

“How To Change, Part 3”
Colossians 3:1-17

March 23, 2014

SI: This will be our third and last study of these verses in chapter 3.

In this passage, Paul explains how Christians change.

One of the wonderful truths of the Gospel is that the Lord accepts us as we are.

But it is also a wonderful truth that he accepts us as we are
to change us from what we are into what we ought to be.

And he expects our enthusiastic participation in that transformation.

The Christian life is one of change—

not just superficial changes, not just changes of image or behavior—
but true changes from the inside out—changes of affections, changes of character.

The problem in the Colossian church was that there were all sorts of ideas
and teachings going around that advocated various shortcuts to change,
shortcuts to sanctification.

Things like special diets, religious rituals, keeping certain holy days,
secret, esoteric Bible studies, mystical experiences, communication with angels.

Paul says all those are bogus.

There are no shortcuts or silver bullets.

The way forward in the Christian life is the way you got in—

by faith and repentance,

by experiencing and working out the reality of your union with Christ.

His life in you and your life in him and the power and patterns for living
that flow from that mystical union.

INTRO: I want you to imagine a scene.

A group of young men—18, 19, 20 years old—it's summertime and they are standing on the top of a cliff or bluff overlooking a body of water.

If you've ever been to Indian Head Rock on Smith Lake, that's the sort of place I'm talking about, where daredevils jump off into the water below.

All of them are wet, they've all jumped and climbed back up except for one.

His hair and bathing suit are still dry because he can't get up the nerve.

All his friends are trying to get him to jump.

They are all shouting different things at him,

but they are all basically saying the same three things.

They are saying: Look at us, bro, we jumped. We're alive.

And they are also saying: Don't be a baby. (Or cruder variations!)

And they are also saying: Be a man.

Look at us, we did it. Don't be a baby. Be a man.

So with knees shaking he takes the plunge and they all cheer.

Now those three encouragements that his friends were shouting at him illustrate the three components of change in the Christian life.

As I've said the past two sermons, according to Paul, change for Christians is a three-fold process.

Not three steps. Not three separate actions, but a unified, threefold process.

We can separate this process into three components to study it—and that's what we've been doing.

But don't forget that in practice, this is an inter-related, all or nothing process.

What are the three components?

First, there is a motivating component, an animating or empowering component.

Paul calls it, in vs. 1 and 2, setting your heart on things above, and setting your mind on things above where Christ is.

It's envisioning your union with Christ in his death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming—all the great and invisible spiritual realities drive imaginations.

This is sort of like all the friends saying:

Look at us, bro, we did it and we're ok. You're just like us so you'll be ok too.

Second, there is a negative component, a putting off, a taking off.

Theologians call it the mortification of sin. To mortify something is to kill it.

Vs. 5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature.

Vs. 8 Rid yourselves of all such things. Vs. 9 You have taken off your old self.

The idea is that you are no longer your old self, so don't live like that anymore. That's like his friends saying: Don't be a baby!

This young man can't really be a baby, even if he wanted to.

He was once a baby, but he'll never be one again because permanently changed. So what do his friends mean? They mean, don't act like a baby.

Don't act like what you aren't. You're done with that.

Third, there is a positive component, a putting on of virtue and goodness.

Theologians call vivification, which is a fancy word for bringing to life.

Vs. 9 Put on the new self which is being renewed.

Vs. 12 Clothe yourself with compassion. Vs. 14 Put on love.

The idea is that you are a new person, you have a new self. So be who you are.

That's like his friends saying: Be a man!

He is a man. He's a young man, but he is physiologically a man.

So what do his friends mean? They mean act like a man.

You might not feel like a man, but so what—you are one.

Act like who you really are.

And the more you do manly things, the more you will come into your identity.

Now, here's the interesting thing about Paul's teaching on this third component.

In other letters where Paul deals with this, like Romans and Ephesians, he focuses on the Christian person as an individual.

You put on the new self as a matter of your personal identity.

But that's not the case in Colossians.

When Paul starts talking about putting on the new self,

everything he says is corporate. It's all about life in the body.

In other words, he's saying that true change, particularly this positive component, can't happen in your life apart from your participation in the life of the church.

Think about my opening illustration, the young man on Indian Head Rock,

the one afraid to jump. If he had been up there all by himself, a lonely day on the lake with the wind whistling through the pines, he would never have jumped.

It was his buddies shouting at him, and being a part of the gang that did it for him.

And it was as much a victory and pleasure for them as it was for him.

So let's look at this third component of change, putting on the new self.

Will do so under two headings. Putting on the new self is a matter of

1. Embracing your corporate identity.
2. Practicing life in the body.

MP#1 Putting on the new self a matter of embracing your corporate identity.

One commentator put it this way:

The “new man” in Colossians 3 is not something inside an individual, but rather the new community in Christ, the church, and together we reflect the image of God. It is for this reason, since we are the new man corporately, that we are not to live like we once did.

This is very hard for us to grasp as American Christians,
because we’re a nation of individualists. It’s in our blood.

In the early days it was the American pioneer spirit—

one man against the wilderness, the cowboy alone on the plains.

