

# PEACE IN THE CHURCH

Colossians 3:12-17

First Sunday after Christmas (Series C)

December 29, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

## MANUSCRIPT

The epistle lesson comes from *Paul's Letter to the Colossians*, chapter 3, verses 12 through 17. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Colossians 3, beginning at verse 12, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>12</sup> Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, <sup>13</sup> bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. <sup>15</sup> And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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This passage begins with Gospel, and so will this sermon. As Lutherans, we're all about Law and Gospel. Those are the two great doctrines of Scripture. The Law tells us what God requires of us, and the Gospel proclaims what God has done for us, especially through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And the Gospel is always the ultimate answer to our guilty consciences, because it comforts us with the gracious truth that God forgives us for the sake of Jesus' blood. So we're all about Law and Gospel. We treasure these two doctrines, and we are careful to keep them distinct from one another. When Law and Gospel get mixed together, and we lose the distinction between them, we begin to think that our good works contribute something to our salvation or our standing before God, when they don't. Our salvation and standing before God is all a matter of his grace through Jesus Christ. So we are all about Law and Gospel.

But that does not mean it's always Law *then* Gospel. There's kind of a cookie-cutter style of sermon where, first, you preach the Law so that everyone knows they're a dirty, rotten sinner. Then you preach the Gospel so that everyone knows Jesus has paid the price for that sin. Sometimes that is an appropriate outline to follow, but not always. Martin Luther did not always follow that outline. Sometimes he started with the Gospel and then instructed his hearers how they should live. Paul does the same in many of his letters. If we always do Law and then Gospel, we might get the impression that we are dirty, rotten sinners, but that's okay. It's not okay. Of course, Jesus has forgiven our sins, but we should never be okay with our sins. The Gospel actually strengthens us to live according to God's will. So, even after learning the Gospel, we go back and consider God's commandments in a new light, with freedom. But we

never leave the Gospel behind. We don't progress from the Gospel to the Law, but we keep the Gospel before our eyes and in our hearts while we live in thankful obedience to our Savior and Lord. As chosen, holy, and beloved children of God, we should desire to live according to his will. So today we start with Gospel, then we will consider how the peace of Christ changes our hearts and minds.

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Notice how Paul does this in verse 12: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." And he goes on for two more verses, listing the virtues of God that we should put on.

He starts with three grace-filled descriptions of God's children. First, chosen. You, as a child of God, are chosen by him. Children never choose their parents. And human parents don't necessarily choose their children, at least not exactly. But they do have some choice in the matter. But God does choose, graciously and freely. And it's not like God chooses the best and brightest among us. Consider whom God chose as the mother and adoptive father of Jesus: a humble and poor couple in Mary and Joseph. As apostles, Jesus chose tax collectors, fishermen, and other working-class men. There were no priests, rulers, teachers, or lawyers among them. And elsewhere, Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians, "Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor. 1:26). God chooses the humble of this world. He even chooses outcasts and criminals. So when we talk about God choosing us to be his children, we should never think that God chose us because *we* are so great. Instead, we should consider that he chose us because *he* is so *gracious*. God chose you to receive forgiveness and to be adopted as his child.

The second grace-filled description of God's children is "holy." Sometimes we use the word "holy" wrongly, as if it means "perfect" or, at least, something in that direction. And the word can have a little bit of that connotation, especially when we're talking about the Holy Spirit. He is certainly perfect. But here, when Paul refers to God's children as "holy," it has the basic definition of the word, which simply means "set apart." The meaning is a little bit related to "chosen." God has set you apart to belong to him. And whenever we talk about being set apart by God, we should remember what we have been set apart *from*, and what we have been set apart *to*. We have been set apart *from* sin, death, and the power of the devil. So we have also been set apart *to* the opposites of all those things. We have been set apart from sin by being forgiven of our sins, so that we would receive the righteousness of Jesus Christ. We have been set apart from death, so that we would receive eternal life through Christ Jesus. And we have been set apart from the power of the devil, so that we would belong to Christ and live under him in his Kingdom forever. To be holy really means that God has set us apart from everything evil, so that we would belong to him and receive every good thing from him.

