

II. Colossians 3:12 – 4:18



Colossians 3:12

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

It is the fact that God has chosen us and loved us so much that makes it possible for us to 'put on the Lord Jesus, the Messiah' (Romans 13:14) in the way described here by Paul. Indirectly he is giving us a portrait of Jesus himself who is our 'life' (3:4).

'Compassion' (σπλάγχνα οίκτιμοῦ) speaks of compassionate feelings that find expression in actions of mercy. We recall Jesus' plea: 'Be merciful (οἰκτιρόμονες), just as your Father is merciful (οἰκτιρῶν)' (Luke 6:36).

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'kindness' (χρηστότης), 'meekness' (πραΰτης) and 'patience' (μακροθυμία) are listed in Galatians 5:22-23 as fruits of the Spirit.

'**Kindness**' refers to whatever is pleasing, desirable, useful, lovely, valuable or morally good. Matthew associates it with the yoke of Jesus as against the yoke of the law (11:30), and for Luke it is characteristic of God who is 'kind to the ungrateful and the wicked' (Luke 6:35).

A person who lives by the Spirit of Christ shares also in Jesus' '**meekness**' (gentleness), a characteristic that is typical of the heart of Jesus (see Matthew 11:28-29).

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'Patience' sometimes translates the Greek ὑπομονη, which speaks of our ability to bear difficulties which are happening to us. The word used here by Paul is μακροθυμία. This refers to our sharing in God's magnanimous love by persevering in doing good and not allowing ourselves to be put off by the opposition or suffering that ensues. It is the ability to remain constant in love and in a big (μακρο) way. It is a fruit of the Spirit because it can come only from God; it is a sharing in the passionate and persistent caring that is revealed most persuasively in Jesus 'loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

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This is the third time Paul has spoken of **humility** (ταπεινοφροσύνη). On both previous occasions (Colossians 2:18,23), Paul is critical of the those who thought that they should be 'humble' by grovelling before angelic powers. The only way to grow in this virtue, as in the others, is to receive it from the one who said: 'learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:29).

Colossians 3:13

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive [χαριζόμαι] each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

The words translated ‘bear’ and ‘forgive’ are participles in Greek expressing aspects of what it means to clothe oneself in Jesus (3:12). Paul is not suggesting that we model ourselves on Jesus ‘from the outside’. It is not a matter of our becoming like him – certainly not by virtue of our own striving. Rather, we are to allow the life of Jesus to bear fruit in our lives.

The words translated ‘forgive’ here in this passage (χαριζόμαι) speaks of our being instruments of God’s grace (χαρις), God’s gracious love to others

It is important to listen to what Paul has to say about forgiving other people. Jesus himself told Peter that he must be ready to forgive seventy times seven! (Matthew 18:21-22), and in the 'Our Father' we pray: 'forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us' (Luke 11:4). The main obstacle to forgiving other people is often our inability to forgive ourselves, or perhaps the fact that we do not experience being forgiven. This means that we do not have the joy of knowing that innocence can be restored, that we can learn to love again, and that we can learn to believe in ourselves again even when we have experienced serious failure to love

Let us spend time contemplating Jesus, watching him forgive and daring to think that what he said to the paralysed man he can say to me: 'Take heart, your sins are forgiven' (Matthew 9:3); that what he said to the woman who was a public sinner he can say to me: 'her sins, which were many, must have been forgiven or she could not have shown such great love ... your faith has saved you; go in peace' (Luke 7: 47,50). Let us make our own Jesus' words to Peter: 'I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers' (Luke 22:31-32; see John 21: 15-18) or to the thief on the cross: 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43). Watching Jesus loving the sinner, I might dare to believe that God is still offering me his love, in spite of my sin.

Of course forgiveness cannot happen without a change on my part. But I can get the courage to change only when I believe I am loved and am therefore lovable. Let us pray to listen to the invitation of God who is calling us to repentance and to the joy of experiencing forgiveness and the life of his Spirit welling up inside us (John 4:14). To know that is to want everyone to know it. It is to want to be reconciled and to have others know the peace of restored communion. We all need to know that our broken lives have meaning, that we are loved in our weakness and that healing is possible. Paul learned this, as he learned everything else that was important to him, from Jesus, the Son of God, the one who, knowing our weakness, 'breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven' (John 20:22). This was the first gift from the heart of the risen Christ.

