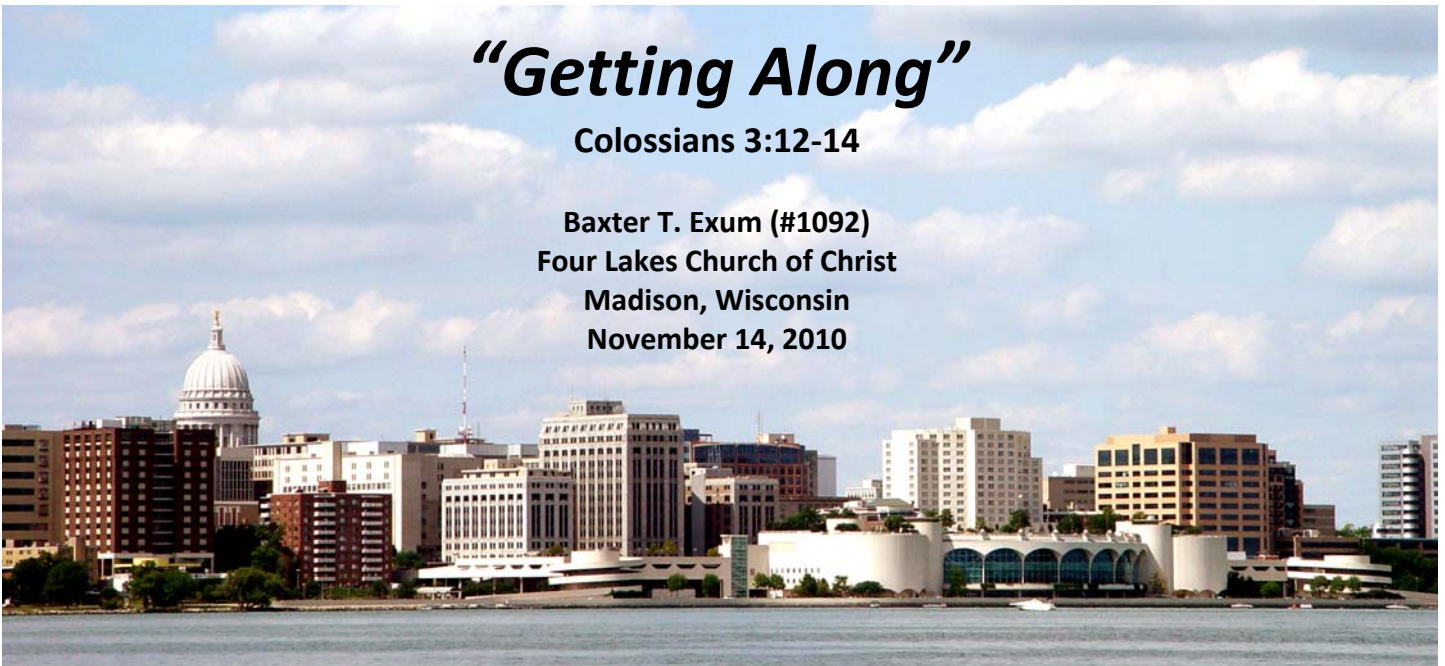


“Getting Along”

Colossians 3:12-14

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Introduction:

For just a few moments, I would like for us to think about the clothes that we wear. Most of us would hopefully agree that certain situations call for special clothing. And so, for example, what we wear hanging out at home at night may not be appropriate at work or school. A firefighter has particular gear that needs to be worn to fight a fire. Doctors have their own special clothing that is worn when they are working, and so when we go to the doctor, we know that the white coat represents a certain level of trust. When the judge walks into the room wearing the black robe, we all rise, because we know that he or she is in a position of honor. Mark Twain once said, “A policeman in plain clothes is a man; [but] in his uniform he is ten.” I think we understand what he meant by that—there is respect for the uniform. Perhaps you will remember the picture that was taken about a year ago by an AP photographer who had been imbedded in a military unit on the front lines in Afghanistan. The unit came under fire from the Taliban, and Specialist Zachary Boyd immediately jumped up from a nap, did not want to waste time putting on his uniform, and returned fire along with his buddies. Of course we know, however, that he was caught wearing his flip-flops, his helmet, a bullet-proof vest, and his bright pink, heart-covered “I Love New York” boxers! The article by the Associated Press quoted him as saying, “Every second counts.” He had apparently purchased the boxers during a layover in New York, and he chose pink because he thought it would make his buddies laugh. He also happened to be wearing a bright red t-shirt, which may not be the ideal color for wearing on the front lines. However, Boyd said, “The enemy already knew where I was. If they want to shoot at me, then that’s less fire they put on the guys that are pinned down, so that’s fine with me.” Apparently, everyone on the American side made it out of the firefight safely, and from what I understand, those boxers are now on display at the 1st Infantry Division Headquarters Museum at Fort Riley, Kansas.

