

## “The Grateful Living”<sup>1</sup> (Colossians 3:12–17)

When I first came to Emmanuel, I was excited to preach through books of the Bible. I wasn't convinced that I needed to do special holiday sermons every year. So when I came to my first Mother's Day, I preached a sermon that wasn't a true Mother's Day sermon. Yet, I made sure that I made numerous applications to mothers. Interestingly, a new couple that I really liked left our church over this decision (and the color of paint in our auditorium). Since that time, I have come to understand the importance of holiday sermons. One holiday that I have always loved preaching a special message on is Thanksgiving. I recognize that Christmas and Easter are “the biggies”; however, I believe the reminder that most American Christians need to hear is a call to thanksgiving.

According to a recent study by the World Health Organization and Harvard Medical School, America may very well be the saddest nation in the world. Researchers found that 9.6 percent of Americans suffer from depression or bipolar disorder—the highest among 14 major nations polled. Those nations that scored better than the U.S. suffer from ongoing wars and rumors of war (Lebanon), vast unemployment (Mexico), and profound poverty (Nigeria). In his *Wall Street Journal* article, “The Great Depression,” Bret Stephens argues that perhaps America scores poorly as a nation because its population is generally comfortable and wealthy. Such luxuries allow that much more time for critically picking apart life situations and personal circumstances. Those who live in countries torn apart by varying social and economic issues have less time to fret over personal gain and ambition. They are simply too busy trying to survive. So what could turn our sad nation around? The research shows that the citizens of the world's happier nations find a steady source of joy in their families, their religion, and their traditions.<sup>2</sup>

This research forced me to raise the question: “What if our church consciously chose not to be so preoccupied with comfort and wealth. Instead, what if we too focused on our faith, our families, and our traditions? I assume that gratitude would well up within us. Yet, perhaps, you don't feel particularly thankful today, and the nature of your problems leads you to believe that you're not going to feel any more thankful this Thursday, no matter how much you wish it to be different. What can you do to develop and maintain a thankful heart? What do you do when you're a Christian and you're having a difficult time feeling thankful? The answer is simple, yet difficult: *Pause to think and you'll have cause to thank.* In Col 3:12–17, the apostle Paul shares two ways you and I can prepare for Thanksgiving.

**1. Dress for spiritual success (3:12–14).** In a mere three verses, Paul discusses our position and our practice. First, he shares three features of our identity in Christ and then provides five responses to fulfilling this identity. In 3:12a, he shares the three features of our identity: “**So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved.**”<sup>3</sup> The word translated “so” is frequently rendered “therefore.” It refers back to 3:9–10 where Paul says you have put off the old man and have put on the new man. Since you have put on the new man, Paul wants to talk to you about your identity. **First, we have been chosen.**<sup>4</sup> God chose me. When? When I decided to accept His Son as the sacrifice for my sin, when I was five years old? No! In Eph 1:4 Paul says God chose me in Christ “before the foundation of the world.” In other words, God chose me before I was born, before I did anything. One of the most incredible thoughts is to ponder the fact that the most important person in the entire universe picked you to be a part of His forever family. God chose you because He loved you and wanted you to spend this life and the next life knowing Him and serving Him. Today, if you are discouraged, this ought to encourage you. This ought to cause your heart to well up with gratitude. Whenever I think of election, I have my own personal Thanksgiving. The doctrines of election and predestination were never meant to divide believers. On the contrary, the New Testament was written to believers who were suffering and experiencing trials in their newfound faith. So Paul and other writers used these doctrines to bring comfort and assurance to beleaguered believers. Reflect on the fact that God chose you. If you ponder this for even a moment or two, you will be flooded with gratitude. *Pause to think and you'll have cause to thank.*

**Second, we are called “holy.”** What does holy mean? It means to be separated from sin. I am righteous. This is positional truth. We wrestle with sin in our body, but we are not defined by our body. We are defined by our spiritual identity. God has declared me righteous. That is what I am! When God looks at me He likes what He sees! Why? Because He looks at me and sees me *in Christ*. What about the horrible sin you did in the past? What does God think about that? It is forgiven! This ought to cause us to break out in praise! *Pause to think and you’ll have cause to thank.*

