

LET THE PEACE OF CHRIST RULE AND BE THANKFUL

Colossians 3:1-17

Key Verse: 3:15

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.”

We are now entering into the season of Thanksgiving. This holiday has a rich history in America. It is usually traced to the well-known Pilgrim celebration held in 1621. The first national day of Thanksgiving was proclaimed by the Continental Congress in 1777.¹ They called on Americans to give thanks to Almighty God for his blessings, to confess their sins, and to trust in the mercy of Jesus Christ to continue living under God’s blessing. President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed Thanksgiving a national holiday in 1863. The driving force behind his decree was Sarah Hale, a Christian philanthropist. Given this wonderful history, what should we do in this season? We should give thanks to God. At the same time, we should realize that Thanksgiving is more than a holiday. The Bible says to be thankful always, even in times of difficulty, loss, and pain. This is God’s will for us (1Th 5:18). By the way, research shows that thankful people are happy people.² However, there is a problem. We tend to be thankful when things go well, but not in times of adversity. How can we be thankful always? It is challenging. In Colossians Paul explains who Jesus Christ really is, what kind of life Christ gives, and how to live this new life practically. A recurring theme is thanksgiving (1:3,12; 2:7; 3:15,16, 17; 4:2). In chapter 3, we can find a secret to being thankful always. Let’s listen.

I. New life in Christ (1-4)

In verses 1-4, Paul describes our new life in Christ and gives clear directives about how to live it out. The key concept he stresses is our union with Christ. This union is referred to by the word “with,” which he uses seven times in chapters 2-3 (12[2]; 2:13,20; 3:1-4). Verse 1 says, “you have been

¹ <https://wallbuilders.com/proclamation-thanksgiving-day-1777/>

² <http://headhearhand.org/blog/2013/05/21/thankful-people-are-happy-people/>

raised with Christ.” Verse 3 says, “You died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.” Verse 4 says, “...you also will appear with him in glory.” The moment we believe in Jesus, he draws us into a relationship with him that is everlasting. This is why Jesus said he will be with us always, to the very end of the age (Mt 28:20). This relationship is so deep and intimate that Paul says, “Christ, who is your life.” Christ is our very life. We are united with Christ by a love so powerful that nothing can separate us from him (Ro 8:38-39).

The implications of this union with Christ are great. We died with Christ, are raised with Christ, and will receive glory with Christ when he comes again. “You died” means that our old self died. It was crucified together with Christ. Christians are not just a better version of themselves. Christians have died to our old selves and live a new life. Let me give an example from North Korea. Now known as an idol worshiping country, just a century ago it was a power station for gospel ministry. At that time, there was a famous pastor named Ik-du Kim. He had once been a notorious gangster. After believing in Jesus, the first thing he did was send out a letter which said, “Ik-du Kim has died.” People rejoiced upon hearing it. One day he appeared in the marketplace, holding a Bible in his hands. People were surprised. They wondered if he had really changed. So, one man poured a bucket of water on his head to see how he would react. Pastor Kim looked at him and said, “You should be happy that old Ik-du Kim is dead.” He had really changed. He became one of the most influential Korean preachers in the 20th century. We died to our old life with all of its bad habits and wickedness. We have a glorious new life in Christ.

Since we have been “raised with Christ” (1), we now live with him in victory. We have access to his limitless strength, infinite wisdom and all of his riches. We are not bound by the power of sin, death or the devil anymore. Now we can have victory over them. We can live a totally new life. Furthermore, we have a great hope. When Christ comes again, we will appear with him in glory. Our natural bodies will be changed into glorious spiritual bodies. We will be free from the presence of sin forever. We will bear the image of Christ. We will inherit the new heavens and the new earth where there is no more sorrow, pain, tears or death. We will enjoy life with Christ and his people in heavenly glory forever.

As those united with Christ, how should we live? Paul tells us to set our hearts and minds on things above. Verse 1b says, "...set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." The phrase "set your hearts" comes from the Greek word "zēteō," which means seek, look for, and desire. It is an imperative verb. As new people in Christ, we need to decide to set our hearts on things above. To any person, the most important thing is what we set our hearts on. This determines the trajectory of our lives and the kind of people we will become. Everyone's heart is set on something. What is your heart set on? What can be worthy of our whole heart devotion? It is Christ who died for our sins and rose again to bring us into glory. That is why his redeemed worship him with all their hearts, saying, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain!" (Rev 5:12). Let's set our hearts on Christ!

