

Love and Thankfulness in 2020

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I want to do a little bit of housekeeping on the front end of the sermon here. Starting in December we are going to begin our Advent Series for the Christmas Season. Prior to that, next Sunday we are going to be continuing in the book of Proverbs. But today, in light of Thanksgiving week we are going to take a break from Proverbs and look at the text you just heard read in Colossians 3.

Our text today deals with two issues that are relevant this thanksgiving week both in our church and in culture and those two issues are unity and thankfulness.

If you've watched any election coverage the question most experts are being asked is: "Has the country ever been more divided?" Everywhere we look people are being categorized not by what we share, but by where we differ.

This has crept into the church as well. If you spend time on social media you can see the divisions, dissensions and hostility that is brewing over topics like race, social justice, masks, coronavirus, and politics. The truth is all of these topics are important, and ought to have a place for discussion inside the text but our text today does little to answer those debates but instead it allows us to enter into those debates and issues not with where we differ, but where we share unity in the gospel of Jesus Christ as his church.

Secondly, given all the things we've dealt with this year it's easy to be ungrateful or at least to justify our lack of gratitude. This can show up in many ways but can be revealed even in the silly posts and memes describing our longing for 2020 to end and 2021 to being. I join many of us in hoping for a fresh start in 2021 yet I wonder if in the midst of all that is going on right now we have forgotten what it means to be thankful in a biblical sense.

Our culture is quick to prescribe what can bring unity and how we can become content, but here in our text today we see the true hope for harmony and thankfulness in the church. The point of our text today is that whatever is happening out there, things should be noticeably different in here.

You see the church in Colossae was not immune from these tensions. There was political turmoil as Nero was becoming increasingly abusive in his rule. Spiritual turmoil as this church received news that their beloved Paul was now imprisoned for his faith, and social turmoil as believers were passing judgments on each other over practices not prescribed or prohibited in scripture.

On top of all this there were those trying to lure them away from the faith delivered to them in the gospel.

This passage today is Paul's arrow into the heart of this anxious, frustrated and burdened church and by God's grace it is good medicine for our own hearts today. The big picture we are going to see today is this: **God's grace gathers the church in harmonious love and rules the church in thankful worship.**

We are going to see this in two parts today. In Colossians 3:12-14 we are going to see **Harmony through love**, and in verses 15-17 we are going to see **Worship through Thanksgiving**.

When we think of harmony and thanksgiving in the life of the church we might think that those are two good goals for any church. But what we are going to see today is that these are not merely goals for a biblical church, these are distinguishing marks of a biblical church. It is commanded that we be thankful and bound together in peace as the church.

To not strive or understand the weight of these issues is to actively disobey what God has given us in his word. Even in 2020, we don't get a pass on love and thanksgiving.

But this is where God's word is so kind to us. As a father, I can command my kids to get along, and I can force them to say thank you. But I can't actually make them love each other, nor can I actually make them grateful. But God is so good that he not only commands, but he provides what we need to heartily obey those commands.

This is what we will see as we begin our first point today: **Harmony through Love**. Read with me **Colossians 3:12-14**.

So here we have this list of actions which Paul is calling the church to put on. The illustration Paul is using is that these are the clothes that the church needs to wear: compassionate hearts, kindness humility, meekness, patience, we are to bear with each other, forgiven each other, love each other, and bind each other together in harmony.

That's a lot which is required of us. This is particularly burdensome when you think that a lot of these things you can't just muster up. If you've ever tried to force yourself to love someone you've probably found a difficult task. Even the fictitious Genie in the movie Aladdin has limitations. He can't make raise anyone up from the grave, and he can't make anyone fall in love.

But God is no genie and his is capable to not only raise us in Christ, but to give us new affections for him and for others. Because if you noticed these commands to do all of this begin with a clear statement of who you are and end with a wonderful reminder of what you have been given.

Look again at the opening of **Colossians 3:12a**.

