

The Character of a Gospel-Driven Church

Colossians 3:12-17

Amid the hundreds of ways life has been changed by the internet over the last two decades, the ease of both finding and leaving an online review for goods or services that you're either looking for or have received, has completely changed the way business works today. In the past, if you wanted to know which vacuum cleaner to buy, you had to find a copy of *Consumer Reports* or something, and hope that they reviewed your particular product. If you wanted to know which restaurant to eat at, or what hotel to stay at, you'd have to purchase a travel guide or hope you can find a review in a newspaper. Today you can sort through thousands of reviews of vacuum cleaners on Amazon, or hundreds of reviews for restaurants or hotels on TripAdvisor. You can shop for dentists, lawyers, realtors, plumbers, auto mechanics, any kind of service industry—all with a convenient 5-star rating system ready to tell you if what you pay for is really what you get.

What's interesting though, is that you can now leave or find reviews for churches online as well. Is this a 3-star church or a 4-star? According to Facebook, Westgate is a 4.2 star church.

To be honest I find the commercialization of church marketing relatively gross. As though the church is a service industry or a retailer, the gospel is a product, and each church is trying to increase their market share or consumer base. It's silly.

And yet, the idea that a church's witness should be *credible*, that its character should be *compelling*—that is not far off the mark. If we continue the agricultural metaphors we've been using to understand Colossians, a local church should not only be concerned with the *quantity* of fruit they produce (more and more people coming to faith in Jesus), but also the *quality* of that fruit—is the gospel producing godliness and character in our lives, steadfast maturity in Christ? Is being reconciled to God and forgiven of our sin actually changing us to be more loving, more forgiving, more unified, more joyful, more and more like Jesus? After all, if we're not experiencing the kind of change in heart and behavior and relationships we tell others the gospel produces, why should we expect them to be convinced or compelled by our message?

And so after Paul lays the foundation of the gospel in his letter to Colossians, that any growth we see or experience comes from being rooted in Christ, not a result of what we can do (trying to serve God without depending on God—the spirituality from below we looked at a couple weeks ago), he tells us in ch. 3 to set our minds on things above, where Christ is. Which means putting off some practices and desires, and putting on new one. Like with a grapevine, you have to cut off and throw away the rotten grapes that threaten to corrupt the rest of the plant, that are unnatural to our new life in Christ. So Paul tells us in 3:5-11 to put away the kinds of attitudes and behaviors that poison community and pollute our relationship with God, as well as our witness as God's people: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry; anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, dishonesty (3:5, 8-9). We used to walk in these, but now that we have died with Christ and been raised with Christ (2:20; 3:1), they are no longer true to our new nature and identity in Christ; we must put them off.

In the same way, because of who we are, because we are rooted in Christ, we not only cut off certain desires and behaviors, we also cultivate godly ones—the kind of character we ought to expect to find in a gospel-driven church, that makes us a compelling community. Which brings us to our passage this morning,

Chapter 3:12-14: “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, 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.” This is the character of a gospel-driven church.

Now we’re going to look at each of these character qualities in a minute. But the tricky thing about cultivating godly character is that you can’t manufacture it. It’s not like a recipe, where you can take a bunch of ingredients, throw them into a machine, and out comes the finished product. Fruit is organic—it’s living. And by definition it can’t be faked or manufactured. You can’t fake love—at least not for very long. You can’t just try harder to forgive when you don’t want to; it’s only real forgiveness if it comes from the heart. And simply being told to love someone, or be kind, or be humble, doesn’t produce love, kindness, or humility in our hearts.

Think about what your parents told you when you were young and you got into a fight with a sibling or a friend. “Say you’re sorry.” To which you mumbles, “sorry.” And what would your parents always say after that? “Say it like you mean it.” But there’s no amount of your parents telling you to say you’re sorry that actually produces sorrow in your heart. You might be able to muster up a hearty, “I’m sorry,” enough to convince them to lay off. But if you don’t mean it, it’s not real. It’s not real forgiveness, any more than hanging a cluster of plastic grapes from Michaels on the end of a grapevine is real fruit.

Being told to say “I’m sorry” isn’t going to produce forgiveness in my heart. Nor is being told to love someone, or be patient, or be compassionate. All of those things flow out of the heart. You can’t fake character or manufacture it. It’s organic. And here’s Paul telling us to do these things. To live out these virtues.