What else should we do? Look at verse 2. "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." The phrase "set your minds" means "keep thinking about." What we think about matters. What do you think about most? Someone's list include what other people think about me, what I don't have, my fears, past mistakes, old wounds, rejections, broken dreams, unfinished tasks, and the like. The Bible says that the mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace (Ro 8:6). We should not let ungodly thoughts occupy our brain space rent-free. Our minds should be a holy space. As human beings, we need to set our minds on things above. What we read, watch and listen to is extremely important. Paul said in Philippians 4:8, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." These noble things come from God, who is our Creator and Redeemer. There are so many divine mysteries in nature. There are so many beautiful stories of God's redeeming love. There is such life-giving truth in God's words. As we think about such things we can grow as spiritual people. One young man was troubled by dark thoughts. But as he listened to a Christian song, Jesus came into his heart and gave him peace.

Setting our hearts and minds on things above does not mean that we ignore our basic human obligations, or as someone has said, being so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. Rather, it means that we are not bound

by earthly life. We pursue a higher quality of life. C.S. Lewis said, "If you seek heaven, you will gain earth as a bonus. But if you seek earth, you will lose both." Jesus said, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Mt 6:33).

II. Put to death the earthly nature (5-11)

As we set our hearts and minds on things above, we need to struggle against our sinful nature. Verse 5 says, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry." The word for sexual immorality is "porneia" in Greek from which we get "pornography." It refers to all kinds of illicit sexual behavior. God created sex to be enjoyed by one woman and one man in the confines of marriage. Any other sexual activity, which includes homosexuality, is not permissible for a believer. The words "impurity" and "evil desires" frame these vices in moral terms. We should call sin what it is and have a clear judgment against it. But our permissive and relativistic society has lost this discernment. Sadly, what used to be called "the sin of fornication" is now referred to as "hooking up," and regarded acceptable. Although adultery used to be illegal, there are now websites advocating it with millions of members. Many kinds of entertainment are nothing more than vicarious indulgence in immorality. We should not be confused; these things are sin. Paul also mentions greed. This is the internal, sinful desire to satiate ourselves with more, more, more. Paul defines it as idolatry. It is to live as if everything exists for us, rather than for God.

What should we do about our sinful desires? Paul tells us to "put them to death." We cannot have a tolerant attitude toward sin, or compromise with sin; we must put to death whatever belongs to the earthly nature. C. S. Lewis' work, "The Great Divorce," illustrates this. It describes the total separation between heaven and hell. In one event, a disfigured man comes before a holy angel of God. He wants admission into heaven. The man has a red lizard on his shoulder; it represents his lustful desires which have bound him and degraded his personality. The angel explains that he cannot enter heaven with the lizard and offers to destroy it. But the lizard whispers into the man's ears, trying to convince him that life without lust would not be worth living. After a painful struggle, the man finally agrees with the angel, who immediately takes the

lizard from his shoulder and destroys it with one swift blow from his sword. Then the man suddenly changes his appearance. All of his ugliness and distortion disappear, and he becomes handsome and strong. At the same time, out of the remains of the lizard rises a great white stallion, which the man mounts. Then they leap upward and onward, soaring to great new heights. Though it may be painful, our sinful nature must be put to death. As this happens, we experience glorious new life.

What becomes of those who live according to the earthly nature with its lusts and greed? Verse 6 says, "Because of these the wrath of God is coming." People generally take the wrath of God lightly. But when we see the flood of Noah's day, and the fire and brimstone rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah, we should realize God's wrath is serious. God is holy. God punishes sin and no one can escape his judgment. Many people think that they can repent "later." But God's judgment is imminent and ongoing. So, we must put our sinful nature to death now, not later. We must rid ourselves of anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language from our lips (8). Paul says, "Do not lie to each other" (9). The church of God is the pillar and foundation of the truth (1Ti 3:15). If lies creep in, the Christian community cannot stand. We must hold to the Bible's teaching regardless of the compromising culture. We must speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). This is the character of God's children. When we do this, God is pleased to dwell with us. We can grow to maturity in Christ, individually and as a community.

In our painful and difficult struggles with sin, we should not lose sight of what God is doing. Verse 10 says, "...and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." God is working on each of us to transform us into his own image. It does not happen in a day; it is an ongoing process. Nevertheless, it is everyone's goal, regardless of our differences in human backgrounds. There is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all (11). In Christ we are all brothers and sisters, becoming like him, forming a new community of his people.