**Third, you are “beloved.”** When you set spiritual goals and fail, God loves you. When you determine to read your Bible and pray every day, but forget to do so after the second day, God loves you. When you are discouraged because you failed God, you lied, you got angry, you cut someone down to size or you slandered someone or you talked about someone behind his or her back, God loves you. When you are disappointed with yourself because you swore, you cheated on an exam, you compromised your beliefs at work or at home, God loves you. No matter what you do or how many times you do it, God still loves you! Nothing can ever, under any circumstances, separate you from His love (Rom 8:31–39).

One little boy was told by his father that he would be a failure. He said all his life he secretly lived to gain his father’s approval. He excelled in business. He earned a million dollars by the age of thirty. He had a beautiful wife and two lovely children. Yet, he found himself in the depth of depression. Why? All he wanted was to hear his father say, “I am proud of you my son!” It is easier for parents to say to their children, I love you; than it is to say “I am proud of you.” To say I am proud of you looks at what they accomplish. When God looks at me He says, “I am proud of you because of what Christ has done in you!” When God looks at me, He likes what He sees. When you look at yourself do you like what you see?<sup>5</sup> *Pause to think about God’s love for you and you’ll have cause to thank.*

I can almost hear Paul shouting: “People! Do you have any idea who you are? Chosen! Holy! Beloved! And do you know who’s responsible for this? God, not you! Are you suffering from an identity crisis? Do you struggle to know who you are? If so, let’s put it to rest here and now. If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior you are one of “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved.” Do you really need to know anything else? Is it not enough to know you are the object of the saving, sovereign love of an infinitely righteous and powerful and holy God? These acts of sheer grace should cause you and me to be overwhelmed with gratitude.

Now that Paul has laid out our position—our Christian identity, he will exhort us in our practice—our responses to fulfilling our identity. In 3:12b–13, he shares five virtues that are rooted in God’s grace.<sup>6</sup> Paul writes, “**Put on<sup>7</sup> a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving<sup>8</sup> each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.**” It is important to recognize that the following five garments can be worn only in community with others—in biblical relationships. How tempting to think that these garments would be so much easier to wear if we did not have to wear them among people. How much easier it is to *think* about “compassion” than to *do* it. How much easier it is to be kind when we are away from mean people.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the continual message of the Scriptures is put on godly garments in the presence of your bothers and sisters in Christ.

- **Put on a heart of compassion.** The term “heart” (*splagchnon*) literally refers to “the inward parts.” It refers to your “guts,” and more specifically the deep seated emotions and affections. This is a very touching and tender expression from the normally hard-line Paul. He is urging the church of Colossae and all believers down throughout time to have compassion for one another. In the ancient world, people were merciless. The maimed, sickly, and aged were discarded; the mentally ill were subjected to inhumanities. But Christianity brought compassion. Today, this characteristic must remain. You and I should offer sympathy and tenderness of heart. After all, God has been incredibly compassionate toward us. *Pause to think and you’ll have cause to thank.*

