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Col 3:12-14

15th Message

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HEAVENLY GRACES TO EMBRACE

SERIES: THE CHRIST-REFORMED CHURCH

Over the past couple of weeks we have reflected on the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and this has coincided well with our studies in Colossians. In Colossians Paul tells us that what happened to Jesus happens to us as his followers. We die with Christ. The sinful nature we inherited from Adam, the core nature we were born with, died on the cross and was buried in the tomb. What we remembered on Good Friday is our reality.

Then we are raised with Christ. We get a new nature, a new self that is created in the image of God. We were created and then we are re-created. What we remembered on Easter is also our reality. The fact that we have been raised with Christ calls us to live a resurrection life, a raised-with Christ life, a life patterned after the life of Jesus. We are called to “practice resurrection,” a phrase coined by Wendell Berry in one of his poems.

Even though we have been re-created by God we don't automatically start living a resurrection life. We have been so saturated with the old nature, and the new is so different, that we must grow into maturity and be formed in Christ. This is an ongoing process that doesn't respond to programs and formulas but rather is filled with mystery and wonder and Holy Spirit that is woven into the fabric of our lives. That is the way resurrection happened with Jesus and it is the same with us.

Paul talks about resurrection life as getting a new wardrobe. First we take off our old sinful ways, the ways of Adam, our sin-saturated clothing. We abandon our earthly ways. We talked about this two weeks ago. Then we put on our new garments, the robes of righteousness, the ways of Christ, garments that reflect the character of Jesus. But what does this new clothing look like? This now will be our focus for the next two Sundays. Our text this morning is Colossians 3:12-14.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones,
 holy and
 beloved,
 compassionate hearts,
 kindness,
 humility,
 meekness, and
 patience,
 bearing with one another and,
 if one has a complaint against another,
 forgiving each other;
 as the Lord has forgiven you,
 so you also must forgive.
 And above all these put on love,
 which binds everything together in perfect harmony.
 Colossians 3:12-14 ESV

Paul's exhortation is to “put on” and it recalls the exhortations “put to death” and “put away” (3:5, 8) in the last section where Paul talked about the things to abandon. Again the idea is one of dressing or putting on clothing.

Paul makes a similar statement in Ephesians 4: “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22-24).

Chosen, Holy, and Beloved

Putting on is based on an extraordinary truth, our core identity and standing in the sight of God. The three adjectives that qualify the exhortation are the basis for everything we do: God's chosen ones, holy, and beloved. The word chosen means that we are elected. Holy means that we are God's set apart people, saints. Beloved is literally, “having been loved ones.” We are pre-loved by God.

These same three adjectives are used to describe Israel, God's first-born son: “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” (Deuteronomy 7:6).

“When Israel was a child, I **loved** him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1).

When we come to the New Testament, they are terms that are applied to Jesus:

Peter wrote in his first epistle that Jesus is “a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God **chosen** and precious” (1 Peter 2:4).

This apostle also made a confession of faith in John's gospel: “we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the **Holy One of God**” (John 6:69).

God himself spoke of Jesus as his beloved son: “behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my **beloved** Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

Now amazingly these three adjectives are used to describe those of us who are in Christ. The terms are used not only here in Colossians but also elsewhere:

“he **chose** us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be **holy** and blameless before him” (Ephesians 1:4).

“we know, brothers **loved** by God, that he has **chosen** you” (1 Thessalonians 1:4).

“we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers **beloved** by the Lord, because God **chose** you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth” (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

What was true of Israel and what is true of Jesus is now true of us. We have been so united with Christ through his death and resurrection that our core identity before the Father is the same as Jesus. We are not an accident; we are a divine choice. We are not what we do. We are not what people say about us. We are not what we have. We are what God has done for us and says about us. It is this identity that is the basis for practicing resurrection. Once again Paul is grounding and centering us on the person and work of Jesus and our union with him.

