

Being Christian, Being Thankful

THANKSGIVING 2019

Colossians 3:12-17

Community Church of Issaquah

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In 1993 Regan's Secretary of Education, Bill Bennett, published *The Book of Virtues* to great fanfare: an 88-week ride on the New York Times best-seller list. He is now a senior contributor for Fox News. Bennett's 7 Virtues were: Responsibility, Courage, Compassion, Honesty, Friendship, Persistence and Faith. His book Participates in a tradition that is as old as Plato and Aristotle of identifying the most important virtues in life.

Would his Book of Virtues share virtues in common with the Stoics and the Peripatetics and the Hellenist Jews? Not quite. They had 4-5: temperance, prudence, courage, justice, and Jews philosophers added Godliness.

In the 3rd Chapter of Colossians, Paul provides a book of virtues for people whose lives have been transformed by their faith in Jesus Christ. He didn't call other to be good people. And He didn't write about the Christian's secret to a Happy Life. He proposes 10 Virtues of New Life in Christ that were set in absolute contrast to 10 Insidious Vices that had controlled the lives of people before they came to Christ. And given the Sunday that I'm speaking it won't surprise you that one of those virtues was to be a person characterized by Thanksgiving. That, along with trusting in the Peace of Christ, Paul says, are the two great Godly pursuits of Christian living.

We heard 6 verses of his book of Christian Virtues this morning, but Paul's proposed Christians ethics starts in Colossians 3:2. Paul begins by calling them to "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth-- for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." The challenge of being Christian is that it doesn't come natural.... We have to set out minds on the supernatural claim of Christ on our lives. There are many ways that people's lives in the 1st century were different than ours. But in many ways the same. It is so easy to get caught up in work, and family, and health, and travel, and leisure, and relationships, and —you know— all the stuff that just comes naturally—that we will lose sight of Christ unless we actively pursue that relationship.

The problem Paul says is that Christians have lots of inclinations that come naturally that are faith destroyers. He lists 10 Insidious vices. The first 5 Invidious Vices: Fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed (which is idolatry). They are insidious because their practice is generally hidden from most people. A greedy attitude toward others in life unlocks the idolatrous truth that is central to all five sins. That's because Greediness places personal needs above all others. And that is what idolatry is in the end. It is a way of life that makes a god of my own needs.

The second 5 Invidious Vices: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth represent the kind of vindictive attitudes it is so easy to adopt toward others. Greediness and Being Vindictive are sinful attitudes toward others that come natural to all of us and are the basis of judgement. The Vices we harbor inside —personal vindictiveness and the lusts to want more and more—are all at the expense of others. These are the sins that bring the judgement of God.

Paul calls all of this sin nothing more than lying to one another because we are not being honest about the sinful GREEDY and VINDICTIVE attitudes we harbor within. He challenges us to turn away from such practices of the old self and cloth yourself in the being renewed in the image of our creator. We are to strip off the dirty and put on the clean clothes of faithfulness every day! He reminds everyone whose life is hidden with GOD in Christ that ever social and cultural hierarchy that ever came natural is unnatural to God: whether the difference is between Jew or Greek, forever church folk or new converts, the semi-couth barbarian or the ultra-anti-social Scythian, or even the landed gentry or the way slave—any group you think you have a right to feel superior to.

Then he turns to the 10 Godly virtues that we need to adopt to replace the vices that controlled the way we lived before serving God and godly concerns became the goal of our lives. Eight of the ten virtues that Paul proposes have to do with how we need to respond like Christ to everyone we meet. The other two are the disciplines of faith we must pursue everyday if we are to remain grounded and focused.

The first 5 virtues are dispositions that Christians must cultivate at the center of their being. They're not practices or disciplines. They are dispositions. This means that the ability to tackle these ways of looking at life have to be put on every day as if you were putting on the full armor of God: Compassion, Kindness, Humility, Meekness, & Patience toward others. These five qualities are inward oriented. They speak to a person's inherent qualities of mind and character. Don't get lost in the trees here. These five dispositions have shades of difference but what they are is the opposite of personal greediness and vindictiveness.

These five virtuous inward dispositions will be joined in the verses that come next with three outward behaviors or practices of Love Acceptance and Forgiveness. Then Paul will add the final two Upward disciplines we must pursue is letting the Peace of God prevail in our hearts and letting Thankfulness spring from our lips. These disposition, practices, and disciplines are virtues that will transform our old self to become the new self of God's new creation in us. But we have to put them all on each day the same as we would put cloths on before we do much of anything else.

