

A Spirit of Unity

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Introduction.

- A. Every Christian, no matter how mature he is in the faith, has temptations and spiritual difficulties before him that he must deal with. He has, if you will, a spiritual mountain before him that he has to climb to get to heaven. When he first comes out of the world, the steps that he must take become obvious if he studies the word at all. He has to put aside the evil ways of the world. If he used to drink, he can't do that anymore. If he used to be sexually immoral, he can't do that anymore. If he used to use foul language, he can't do that.
- B. However, friends, the upward call of God in Christ Jesus doesn't just ask us to quit drinkin' and dancin' and smokin' and swearin'. It's true; those things are important, and once we get them out of our lives, our demeanor becomes much more like what people expect Christians to act like. We now play a pretty good Christian on TV, if you will. However, the sense that those things bring of having "arrived" is illusory. We've climbed a shoulder of the mountain, and we think we're at the peak, but the mountain is still before us.
- C. Once we reach this point, our challenge as Christians now becomes not battling the obvious sins of lifestyle, but the subtle sins of attitude in mind and heart. Satan might not be able to get us to drink anymore, but he's sure going to try to get us to become angry at our brother. It is critical that we recognize this struggle, not just for our sakes, but for the sake of the church with which we worship. 99% of church problems come from brethren who understand that sexual immorality is sinful, but don't understand that bitterness is also sinful. Without a trace of guilt, these brethren do evil things that gut a church the way a hunter guts a deer.
- D. We need to be wiser than that. We need to acknowledge the mountain that is before us, the constant challenge of maintaining the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. As always, though, God does not leave us without aid. Among many other passages, Paul addresses precisely this problem in Colossians 3:8-15. Let's consider this passage this evening, then, to learn what we must do to nurture this spirit of unity.

I. The Transformation of Putting Off.

- A. Colossians 3 is one of the most comprehensive chapters of the Bible. It begins by encouraging Christians to seek the things above, essentially the same thought as the mountain-climbing we've been considering so far this morning. Paul even describes things in the same order as we did, when he talks about making lifestyle changes in Colossians 3:5-7. This chapter would sure be a lot easier to deal with if Paul stopped there, but he doesn't. Look at how he continues on in Colossians 3:8-9a. In a portion of Scripture that's basically a beefed-up verse, Paul instructs us to do some things that many Christians struggle with for years or decades.
- B. He first warns us to put off three evil sisters, three attitudes that poison our hearts. They are anger, wrath, and malice. These three attitudes are quite similar, but there are subtle differences in the way they present themselves. Anger is just plain getting mad. Wrath is an explosive anger directed immediately at something or someone. Malice, by contrast, is a lot quieter. It is simply ill-will directed at someone that seeks to injure them in whatever ways present themselves, ideally ways that allow the malicious one to proclaim innocence.
- C. Two things that unite these attitudes, though, are the elements of selfishness and self-righteousness. When we're angry, we're almost always angry about us, about some injury or slight that we believe has been inflicted on us. Then, because we think we have been unfairly mistreated, we feel justified in mistreating another. We say "Yeah, I said that to him, but did you hear that horrible wicked evil thing he said to me first?" This is where the evil actions described in this text come from. Slander, abusive speech, and lying, among many other things, arise because of an evil, selfish, self-righteous attitude in the heart.
- D. I wish I could tell you that none of these things ever abide in the hearts of Christians, but as I suspect some of you know from personal experience, that is hardly the case. Nearly every time a church is split, those attitudes and actions are present. A good friend of mine who's seen more than his share of church trouble describes it this way: You have a church that's run by the people who have always run it, and it's just bopping along fine until new people with new ideas show up. If both the new members and the older members are willing to concede that their personal way is not the only way, the church will stay healthy, but if they aren't, trouble starts. The conflict may be cloaked in doctrinal terms, but generally, it boils down to, "I want to have my way in this church because I'm right, and I don't want you to have your way because you're wrong." You see? Anger and wrath that come from selfishness and self-righteousness. And the church splits.
- E. We see Paul's solution to the problem in Colossians 3:9b-11. His point is that all of that angry, wrathful, me-oriented attitude is precisely the way that the world does things. That attitude and its attendant evil belong to the old self, the one that we were supposed to have laid aside when we became Christians. God expects us to have put on the new self. As opposed to the old self and its selfish delusions, this new self is constantly renewed in true knowledge. As it grows more like God, it understands more and more that cornerstone of Christian thought: that the self really isn't all that important.