What Paul says is absolutely critical to practicing resurrection. If we do not have a sense of our core identity we will live badly and poorly in our own strength. Our efforts will be a mere imitation of what God has in mind. We will perform Christian duties and responsibilities to gain identity, alleviate guilt, and find approval from others. We will not live freely and joyfully. We will live as slaves, not sons and daughters. Each and every day we need to remind ourselves that we are chosen, holy, and beloved.

For me the realization of this core identity came through a very difficult time in my life when I was 42 years of age. It came through the death of parents and painful failure that stripped away the identity that I had built for many years and worked so hard to maintain. A deep inner journey was required over a period of a couple of years to finally bring me to the place where I was totally vulnerable before God. And finally, in that place of brokenness and honesty, I could hear God call me his beloved son. Maybe this process will be easier for you or maybe it will be harder. But practicing resurrection depends on it.

The idea of putting on brings other thoughts to mind as well. First, we are not dressing to look externally like Christ over an unredeemed inner person. This is similar to what I just said, but slightly different.

Paul has already said in verse 10: “you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col. 3:9–10). Paul also says this in Galatians 3: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). We are putting on garments appropriate to our resurrected new self. We are not pretending to be something we are not.

Second, we need to put off before we put on. We would never put on a coat while we were already wearing one. We would never put on clean clothes over soiled ones. We put off the fleshly ways that remain with us even though we have been redeemed.

Third, the idea of putting on is active, not passive. The resurrected life is something that requires intention, cultivation, and thoughtfulness. It doesn't just happen without effort, obedience, and making choices. However, putting on is based on the constant awareness of our standing before God – chosen, holy, and beloved.

Five Graces

With the foundation now in place we can really start living resurrection life. What does this look like? Paul begins with a list of five virtues – compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. This list of five is a contrast to the two lists of five that we are to put off that Paul gave in the previous section. We are to put off such things as sexual immorality, lust, anger, slander and lying and put on the character of Jesus. Let me briefly define these five graces.

Compassionate hearts literally means “bowels of compassion or mercy.” The ancients believed that the seat of our emotions was located in the bowels. Compassion means to be moved deep within us. Many of the people we encounter in life are suffering. They are the weak, the weary, and the wicked; the least, the lost, and the left out. Living the resurrection means that we are sensitive to the sorrows of others. Our gut is always moved by the ills that confront humanity. We mourn with those who mourn. We guard against a hardened heart.

This past Friday I received a call from a man who has done work around our house. He was calling to give us a quote, but we ended up talking about his newborn son. The child had been born almost three months early. He weighed only two and a half pounds and had problems with his intestines. As a result he has had two surgeries since birth and my friend just found out that he was going to need another surgery. As my wife listened to our conversation I saw the compassion visible on her face. When I hung up the phone she said we needed to go to the hospital. As a result we met my friend's wife and son. I even got a chance to pray with his wife, not knowing if she had any religious background. All I needed to do was follow my wife's compassionate heart.

The word “kindness” means “goodness” or “generosity.” It is a fruit of the Spirit and reflects God's gracious attitude and acts towards sinners (Ps. 34:8; Luke 6:35; Rom. 2:4; 11:22; Eph. 2:7). Jesus never kept score.

Humility means to “make yourself low” and implies freedom from pride or self-assertiveness, freedom from the need to exalt self, a readiness to forgo your own rights, and a willingness to take the seat at the end of the table or be with the marginalized and unimportant people (Mic. 6:8; Is. 57:15; Matt. 11:29). Paul used this word twice in chapter 2 (2:18, 23) to describe the false humility of the heretical teachers. Their humility was a prideful show of self-abasement and denial, using religion to exalt self – “look at how religious and godly I am.”

Meekness or gentleness is also a fruit of the Spirit. Moses was described as meek in Numbers 12:3 and Jesus described himself as both humble and meek (Matt. 11:29) and said that the meek shall inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5, Ps. 37:11).