But regardless of what we do or don’t wear to work, we know that the Bible says a lot about clothing, not just physically, but in a symbolic sense as well. For example, in Romans 13:14, Paul says that we are to, “***...put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.***” In Ephesians 4:24, he tells us that we are to, “***...put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.***” In Ephesians 6:11 we are told to, “***...put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.***” In 1 Thessalonians 5:8, the apostles says that, “***...since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation.***”

This morning I would like for us to consider a request from one of our members by looking together at another passage where the apostle Paul addresses the spiritual clothing that we are to wear. The passage is found in Colossians 3 (p. 1844), and the request from one of our members is this: How to love, serve, and work together in the church—accepting each other’s flaws and dealing with our own; being there for each other with true Christian love. As I have thought about that request over the past month or two, a tiny little passage from Colossians 3 kept coming to mind. We know that the apostle Paul was writing to the church in Colossae, to a struggling congregation in what is modern-day Turkey, and in Colossians 3 Paul was focusing in on how the Christians in Colossae needed to change their own personal behavior. In Colossians 3:1-3, Paul wrote about how they needed to set their minds on things above and not on things that are on the earth. In verses 4-11, Paul wrote about how they were to give up various sins, that they needed to take off certain behavior, just as someone would take off an old, dirty piece of clothing.

And yet when we get to verses 12-14 we come to a passage where the Christians in Colossae were told to put on something. In other words, it was not enough for them to take off what was bad, but they were told to put on what was good. And as we look at those three verses (verses 12-14), we find that these good things are all very closely tied to getting along with our fellow Christians. And, as I understand it, this is Paul’s inspired answer to the request that has been made by one of our members: How do we get along with one another in the church? In spite of our differences, how do we make it work? If you will, then, please look with me at Colossians 3:12-14, where the apostle Paul says,

¹² So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; ¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. ¹⁴ Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Back up at the beginning of verse 12, we find that Paul addresses those of us as Christians as ***“those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved.”*** The fact that we are ***“holy”*** refers to the fact that we are different, we have been set apart, we are unusual or strange. We have been chosen by God. We are loved by God. And so as Christians, there are certain things that we need to ***“put on,”*** certain attitudes, certain behaviors, and as I looked through these characteristics over the past several weeks, I realized that all of these things we are about to consider absolutely have to be done with other people. For example, I cannot be kind my myself, but that is a quality that has to be expressed to another person. I cannot be gentle by myself, but that is a quality that only expresses itself with another person, and so as we study this request from one of our members concerning how we can get along with each other in the church, I would like for us to keep this in mind, that this is a group effort.

I. First of all, then, we discover in verse 12 that we are to put on a HEART OF COMPASSION.

“Heart of compassion” comes from two words: One refers to feeling of pity, and the other refers literally to a person’s “guts.” The word refers to the organs, to the heart, the liver, the intestines. Back in ancient times, people considered the guts to be the place where their emotions came from. We may think that we have advanced far beyond that today, and yet even today we sometimes refer ourselves as having a “gut feeling” about something. We talk about having a “gut-wrenching” problem. We talk about being so nervous that our stomach is “tied in knots,” and so on. And so even in our English translations, and even with the difference in cultures, we know what Paul was talking about here. He wants us as Christians to put on a ***“heart of compassion,”*** towards one another. He wants us to have the kind of concern for one another that rips our hearts out, not just a surface, “Hey, how are you this morning,” but he wants us to be deeply concerned for

each other. He wants us to feel what others feel. Instead of assuming the worst or jumping to conclusions, he wants us to feel what others are feeling. He is talking about genuine care and sympathy. He is talking about being sensitive to the needs and concerns of others in the congregation. He is talking about the kind of concern that motivates us to do something, not a feeling that we can easily brush aside and ignore, but a deep concern that causes us to get involved. He is not talking about some kind of superficial concern that lets us assume that someone else will handle the problem, but a kind of concern that motivates us to take care of it.

