

Colossians 3:12-25: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 August 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Colossians chapter 3 verses 12 to 25. And be thankful.

For this pleases the Lord. And there is no partiality.

In Colossians chapter 3 Paul has been talking about the ways that we should regard ourselves in the light of our participation in Christ. And how we should put off the old self. Condemning to death those aspects of ourselves that are earthly.

Now in the second half of the chapter he turns his attention more fully to the alternative patterns of life that we must adopt. Patterns of life that are characteristic of the new self. These are the new garments as it were with which we must clothe ourselves.

As God's chosen people we must be marked and distinguished by particular graces. Speaking of Gentile Christians as God's chosen people is to refer to them in ways previously reserved for Israel.

[2 : 11] In place of the vices that Paul has mentioned earlier as things to be put off. We must positively clothe ourselves with compassion. Kindness. Humility. Meekness.

Patience. Forbearance. And forgiveness. These are the sorts of behaviours that would have been perceived as weak and servile by the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. Lacking in honour, spiritedness, power, dominance and generally unmanly.

A real man stands up for his honour, avenges himself, he's proud and tough and effectively asserts his dominance. While the Christian faith still has a substantive account of masculinity.

Which can also require defence from challenges of a rather different kind in the contemporary context. It is imperative that we appreciate how much of a revolutionary departure from cultural norms the vision of virtue in the teaching of Paul actually was.

And that we resist the calls to return to such pagan norms. Especially in the context of masculinity. That we hear from various quarters. Such traits of meekness, forbearance and forgiveness will distinguish us as people of Christ.

[3 : 15] Making us stand out from the people who are around us. Paul's teaching here concerning forgiveness recalls that of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 6 verses 14 to 15.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. For Paul, love is the quintessential Christian virtue.

It's the virtue that holds everything together. It runs throughout the whole. Love is the white light that is refracted into the various virtues that he speaks of here and elsewhere. Elsewhere, when Paul speaks of love, he speaks of it as the fulfilment of the law.

In Romans chapter 13 verses 8 to 10. Owe no one anything except to love each other. For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and any other commandment are summed up in this word.

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. In Jesus' teaching also, love to God and one's neighbour summarises and unites the entirety of the commandments.

[4 : 25] Once you understand the centrality of love, the unity of everything else becomes apparent. Love is also that in which everything else reaches its glorious height. In 1 Corinthians chapter 13 verse 13.

So now faith, hope and love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love. Love is also that without which everything else is vain or empty.

1 Corinthians chapter 13 verses 1 to 3. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. The peace of Christ should rule in the hearts of his people.

Paul makes a similar point back in Philippians chapter 4 verse 7. If the Colossians are to avoid the wrath, the envy, the malice and the anger that drives most people, they need peace to reign in their hearts.

[5 : 37] When others around us are stirred up by anger, resentment, antagonisms, fear, anxiety and all these other things, how do we know the calm that enables us to think clearly and act wisely?

It's God's peace that guards our hearts and minds in situations of conflict. On occasions when there is conflict without, if this peace reigns within, our hearts and minds will be protected from being caught up in it.

We will be able to think and act with wisdom and grace when others are losing their composure, their wits or their clarity of mind. We were called to such peace as one body. The peace isn't just to be internal to us as individuals, but characteristic of Christian community more generally.

enabling us to exist at peace with each other, as one body, rather than as a fractious set of warring factions. The peace of Christ is a mark of his rule. It's a mark of his assuaging the fears and subduing the passions and the antagonisms that assail us.

The peace of Christ is the result of his conquest of our rebellious spirits, his stilling of the boisterous waves of our souls. And when such peace reigns within us, it should be expressed in the giving of thanks.

[6 : 46] Paul calls for the word of Christ to dwell in us richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in our hearts to God.

Paul's teaching at this juncture follows the pattern that we see in Ephesians chapter 5, verses 18 following, where he moves from teaching about the word of Christ dwelling in us, to teaching a code of behaviour for the Christian household.

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In both of these places, Paul talks about the indwelling of Christ as something manifested and realised in the singing of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. In scripture, the word of God is often given to us from outside.

When we read the word of the law, it comes to us first and foremost as words from outside of us that we hear. However, we are supposed to take the word of God into us, to make the word of God part of us through memorisation, and also through song.