And in more recent times it’s the therapeutic approach of the me generation.

How do I feel? What are my needs? What’s good for me?

That has led to a sort of Christianity in America that is individualistic to its core.

At the most fundamental level, it’s just me and Jesus. My personal faith primary.

The church is only beneficial in so far as it serves my personal faith,
and my personal Christian experience. That’s the common view.

How do American Christians usually justify changing churches?

I wasn’t being fed. The church doesn’t have the programs I need.

I didn’t feel welcomed. Nobody talked to me.

That sounds perfectly reasonable to us.

And the American church has mostly responded by catering to that thinking,
marketing itself as a product for the consumer.

A preacher friend sent me flyer a few years ago advertising new church in his town.

The front had a picture of a cool, hipster couple, barefoot, jeans and t-shirts.

Big words said: Short services, loud music, casual atmosphere.

Then there was a sentence in quotation marks, I guess spoken by the hipster gal
on the front, “Finally a church my husband would come to.”

On the back was some information about the church:

We wanted to start a church that was great for men—not just women and children. That’s
why you’ll notice our media, short services, stupid jokes, and a place where you can dress
however the heck you want.

So this is a church for men who are mentally lazy and who like to look like slobs.

And they’ll probably move on down the road when a more exciting church opens,
because it’s all about individual preferences.

A few months ago, I saw a sign that said something like:

“A church for people who hate church.” Totally caving to individualism.

We’re so used to that sort of thing we hardly even notice it.

But look how Paul says that you are to see your new self—
not just me and Jesus and my individual spiritual life and preferences.
He calls the Colossians “God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved.”
When you hear that phrase: God’s chosen people, who do you think of?
The Jews. Israel is God’s chosen people.
Most believers are fine with that, referring to Israel as God’s chosen people.
But when the church is called God’s chosen people,
folks start arguing about predestination.

We’re not going to get into that today.

Here’s the important thing, Paul and the rest of the New Testament applies the
Old Testament corporate names and titles for Israel to the church.

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,

a people of God’s own possession—as Peter says in his letter.

The promises to Abraham that through his offspring all nations would be blessed
is fulfilled through the church. Israel’s history is our history.

And Paul calls us holy—that means set apart for God’s unique purpose and use.

But we’re not just holy as individuals, we are a holy nation.

He works out his purposes in the world through the church as a whole.

So not only our fundamental identity corporate, our fundamental purpose is too.

This is striking language and not usually how we think of ourselves.

I’m part of a people, a nation, a kingdom—so my usefulness to God

and my growth is tied inseparably to my identity within that people.

And furthermore, all of this talk about our corporate identity is saturated
with talk of God’s grace. All our dealings with him are exclusively by his grace.

He chooses, he loves, he has mercy, he sets us apart as holy.

One of the Old Testament passages that Paul probably had in mind was Deut 7.

There the Lord says to Israelites: I didn’t choose you because of anything in you.

I didn’t choose you because you were a great nation.

I chose you because I loved you, and because I made a promise to Abraham.

The Lord didn’t love us because we were lovable or commended ourselves
to him in some way—he loves us because he loves us.

He chose us and adopted us “In accordance with his pleasure and will, to the praise
of his glorious grace” as Paul says in Ephesians 1.

Once again, that raises all sorts of issues that Christians argue about—

What about free will? What about the free offer of the Gospel?

Those are all interesting theological questions,
but that's not why Paul mentions these things, to argue theology.
It's so we will understand who we are.
We are a people who have been recipients of God's grace.

Paul drives this home one more way, it's in verse 11 where he says:

Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian,
slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

He's talking about the strongest identity markers and divisions in first century
society. Divisions between Jews and Greeks.

Jews regarded circumcision as a proud mark of their ethnic heritage.

Greeks viewed circumcision as mutilation, proud of their perfect bodies.

Scythians were a rough and wild people from around the Black Sea, proud
of independence. Greeks viewed them as barbarians, proud of sophistication .

And then there was the great separation between the slave and free man.

We could come up with our own list.

Think about the divisions in our country between political conservatives and
liberals, Republicans and Democrats, or divisions between whites and blacks,
or white-collar, blue-collar divisions—all marks of identity.

Paul says Christ is all that matters, which is the point of that last phrase in vs 11—
Christ is all and is in all.

This means that your identity as a member of God's chosen people
is more important than your national identity, your racial identity, political
identity your socio-economic identity, even your natural family identity.

This is your new self—it is a corporate identity as a member of the chosen,
holy, dearly loved, people of God in whom Christ dwells.

It is through the church that God is working out his purposes in history.

So in order to change, you must see your new self in Christ as a corporate identity.

And putting on the new self, growing into who you really are,
can only take place in the body of Christ.

I know that sounds abstract, so let's bring it down to earth.

That's exactly what Paul does. Brings us to our next point.

MP#2 Putting on the new self is a matter of practicing life in the body.

You change and grow in grace in the context of church life.

Paul starts with a list of virtues, verse 12:

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Every one of those is impossible to do in isolation.

You can't clothe yourself with compassion unless there are people you can be compassionate toward. Kindness, humility, gentleness, patience—they all have to be focused toward people.