The church that Paul is writing to are God's chosen ones, God's precious people who through the gospel he chose to save through Jesus Christ. If you believe in Jesus you are one chosen by God himself. It is not random coincidence or combination of your family background or American heritage, it is evidence of God's underserved and unearned grace.

But here Paul points out the effect that has on who you are: as God's chosen people you are holy and you are beloved. The word holy in this sense means set apart.

Christmas is around the corner and what you might do with your presents is find the one that you think has the best gift in it, and you might set it apart for last. You separate it from the others because of its value and worth. In our salvation God sets us apart and even calls us his inheritance, we are God's gift to himself.

But more than that, we are his beloved. To be saved by God is to be loved by God. That's it. No one is saved by God apart from God's emotions being set towards you through the work of Jesus.

This love not only tell us something about God, but it tells us something about ourselves doesn't it. While God is loving, we are sinful and needed to be forgiven. Paul alludes to this in **Colossians 3:13-14**.

Did you see what Paul is doing here? He is saying love one another dearly, but then he's also pointing us to where we find this capacity to love: we are loved. He has provided for us what he demands from us.

We love because we first and foremost are already beloved in the gospel. We forgive because we first and foremost have been forgiven in the gospel. This community, this unity, is to look drastically different in contrast to our world because we are holy, set apart from the world. The love that binds us together in harmony is a witness to the world of the love which binds lost people to God through Jesus.

Paul often gives lists of attributes which Christians are to put on because of this gospel, but this list is a list which includes exclusively attributes which create a community characterized by love and grace.

Look at what Paul says right before this passage: **Colossians 3:11**.

We often think that unity in the church is easy, and that when we see pictures of the early Christian church in Acts that harmony was natural. But what we see here is that this new church was eclectic and diverse.

There are a people from different cultures, different backgrounds, and different social and economic brackets. In fact what's interesting in reading the New Testament is how these potential points of division and dissention were in just about every church we see represented. These issues stretch from biblical interpretation to political and societal preferences.

In Romans Christians, are wrestling over those who eat certain foods and those who do not. In 1 and 2 Corinthians, we see a members lording their spiritual gifts over other members who don't have the same gifts, we see discrimination between the rich and the poor and we see the false division between those who follow Paul and those who follow Apollos.

In Galatians, we see Peter and Paul get into a disagreement and the tension between the circumcised and the uncircumcised in the church. In Ephesians we encounter hostility between Jewish and Greek Christians. In Colossians the church is arguing over which days are the right days on which to worship. In 1 and 2 Thessalonians there is debate over when Christ will come back. 1 Timothy seems to allude that Timothy was belittled due to his age, and in James we see a church openly playing favorites when it comes to care and discipleship.

Don't forget that among Jesus' first disciples were nationalistic zealots like Simon, and Roman sympathizers like Matthew. But what brought Matthew and Simon together is the same thing that brings the churches together in Colossians 3:12, the chosen call of God. If we really believe that God calls people from every tongue and tribe then we need to understand the unity that can come not apart from doctrine, but through the doctrine of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The church, this church, will always be a place of potential division because the gospel is so diverse in its salvation. If anyone is to display a unique harmony to the world it ought to be the church.

That's not to say all divisions are bad in the church. There are divisions which are severe, the church is called to draw lines between those who preach the gospel and those who preach a false gospel. There are instances where the church is to discipline members who profess Christ but live in unrepentant sin. But even these divisions exist to protect the unity of those who share Christ, and to warn those who do not.

But here, for things that do not fall under those categories, we are to bear with one another slowly and carefully having a heart of compassion.

I will say this right now. I have many friends across the country who work in churches, and I have heard horror stories this year of how believers are treating believers and leaving inside their own churches.

I want to be clear, that is has been an immense grace, that our elders are fully aware of, to pastor you during this time. As best as we can tell, with all the oddity and constant changes which we've experienced in our church and in our culture, it has been a privilege to see you bearing with one another.