[7 : 56] Singing the psalms is a way in which the word of God becomes part of us. It conscripts our emotions. It arises from within us. It is something that appeals to the loves, the desires, the affections, and it calls us forth in delight and love for God's truth.

In the singing of psalms, the word of God becomes richly part of us. They are not just words that we are sent to outside of ourselves. They are expressed in the first person. They are an expression of the heart that has been warmed by the truth of God and now declares that truth with transformed affections.

The word of God having been hidden in our hearts by memorisation and meditation are now springing forth in delightful song and worship. Everything that we do should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, under his authority and for his glory.

And we give thanks to God the Father through him, as creatures of God's handiwork and as tokens of his redemption. Everything that we have and are is a gift that we have received from God's hand.

And the purpose of our lives should be a rendering back of ourselves, in word and in action, to God in thanks. From this, Paul turns to the behaviour that should characterise the Christian household.

[9 : 07] The Christian household in the relationship between husband and wife, between parents and their children, and between servants and their masters. Paul's teaching on these matters is not just a knee-jerk conservatism, a desire for social conformity and respectability from Christians that will avoid them becoming scandalous in their society.

No, the practices that he advocates are related back to the Lord. Wives are to submit to their husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. This submission is a form of behaviour that is appropriate to the new realm of life into which we have been brought by God's grace in Christ.

The relationship between husbands and wives is not a symmetrical one. Wives are instructed to relate to their husbands in a way that differs from the way that husbands are instructed to relate to their wives.

This is the same in other parts of the New Testament, both in the teaching of Paul and in the teaching of Peter. However, it should be noted that Paul does not say, Husbands, you have authority over your wives, and wives you must submit to that authority.

Paul's teaching is not founded upon a male prerogative. Rather, both husbands and wives are instructed to give priority to consideration of the other and their well-being. The asymmetry is important, though.

[10 : 19] In Paul's teaching elsewhere, in 1 Corinthians 11, verse 3, and Ephesians 5, verse 23, he speaks about the man as the head of his wife. As such, the man should be given an especial honour.

The nature of headship is not primarily seen in the face-to-face relationship between the husband and the wife, but more particularly in the way that the husband leads the way out into the world. The husband stands for his wife and family in the wider society, and he is particularly responsible for setting the tone and maintaining the foundations and boundaries of his household.

As his wife submits to him, she is not acting as a doormat, but rather making this task joyful and pleasant for him, one in which the weight of the responsibility that he bears is not experienced as one subjecting him to constant blame, but rather as one that honours him with a particular and important task, his wife acting as his counsellor and encourager and supporter, not his constant critic.

For his part, he is called to love his wife, especially seen in not being harsh with her. He has to be gentle, kind, meek, forgiving, and forbearing with his wife. His position in the family is not one that is given to him for self-aggrandizement, but rather for the building up of the entire household in a way that glorifies God.

This is particularly important when he is raising his kids. A father who is overbearing, a father who tries to dominate his household, can be a great cause of frustration and discouragement for his children.

[11 : 46] The Christian father, by contrast, should be one that encourages and builds up his children. He must use his own strength in a way that builds up the weaker people around him. In a way that enables them to rise to their own full stature.

Rather than provoking his children, he should be kind and gentle, encouraging them in their growth by his careful instruction. Many Christians would find themselves in a position of slavery.

Slavery was a common position for people in the ancient world, and it could feel alienating as if they had no agency whatsoever. But even for the bondservant, there is a way in which they can find dignity in their labours.

They can work as to the Lord, not just for the eyes of their masters and for what they see, but for what the Lord, their true master, sees. In recognising that their true master is the Lord, and not primarily their earthly master, the mindset that they take to their labours can be one governed by the dignity that they find in work that is ordered towards the approval of Christ.

From him they will receive not meagre payment, but a rich inheritance, one belonging to the sons of God. Knowing the justice of their true master, they can also act with patience and fortitude in situations of oppression.

[12 : 57] They know that the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong that he has done. Oppressive earthly slave owners will one day be judged by the Lord, whereas those who have faithfully sought the Lord's approval will be rewarded.

A question to consider, how, looking at Paul's teaching concerning the proper behaviour of Christians, can we see that Christ is absolutely integral and indispensable to the entirety of it?