And I know sometimes it is easy to get calloused toward certain situations. Sometimes we can justify our concern away by thinking to ourselves, “Well, they kind of created this problem for themselves. If they managed their money better like I do then they wouldn’t be in this situation. If they disciplined their children perfectly like we do then they wouldn’t be having this problem.” And yet when those thoughts sneak in, we need to remind ourselves how Jesus treated other people. Jesus sat down with the woman at the well in John 4, an outcast from society, and He listened to her concerns. Jesus ate dinner with Zaccheus, a man who was despised for collecting taxes from his fellow Jews, taxes that were then turned over to the occupying Roman government. Jesus showed compassion toward the woman who was caught in the very act of adultery as she was dragged out as an example by the self-righteous religious leaders. Jesus paid attention to the little children who were considered nothing more than a distraction by the apostles. Jesus, then, is our perfect example. Just as the Lord showed concern to those who needed it, so also we are to put on a heart of compassion. As we pray for each other, it is possible that we might be God’s way of answering our own prayer. Let us, then, open our eyes to the concerns of the other members of this congregation.

II. There is a second characteristic that Paul tells us to put on, and that is, if we are to get along with each other as a Christian family, then we must also put on KINDNESS.

The idea here is that we are to be good to each other. Perhaps it would help us understand what Paul was saying here if we knew that this same word was also used to refer to wine that had aged over time and had lost its harshness, it had mellowed over time and had become good or kind. Kindness, therefore, is treating others without harshness. It involves treating other people with respect and honor. And I know that this is a simple concept, but sometimes we need a reminder. We need a reminder to be soft with people, to be nice, to just be good! Several days ago I walked to the Target by our house, and since most new buildings are not designed to be pedestrian friendly, I had to walk across what seemed to be half a mile of parking lot. But on the way across the parking lot I had to walk by a woman who had just unloaded her cart into the back of her huge SUV. It was windy and cold, I think she might have also unloaded a kid or two into the car, but she was standing there balancing a cake and the cart and trying to figure out how to close the back of her car. I just said, “Can I take that cart back in for you?” and I thought the woman would burst into tears of joy! It was a small thing for me, but it apparently meant a lot to her. Maybe that’s what Paul is talking about here—be kind to each other, put on “*kindness*,” let it be who you are, hold the door open, smile every once in a while, be nice!

III. If we look back at verse 12, we see a third quality that is necessary for getting along with each other as Paul tells us that we are to put on HUMILITY.

Humility means that we will recognize our own weaknesses. It means that we look at ourselves as compared to the perfect Son of God. Humility does not mean that we always go around putting ourselves down, but it means that we look at ourselves as compared to Jesus. We are important, and we are special, but we are who we are. We are not to be aloof, or arrogant, or proud, we are not to always be insisting on our own way. A

humble person may be a powerful person, but even if that is the case, we look for ways to submit to other members of the congregation.

I am reminded of a young woman who came to the minister and said, “You know, I’m having a hard time overcoming one particular sin, and I need your help. Whenever I come to church every Sunday, I can’t help but thinking that I am the prettiest girl in the whole church. I know I shouldn’t think that, but I can’t help it, and I need your help with this.” And the minister replied, “Don’t worry about it, because in your case it is not a sin, it is just a horrible mistake.” You see, the young woman had a problem with humility.

However, as Paul said in Philippians 2:3-4, ***“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”*** It seems that arrogance is what causes so much trouble sometimes. When I’m driving, everybody needs to be going my speed. When I go shopping, everybody needs to get out of my way. It is all about me! Paul, though, is saying that those attitudes have no place in the church, but if we are going to get along with each other, then we must clothe ourselves with humility.