- **Put on kindness.** Like each of these characteristics, the word kindness is used of God and Jesus throughout the Scriptures. In Rom 2:4, Paul says that “the kindness of God leads you to repentance.” The word kindness (*chrestotes*) was even used to describe wine which has grown mellow with age and has lost its harshness.<sup>10</sup> Kindness occurs when we treat others the way we wish to be treated.
- **Put on humility.**<sup>11</sup> The Greeks never applied the word humility to themselves. They were a proud people. Paul was *not* suggesting a cringing, groveling servility; nor was he teaching his followers to think poorly of themselves. Rather, he was teaching the necessity of the absence of self-exaltation.<sup>12</sup> On my way to a theological conference this past week, I bumped into one of my favorite doctoral profs on the airplane. Michael Wilkins is one of the most humble scholars I’ve ever met. So I asked him, “How have you remained so humble despite all of your success?” He responded by saying, “I know myself too well and I recognize that I am not humble. I also know my own sin so I know I need to continually cultivate humility in my own personal life.” Dr. Wilkins is an example of a man who prays that Jesus may increase and he decrease (John 3:30).
- **Put on gentleness.**<sup>13</sup> The word “gentleness” (*prautes*) literally means power under control. It was used of powerful horses that were broken. It was a medical term used of medicine that eases a fever. It is used of a mild wind used to drive a ship. It is used of gentle speech exercised in a heated debate. This quality is a combination of power and tenderness expressed at once. The leading Greek lexicon defines gentleness in this way: “The quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance.”<sup>14</sup> The model in humility and gentleness is Jesus who claimed to be “gentle and humble in heart” (Matt 11:29).
- **Put on patience.** This is the discipline and resolve to not run from conflict or personal difficulties. It is the choice to overlook someone else’s faults. This is the choice not to retaliate in actions, words, or intonation when offended. Patience takes a wound or offense correctly and allows for a positive and kind reaction. Patience means I will not turn a cold shoulder to anyone; it means I will not write off anyone as a loser/no good/unsalvageable. You may say, “I have a short fuse and it is just the way I am!” But the point is that God has a long fuse, and He lives in you and wants you to follow His example, not your own.

Two participles: “bearing with”<sup>15</sup> and “forgiving”<sup>16</sup> expand the thought of patience. “Bearing with” suggests the thought of putting up with things we dislike in others. This is speaking of those with maddening traits, shortcomings, personality quirks or behavior patterns which irritate, aggravate, annoy, or anger us. It is putting up with some character flaw or excess.<sup>17</sup> “Forgive,” a word used in 2:13 of God’s action toward us, has the sense of forgiving freely.<sup>18</sup> This is not the normal Greek word for “forgive.” Instead, this is a verb built off of the word “grace.” It means to forgive those who don’t deserve it, to pardon, or extend grace to one another. Interestingly, grace and gratitude are from the same Greek word. Paul’s asking believers to forgive one another reveals that he is no utopian dreamer. He recognizes that Christians are not perfect and will sin.<sup>19</sup>

After rattling off five garments, Paul closes this section in 3:14 by elevating the cumulative impact of love.<sup>20</sup> He writes, “**Beyond all these things** [these other garments or virtues] **put on love, which is the perfect bond<sup>21</sup> of unity.**” Love is what binds us together and produces maturity and completion in us. Without love we will not only be half-dressed, but half-finished.<sup>22</sup> It is love that leads people to plug into a church and experience God. You are a part of the success of our church.

[Paul urges you and me to “dress for success.” Why is this so important? Paul yearns for us to display our position and practice in Christ. A second way to prepare for Thanksgiving is...]

**2. Live for Christ's pleasure (3:15–17).** There are three noteworthy observations in this section. (1) The key phrase in each verse of this section has to do with Christ: “the peace of Christ” (3:15), “the word of Christ” (3:16), and “the name of the Lord Jesus” (3:17). (2) The thrust of this section is thanksgiving—a term that is repeated in all three verses. (3) There are changes in syntax. In 3:12–14 Paul uses plural active commands while in 3:15–16 he uses singular passive imperatives. He then returns to plural active commands in 3:17.<sup>23</sup> Paul begins in 3:15 with these words: **“Let the peace of Christ rule<sup>24</sup> in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.”** The peace of Christ is to rule in your hearts. “Rule” does not capture the full significance of the word *brabeuo* (cf. 2:18). This is a metaphor that comes from the context of athletic games where an official would serve as an umpire in judging a conflict.<sup>25</sup> Since you have a relationship with Christ, Paul expects peace to abound in you and throughout your church. After all, you were called for this purpose. He then issues a present tense command that can be translated: “keep on always being thankful.” The mention of thanksgiving should be no surprise to anyone who is familiar with Colossians (1:12; 2:7; 3:16, 17; 4:2).