- F. Paul then described one of the applications of the understanding of the new self. In first-century terms, the Colossians, before they became Christians, saw themselves in many different ways: Jews, Greeks, barbarians, Scythians, slaves, and freemen. As a result of how they understood themselves and others, they were separate, divided from those whom they did not see as like them. What happened, though, once they put on the new self, is that all of that changed. All of those old identities were replaced by the identity of Christian. Christ was everything to them, and they saw Christ in everyone who was one of His brethren.
- G. It is absolutely essential that we adopt this perspective in the 21st-century church too. If we divide our congregation into "us" and "them," it is because the devil is leading us to do it. When we look at this congregation, we must see only an "us," because all of us alike are Christians. The only way Satan will ever be able to divide us is if we first acknowledge the division ourselves. If we do not, we will be forever united.

II. Putting on Unity.

- A. This understanding of the old self with its divisions versus the new self and its unity with brethren is central to what Paul says next, in Colossians 3:12-15. As Paul begins by saying, this is the way that those who have put on the new self should behave. It is appropriate living for those who have been chosen by God. As opposed to the angry, selfish heart that we are to put off, 3:12 describes the heart we should put on.
- B. Before we met the three evil sisters of anger, wrath, and malice. Now, opposed to those, we meet the five good sisters of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Remember how anger, wrath, and malice were all inward-focused qualities that concerned themselves with the self? All five of the attitudes that we are to put on are outward-focused. Compassion empathizes with the suffering of another. Kindness looks to show consideration for another. Humility places the other above the self. Gentleness seeks not to harm the other. Patience endures the other with mildness. All of these are essential attitudes to the Christian.
- C. Just as the attributes which we are to put off all show themselves in a course of action, so too these desirable attributes manifest themselves in the way we live. According to this text, they are to bear the fruit of bearing with one another and forgiving one another. In this one verse, we see instructions for dealing with every Christian who ever does something we don't like. If the thing that we don't like isn't sinful, we are to bear with our brother. If the thing that we don't like is sinful, we are to forgive him.
- D. Let's begin by looking at bearing with first. The Greek word translated here as "bearing with" means something like "to hold up." It reminds me of the way that Lauren and I hang up pictures. I suspect that in most households, it's the woman who's the perfectionist about where a picture needs to go, while the man is the one who's willing to put the thing in the back of the closet for the next two years, but for us, I'm the nit-picky one. If I get what I want, I will spend hours perfectly aligning every picture we own. So while I'm doing this, adjusting, surveying the room, adjusting again, surveying the room, and so on, guess who's holding up the picture? That's right. Poor Lauren is stuck with bearing with me, both literally and metaphorically.
- E. This idea of bearing with is precisely the way that we need to deal with our brethren. In a congregation of more than half a dozen people, there's bound to be somebody who really gets on our nerves. They're not sinful; they're just irritating. Folks, no matter how much we want to, we can't let the quirks of our brethren get in the way of treating them in a kind, compassionate, and patient manner. Every Christian is infinitely precious in the sight of God. Who's to say that God didn't want them that way? Besides, I suspect that most of us have our rough edges too. Let's treat others with the consideration we ourselves need from them.
- F. When things get more serious, when our brethren actually sin against us, we have a duty to forgive them. Nor is this any reluctant, half-hearted, weasel-worded forgiveness, either. Paul tells us that we are to forgive one another as just Christ forgave us. What a lofty standard for forgiveness that is! We know first of all that the forgiveness of Christ is complete. We've done a whole lot worse to God than any human has ever done to us, but the Bible tells us that when God forgives us, He no longer even remembers our sin.
- G. Second, the forgiveness of Christ is unconditional. When Jesus was dying on the cross, He didn't cry out, "Father, forgive them, but only if they apologize really nice." Instead, He forgave the very people who were still gleefully torturing Him. Now, don't get me wrong. When a brother sins against us, he also sins against God, and we need to encourage him to repent for the sake of his soul, but our forgiveness cannot be conditioned on that repentance. We need to learn to forgive like Jesus and remember their sin no more.
- H. Paul next instructs us that above all of these things, we are to put on love. The word here, of course, is *agape*, that self-sacrificing love that directs every Christian feeling and every Christian thought. This kind of love embraces all of the attitudes we are to put on, and many more besides. Paul tells us that love is the perfect bond of unity. The image here is that love is like a belt. Just like my belt keeps my pants from falling down and my shirt from coming untucked, love is the belt that holds the church together. It's what keeps all of these other actions and attitudes in place, so that we can remain united even in the face of problems.
- I. Just as the worldly attitudes we looked at add up to conflict and strife, so the Christian heart adds up to peace and unity in the Lord's church. As we do all of these things, we find that peace will naturally rule in our hearts, and that we will be able to savor together the blessings of Christ to which we were called in one body.

Conclusion. However, even more important than peace with Christians is peace with God. If you need it, seek it.