And the third grace-filled term is "beloved." The meaning of this is more obvious, but we still might pass over it too quickly. "Beloved" means that you are loved by God. God loves his children. He loves you. And by "love," we do not mean that he merely likes you or has warm affections for you, but he puts you ahead of himself. That's what love is, to put the object of your love ahead of yourself. And it's really radical to think that God would place you ahead of himself. After all, he's God. He is the supreme being in the whole universe. He created all things, and he rules over all things. Should we really be so bold as to think that he cares about us more than he cares about himself? Absolutely! Because that's what love is. And he's the one who taught us to love. If not for him loving us, we would have no idea what it means to love. Consider Jesus Christ. This is the ultimate manifestation of God's love. He gave himself for you.

You were lost in sin, doomed to die, and under the accusation of the devil. But Jesus took that sin upon himself. He endured that death for you. And he was condemned, not merely by the devil—that doesn't mean much, but by his own Father. The Father never ceased loving his Son, Jesus. But in love for you, he poured out his wrath on his Son Jesus, who willingly and joyfully bore it (Heb. 12:2), in order to redeem you from the curse of sin and death. God truly put you ahead of himself. And that love continues. The sacrifice of Jesus was a one-time thing. It paid for all the sins of the world. Jesus never has to do it again. But the love of God does not cease. It is not as if he put us first in that moment, but then went back to caring about himself again. No. For every moment of eternity, God puts his creation ahead of himself. He always puts you ahead of himself. Yes, little, old, humble you, he always puts you ahead of himself. That's what it means that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). For all eternity, he never changes from that. God is love, and you are his beloved.

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So those are the three grace-filled descriptions of God's children. And Paul says, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved ..." Then he lists seven virtues of God. And remember, these are virtues that exist first in God. And they are perfectly manifested in him. So then we, as God's children, should also begin to manifest these virtues in ourselves. God has given us the righteousness of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:21), he has made us a new creation in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), and he has given us the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:7). So these virtues should begin to appear in God's children as well. We never display them perfectly, so do not expect that. And if God also gifts us the virtue of humility, we may not even recognize these virtues in ourselves, because then we might become conceited. So we do not measure our salvation by the presence of these virtues. But we trust that God will give us these seven virtues, and we should make every effort to wear these virtues.

"Compassionate hearts" (3:12). This is an emotional description. We should try to not think of love as an emotional thing, because love means putting another person first, even when we don't feel like it. But compassion is the emotion that is often associated with love. It's that pity or empathy we feel for those who are hurt or in need. It's the feeling you get when your kid falls off a swing and starts to cry. You just want to scoop them up and make them feel loved. The compassionate hearts God desires for us to have means that we would see all people through God's eyes. Whether they are currently his children or not, we should see them as his creatures and objects of his love. They are precious, eternal souls, whom he desires to scoop up out of sin and death to receive his mercy.

"Kindness" (3:12) is similar to love. It specifically means "acts of kindness." It's benevolence or generosity. It's doing something that will be beneficial to another person.

"Humility" (3:12) means considering others as more important than ourselves (Phil. 2:3). So it is also related to love. It's not self-deprecation. There's no point in running ourselves down. That's usually a false humility. True humility doesn't really think about oneself very much. Rather, it thinks of others and considers how we might serve them.

"Meekness" (3:12) is not weakness. It's a gentle kind of love and a gentle kind of strength. Perhaps you are strong enough to force your will. Meekness means that you don't. It's a deference to others when it is good for them.

"Patience" (3:12) is similar. It's the opposite of impulsiveness. Instead of making things happen on your terms and according to your timeline, it means waiting until the time is right. Patience is best practiced by those who trust in the Almighty God. If something is right, we can wait for his timing; we don't have to force the issue. Faith leads to patience.

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“Bearing with one another” (3:13) means that we tolerate another person’s weakness or sin. It does not mean that we ignore it. And it certainly does not mean we accept or celebrate another person’s sin. To do that would be very unloving, because sin is harmful for those who practice it. But we tolerate it in patience. It means we accept the problem their sin or weakness may be to us, while we encourage them to repent and grow for their sake.

