



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Bound by Love, Ruled by Peace, Dwelling in the Word

Colossians 3.14-17

David Anguish

Introduction

I'll begin by calling attention to some traits of the Colossian church as inferred from what we know about the region and Paul's letter. The city was in western Asia Minor, within the cultural orbit of the cosmopolitan, religiously diverse, and licentious city of Ephesus. Some members of the Colossian church were Jewish. But some were Gentiles who had converted from a pagan background. All of them were called to a high ethical standard that differed radically from the predominant culture that surrounded them.

Although the prevalence of the Judeo-Christian culture in our background and circumstances may make it harder for us to appreciate, the challenge they faced as a church cannot be overstated. That said, most of us understand enough about the challenge of making real change at the personal level to at least begin to grasp what was entailed. It's hard to resist the tendencies of nature and cultural nurture (3:5-11). It's also hard to replace them with relational ethics that are unequivocally honest, put up with difficult people, and forgive real offenses (3:12-13); it's especially hard when the process involves people from diverse backgrounds who are used to being polarized (cf. 3:11).

Bound by Love (3.14)

"And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

Because our world typically uses one word to refer to many ideas and makes the emotional and romantic components primary, we need regular reminders about the nature of the love that is at the heart of the New Testament's teaching. Most often, the word translated "love" is a form of ἀγάπη (*agapē*). Though Christians did not invent this word, they did give it a prominence it did not have in the Greek world at large. Simply stated, *agapē* as used by New Testament writers was not mainly about emotion or romance; it was about the will as Matthew 5.43-45 shows.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of

your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

Verse 43’s reference to loving neighbors and hating enemies fits with the most common modern understandings of love; we love the people we feel good about and don’t love the people we don’t. But if love is mostly about good feelings or attraction, verse 44 makes little sense. An enemy is not someone we feel kindly towards, yet Jesus says to “love your enemy.” How is that possible? The example of the Father, to which he alludes in verse 45, shows us. He does good for people regardless of whether they are his friends or avowed enemies.

First John 4.9-10 shows the point another way. Even though our sin made us enemies of God (cf. Rom 5.10), he showed his *agapē* by sending his Son into the world so that we might live through him. John summarizes, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (v. 10).

In Luke 10.25-29 and 37, Jesus showed what *agapē* looks like in action. When a lawyer asked him to identify the greatest commandment, Jesus said it was to love God with all of one’s heart, soul, strength, and mind. Closely aligned with love for God is loving my neighbor—who also bears God’s image (cf. 1 John 4.20-21)—as myself. The lawyer apparently grasped the implications of what Jesus was saying because, in an effort “to justify himself,” he asked, “and who is my neighbor?” (v. 29). Jesus then told a story about a traveler who was robbed, beaten, and left on the side of the road half dead. Which man, Jesus asked, had been a neighbor to the victim, the priest, Levite, or Samaritan? The lawyer answered, “the one who showed him mercy.” That, Jesus said, is the model we should follow and the way to practice *agapē* (vv. 36-37).

In view of these texts, therefore, we can define *agapē* in terms of intentional esteem. It is the action of seeking another’s best interest even if that means sacrificing our own interests to do so.

When we look at Colossians 3 with this definition in mind, we see that the only thing that can hold a congregation together is the practice of esteem centered *agapē*. The reality is that our churches are made up of difficult people whom we sometimes must “bear with” (v. 13)—just we hope they will bear with us when we are difficult. We and they get under each other’s skin. We and they are not always likeable. We and they make mistakes that require forgiveness.

Paul didn’t say to “like” difficult and offending people, he said to make *agapē* the most important trait we focus on (“above all these” — v. 14). As an intentional act of the will, we decide to cut each other some slack and, if necessary, to forgive—not because it’s easy or enjoyable to do, but because it’s God-like and therefore right.

Whether we will do this depends on whether we will follow the teaching we read in verse 15.

Ruled by Peace (3.15)

“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.”

Two things need to be clarified to correctly see Paul’s point here. First, the Jewish idea behind the word “heart” (καρδία; *kardia*) had more to do with the intellect, really the will, than with emotions. It had to do with the direction of the mind toward the things of God.¹

Second, continuing the understanding we find in the Old Testament, the New Testament writers understood the word “peace” (εἰρήνη; *eirēnē*) as broader than merely an absence of conflict. In interpersonal relationships, it is the condition that exists when things are right

between people, a condition that is in turn based on whether things are right with God. Ideally, when people are at peace with God, they share God's priorities and so the absence of conflict will ensue.

That Paul meant something like this is evident in his exhortation to let peace "rule." "Rule" (βραβεύω; *brabeuō*) "is drawn from the athletic contest, meaning, first, 'award a prize (βραβεῖον)' and so 'act as judge or umpire, preside (at an election), arbitrate, and then 'direct, control'."² What rules our lives is not what we feel is right, whether we think someone is worth bearing with, forgiving, etc., but "the peace of Christ." He is the head of the body and therefore preeminent (Col 1.18).

Furthermore, the idea entailed in "peace" echoes the Old Testament's emphasis on what results when God's will is followed; it is conformity to what is entailed in our calling (cf. the phrase, "to which indeed you were called in one body"). Understanding "peace" in this way helps us make sense of texts like Matthew 10.34 (cf. Rom 3.17; 1 Cor 7.15), not to mention Titus 3.10-11 where Titus was told to confront divisiveness with warnings and then ceasing the relationship with the person who foments division. The reason for such decisive action is not because the person is difficult or made a mistake, but because "such a person is warped and sinful" (v. 11). What matters is not just getting along, but submission to God.

Dwelling in the Word (3.16-17)

"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. 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."

Since Christ's authority and standard are crucial to body unity, we would expect the idea of letting his word govern our lives to be part of Paul's exhortation. The word is always prominent in the faith process (see Rom 10.17; John 8.32; etc.), including in the Colossian letter (Col 1.5, 25).

Once again, the emphasis is on the community (see 3.12-13): all the methods he tells us to use to let the word dwell in us are to be practiced by the group and involve actions that are reciprocal. They include teaching and admonishing, in harmony with wisdom; worship in song as a means of teaching; exhibiting the spirit of thanksgiving which indicates our dependence on God; and, above all, a concern to never do anything outside "the name"—the authority—of the Lord Jesus. Where there is mutual submission to the word, peace will result, *agapē* will be practiced, and the lofty ethics of verses 12-13 will be observed.

Conclusion

As we look back at Paul's teachings in verses 12-17, we see again how important *deciding* to do what is right for being godly people. Good feelings will likely result from doing right because things will be as they should be. But the call is not to "feel good" and then do, but to do so that the life of Christ will be demonstrated in our lives.

www.davidanguish.com

Notes

¹ See the discussion of the phrase in verse 12, "compassionate hearts," and especially note ⁴, in the previous lesson in this series, "Remember Who You Are."

² 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), 234.