

Let's keep our Bibles open right there in Colossians chapter 3. I'm grateful for this opportunity to preach to our whole church this weekend, and I'm also excited to be with you in person next month. This is our third all-church message in the book of Colossians this year. Back in May, we looked at Colossians 1:3-8 and saw the importance of focusing our ministry on gospel proclamation which produces the good fruit of faith, hope, and love, to the glory of God. We saw our church's mission statement in those verses. Then, in July, we looked at Colossians 2:1-5 and saw the importance of guarding ourselves against anything that would cause us to lose our focus on Jesus Christ and drift away from our dependance upon him. We saw the need as a church to stand firm in faith, enjoying all the encouragement, unity, and security found in Christ alone.

And now, in Colossians 3, Paul stresses the importance of pursuing Christ-like character by fighting sin and running after righteousness. In other words, this chapter of Colossians is all about holiness. I wonder what comes into your mind when you hear that word. For some people, the word "holiness" carries a negative connotation because a holy life sounds like a life full of strict rules, serious behavior, and very little fun. Others have a negative reaction to the word holiness because it simply seems unattainable, a quality exemplified in the most eminent saints, but out of reach for most of us.

In C.S. Lewis's fictional book, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, he tells the spiritual journey of a man named John. John grows up in a town called Puritania, owned by someone called the Landlord, who represents God. As a young boy, John meets with someone called the Steward, who represents Puritania's pastor. But the Steward is not a very good pastor. When he speaks about the Landlord, he portrays him as a cold, distant deity. A god who is only interested in issuing prohibitions and meting out punishment. At one point in the story the Steward hands John a big card with small print all over it. Then the Steward says, "Here is a list of all the things the Landlord says you must not do. You'd better look at it."

"So," Lewis writes, "John took the card: but half the rules seemed to forbid things he had never heard of, and the other half forbade things he was doing every day and could not imagine not doing: and the number of the rules was so enormous that he felt he could never remember them all."¹ As far as this boy John can see, life in Puritania is a life full of strict rules he cannot possibly follow. And for some people, that's what holiness sounds like. It sounds puritanical, undesirable, and unattainable. And maybe that's how you feel today.

Well, if it is, I hope you will allow God's word to change your perspective. Because the Bible presents holiness as both a great joy and a glorious possibility for any one of us. In other words, a holy life is the kind of life you and I really can experience and enjoy! For example, Psalm 96:9 calls us to *Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness* (Psalm 96:9). Think about those words: the splendor of holiness. Holiness is something full of splendor. It is magnificent and it is grand. J.C. Ryle goes so far as to say that the pursuit of holiness "is the only way to be really happy."² A holy life is a blessed life. And it really can be your life, because our God does not issue impossible commands. So, when he calls us to worship him in the splendor of holiness, there

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*

² Ryle, *Holiness*, 56.

must be a way to do so. Colossians 3 shows us the way. I want you to see what Paul says here about holy people, living with holy attitudes, engaging in holy actions. Because by God's grace, these verses can describe each of our lives, and our life together as a church family. Let's start with what Paul has to say about...

1. Holy People

There's way more in this chapter than we could possibly cover in one message. So, we're going to focus primarily on verses 12-14. Look with me at verse 12: *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience* (v. 12).

This verse is calling us to put on certain qualities the way we put on our clothing, to cover our lives in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. We'll look at all of that in a few minutes, but before we focus on Christian character, we must not miss the profound description of Christian identity that we find in this verse. Notice, Paul calls these Christians in Colossae *God's chosen ones, holy and beloved*. This is the way Scripture has always described God's people.

For example, in Deuteronomy 7:6, God tells Israel, *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).

You are chosen. You are holy. You are treasured... beloved. Now, here's the question: why was Israel chosen, holy, and beloved? Did they earn it? Were they so mighty and impressive and obedient that God couldn't help but set his affections upon them? No. Verses 7-8: *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, but it is because the LORD loves you...* (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

He chose you; he set you apart and set his love upon you because he loves you. It was his decision and his initiative! You didn't earn this status; you didn't earn this love. In fact, you never could have. It's all a gift of God's grace. And church, it's the same with us. We are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, because of the sheer grace of God. Therefore—and this is so important—our pursuit of holiness is not a call to earn a status we do not have, but a call to live in response to a status that has been bestowed upon us.

Imagine a child born into deep darkness and dysfunction. She suffers because of her environment, and as she grows, she begins to contribute to the depravity with evil of her own. She is both a victim and an offender, and her life is headed for destruction. But a loving couple hears of her situation and decides to welcome her into their home. From the get-go, their plan is to adopt her, and after some time that process is complete. She didn't do anything to deserve this. It was entirely the couple's decision. They chose to set her apart as their own beloved daughter. And now she gets to live in light of this new reality. She has many struggles, and she often falls into old, bad habits. But her parents show her grace, and over time, her new life in this new family begins to transform her attitudes and her actions.