IV. There is a fourth concept in verse 12, and that is, we must clothe ourselves with GENTLENESS.

The word Paul uses here refers to power under control. In know that sometimes people think of gentleness, and they may think of a wimpy person who is always getting stepped on, but that is not what the word requires. But rather, we could refer to gentleness as being the opposite of flying off the handle. Gentleness is the opposite of road rage. Gentleness is the opposite of yelling and screaming at the customer service desk. When I think of power under control, I think of our snow plow drivers here in Madison. What restraint that must take, to have a tiny little car zip around and pass a plow—that huge plow could easily take revenge, but they show some amazing restraint! Gentleness is having the power to take revenge but holding back instead. Gentleness is a powerful car with a good transmission—power under control. Gentleness, then, does not mean that we allow ourselves to get walked on, gentleness does not require that we ignore evil, but gentleness means stepping in and using our strength to step in and carefully stand up for those who are not able to stand up for themselves. Gentleness means that we are angry under the right circumstances. Gentleness is what we see in Jesus—power under control, the Son of God restraining Himself in human form, paying attention to little children and driving money changers out of the temple with a whip—power under control. Gentleness means keeping calm under stress. Gentleness means that in a time of conflict we will lower our voice instead of raise it—power under control is the meaning of the word, and it is a requirement if we are to get along with one another in the church!

V. At the end of verse 12 we come to another concept that is absolutely necessary for us to get along with one another, the idea that we are to put on PATIENCE.

My understanding is that the Greek word translated here as ***“patience”*** actually comes from two words, “long” and “wrath” or “anger.” And so the idea behind patience here is that it should take us a long time to get angry with a fellow member of the congregation. It means that we can go a long time without complaining or lashing out at someone. It means that we will go a long time without responding with resentment or bitterness. It means that we will be constant and calm, regardless of what others may do to us. I remember taking our beagle puppy to those canine good citizen courses, and our little 10-pound beagle just loved this huge Great Dane. Our dog would just constantly jump up on this big dog and try to nip at its ears. But through it all, the Great Dane would just stand there—it took a lot to make it mad, and that is the idea that

Paul is getting at with the word *“patience,”* we are to be *“long-suffering”* with one another (as one translation puts it). Even in difficult circumstances, we are to be patient with the people around us in the church. We give each other room to grow. We assume the best of each other. We give each other the benefit of the doubt. We remember that all of us are growing. We remember that some things that are easy for us may be difficult for others. We are to clothe ourselves with patience.

VI. In verse 13, we come to another quality that is very important when it comes to getting along, and that is, Paul tells us that we are to BEAR WITH ONE ANOTHER.

Literally, we are to *“hold up one another,”* not a “hold up,” but a “hold up,” “forbearance,” as some translations put it. We are to support each other. Some of our younger members are so good at doing this literally as some of our senior saints come in from their cars. But we know that we can hold each other up in other ways as well. The idea is that we are to put up with each other, that we are to cut each other some slack, and that we are to offer spiritual support.

We are to bear with one another. Sometimes we may have an issue with how someone else is raising their kids, or how someone else handles their finances, or maybe how someone manages their time. In fact, each of us could probably pick out just about anybody in this room, and we could find something about that person that we find irritating or even offensive. Paul, though, says that we are to bear with one another. Of course we usually see this kind of thing in the Bible, and we think, “Yes, I need to bear with other people.” But sometimes we need to remind ourselves that other people may need to bear with us. In other words, sometimes we are the ones who need support. Sometimes we are the ones who have some kind of weakness, some kind of failure, some kind of irritating behavior. Sometimes we need to put up with other people, but there are times when we are the ones who need to be put up with. I know it is hard to believe, but there are some things about each of us that really just rub other people the wrong way. Sometimes all of us will do something to irritate another member of the congregation. The Golden Rule says that we are to treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated. In other words, we should treat the quirks that other people have the same way we would like them to treat us. As Paul said in Romans 15:1, *“Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.”* Paul, then, is saying that there are many times when we will need to make a conscious decision not to make a big deal out of something. There are times when we may need to make it our problem and not their problem.

This does not mean that we should excuse sin, and it doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t challenge each other to live lives that are closer to the Lord—we are not talking about ignoring sin for the sake of not hurting someone’s feelings, but it means that (outside of sin, in the realm of opinion) there are a lot of things we can decide to overlook, because our goal is to get along.