So how is genuine Christ-like character possible? We can’t manufacture it. But we can nurture it. The only way a grapevine grows is naturally, out of a solid root-system, with proper supports. The only way to cultivate real fruit in our lives, the fruit of transformed character, is to remain connected to the root, from where life flows, and to rely on the trellis God supplies, the support he gives for the growth.

The Root: Identity in Christ

Paul has talked a lot about being rooted in Christ in this letter, and reminds us of it again right at the beginning of v. 12: “Put on then, *as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved*, compassionate hearts” and so on. He doesn’t just tell us to do something. First he reminds us who we are. That God has chosen us to be his children, not because of anything we’ve done, but by his grace. That we are holy and beloved as his children, not because of anything we have done, but because through faith we have been united with his holy and beloved Son, Jesus Christ. When God looks at us he sees us through his Son. When he commands us, he’s already provided his Spirit for the power to obey.

We never move on from depending on the gospel. If we've said it a thousand times here, we'll say it ten thousand more. The idea that beginning a relationship with God is a gift of his grace, but walking in relationship with God is up to us, a matter of performance, is not only soul-crushing, it is antithetical to biblical faith. As Paul says in Galatians 3, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). That's pure foolishness! We are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. And we are sanctified by grace—we become more and more like him—by grace through faith in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. Jesus is the root; apart from him we can do nothing (cf. Col. 2:6-7; Jn. 15:5).

The Trellis: The Peace of Christ, the Word of Christ, the Name of Christ

But not only is Christ the root who provides the growth; he is also the trellis that supports the growth of godly character within the family of God. If you think again of a grape vine, not only does it need to be firmly rooted, it needs supports to hold it up out of the dirt and into the sun. In vv. 15-17 Paul tells us three things God has given us to support the character he calls us to in vv. 12-14, like three rails on a fence: the peace of Christ, the word of Christ, and the name of Christ.

The Peace of Christ. Verse 15: "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful." Godly character among imperfect people, things like kindness, humility, and forgiveness, will only be possible if we submit ourselves to the peace we have in Christ. The peace he accomplished for us on the cross (cf. 1:20). Peace with God, and peace with one another, because our sins have been paid in full. That peace is to rule our hearts. It is to be our final arbiter; the rule by which we decide our disputes. Not our personal interests or desires, not this agenda or that. Rather, letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts is to let the gospel dictate how we treat each other—the gospel of God's peace.

The Word of Christ. Verse 16: "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." The second support God has supplied to nurture our character is his Word, namely the gospel message of Scripture. The message that tells us, as Tim Keller has so wonderfully summarized, "We are more flawed and sinful than we ever dared believe, yet we are more loved and accepted than we ever dared hope at the same time."¹ So, *we are more flawed and sinful than we ever dared believe*—that's simply to acknowledge what Paul says in ch. 2:13: "And you ... were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh." The consistent witness of Scripture is that the only thing we bring to the table in our relationship with God is our sin. We are all in need of a Savior. But second, *we are more loved and accepted than we ever dared hope*: God's mercy is more than enough to deal with our sin, as pervasive as it is. We can never exhaust it or find its end. This is to acknowledge what Paul says in the rest of 2:13: that God has "forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:13-14).

Let that message dwell in you, make its home in your heart. Which means we have to make our home in the Scriptures, letting the message of Christ wash over us daily and shape the way we think and feel and act. And there are all sorts of ways that we can saturate our lives in this gospel truth. Paul speaks of teaching and admonishing one another—something we try to spend time

¹ Tim Keller, "The Meaning of the Gospel," available at: http://extendingthekingdom.org/?page_id=17. Accessed Sept. 6, 2011.

doing each week. Singing songs to one another that refocus our hearts on the gospel of Jesus; this is what drives Drew as he's selecting songs each Sunday. But whatever it looks like, we must make our home in the Word of God and the message of the gospel. Spend time in this book. As one of my former pastors, Kent Hughes, once said, "You cannot be profoundly influenced by that which you do not know."

The Name of Christ. Verse 17: "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." This reminds us why we do what we do. Not for our own sake, but for Christ's. To do everything on his behalf, for his purposes and his glorious reputation, for the sake of his gospel. If what's at stake in how I live, what I say and do, is not just my reputation, but Christ's, that's going to change the way I live. A passion for Christ's reputation is a support for the kind of godly character God calls us to.