Let's look at the three central outward Christian virtue practices that begin in Colossians 3:13. The first is the challenge to "bear with" one another. It calls us to accept people in all their differences—to become Accepting People. Add to this the challenge to forgive others. The text here in Colossians is a restatement of what Jesus said after teaching the Lord's Prayer: ¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The third practice was Love. Of The three OUTWARD Practices— Love Acceptance and Forgiveness—it is Love that is above all—for it binds the others together. These are the three outward, other-centered practices of Christian faith. Like the virtuous dispositions of faith, the virtuous practices must be donned like clean clothes every day.

Did you notice that 8 of the 10 Godly Christian virtues are about how we treat others who are different than we are? It is about learning how to work together with people who come with different needs and different perspectives and accept them, forgive them when they fail or falter, and let them know that they are LOVED.

At this point Paul shifts to take up the final two Virtues—Instead of being other centered these are the two that are God-Centered. The final two Virtues are identified here: “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.” So, what is the “Peace of Christ.” The actual language Paul uses says that we need to let the peace of Christ “prevail” in our hearts. This “prevailing” challenge is calling us to learn to trust God rather than ourselves. Most of us learn early to trust ourselves in most matters and only try to trust God with matters that are out of our control. Not so, says Paul. We need to trust God with the very things we are most apt to just turn to ourselves for, or we will never really learn how to develop the peace of God in our lives.

So, is learning to trust the peace of Christ learning how to let the experience of God’s righteousness prevail in our lives? Is it the assurance that by committing our life to Christ we’ve become a child of God? Is it resting in the promise that God will provide in our lives? It’s all of those. But having said that we need to remember that this isn’t our peace. It is God’s peace that we let prevail—and that requires that we give our worries and fears and failures to God, confess when we have failed to put on our Godly dispositions or practice Love Acceptance and Forgiveness. Peace in these matters is never brought about by our own effort. It comes from God. But the pursuit of that peace is the pursuit of Godliness in our lives. And that is a discipline that is more than just putting on the armor of God like clean clothing each day.

The Pursuit of God’s peace takes prayer and study of God’s word. We must Pursue Peace. And remember that 10 and last Virtue is the virtue of Thankfulness. The word Thankfulness occurs 7 times in Colossians. It is the Theme that runs like a drumbeat through the letter. We saw it named as the Virtue in vs. 15 and here again in vs 16 it shows up, translated as the word gratitude. Gratitude is expressed in singing psalms. The word psalms here like the Book of Psalms is an invitation to let our hearts sing in prayer, and our hearts sing in hymns, and our heart sing with the swell of spiritual songs of every kind—worship is the expression of thankfulness.

Which is why Colossian’s Chapter of Godly Christian Virtue concludes with the final call that in all that we say and do, do it as messengers of the Lord who are giving thanks through Christ to God the Father. We are called to tell God how thankful we are. Colossians 3:17 would serve us all well as the prayer at our celebration table this Thursday. As we eat, talk, love, accept, forgive, we need to make sure that we also make time to publicly express our thanks to God. Not just in prayer, but in saying out loud what we are thankful for so that others hear and characterize us as thankful people.

Pause. I wince as I say that. It’s a statement I’ve probably said in every Thanksgiving Sunday Sermon I have ever preached. The point of a Thanksgiving Sunday sermon is usually to tell us that “We ought to be thankful,” And when I say that I have a vision of my mother telling me that I forgot to say thank you to the lady who gave me a cookie. So, I did what every child does. I dutifully said, “Thank you.” And the person said, “You’re welcome.” But everyone knows that it wasn’t a genuine expression of thankfulness that sprang from my own heart. So me telling you that Thanksgiving is coming this week and be sure to tell God your grateful.... Well....

But when Paul told us that we need to make thankfulness front and center in our lives, he put it as the climactic and underscored point up his counsel on how we are to grasp that s those who have died to our old way of life and have lives “hidden with Christ in God” we need to put

on the new self of Christ-like attitudes every day of our lives as surely as we put on clothes when we awake. And if we put on these virtues every morning of our lives it will transform us into Christ-like people. And like Christ—the one attitude that will shine through more than any other is our gratitude to God. So, this Thursday when you wake up, put on clean clothes and go forth and put on Christ. And when you do, thankfulness will come as natural as breathing.

Amen? Amen.