VII. In verse 13 there is another quality for us to put on, and that is, we are told here to FORGIVE EACH OTHER.

And as Paul said, we are to forgive each other, *“...whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.”* A *“complaint”* in this context refers to a legitimate reason to be upset with someone. Some translations refer to having a *“grievance.”* In other words, Paul is talking about how we react when someone does something bad to us. And here again, we have all been through this, but Paul reminds us that we are to forgive each other, we are to have an attitude of forgiveness, just as the Lord has forgiven us, like a debt that has been wiped clean.

Sometimes we will hear the old saying that apparently goes back to Alexander Pope, “To err is human, to forgive divine.” There have been some interesting variations on that statement through the years. Dog lovers, for example, have been known to say, “To err is human, to forgive canine.” Mae West has said, “To err is human, but it feels divine.” Those of you who work with computers have perhaps heard the saying, “To err is human, but to really mess it up you need a computer.” But the original saying is very true: To forgive is divine. We are to forgive each other just as the Lord has forgiven us. And no matter what any other person has ever done to us, it pales in comparison to what the Lord has forgiven us of doing to Him.

VIII. Before we close this morning, we need to consider one more piece of clothing—it comes in verse 14 as we find that BEYOND ALL THESE THINGS WE ARE TO PUT ON LOVE, WHICH IS THE PERFECT BOND OF UNITY.

In other words, after we have done all of these other things, we put on love, and love is what ties it all together. And the kind of love Paul is talking about here is AGAPE, the kind of love that is based not on a feeling but on a decision. This is not a matter of, “I love her because she’s so pretty,” or, “I love him because he’s so nice,” but this kind of love is a decision to do what is best for another person, regardless of whether that person has done anything to deserve it. It is the kind of love that God showed for us, “*...in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8). We didn’t deserve it, we didn’t ask for it, we weren’t even born yet! But the Lord came to this earth and died for us. Paul is saying: That is the kind of love that you are to have toward the other members of the congregation. Love, even when they do not love you back. Love, even if they don’t deserve it. Love, even if it is difficult. Do for them just as the Lord has done for us. Do you want to get along? Paul says, “*Put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.*” Love is what holds it all together. As Jesus said in our Scripture reading this morning, we are to love God and we are to love our neighbor, “*There is no greater commandment than these*” (Mark 12:31).

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I would have to say that a lot of these things are pretty hard—a lot of these things are difficult. It is hard to be compassionate, and kind, and humble, and gentle, and patient. It is hard to bear with each other, it is hard to forgive, it is hard to love each other, but it is a thrilling challenge. It is a challenge that will keep us focused for the rest of our lives. If we are going to do it, we need to spend more time in God’s word, we need to spend more time in prayer, and we need to spend more time with each other. As I pointed out at the beginning of our study this morning, none of these things can be done on our own, but all of these things have to be done with each other, and not only do these things need to be done with each other, but it would be rare for us to even be able to do these things between 10:30-11:30 on a Sunday morning. As we close, I would like to propose a little challenge: Look at the back of the head of the person in front of you, and ask yourself a question: Have I been compassionate to that person this week? Have I practiced kindness toward that person over the past seven days? Have I interacted with this person in humility over the past few days? Have I been gentle to this person lately? Have I been patient to this person? Have I ever had an opportunity to bear with this person and forgive this person? Have I (in a concrete way) been able to demonstrate my love for this person? I hope we realize that Paul is telling us that we need to somehow find a way to get together and do these things. And chances are, it does not happen during worship, but it involves getting together outside the worship assembly so that we can get involved in each other’s lives. And so if we could look at the back of that head one more time, let’s ask ourselves: How can I do this with that person this week?

When it comes to what we wear, we might not recommend wearing a red shirt and pink boxers during a firefight with the Taliban, but we can agree with what Paul wrote here: If we hope to get along in the church, these are some things we must put on. For those who are not yet Christians, the most important thing we can ever put on is Christ Himself. As Paul wrote in Galatians 3:27, “**...all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.**” If you have any questions about this, we would invite you to study with us. If you are already a Christian but are having some special struggles, we would be glad to pray with you about that. But if you are ready to obey the gospel, if you are ready to put on Christ in baptism, you can let us know about your decision by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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