But notice what Paul assumes. He assumes that a church will do a good job bearing with each other, but there may come a time where bearing with people might eventually lead to forgiving people. In other words we've been at this in a difficult time for a while now, and as we continue to care for one another we will inevitably find those who have actually sinned against us.

It is to be expected that Christians, yes even Christians, will sin against each other in the church. You see a hypocrite is not the person who sins, the hypocrite is the person who expects he never sins. And when we sin, we are called not only to ask for forgiveness, but we are to forgive.

Why? Because Christ forgave us when we were yet his enemies.

The word translated here as forgiven is a unique word. There is another Greek word for forgiveness which is more legal. But this one has as its root the word "grace." It is the same root which makes up the words for thanksgiving we will see later in this text.

In other words we are not to forgive each other out of a stoic sense of justice, we are to bear with and forgiven each other because we have received the grace of God ourselves in the gospel. We were once enemies of God himself, contrary to all he knew to be good and true, and yet Christ came to take away our sins because of his love for us.

There is a unique principle in rubber which allows it to be used frequently as a safety features across the globe. That is its resiliency. Rubber, when pressed, struck or dented, possess the scientific principle which allows it to recover and regain its shape after it's been hit.

The principle which gives the church its resiliency is the love each member has experienced in Jesus Christ. We are fundamentally different because of what we have experienced in Jesus. We know what it's like to bear with people for Christ did so for us. We know what it's like to love sinners saved by grace because Jesus loved us enough to be saved by grace. In the church we might be diverse in many ways, but above all we are to be bound to perfect harmony by the love which binds us to God in Jesus.

This leads to our second point today: **Worship through Thanksgiving.**

Read with me **Colossians 3:15-17.**

In verse 12 we see that God's beloved are chosen by God, but in verse 15 we see where they have been placed when they are chosen: in the body. To be chosen by God is to be called into the church. What characterizes a biblical church? Harmony in love and deep thankfulness in the gospel.

Did you see that three times in the text we just read we are encouraged, commanded to be thankful, in the church?

First, we are commanded to be thankful because of the peace of Christ which rules our hearts in the church.

What a wonderful picture, the peace of Christ which rules, our hearts. We know the effect peace has when it comes to ruling don't we. Have you ever experienced a peace so strong that it masters you?

We are weaning our two year old off of her pacifier and we are realizing that she is ruled by that peace. When she is frustrated or tired she comes to us and begs us for her pacifier. When she gets it she holds it in her mouth, crouches on the floor and just starts humming to herself. You can physically see her whole body relax.

She is ruled by that peace. In a year like 2020, it's not hard for each of us to imagine our own pacifier. Something that seems to be hidden away on the top shelf of the pantry, but if we could just have it, it would rule us in peace.

It would cause us to experience so deep a relaxation and a security that we might feel that for the first time in nine long months we can breathe for a moment.

Our world is looking for this peace. For the original audience the peace they hoped in was the peace the Roman Empire might provide. We hope it might come with the dawn of a vaccine, a new political program, or the arbitrary changing of a year. Peace is always personal.

But here dear church, is offered the peace of Christ himself. This peace isn't found in the world which is always changing, this peace is found in your heart. In other words this is a peace that surpasses your circumstances.

Look at how Paul set this up earlier in **Colossians 1:19-20**. How does Jesus bring us peace? By the blood of his cross. Look again at **Colossians 2:13-15**.

How does Jesus bring us peace? By giving us eternal peace before God himself. How many of you wrestle with the guilt of not measuring up to your own standard or the standard of those around you? How many of you fail to find peace in a world that's always changing? How many of you struggle to find peace in the allure of wealth, relationships or adventure?

None of those things can bring you peace because they can't solve the biggest problem in your heart: lack of peace with God. Nothing is right if that's not right. But in the gospel Jesus makes it right by paying for your sins so that you might stand before God un-condemned and unashamed.

In Romans 8, Paul puts this peace in Jesus to the test with a slew of hypothetical questions. What happens to this peace when we feel condemned? What happens to this peace when others seek to bring charges against us? What happens to this peace when the world teeters?