Colossians 3:14-15

¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Verse fourteen speaks of 'love' and verse fifteen of 'peace'. Both of these are listed as fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22.

It is in love (ἀγάπη) that 'we have come to fullness in him' (2:10). It is love that informs all the other virtues, giving them that special quality that identifies them as Christian. It is in experiencing our love that others come to experience, through us, the love of Christ.

Colossians 3:15

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

Paul's prayer is that they will experience the peace (εἰρήνη) that is the fruit of grace: the fullness of life that happens when each member of a community contributes his or her gifts to the others in harmonious communion.

The peace which is offered to us as Christians is an overflowing of the peace with which the Father has filled the heart of his Son. Throughout this letter Paul stresses the fact that fullness of life is found only in Jesus, and it is to him, and to him alone, that we must look for life.

Colossians 3:15

Be thankful

Paul's list comes to a climax with the virtue of 'being thankful (εὐχάριστος)' which permeates verses fifteen to seventeen. He knows that our mutual love must flow from our prayer and be an expression of our communion with God.

Colossians 3:16

¹⁶Let the word of the Messiah dwell in you richly; teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

In verse sixteen, the words ‘teaching’, ‘admonishing’ and ‘singing’ are participles in Greek, not separate imperatives. They indicate different ways in which Christ speaks to us through each other. Our teaching and admonishing will be ‘wise’ only if it is the teaching and admonishing of Jesus that we mediate to each other (see 1:9).

Colossians 3:17

¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Notice how Paul concludes this portrait of the Christian life by referring to communal prayer (see 1:12), to doing ‘**everything in the name of the Lord Jesus**’, and, once again, to gratitude. There is nothing individualistic about this portrait, nor is Paul exhorting us to Stoic virtue acquired by self-motivated discipline. He is exhorting us to welcome and be faithful to the life given us in the community of the church by the risen Jesus.

Colossians 3:18-19

¹⁸Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

¹⁹Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly

Paul is not speaking here of the relationship between men and women. His focus is on the kind of conduct which is fitting for a Christian within the home. While he addresses his words to people who were living in the domestic structures that were taken for granted in the Jewish, Greek and Roman societies of his day, we would miss the point of his exhortations if we thought that he was simply repeating traditional teaching. If his readers followed Paul's exhortations given here, the domestic institutions within which they were living would undergo a revolutionary transformation. Perhaps it is because Paul has not personally evangelised Colossae that he includes these basic exhortations which are not found in his earlier letters.

In addressing himself to wives, his concern is not that they take their proper place in relation to their husband in an order which, along with all his contemporaries, Paul understood to be part of God's design. This he takes for granted. His concern is in the way they conduct themselves within this order. They are to be subject 'as is fitting in the Lord'. As a Christian, her lord is the Risen Jesus. Her submission to her husband, therefore, is to be exercised in a manner that is consistent with all that this letter has said about the lordship of Jesus and about how we should relate to each other as members of his body. This includes what he wrote to the Galatians: 'there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

The position of the husband gave him greater scope for abuse of power. Paul, therefore, explicitly exhorts him to love, and therefore to live the virtues of which he has just been speaking.

Colossians 3:20-21

²⁰Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. ²¹Fathers do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

Paul then speaks of the relationships between children and parents. What he says to the ‘**fathers**’ could be said to mothers as well. Once again, by focusing on ‘**the Lord**’, he provides a Christian dimension for advice that could otherwise be found in any Stoic manual. We are reminded of 1Thessalonians 2:7-12, where Paul speaks of his ministry in terms of the care given by a mother and a father to their children.

Colossians 3:22-25

²²Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, ²⁴since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. It is the lord Christ whom you serve. ²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.

Domestic slavery was so much part of daily life in Paul's world that he can exhort us to be like him in being a slave of God (1 Thessalonians 1:9), of the Messiah (Galatians 1:10; Romans 1:1; Colossians 1:7; Philippians 1:1), and of one another (Galatians 5:13). Important insights into Paul's attitude towards institutional slavery can be found in his letter to Philemon, a letter together with the Letter to the Colossians.