Brothers and sisters, that's Christianity. We were all born into darkness and dysfunction of this fallen world, contributing to the depravity with evil of our own. We were headed toward destruction. But God chose us, and brought us into a whole new life, a life united with Christ. This change could not be more dramatic. Colossians 3:3 puts it like this: *You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God* (Colossians 3:3). The person you used to be is dead and gone, and the new life you now have is hidden, safe and secure with Christ. You belong to his family. You did not deserve this, but God set his love upon you and saved you. You are chosen, holy and beloved. And for the rest of your life, your job (and your joy!) is to learn to live in light of this new reality.

As Colossians 3:5 and 8 say, your call is to *Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness... anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk* (Colossians 3:5, 8).

Old habits die hard, so you'll often fumble and falter and fail. But when you do, God will not disown you. He will give more grace to you. And over time, his grace will change you. Friends, this is so important to see clearly in Scripture and to believe with all our hearts: we do not pursue holiness so that we might become holy people. We pursue holiness, because God has made us holy people. As we learn to walk in the new identity that is ours in Christ, he will transform our attitudes and our actions. Which is where Paul takes us next. Let's consider some...

2. Holy Attitudes

Look at verse 12 again: *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience* (v. 12).

This is a very positive vision of a holy life. Which is an important reminder that holiness is about more than avoiding sin, it is also about pursuing Christ-like character. Some people seem to think that all God has to say to us is, "Stop this and stop that." Like the Steward in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, telling John all the things he must not do. There are plenty of things God tells us to stop. Again, you can see a bunch in Colossians 3:5-9. But there are also plenty of things God calls us to start. And if we do not foster a positive vision of a holy life, if all we ever think about is what we must not do, we're setting ourselves up for all kinds of trouble.

Allow me to illustrate this with a silly example. Let's play a little game. Ready? I want you to try very hard, right now, not to think about a pink elephant...

What just happened? You imagined a pink elephant, didn't you? You've probably encountered this pink elephant paradox before. It's a fun way of experiencing a frustrating reality: The more we try to avoid thinking about something, the more we think about that very thing. The best way to stop thinking about pink elephants is to start thinking about something else entirely. Fighting sin is similar. It's important to know which sins you are prone to commit, and which temptations are most likely to trip you up. It's wise to name them, confess them, and flee from

them. But it's not wise to fixate on them. Because a preoccupation with sin can often become a path toward sin.

For example, take a group of well-meaning guys who get together with the shared commitment to battle lust. But their conversation centers on all the things they want to avoid—the sites they won't visit, the movies they won't watch, the places they won't go to. They spend the better part of an hour talking about everything that tempts them. And do you know how they feel at the end of their time? Tempted. Or imagine a recovering alcoholic whose only strategy to avoid alcohol is to avoid alcohol. When she goes into the grocery store, she won't go near those aisles. When she's watching TV, she won't watch those commercials. When she's at a family wedding, she repeats two words in her head: Don't drink. But the more she tries to suppress the desire, the more allure she feels.

In these scenarios, what will help? The guys' accountability group needs to shift the conversation from the lust they want to fight to the purity they want to foster. The woman in recovery needs to fill her mind with a positive vision of a sober life, not just the fear of falling off the wagon. If we want to resist temptation well, we cannot exclusively focus on what we're running from. We must also fix our eyes on what we're running toward. To put sin to death, we must pursue righteousness. Which brings us back to verse 12, where Paul says, *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience* (v. 12).

Again, this is a beautiful vision of a holy life, the kind of life that will glorify God and stand in such stark contrast to so much of what we see in this world. In a world that is often cruel, harsh, proud, brash, and quick to condemn, people living like this will shine like lights! Imagine a church full of people, growing in these qualities. People with compassionate hearts. People who see the suffering of others, as well as the sins of others, and their gut reaction is pity, mercy, and genuine concern. And this leads them to pursue kindness, to engage others with a spirit of generosity, to build up and not to tear down. Not so that they can get a pat on the back, but because in humility they consider the needs of others more significant than their own. Therefore, in meekness, they take the gifts and opportunities God has given them, and they harness that strength to serve and to bless. And even when it's hard, even when people are difficult, they persevere with patience. God is calling us to be these kinds of people! He is calling us to put on these qualities, to pursue these holy attitudes in our church, in our homes, and in all our interactions.