Look at how Paul puts this in **Romans 8:31-35**. The answer to all these rhetorical questions, questions which seek to test our peace and try our spirit is "No, No, No, No.!" Nothing can shake the peace of Christ which rules our hearts if we are found in him.

Brothers and sisters there are so many things in this world that can take away your job, your health or even your loved ones, but nothing can take away this peace that comes through Jesus Christ. The only way you can ever believe that claim is to try it for yourself.

Now I want to be honest with you all, I wrestle with thankfulness. I have the spiritual gift of pessimism. It's not so much that I am unable to be grateful, it's that I immediately start thinking about when this gift will run out or break.

I get so distracted by the brokenness of the world that like a seed among weeds, my sinful heart often chokes out what little gospel gratitude I might have. Maybe you feel the same way.

But this is why we are not called to be thankful alone. This is why we are called for peace to rule in our hearts in one body. The nature of the church is a community who constantly reminds others of this grace.

Read with me **Colossians 3:16**.

How might the church fight for thankfulness in times in which it seems we have little to be thankful for? We become so saturated with the gospel of Jesus that we can't help but leave a trail of it everywhere we go.

If you have kids or pets, you know what it looks like to have something dwell richly inside of someone. You can see kids outside playing in the mud, or a dog running in the snow. But you also see what happens afterwards: trails of dirt and water throughout the whole house.

Next time you see that mess, I want you to think to yourselves: "This is what it means for the word of Christ to dwell richly inside of me." The church is to be a place where we together roll around in the mud of the gospel so that everywhere we go and whatever we say the droppings of grace freely fall from us.

This word of Christ, this gospel is, to be so pervasive in this community that those who are weak and wounded might come in and leave full. And it's here we see our philosophy of ministry at Sovereign Hope: whether we are teaching, singing, warning, praying or speaking we want the gospel to permeate everything.

Why? Because we need it. I need to be reminded of what I have in Christ, you need be reminded of what you have in Christ.

I know for many of us COVID has disrupted our experience in the church, but praise God that he has shown us principles here that can be applied broadly. While some of us may not be able to gather in this group, we can all think of what it might look like to bring this experience into our homes, our phone calls and our video chats.

What does it look like for you to reach encourage another person in this body with word of Christ? Because as we sit a semi-homeless church, trying to raise funds, in the midst of a global pandemic, while many of us are still not able to physically gather with us we have not lost the immense grounds for worship that we have in thanksgiving as the church.

Look at what Paul says the church bears witness to in **Ephesians 1:9-10, 3:8-10**. This side of the cross we get to see the full picture of God's will to save the world through Jesus. Look at what Peter says in **1 Peter 1:10-12**.

Do you understand the privilege it is to simply be part of God's church this side of the cross! Do you realize what you've seen!

David was a man after God's own heart. He danced in the presence of the Lord before the Ark of the Covenant. Solomon saw the glory of the Lord fill the temple in radiant glory.

And yet do you understand what Paul and Peter are saying. David and Solomon would have given up all of the wonder they encountered if only to be part of the New Testament church. Oh, the joy they would have to hear not of the promise of redemption but to sing the praises of the person of it!

For David to get a text or a phone call midweek encouraging him with the word of Christ would have sent him over the moon. Since we have such a hope, we turn to everything as the church with gratitude.

This is where Paul brings the closer: **Colossians 3:17**.

To be a Christian is to be given grounds for life and thankfulness in the gospel.

In Zechariah 4, the prophet is speaking to a people who are disheartened. They had been promised a rebuilt temple where they might worship, but at every corner the plan seemed to be frustrated. But in chapter 4 God wants to remind them that he is going to do it, and that it will be Zerubbabel who will oversee the temple building.

And look at what God says to these people: **Zechariah 4:8-10**.

Dear friends, we may know the day of small things right now. But let us not despise them for we have seen a builder greater than Zerubbabel. We have seen Christ the cornerstone of the church, so let us be thankful for all he has done and is doing knowing that none of our days will go to waste.