Though Paul does not question the existence of slavery in this passage, baptism into the Christian community has introduced into this institution, too, a principle that transcends it, and that would necessarily transform it – the principle already stated by Paul earlier in this letter: ‘there is no longer slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!’ (3:11).

Paul exhorts slaves to have only one thing in mind: pleasing their real Lord, Jesus (compare Galatians 1:10; 1Thessalonians 2:4). At the same time, the freedom they experience by following Jesus is not to be used as a licence for disobedience to their masters. Paul reminds them of the justice of God and that they will be judged, impartially, according to their behaviour, as will their masters.

Colossians 4:1

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

The exhortation to the masters to ‘**treat your slaves justly and fairly**’ could be found in any Stoic manual. The transforming Christian principle is found in the final phrase: ‘**knowing that you also have a Master in heaven**’. Acknowledging this introduces into the relationship between master and slave the qualities of the heart of Jesus that Paul listed earlier in the chapter. Such attitudes could not but affect the institution itself.

Colossians 4:2

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.

In these concluding exhortations, Paul picks up key elements of his letter. He begins with **prayer**, for everything we are and everything we do is to flow from our communion with Jesus. Prayer happens when we attend to this communion and make space for our mind and heart to respond to the invitation of Jesus to enter ever more deeply into his own communion with God. We are to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus (see 3:1-3), and with thanksgiving (see 1:12; 2:7; 3:15-17).

Colossians 4:3-4

At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of the Messiah, for which I am in prison, so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.

Paul asks the Colossians to pray for him. Throughout this letter he has spoken of the gospel as ‘the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints’ (1:16). God has chosen Paul as his instrument in making this mystery known. It is because of this commission that he is in prison and he asks them to pray that an opportunity will open up for him to continue his mission and to carry it out faithfully.

Colossians 4:5-6

Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

When, earlier in the letter, Paul exhorted them not to live ‘**as if you still belonged to the world**’ (2:20), he was referring to the behaviour in which they indulged before they came to know Jesus. He was not asking them to be out of touch with the society of which they were part. They, too, have a mission to preach the gospel by word and example, and so Paul exhorts them to take every opportunity to reach out to those who do not belong to the Christian community. They are to do so with the ‘**wisdom**’ that only Christ can give (see 2:3) and with his ‘**graciousness**’.

Colossians 4:7-9

Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; ⁹he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

Tychicus is the bearer of the letter. Paul wishes to establish his credentials, and, in so doing, to assure the Colossians that they can put their trust in the oral reports which he will give them. Luke tells us that he was from Asia and that he was among those who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the collection (see Acts 20:4). With him is Onesimus, the slave who is the central figure in Paul's letter to Philemon.

Colossians 4:10-11

Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions — if he comes to you, welcome him. And Jesus who is called Justus greets you. These are the only ones of the circumcision among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.

Paul sends greetings first from the only three Jewish Christians who have stayed with him and worked with him in his mission to the Gentiles. In his letter to Philemon Paul names **Epaphras** as being in prison with him. This time he names **Aristarchus** (mentioned also in Philemon 24). Luke tells us that Aristarchus was from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4). He was with Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19:29), and, like Tychicus, he was one of the delegates who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the collection (Acts 20:4). He was with Paul on the ship that took Paul as a prisoner to Rome (Acts 27:2).

Mark is mentioned with Aristarchus also in Philemon 24. He is identified here as a cousin of Barnabas, which points to him being the John Mark mentioned in Acts as being a native of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). He accompanied Paul and Barnabas from Jerusalem to Antioch, and was with them for the first part of Paul's first missionary Journey (Acts 12:24; 13:5,13). When Paul set out on his second journey he refused to take Mark, who accompanied Barnabas instead to Cyprus (Acts 15:37-39). He is called 'my son Mark' in the First Letter of Peter (1Peter 5:13) and is the author of one of our four Gospels. We have no further information on **Jesus Justus**, Paul's third Jewish co-worker.

Paul's comment in verse eleven gives us a glimpse of the pain he suffered at the failure of his people to accept the Messiah and to take up the challenge of the mission given them to take this faith to the nations.

Colossians 3:12-14

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of the Messiah Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills. For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. ¹⁴Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you.