So Christ is the root who provides the growth. He's also the trellis that supports the growth of godly character within the family of God. What then does real fruit look like? More importantly, what does it taste like? The sweetness of gospel character that makes the church a compelling community?

The Fruit: Godly Character

Come back to vv. 12-14. The first thing Paul mentions is *compassion*. Heartfelt mercy. The sense of deep concern for someone in need; a concern that motivates us to do something about it. The compassion that Mark gave testimony to experiencing after their recent fire.

Real compassion comes from a heart changed and supported by the gospel. What makes that possible, and increasingly *involuntary*, among God's people, is a deepening sense that God has had compassion on me. He has looked at my pitiful state and he's reached down to help me in mercy. I was a sinner deserving of judgment, and God had mercy on me. Just think about your last week—all of the nasty things you've done, said, or thought. God knows about everyone of those, and *he still loves you and delights to call you his child*, because you have been united with his Son, Jesus Christ. That's mercy.

But what happens to compassion when I forget the gospel, or fail to depend on the gospel? If I forget my own sinfulness and weakness, or the sufficiency of God's grace? That's when we begin to look with judgment on others in their suffering. 'You got yourself into this mess; you should have thought of that earlier.' That's when we react with anger—'because of your problems now I have to rearrange my life to bail you out.' Or even malice, using the hardship of others as a chance to get ahead personally. Those are the kinds of character traits we're supposed to cut off. But we'll only recognize them as being out of place on the vine if we're connected to the root and leaning on the supports, the peace of Christ, the word of Christ, and the name of Christ.

Second, Paul calls us to *kindness*—doing good to another. Our natural inclination is to offer kindness to others in proportion to the kindness we receive from them. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours; you stab mine, I'll stab harder. That's how the world works. Kindness is often a means to an end, a way of getting something. Not always; there are truly kind people in the world. But that's the default of fallen nature. God shows us a better way. The word Paul uses for kindness here usually describes God's goodness and kindness in saving us (e.g. Rom. 2:4; 11:22;

Eph. 2:7; Tit. 3:4). The kindness God extended to us *while we were yet sinners*, by sending his Son Jesus. God did good to us when we deserved the opposite; he did not repay us evil for evil, but good for evil. When that truly captures our heart, when the peace of Christ rules our hearts, how can we respond in any other way, but to do good to those around us, even if they don't deserve it?

Next Paul speaks of *humility*—thinking of others as more significant than ourselves. Humility is not thinking lowly of yourselves; it's not a self-loathing or a wallowing in your weakness. It's thinking high thoughts of God, and high thoughts of others, and accurate thoughts of yourself—that you are a sinner saved by grace. When I forget that—how holy God is and how far short I fall, how loving God is and how he's raised me up with Christ—when I forget that, it's easy to be judgmental and proud, to think that I have it together. That, boy, God is lucky to have me on his team. It's only when I remember the root, and rely on the trellis, that genuine humility is possible.

Next is *meekness*—being gentle toward others. Sometimes we think of meekness as being weak, but that's a mistake. It's not about how much strength you have, but how you use it. Do you use your power to get what you want, like a bully on the playground, or are you gentle with others, entrusting the results to God's hands?

Closely related to that is *patience*—giving time and space to others without getting angry or thinking less of them. This is probably one of the hardest virtues for many of us to cultivate, but think about it like this: patience in the community of faith is simply extending to others the grace that God has extended to us. Think how patient God is toward us in our sin and weakness. Sure, it's frustrating when someone never listens, or keeps making the same mistakes over and over—but then I think, that's me. That's exactly me in my relationship with God. He is so patient.

The call to patience is also the recognition that the community of Christ has not arrived. No local church is a perfect embodiment of these virtues. Sometimes when we're hurt, we think it's easier to go somewhere else instead. But not only does that fail to deal with the problem (you just carry it with you into a new community), it forsakes that third support rail, to do everything in the name of Christ. Whose reputation am I prioritizing when I run or leave a “bad review” online instead of talking to the people who hurt me? Does that make Jesus look better? How much more compelling is the community of faith when we have the patience to love one another and work through our differences with both truth and grace?