III. Clothe yourselves with God's nature (12-17)

In the past we were wretched sinners and enemies of God. But God, in his great mercy, forgave all our sins and made us a new creation in Christ. Now we are God's people and should live accordingly. In verses 12-17 Paul tells us specifically what God's people should be like and how we should live together. Verse 12 says, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Compassion is to share others' struggles and agonies as our own. Kindness is to do good for others unconditionally. Humility may be the most important virtue. It is to acknowledge God as God and to respect others more than oneself. Gentleness is not subservience. It is strength used in loving service. Patience is waiting quietly, depending on God. As God's children, these virtues are to be expressed through us in ever increasing measure.

Now Paul tells us how to build up a healthy Christian community. Verse 13 says, "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." As beings made in God's image, each person has strong points. And as fallen sinners, each of us has weak points. We should encourage others' strong points and bear with their weak points. However, we tend to do the opposite. We ignore others' strengths, pinpoint their weaknesses, and try to correct them. But changing another's character is God's work. Our job is to bear with others and to forgive them. For this, we need to cultivate a forgiving heart. It is good for us. An unforgiving heart makes a person bitter and sick. What is worse, it poisons others. But a forgiving heart brings one peace and joy and enables us to reconcile and live in harmony. Still, forgiving others is not easy. So, Paul said, "...as the Lord forgave you." When we remember Jesus, who forgave all our sins, we find grace to forgive others.

Verse 14 says, "And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." All the Christian virtues are summarized in one word: Love. Although we have great faith, without love we are nothing (1Co 13:2). God is love. God's children must be growing in the love of God until we reach maturity. This love enables us to always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere (1Co 13:4-8). This love binds us all together in perfect

unity. Paul says, "Put on love." Jesus' great command to us is, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (Jn 13:34-35).

Let's read verse 15. "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful." What should we let rule our hearts? The peace of Christ. The peace of Christ is the calm, absolute assurance that comes over us because we are God's children. It is rooted in God's unfailing love, his almighty power and his perfect goodness. It is heavenly peace that no one takes away. God pours this peace into our hearts like a gentle river fills a reservoir. He wants us to have this peace all the time. Why is this important? When we do not have Christ's peace, we become anxious and upset. We spread anxiety to others and disrupt the Christian fellowship. But when we have Christ's peace in our hearts, we are happy and stable. We can work hard with joy, serve others well, and be a blessing.

The question is how we can maintain this peace. Paul said, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts..." This word "rule" comes from a Greek word that means to act as a judge or referee. When the referee sees a foul, he blows his whistle and the game stops. A penalty is assessed, and fair play continues. Whenever our peace is disturbed, we need to stop and examine our hearts. We need to listen to God and obey his word. Then our peace is restored. Earlier this year I felt I lost my peace. There seemed to be several reasons. When people left our church, we agonized, especially over our children. During this process, I found that my love was shallow. Moreover, as I am now in my 60's, I face a changing life stage. Though I feel like a teenager in my heart, I am not. It is time for me to be very intentional in raising up young leaders. This requires me to die to myself in many ways. Yet the real problem was within. I was not sure of God's love. In his mercy, the Lord gave me John 14:3b, "I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." I was surprised that the Lord loves me so much that he wants me to be with him in heaven forever. My peace was restored. I found new strength, new hope and new joy. Then, thanksgiving topics began to arise one after another. I felt truly thankful for the word of God through John's gospel; for my wife's faithful support; for God's blessing and discipline on family members; for the growth of our staff members; for the prayer and

perseverance of our elders; for the revival of student ministries in Chicago; for the prayer support of fellowship leaders and members; for our missionaries and their fruitful ministries; and for the work of God in Kiev, Moscow, Odessa, Europe, Kazakhstan, Kenya, and throughout North America. My heart began to literally overflow with thanksgiving. This happens when the peace of Christ rules our hearts.

Verse 16 tells us to let the message of Christ dwell among us richly. This is the gospel, the good news of salvation. Whenever we think about this good news, it brings us joy and peace and we can bear good fruit. In our society, we hear a lot of bad news every day. But we must not let the bad news have the last word. We must share the good news continually so that the message of Christ may dwell among us richly. As it does, it overflows into families, neighborhoods and the world. This is why we should sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in our hearts to God.

Verse 17 concludes, “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Jesus Christ is Lord. He is the head of the church. Whenever we gather, we must do everything in him, through him and for him. Then God is pleased to bless us abundantly. The eminent Johannes Bach did not sign his name to his compositions. Instead, he wrote the letters “INDNJC,” which are abbreviations for the Latin phrase, “In Nominee Domini Nostri Jesus Christi.” In English it means “In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.” This is the right attitude of a person in Christ.

Today we have found a secret to being thankful. It is to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. Lord Jesus Christ may your peace rule over us.