Paul spoke of **Epaphras** in introducing the letter. It was he who proclaimed the gospel in Colossae and in the other cities of the Lycus valley (see 1:7-8). Paul speaks highly of what Epaphras has done for them and assures them of the prayers which Epaphras is constantly offering to God on their behalf. Epaphras, Luke and Demas, are mentioned together also in Paul's letter to Philemon (verse 23).

Colossians 4:14

Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you.

It is interesting to note the presence of two of the gospel-writers with Paul. We know of the careful research that went into Luke's writing (see Luke 1:1-4). The similarities that exist between his gospel and that of Mark may go back, in part, to this time of shared ministry.

Colossians 4:15-16

¹⁵Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. ¹⁶And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.

The only member of the community of Colossae whom Paul names in his greetings is **Nympha**. Some early manuscripts use the masculine form, Nymphas. We know from the letter Paul sent to Philemon that a community met in Philemon's house. The fact that Tychicus is carrying a personal letter to Philemon may account for Paul's not mentioning him here by name.

His mentioning of Laodicea gives us a glimpse into the way Paul expected his letters to be passed around from one community to another.

Colossians 4:17-18

And say to Archippus, 'See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.' I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Paul has a message for **Archippus** (also mentioned in Philemon 2). We can presume that he also gave Tychicus other messages to pass on orally to the Colossians.

Paul finishes the Letter in his own hand He reminds them that he is in prison and concludes with a prayer.

A reflection on the role of the church in the letter to the Colossians

The central focus of this letter from the beginning to the end is Jesus. In the reflected light of his glory, Paul offers us also an inspiring portrait of the church, the community which shares in Jesus' communion with God and so in his **'fullness'** and in his glory.

As in his earlier letters, Paul speaks of the church as the **'body'** of the Messiah (1:18; 1:24; 2:19; 3:15). Here, however, for the first time, he speaks of the Risen Jesus as its **'head'** (1:18; 2:19), highlighting his role as the source of the life experienced in the community and as the one who directs and governs it.

It is in the church that the ‘**gospel**’, the ‘**word of truth**’ which is ‘**bearing fruit in the whole world**’ is proclaimed and welcomed (1:5-6) . The members of the church (the ‘**saints**’) are promised the inheritance that awaits them in heaven (1:12). The church is the ‘**kingdom of God’s Beloved Son**’ into which we are transferred (1:13), and it is in the church that we experience God’s forgiveness (1:14; 2:13; 3:13).

The gospel is to be preached to ‘**every creature under heaven**’ (1:23; compare Matthew 28:19), for God’s love reaches out to everyone. This is the ‘**mystery**’ only now revealed and made known ‘**to his saints**’ (1:26-27).

The Risen Jesus lives in his church (1:27), and so it is in the church that we ‘**come to fullness in him**’ (2:10). Through baptism into the church we are initiated into his risen life (2:12). Paul can say to those who form the body which is the church: ‘**When the Messiah who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory**’ (3:4).

Throughout Colossians, Paul’s reflections on the church are by way of contrast with the false wisdom and the false salvation that is offered by the surrounding cults whose teaching is threatening the faith of the community.

God in his mercy draws to himself those who have not heard of Jesus in ways which are wrapped in mystery. But Christians cannot be true to their calling unless we long that everyone come to know what God has revealed of his love in Jesus, and unless we long to draw everyone into the church which is called to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Until everyone belongs, the church's unity is incomplete and the body suffers from its fractures. One motivation for Paul's writing is to counter factional elements in Colossae.

While there is sin in the members of the church, the church's holiness is stained and the church's witness obscured. Hence Paul's plea that '**God's chosen ones, holy and beloved**' will clothe themselves in Jesus (3:1-17).

In the church everyone is invited to experience the life of Jesus and everyone is invited to contribute his or her love and other gifts to the community. Until everyone accepts this invitation, the catholicity of the Christian community will remain incomplete.

Finally, while ‘empty’ and ‘deceitful’ teaching (2:8) distracts from and undermines the ‘word of truth, the gospel’ (1:5) that has been handed on through tradition from those commissioned by Jesus to take his word to the ends of the earth, the apostolic dimension of the church will also suffer.

Paul’s challenge to us all is simple: we are to set our mind and heart on God’s Beloved Son, and allow him to change all our thoughts, desires and actions till they are ‘according to him’ (2:8).