You might say, "But I can't do this!" But the Bible's response is, "Oh yes you can, if you are in Christ!" On your own you would be incapable of producing these qualities, just as a dead branch lying on the ground is incapable of producing fruit. But if you are in Christ, if your life has been grafted into his life, and his Spirit dwells within you, then the fruit will grow. For he himself is full of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. And he will produce these qualities in you. So, pursue them with confidence. Seek to foster these holy attitudes. Christ made you a holy person. Now live accordingly! And not only in your attitudes, but also in your actions.

3. Holy Actions

The Bible is full of holy actions which should fill the lives of holy people. But in verses 13-14, Paul highlights 3 actions, which put the attitudes of verse 12 into practice. These are holy actions to pursue in our homes, our offices, our schools, our neighborhoods, and anywhere else. But since Paul is writing to the church at Colossae, and I have the privilege of speaking to our whole church today, I want us to focus on how these actions will bless our fellowship here at The Orchard. Paul speaks about bearing with one another, forgiving one another, and loving one another. Let's take those one at a time.

A. Bearing with one another

In verse 13, Paul speaks about *...bearing with one another...* (v. 13).

"Bearing with" can also be translated "put up with." And as one commentator writes, "For the sake of maintaining community [within the church], we will sometimes have to 'put up with' people with whom we would not normally choose to associate."³ In our world today, we often get to choose the people we associate with. We can curate our digital world—the sites we visit, the accounts we follow, and the voices we hear—so we only listen to people we agree with. Even our interactions with others in the real, physical world are increasingly happening on our terms.

Don't like one of your neighbors? Well, you can pull into the garage and close the door behind you when you get home so you don't have to talk to him. Don't want to talk to the stranger on the airplane? Just throw on the noise cancelling headphones. She'll get the message. In so many ways, in so many places, we can choose who we interact with. But that doesn't work at church (or at least it shouldn't!). The church in Colossae was made up of people from a wide variety of ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. But as Colossians 3:11 says, *Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.*

The beauty of this unity in diversity proclaims the glory of our Savior, who calls all people to repent of their sin and turn to him. But it also presents us with a challenge: Will we bear with one another? When we don't understand each other? When we disagree with one another? Well, as holy people, this is our calling. And so is...

B. Forgiving one another

...forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (v. 13).

The fact that church members must forgive one another obviously implies that church members will sin against one another. So don't be surprised when that happens! We're all in the process of putting sin to death and pursuing righteousness. We all still stumble and falter and fall, and sometimes we fail one another. But when that happens, when someone in the church wrongs you, what does holiness look like? Forgiveness.

³ Douglas Moo, *Colossians*.

I remember talking with a member of our church many years ago. She had been wronged by another member, and he apologized, but she was struggling to forgive. What helped? Remembering how the Lord had forgiven her. Brothers and sisters, we have all offended the Lord, more than we can even comprehend. We deserve nothing from him but condemnation. But he paid our debts and cleansed our unrighteousness through his own blood shed upon the cross. He forgives all our sins, and he remembers them no more. Knowing this, how could we refuse to extend mercy to one another? As holy people, forgiveness is our calling. And lastly, so is love.

C. Loving one another

Look at verse 14: *And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony* (v. 14).

Our kids are often bringing home crafts from school. These crafts are often a conglomeration of paper and other decorations formed into some work of art. But it would all just be scattered pieces in their backpacks if the glue wasn't holding it together.

Church, love is the glue that binds everything together. Without love, The Orchard would simply be a scattered collection of people and programs. But with love, we are a people united in affection, a people building one another up for the glory of God. Despite our differences, and despite our sins, we can love one another. Because he first loved us.

Conclusion

This brings us full circle. As God's people, by God's grace, we are a chosen people, holy, and *dearly loved*. This is the first and most important thing to know about holiness. Before holiness is anything you do, you need to see that holy is who you are in Christ. In Christ, God has set us apart for his good purposes. He has set his gracious love upon us. Our responsibility is to live out this new identity with all the strength that he provides.

I hope you see that a holy life is not an impractical or impossible life. It is a life of splendor, a majestic and grand life. It's a life full of holy affections: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. It's a life full of holy actions: bearing with one another, forgiving one another, and loving one another. It's a happy life. It's a joyful life. It's a Christ-like life.

And perhaps you're not yet a Christian, but you're thinking, "That's the kind of life I would like." You want to grow in the affections and actions you see in these verses. You want to know that you are God's beloved. Well, here's the good news: In John 6:37, Jesus says, *Whoever comes to me I will never cast out*. "Whoever" is a big category. There's room for you in there! So, if you will come to Jesus in repentance and in faith, he will welcome you! He will lavish his gracious love upon you, and he will form this kind of life in you.