A common complaint among parents is that their children do not show appreciation for what they have been given. When we recall our childhood, we did not appreciate our parents either. Children today are no different. They are not thankful for what they have. Children have little capacity to understand what their parents have done for them. Likewise, God can say, “My children do not appreciate what I have done for them. They seldom give thanks for what they have.” Ouch! Gratitude is an issue of our maturity in Christ. In your daily devotions, do you make it a practice to give thanks to God every day? God wants us to say, “Thank you, Lord, for saving my soul, for making me whole, for sustaining me every day.”<sup>26</sup>

In 3:16, Paul writes, **“Let the word of Christ richly<sup>27</sup> dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”<sup>28</sup>** The verb “dwell” (*enoikeo*) means “to keep house.” The “word of Christ”<sup>29</sup> specifically refers to the gospel of Christ (cf. 1:5).<sup>30</sup> This is in keeping with the first two chapters of Colossians where Paul upholds Jesus as the Christ. Paul is saying, “You should ensure that the gospel lives in you like you live in your home. I assume that you are familiar with your home: where all the closets are, where you have items stored. I would guess that you can even find your way around your home in the dark, right? Paul says, “I want you to be that acquainted with the gospel.” What is interesting about this verse is that Paul is exhorting us to preach the gospel to one another in the context of the local church! This means in the auditorium, foyer, fellowship hall, and parking lot, we are sharing Christ with one another. This supports my premise that the reason we don’t share Christ with unbelievers is that we don’t share Him with believers! If I was to eavesdrop on your conversations that church, would I find you speaking about Christ or work, entertainment, sports, or even the weather? When we come to church, we ought to be focused on the message of Jesus Christ! If we learn to talk about Jesus Christ with our fellow believers, we will certainly talk about Him with those that don’t have a relationship with Christ. It will be a natural and inevitable response. *Pause to think and you’ll have cause to thank.*

Paul also challenges you to fill your life with Christian music. Listen to songs which make you so thankful that your heart bursts with gratitude for God’s grace. As these songs begin to reprogram your emotions, your heart will become Christ’s home. There is so much power in music, particularly songs that glorify God. I am not here to critique styles of music nor do I want to discuss the supposed sacred versus secular distinction. All I want to say is this: Lyrics matter. We need to choose the best over the good.

Our passage closes in 3:17 with a powerful exhortation: **“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.”** The Greek word for “whatever” (*ean*) is a very fascinating term. The word literally means “whatever.” Imagine that! “Whatever” means “in anything and everything.” This is as comprehensive as it gets! The phrase “word or deed” encompasses all of life. Our words are everything that passes our lips, even in unguarded moments. Our deeds refers to every action that we take part in, regardless of how monotonous.

R. E. O. White, the British preacher, observed regarding the fullness which these verses command: “The surest sign that you are carrying a full bucket is wet feet.” Have you ever attempted to carry a full bucket to clean the floor or wash the car? What inevitably happens? You *always* get your feet wet! Similarly, when you are full of God’s grace, thanksgiving will spill out on you and others.<sup>31</sup> You can and will be filled to overflowing when you will be filled to *will* overflow. *Pause to think and you’ll have cause to thank.*

### **Scripture References**

Colossians 3:12–17  
Colossians 2:6–7; 3:1–11  
Ephesians 5:1–4, 15–21  
Galatians 5:22–23  
1 Thessalonians 5:16–18  
Psalm 28:7; 92:2  
Deuteronomy 8

### **Study Questions**

1. What does Thanksgiving typically mean to me? How is it different from the other holidays? What usually goes through my mind as I prepare for the holiday festivities? Spiritually speaking, what would I say that I am the most grateful for?
2. How often do I reflect on my election (i.e., God’s choice of me, 3:12)? When I think of the fact that I have been “chosen,” what thoughts enter my mind? How does this motivate me in my own Christian life? What effect does this have in my burden for lost people and in my zeal for ministry?
3. What characteristic listed in 3:12–13 am I striving to cultivate in my own life? In what ways am I weak in this area? How can I mature so that by next Thanksgiving this characteristic is an evident strength in my own life?
4. To what degree do the peace of Christ and the word of Christ enhance my gratitude (3:15–16)? How does my church exhibit a thankful spirit? In what areas can we grow to be “complete in Christ?” Read Colossians 1:28 and Ephesians 4:11–16.
5. In my home, workplace, and church, how do I do what I do for Jesus Christ (3:17)? How does this play out in my life? Would those close to me say that I am a thankful, content, and appreciative person? If not, why is the expression of thanksgiving so difficult for me?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This clever sermon title comes from Barry C. Davis' unpublished sermon by the same name.