“Forgiving each other” (3:13) means that we accept the debt or harm for another person’s sin. Again, it does not mean that we approve of sin. It does not mean that we enable abuse by submitting to it. But when a person sins against us, we bear the harm, and we do not seek retribution. If they sin against the state by committing a crime, it is often right to report that crime or encourage them to report themselves. Then we let the state deal with matters of civil justice. But we do not seek our own personal justice. Why? Because the Lord Jesus has forgiven us. And he has forgiven us of a far greater debt than anyone else could incur against us (Matt. 18:21-35). “So you also must forgive (3:13).

Then Paul wraps up these virtues by saying, “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (3:14). When Paul puts love above all these virtues, he does not mean that all these virtues are good, but love is really the one that matters most, as if we can ignore these virtues if love leads us to do something else. Rather, he means that love is the supreme virtue, and all of these seven virtues are their own little nuance of what love is. Remember, love is putting another person ahead of yourself, and all of these virtues describe love manifests itself. So you can imagine a flowchart. And at the top of this chart is the word “love.” And then there are lines connecting love to each of these seven virtues: compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving each other. Then you can compare that flowchart to 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul again defines *love* in much the same way. These are the ways in which we put another person ahead of ourselves.

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And where do these virtues come from? They come from the peace of Christ, which he has created between God and man by the blood of his cross (Eph. 2:13-22; Col. 1:20). When the angel announced Jesus’ birth to the shepherds, he proclaimed “peace on earth” (Luke 2:14). That peace comes through the sacrifice of Christ. And here Paul specifically speaks about peace in the Church. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body” (3:15). The only way to have true, lasting, and substantial peace is for the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts. And by that I mean the reconciliation that Christ made between us and God when he accepted our sins and sacrificed himself in order to atone for them. When that peace rules in our hearts, only then can we really be at peace with one another. This peace is not simply the absence of hostility. That, often, is all the world means when it talks about peace. But true peace is more than just not fighting. It is to recognize one another as fellow members of the body of Christ. It’s to look at the person next to you and say, “They are connected to Jesus, just like I am. They have been forgiven of their sins, just like I have. So we are in this Church together, and we are a gift to one another.” This only comes from the peace of Christ.

I was listening to some Christmas music the other day. And I heard a new attempt at a Christmas song. I didn’t catch who wrote it. But they said, “Let there be peace on earth, and let it start with me.” And that caught my ear. It sounds like a pious sentiment: “Let it start with me.” But it’s missing the real source of peace. And it’s more than a little bit prideful to think that I might be the start of peace on earth. Peace can only come from Christ. Over and over again we see the results of when man tries to create peace by his own effort. You perceive some injustice in the world, either against you or someone else, and you speak against it. Speaking turns into

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protest. Protest turns into hate. Hate turns into violence. Then someone speaks out against that, and it happens all over again. It starts with a good intention of wanting peace and justice. But if we think our hearts can be the source of that peace, or if we think our sense of justice justifies hatred toward another, it will never come. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” And I’m not really trying to give a prescription for world peace. That can’t happen unless every heart has the peace of Christ. But in our church and in your families, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” The blood of Jesus has made peace between you and God. Let that have first place in your mind and heart.

How does this peace have first place? It comes from the Word of God. So Paul says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (3:17). Last Sunday I inadvertently gave you a preview of this sermon. I had no idea this text was coming up, but I quoted that verse to you when I encouraged you to read Scripture, sing hymns, and pray together in your homes. I hope you will take that to heart, because this is how the peace of Christ comes to rule in your hearts. It’s why we read Scripture, sing, and pray here on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. But the peace of Christ is not only for Sundays and Wednesdays, and it’s not only for you in your relationships at church. But it is for your entire life. So let it be your daily discipline. Read Scripture together, teach and encourage one another. Sing together. And offer thankful prayers together to God.

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You are chosen by God to be his children. You are holy. You are loved by God. So may his love be manifested in your lives, and may the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. This is God’s good and gracious will for you. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.