cf. Phil 2.3; Eph 4.2). For the Greeks, this was unpopular, too closely related to servility to ever be considered a

popular virtue (Dunn, 229). But, as Paul says elsewhere, it is the trait of Christ that led him to the cross, the model for how we should treat others (Phil 2.1-11). It was also characteristic of Paul himself (Acts 20.19).

Fourth, we should put on “meekness” (πραοτης *praotēs*). The word entails strength that is under control and has to do with approaching other people in a way that refuses rudeness or arrogance (see Wright, 142). Like humility, this was also exhibited by Jesus (Matt 11.29).

Fifth, we should practice “patience” (μακροθυμία; *makrothumia*). This word also has to do with our reaction to other people. It is the opposite of resentment or wrath. And it serves as the perfect introduction to the exhortation that follows.

... *And To Do (3.13)* ...

In verse 13 Paul applies the traits enumerated in verse 12, focusing on relationships. As Wright summarizes, he tells the Colossians to “restrain your natural reaction towards odd or difficult people, let them be themselves—and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another,…” (Wright, 142). Together, the traits in verse 12 and applications in the following verses remind us that Christ-followers are not to see themselves as merely individual believers, but as part of a community of faith.

Three ideas stand out. First, the present tense participial phrase “bearing with one another” (ἀνεχόμενοι ἀλλήλων; *anechomenoi allēlōn*) “has the sense of ‘endure, bear with, tolerate’” (Dunn, 230). The phrase suggests that, when we encounter attitudes and behaviors that are immature or tiresome, we intentionally will ourselves to bear with the troublesome people.

Second, the present tense participial phrase “forgiving each other” (χαριζόμενοι ἑαυτοῖς; *charizomai heautois*) shows how to bear with others and establishes the theme for the remainder of the verse. Unlike “bearing with one another,” “forgiving each other” points to a wrong done, as evidenced in the word “complaint” (μομφή; *momphē*). The offending party is at fault and is deserving of blame or censure. The NASB more clearly brings out the force, translating the entire clause, “forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone.”

Why we should bear with and forgive is brought out in the last phrase: “as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” At the center is the example of “the Lord.”⁵ “As,” literally “just as” (καθώς; *kathōs*), recalls the theme previously established in the letter: Christ is supreme and the model for behavior. Just as we are called to do to others, he “has forgiven you”; Paul repeats the verb χαρίζομαι (*charizomai*), “to give freely as a favor, give graciously.”⁶ Significantly, this is from the same root word as “grace” (χάρις; *charis*). The point is that we are to value others as the Lord has valued us to the point of extending grace to them just as he extended it to us. Realizing this goal will require us to show “mutual respect and support, ... recognition of mutual vulnerability, ... valuing of each other beyond individual hurts and faults” (Dunn, 231).

Conclusion

Having considered the teaching of Colossians 2.12-13, let’s take a moment to work backward in the text. How easy is it to forgive others? To bear with difficult people? When we let those questions sink in, we will better comprehend the importance of growing in mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. We will also better understand that these traits and their

subsequent behaviors are not just “things we do,” but grow from the realization of who we are: Christ-followers who are chosen of God, holy, and beloved.

www.davidanguish.com

Notes

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 227.

² N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 141.

³ It is worth noting that modern ethics courses, in a trend that has at times also characterized our churches, shortcut the process implied in this principle. In antiquity, ethics teaching began with the *summum bonum*, the highest good, why one lives, before turning to how to live. Paul stood within this tradition, but he would have been a lousy modern ethicist! For additional discussion, see Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 17-18.

⁴ A more literal translation is preferred here to distinguish from Paul’s later use of “heart” (*καρδία; kardia*) in vv. 15-16. The heart in Jewish thought had more to do with the intellect, really the will, than with emotions, as it is used today. The repetitive use of the word in verses 15-16 illustrates this, in both cases referring to decision-making or to the acceptance of teaching more than to feelings.

⁵ Dunn addresses the question whether “Lord” here refers to Christ or the Father. Though the point remains the same either way, he is probably correct in concluding that Christ is the likely referent here, noting that, in Paul’s writings, except for Old Testament quotations, “Lord” “always denotes Christ.” He recalls examples from the gospels where Jesus forgave (Mark 2.5-7; pars.; Luke 7.47-49) (Dunn, 231).

⁶ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1078. Note that a second meaning is “to cancel a sum of money that is owed, *cancel*,” A third meaning, derived from the first two, is “to show oneself gracious by forgiving wrongdoing, *forgive, pardon*” (Col 3.13; cf. Eph 4.32; Col 2.13; 2 Cor 2.10; 12.13).