That makes our next virtue all the more important: *bearing with one another in love*, and *forgiveness*. And if you think patience is hard, here's the real test of Christian community.

The logic of forgiveness is quite simple; v. 13: “As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” Living that out is anything but simple. What if they do it again? How do I know that they're really repentant? What about my pain? My humiliation? What about the cost I've endured because of their sin—emotional, financial, social? Is the peace of Christ really sufficient to rule in our hearts—to be our final arbiter among us? Is the gospel really sufficient to bring reconciliation and forgiveness between two sinners on earth? Sure, we're willing to trust the gospel to deal with the wrath of a holy God, but we're not willing to trust it to deal with the wrath of an unholy spouse, or an unholy ex-boyfriend or girlfriend, and unholy parent or sibling or friend.

I want you to hear this: if the gospel is capable of saving your soul from hell, it is more than capable of taking a train-wreck of a friendship, a strained work-relationship, or a faltering marriage, even a marriage fractured by adultery and betrayal, and putting them back together, and bringing out of them something even more beautiful than was there in the first place. If God can do that in my own heart, can he not also do that in the community of faith? Yes, the pain is real—more real than most of us can imagine. And yes, trust takes time to rebuild. But forgiveness is part of the lifeblood of God’s new community. It’s part of the clothing we wear. And it’s necessary anytime two sinners share the same space. What we have to remember is that if Christ’s grace is sufficient for me, it sufficient for those who sin against me as well. Christ paid for their sin, too, so I don’t have to dish out my punishment or hold out for my revenge. That revenge and justice was already poured out on Christ, and I am now free to forgive—to cancel the debt of sin committed against me and extend mercy and love in its place.

And that love is the crowning jewel of Christian community. In v. 14 Paul speaks of *love* as an overarching virtue which binds all these different virtues of compassion, kindness, humility and so on together in perfect harmony. Loyal, sacrificial, covenant love. Not merely a feeling of affection (though I believe that will grow), but *a covenant commitment for the good of the other at the cost of self*. That’s love. And it holds all these other virtues into play. It motivates us to do the hard work of being kind and compassionate and forgiving to others in God’s gospel-community. And again, that chief motivation comes from the fact that God in his all-sufficient grace first loved us.

There’s one more key virtue in our passage, sprinkled throughout, and that’s thankfulness. Notice how often this comes up in vv. 15-17. Verse 15: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . . and *be thankful*.” Verse 16: “singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs *with thanksgiving* in your heart to God.” Verse 17: “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus *giving thanks* to God the Father through him.” Gratitude permeates the Christian life, and this makes perfect sense when the gospel is in focus. We have brought nothing to the table but our sin. Christ has responded with all-sufficient grace, stripping us of our sin-stained garments and clothing us in his own righteousness and peace. If we really get that—if we really understand in our hearts all the God has done for us, all that he has rescued us from, all that he has given us in his Son, and all because of his undeserved, unmerited, all-sufficient grace—how can we as a community be anything but thankful?

These are the marks of a compelling community: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, love, and gratitude. This is the character of a gospel-driven church. And we shouldn’t need an online review system for people to know whether we’re the real deal. People should be able to tell simply by spending time with us. We should be able to tell simply by spending time with one another. We have not arrived, and we will not arrive completely this side of heaven. But God has given us everything we need in his Son, by his Spirit, to make us grow, being rooted in Christ, and supported by Christ—his peace, his Word, his name. A truly compelling community is formed, guided, and nurtured by the gospel of Jesus.

May it be so among us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Questions for Study and Understanding

1. What was said before this passage that helps us understand what Paul is saying here?
2. What words or ideas are repeated in this passage? How do they help us understand what Paul is emphasizing?
3. At the beginning of v. 12, why do you think Paul reminds the Colossians that they are “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved”? Why is that important to understand here?
4. How would you define each virtue Paul lists in vv. 12-14?
5. What does Paul call the church to in vv. 15-17? How do you think this relates to the virtues he lists in vv. 12-14?

Questions for Reflection and Application

6. Which of the virtues in vv. 12-14 do you find come most naturally for you? Which are the most difficult?
7. Why are these virtues so hard for us?
8. How would the church be different if these things were consistently true of how we lived? How would the world’s view of the church be different?
9. When you find yourself struggling with one of these character traits in the future, how will you respond differently in light of this passage?