Then Paul gets even more specific.

He lists one practice after another that we are to carry out in the church.

“Bear with each other.”

The word can also be translated endure each other.

That means you have to be in a church long enough that some people start to get on your nerves.

How else are you going to clothe yourself with patience?

There have to be people for you to learn patience by practicing on year after year. And trust me, you are giving other people practice too.

“Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as Lord forgave you.

That means you have to be close enough to people in the church so there might be occasions when you offend each other, even sin against each other.

Even bad enough that we have to remind selves Christ forgave us.

Lone Ranger Christians, who hop from church to church and never settle down, who always sit in the back and slip out after the benediction—they are never going to get close enough to be wronged.

Too bad for them.

How else are you going to have the opportunity to forgive?

How else are you going to clothe yourself in humility?

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,

since as members of one body you were called to peace.”

This is not a command to be internally peaceful—

it's a command to promote peace in the church between people.

It's clothing yourself gentleness and patience as you pour oil on troubled waters and mediate conflict between brothers.

You know what I'm going to say next, because I've already said it twice.

Have to be involved in the life of the body to have peacemaking opportunities.

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly
as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.”

If you don't know people in your church, and if they don't know you care,
you can't do this. You can't call someone out of the blue and say:

Listen, brother, I know your troubles or the trouble you are in.

Let me read you a Bible passage that I think you need to hear.

Someone in our church did that very thing for me this week.

Called me, read me a few pointed verses, admonished me with wisdom
regarding a situation I was on the verge of blowing.

He was able to do that because he's committed to life in the body.

In doing that he was putting on the new self, clothing himself with compassion.

“Singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

The context is obvious—this isn't private devotions, as important as those are.

This is corporate worship. The assembly of God's people on the Lord's Day.

Worship brings me to the cross. At the cross I see that the Lord Jesus endured and
continues to endure my sins with patience, he forgave me even when my
confession was imperfect, he made peace with me when I was at war with God,
he admonishes me gently through his word and Spirit.

Now I'm sure you noticed, as we went through Paul's list of commands,
that he obviously doesn't think the church is full of perfect people.

It's full of people we have to endure, and forgive, and make peace with,
and admonish.

And it implies that there are times that we ourselves are going to be hard to bear,
and that we will do things that need forgiveness, and that we are going to be mad
and in need of a peacemaker, and that we will need to be admonished.

In other words, putting on the new self happens in the context of dealing with
sins, character flaws, failures, offenses, and conflicts among believers.

So let me just give two practical suggestions—one positive, one negative—
to keep in mind. I'm giving you these because I need to hear them.

I have a hard time doing both of these things.

First, keep short accounts. Don't let things fester.

Don't let grievances, fights, concerns among Christians fester.

Often it's appropriate to say: This is no big deal, I need to get over it.

Love covers a multitude of sins. Best thing to do to let it go, not bring up.
But if it does fester in your mind, you have to address it,
or it will become bitterness and a grudge—and you won't grow, regress.

So take the initiative and go to the person and say, This feels broken.
I'm sure I've done some things and contributed to this,
but here's what it seems like has happened from my perspective.
What do you think? How can we work this out?

That sounds easy, procedurally speaking, but it's hard to do correctly.
Because first you have to take any resentments or hurt feelings or disappointments
you have and lay them at the cross and admit . . .
Jesus, I love to feel resentful and hurt or angry. Sweet morsels to me.
Have to examine yourself. Take the log out of your own eye.
Until you have done that, can't go to brother as a fellow recipient of grace.

And in this matter of keeping short accounts, use the church.
Especially when you are indignant and your feelings are high—
pull other believers in to help you talk through things with person.
Elders are ready for that. Grab one of your elders, can So and so and I talk?
See, we want to get to a place in all church conflict where it becomes an
opportunity to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

Second, the negative, don't use the language of holy war.

Here's what I mean.

When Christians have disagreements and conflicts, a whole set of pathologies
can come into play, because we think we are fighting for righteousness.
I'm not concerned for myself, I'm concerned for the truth,
I'm concerned for the purity and witness of the church.
This is not about me, I'm fighting for Jesus.
This person threatening the church with his behavior, her attitude. I won't allow.
After what he did, I have a hard time believing he's a Christian.
After what she said, I really wonder if she's a believer.
That's the nuclear option. We get there in about five minutes.

When you're fighting for the truth and for the church,
you can find yourself saying things that that destroy the little buds of
compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.
Instead say: The Holy Spirit is at work. Christ is building his church.
Love hopes all things and believes all things.
What's our goal? To put on the new self.
To be the chosen holy and loved people God that we are.
So guard your language. Jesus will take care of his church.

Don't be a baby. You're not a baby. Don't act like one.

Be a man. That's who you are. Act like one, take the plunge, bro.

Enter fully, with an open heart and a positive attitude into the life of the church.

Don't recoil in fear or disappointment or hurt feelings
over sin and weakness in the body.

But bear with each other, forgive each other, let peace rule, admonish one another,
worship and sing together, take the Lord's Supper together.

And in doing that, you will find yourself, more and more changed for the good
as the years go by—
clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.