<sup>2</sup> SermonNews.com, "America Is World's Saddest Nation," *The Wall Street Journal*, "The Great Depression," 3/9/2007, Bret Stephens.

<sup>3</sup> These three descriptions are used in the OT of Israel. The precise terms are not used together although the themes are present throughout Scripture (see Deut 7:6–7; Rom 1:7; 1 Pet 2:9–10).

<sup>4</sup> The term "chosen" (*eklektos*) is the overarching idea with "holy" and "beloved" expressing aspects of that idea. Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*. Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 44 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 198; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*. Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 275.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Amandus, "How to Rebuild Personal Integrity" (Col 3:12–17): unpublished sermon manuscript.

<sup>6</sup> These five virtues most likely parallel the five vices of Col 3:5, 9.

<sup>7</sup> The tense of *endusasthe*, an aorist imperative, speaks of an action to be undertaken with a sense of urgency. This verb is also in the emphatic first slot of the sentence.

<sup>8</sup> This word (*charizomai*) is the same word Paul used in Col 2:13 to refer to God's canceling of the debt that we incurred to Him. The same forgiveness that God has given us, Paul now commands us to give to each other.

<sup>9</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ*. Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 1989), Electronic ed.; O'Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, 204.

<sup>10</sup> Barclay 188–89.

<sup>11</sup> This term is used in a negative sense in Col 2:18, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, Electronic ed.

<sup>13</sup> Paul often uses this metaphor for the Christian life (cf. 1 Cor 4:21; 2 Cor 10:1; Gal 5:23; 6:1; Eph 4:2; Col 3:12; 1 Tim 6:11; 2 Tim 2:25).

<sup>14</sup> BDAG s.v. *prautes*.

<sup>15</sup> *anechomenoi*,

<sup>16</sup> *charizomenoi*,

<sup>17</sup> Ed Underwood, "Put On Christ!" (Col 3:12–15): unpublished sermon notes, 11/27/94.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Eph 4:32; 5:2, 25, 29; also Rom 15:7. On the interdependence between forgiveness and being forgiven cf. Matt 6:12, 14–15; 18:23–35.

<sup>19</sup> David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*. NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 211.

<sup>20</sup> Love, which issues in unity, is the distinctive mark of the Christian (cf. Eph 4:2–3; 1 Cor 13; Gal 5:22).

<sup>21</sup> Nor is it accidental that "bond" (*sundesmos*) was used already in Col 2:19 in the more technical sense of "sinews, ligaments" of the body.

<sup>22</sup> Derek Tidball, *The Reality of Christ* (Ross-Shire: Great Brittan: Christina Focus, 1999), 164.

<sup>23</sup> This last observation comes from Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 274.

<sup>24</sup> The word ("rule") is only used here in the NT. BDAG s.v. "be in control of someone's activity by making a decision, be judge, decide, control, rule."

<sup>25</sup> Clinton Arnold, "Colossians," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Volume 3, Romans to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 395.

<sup>26</sup> Grant C. Richison, *Colossians*

<sup>27</sup> The word *plousios* ("richly") is emphatically placed as the last word in the clause.

<sup>28</sup> Dunn writes, "It is a striking feature of the Pauline corpus how much Paul insisted that the members of the churches to which he wrote should recognize their mutual responsibility to instruct and admonish (JB/NJB's 'advise' is too weak) each other (Rom 12:7; 15:14; 1 Cor 14:26; 1 Thess 5:14; 2 Thess 3:15; note also Gal 6:1–3).

<sup>29</sup> This phrase is found only here and Heb 6:1 in the NT. The "word of the Lord" (referring to Christ) occurs in 1 Thess 1:8; 4:15; 2 Thess 3:1; 1 Tim 6:3 (plural).

<sup>30</sup> Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 285.

<sup>31</sup> Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, Electronic ed.