Patience means to be long suffering, literally “to put anger far from you,” and is also a fruit of the Spirit (1 Cor. 13:4; Eph. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:14). Having the character of Jesus means that we don't react with panic or a short fuse to circumstances or people.

Not only do these five virtues remind us of Jesus but they remind us of what God said of himself when he stood with Moses: “The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The

LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6).

The word that might capture the essence of these five virtues is grace – gracious acts, gracious words, and gracious thoughts. All of these words imply relationships with people and the fact that we have choices as to how we relate to others. We might reflect back on this past week and ask, “When was I practicing resurrection as the beloved and when was I resisting to do so?” These five graces comprise a pretty good list against which to evaluate our progress if we are serious about practicing resurrection.

A couple of years ago I was walking alone down the streets of Carmel at night. Ahead of me on the sidewalk was a couple, nicely dressed. The woman was crying hysterically and the man was trying without success to comfort her. I suddenly felt deep compassion and I so wanted to offer my help, to say: “I am a pastor, is there anything I can do to help?” But I resisted and walked on by. Perhaps she would have slapped me and told me to mind my own business or perhaps there would have been an opportunity to be Jesus. I will never know and every time I remember the incident I do so with regret. We are learning to respond differently than our natural inclinations. It isn’t easy.

Paul now continues on with several other virtues. We will take up three of these this morning and leave the rest for next week. The first is “bearing with one another.” The idea here is to show forbearance and tolerance, to endure, to put up with each other. This flows out of being patient and long suffering, the last virtue listed in the previous five. All of us deal with stress, and what causes stress in our life mostly involves people. Practicing resurrection means dealing with these stresses in a healthy way.

The second virtue is forgiveness. The occasion for forgiving is blame or a cause for complaint. The reason we forgive is because God has been so gracious and forgiving of us and therefore we are to respond to others in the same way. The root word used for forgiveness here is “grace.”

An unforgiving spirit is a barrier to receiving God’s forgiveness. If we know the blessing of being forgiven, it is inappropriate to refuse that blessing to another, especially to someone whom God has forgiven. Note that there are no limits or conditions. We forgive seventy times seven (Matt. 18:22). Perhaps Paul was familiar with the Lord’s prayer, “forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

All of us encounter hurt and pain given from other people. The natural person holds onto these hurts, lashes back in anger, and withholds grace even when it is asked for. The resurrected person is able to let go of resentments, accepts insults as the sufferings of Christ, and responds in grace in the face of wrongs inflicted, whether intentionally or not. We are reminded of Jesus who said on the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). We could spend a whole morning talking about forgiveness because it is so near to the heart of God.

And then finally we are to put on love. The exhortation “put on” is actually not repeated. The text reads simply: “and over all these love which is the bond of completeness.” Paul points to love as the crowning grace (Gal. 5:6, 22; Rom. 13:9-10). He says in 1 Cor. 13: “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest

of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). Perhaps Paul sees love as the outer garment that adorns the new resurrection wardrobe.

The idea of love being the bond of perfection most likely is a reference to love binding together the members of the body of Christ into unity rather than binding together the other graces. Love brings the body of Christ into perfection, completeness, or maturity.

We might see love as a separate virtue but the more I think about it, selfless and sacrificial love is at the core of all the other virtues. Love infuses all the other virtues. What good is it if we appear to show patience but are seething on the inside? Or offer forgiveness while harboring resentment? All the other virtues must spring forth from a heart of love.

This seems to be what Paul says in 1 Cor. 13 – love manifests itself in the ways we have been talking about.

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”
(1 Corinthians 13:4–8)

“The other virtues, pursued without love, become distorted and unbalanced.”¹

The goal of spiritual formation is to live a life of love. “Love is the fulfillment of the law of God because love does a neighbor nothing but good.”² A life of love means that we are willing to follow God’s call even unto death. We no longer fear or feel the need to control. We live with deep compassion, even under extreme hardship. We don’t need things or people to bolster us because God is enough. We are detached, free from encumbrances and travel light. We delight in serving without fanfare or acknowledgement. We are abandoned to God. To live well means to love well.

This is Paul’s concern with the false teaching that might affect the Colossians. What the heretics are promoting does not produce a life of love. The false teaching is a self-made, do-it-yourself type of religion. The focus is on rules for food and drink, traditions and holy days, sin management – do not handle, do not taste, do not touch – and emotional spiritual encounters with angels. It all sounds good and wise and religious but the focus is totally on self. It is religious activity without Christ. It is anything but resurrection life.

Living a religious life is a lot easier than practicing resurrection. That is why religious activity flourishes and a life of love does not. We can get our hands around religious rule keeping. We can define it and control it. We can check off our boxes, receive credits and grades, and get gold stars. We can manage religious activities and programs.

But we can’t manage resurrection life. We can’t define it or control it. There are no clear rules or guidelines or hard limits and conditions. Certainly Paul is not talking about loving in ways that enable codependencies or sanction abuse or promote unhealthy relationships. But resurrection takes us a lot further than most of us want to go. It forces us to let go of more than we

want to let go of and requires more of us than we want to give. It is uncomfortable at times. It is all about people not projects. It is about a lot more than sin management. It requires us to depend on the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit.

Living in this text this week has not been easy for me. I don't think it is easy for any of us. Pondering the things we must put off can be sobering, but thinking about what we must put on might be even more sobering. It is easy for us to do it out when we are on duty, when we expect it, and when we don't know people all that well. But as we move from surface to closer and closer relationships it is much more difficult – marriage, family, brothers and sisters in Christ who we know well and who know us well. When we know people well we know their flaws and sins and weaknesses. And they know ours too. Are we willing to practice resurrection in these relationships? If you are like me it is much easier to see failures than successes and to get discouraged.

The more I thought about it though I realized that the only real danger to practicing resurrection is to stop practicing – to get discouraged, lazy, give up, say I just can't do what God would desire me to do. As we reflect on and evaluate our relationships we simply confess instead of defend, and give over our earthly ways to the Lord. Then we rise each day to practice resurrection and pray that God will continue to mold and shape us into the image of his son. We continue to believe that everything is grace and given to us by God – our circumstances, struggles, and the people in our lives – as God's workshop for us to be formed in Christ.

Let me close with a true story that gets right to the heart of practicing resurrection.

There was a man who worked downtown in one of our large cities and every day road the train home from work. On one occasion he was running a little late, and as he descended the steps of the terminal to the platforms below, he looked across the way to see the conductor of the last train to his suburb calling the "All aboard!" and lifting the step into the coach. He began to run, his eyes fixed intently on his ride home. As he ran he failed to notice a little boy, standing on the platform, holding a box in his hand. He bumped the child with his briefcase, spinning him around. The box he was holding flew from his hands, the lid came off, and the little boy's puzzle fell in pieces to the platform.

As the man ran past he looked back at the little boy and his puzzle, then to his departing train. Then he set down his briefcase and turned to the little boy, as his train, the last train of the evening, began to pull away from the platform. He knelt down, scooped up the pieces of the little boy's puzzle, put the lid back on the box, and handed it to the boy, patting him on the shoulder and smiling as he did. At which the little boy, looking at him wide-eyed, asked, "Mister, are you Jesus?" At which the man realized that, for just that moment, he was.³

When we practice resurrection people will think we are Jesus.

May the love and grace of God abound in our hearts today so that we would be vessels of that divine love and grace to those around us.

1. N.T. Wright, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Colossians and Philemon*, (IVP Press, Downers Grove, IL. 1986), 147.

2. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1984), 156.

3. T.M. Moore, *Are You Jesus? The Effects of the Spirit* (3), Webcast, January 25, 2012 (<http://www.colsoncenter.org/the-center/columns/viewpoint/17353-are-you-jesus>).