

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Revelation

Lord God of love, Lord God of power and might, Lord God of compassion, Lord God of awesome redeeming power, Lord God of companionship, Lord God of valour and victory, Lord God of comfort, Lord God of searching authority; touch me with one tip of your finger so that I might feel You close in my hour of need. May Your revelation to my soul be a revelation of Your love for me, in CHrist. AMEN

For myself

Pray for God's protection on all you do this day, on yourself and on your friends and family.

For others

Pray for people in church with who you have a difficult time, due to personality problems or any other issues. Pray with love because love conquers all.

Meditation

What is heaven?

What is your picture of this place where Jesus' lives?

Is it far above, untouchable, or it is within your grasp, touched, like a feather at fingertips.

Think and pray,
and do not let imagination run too riot,
Jesus left a final Will and Testament,
Written words to tell us of His home.

Yes, glimpsed by faith beforehand,
it is the pasture wherein rest is found;
it is where love has conquered death;
it is where Jesus welcomes a child,
it is the home of many mansions,
 ready and prepared;
it is where even sparrows
 do not fall unnoticed;
it is where lamb and lion love as one,
 and 'saint' and 'sinner' find their grace.
it sparkles in its glory, crystalline,

and farther than the eye can see;

Let pictures from God's words inspire,
let visions of God's people speak,
let fires of God that burn within
encourage the eternal truth
that heaven is your one true home,
both now, and then,
for ever.

Bible Passage

Colossians 3:12-17

¹² As God's chosen ones who are holy and loved, clothe yourselves therefore with sympathy and compassion, goodness, humility, gentleness and patience' ¹³ bearing with one another and if anyone has a grievance against someone, forgiving them; and you must forgive others just as the Lord has forgiven you. ¹⁴ Over and above everything is love, which is the bond which holds everything together; ¹⁵ and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, into which you were called as one body; and be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the Word of God dwell in you richly; teach in all wisdom and advise one another, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God with thanksgiving in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Review

Today's passage is a wonderful affirmation of the truths of our faith. It describes the nature of our salvation found in Christ and encourages each believer to practice forgiveness and act in love. It rejoices in the experience of God's love and also the unity of the 'body of Christ', which is the church, and encourages a fellowship of worship and learning, so that whatever is done is 'in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father ...' (3:17). Every part of this passage contains encouragement and positive advice for the Christian, as an individual and also as a part of the God's church; it is a joy to read!

In yesterday's reading, Paul identified the evils of the world that a believer had to 'put off' (3:8) in order to live the life of Christ. Just as such evil had to be taken off, Paul now encouraged believers to put on the things of Christ (3:12). What Paul describes in this way is very important, because moral characteristics are not a matter of natural make-up or upbringing; they are a matter of choice. Just as it is impossible to be rid of the evils and self-centredness of worldly morality without deciding to be rid of them, so it is impossible to do what is right without making decisions and taking positive action. Paul constantly warns the readers of all his letters that being good and reaping the rewards of the spiritual life does not just 'happen' to people, it comes about by accepting God's Word and following the way of Jesus Christ. Therefore, in this passage, Paul encourages his readers at Colossae to accept the highest moral calling, and now that his letter is part of our Scriptures, these words invite us to do the same. To choose to do what is right and good is God's fundamental challenge to all people, everywhere.

We often find that in the New Testament letters, the language of 'being clothed' reflects the important practice of baptism. Baptism would have been frequent in the early days of the

church as it expanded and grew, and there is evidence that one of the features of a baptismal service was the removal of old clothes symbolising the past and after the act of baptism, the putting on of a new garment as a sign of the new life. This is reflected strongly in what Paul says here, which seems highly appropriate for instructions to those who were being baptised. This is only a fruit of our imagination, but it is reasonable; the whole text sets out clearly the basic instructions that might be given to someone embarking on the Christian life.

The symbolism of baptism is that we die to self so that we can be made alive 'in Christ' (Rom 6:5f.). Paul said earlier in Colossians; 'if with Christ you died ... why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?' (2:20). These quotes illustrate that the talk of baptism in Paul's letters is all about life, and how to live the Gospel. The great qualities listed in verse 12, for example, demonstrate the loving characteristics of God that can only be live by choosing to live with Christ and be 'in Christ' by baptism. Paul goes on to explain that the Christian life is not just about morality; it must reflect the unity of God, for God is one. This is what lies behind verses 13-15, in which love is 'the bond which holds everything together' (3:14), based on mutual forgiveness exemplified in the life of Christ (3:13). The word 'peace' (3:15) reminds us of the ancient Hebrew word for peace, 'shalom', which contains the idea of being at one with others and living in harmony. Paul knew that unity was essential if the Christian community at Colossae was to stand firm against the heresies that beset them.

Lastly, when God's people are at peace with each other and unified in the Spirit, they are not only able to exhibit the high standards of morality that reflect the nature of God, they are also enlivened in worship. Verse 16 describes the essential unity of worship that has defined the practice of Christian communities for centuries, combining the challenge of the 'Word of God' and helping one another with singing the different varieties of 'psalms, hymns and spiritual songs' (3:16). Only when a church is unified in Christ is its worship effective, and the Lord's name is truly praised. This worship is an expression of the life and mission of the church of God with Jesus at its centre, the source of all its life.

Going Deeper

Each part of this great text contains deeper truths, for it is easier to talk about love and compassion, for example, than to put them into practice. Paul never wavers from his insistence that Christ is the source of all that is good, and at the end of this passage, describes worship offered to God by the community of the true church which is focussed on Christ.

Being clothed with the characteristics of God (v12)

It is all very well enthusing about the wonderful qualities described in this passage of Scripture, in particular those of verse 12, but these are all highly deceptive. So many of us believe we can aspire to sympathy and compassion, goodness, humility, gentleness and patience (3:12) in an entirely natural way, but we cannot attain them without considerable difficulty and cost. Each quality, it seems, lies easily within our grasp and whilst it is easy to preach their merits, most of us bear the scars of what happens when we attempt to put them into practice and discover that life is far more complicated, and our dreams of living in a godly way have then been shattered by the world. For example; who has not discovered that if you demonstrate goodness in your dealings towards others generally, then there can quickly come a time when some will take advantage of that goodness and expect you to do things for them 'out of the goodness of your heart' which in all truth, they should do for themselves. The moral is simple; in the world, if you make yourself available with good intent, then people tend to walk all over you!

Two things follow from this. Firstly, the whole point of Paul's teaching is that if those of us who make up the fellowship of believers all live by God's moral standards, then this should never be the case within the church. Indeed, if people feel presumed upon or walked over at church, then there is something fundamentally wrong within the fellowship and it must be asked whether Christ is truly at its centre. Secondly, whilst it may be wise for us to be cautious about 'being good' in the world, it is our calling to demonstrate this as a testimony to God in this evil world. It is entirely understandable then that Jesus should teach the general principle that those who follow him will be persecuted (Matt 5:10f. etc.). It does not take too much thought for us to realise that as individuals, we are best able to demonstrate goodness in the world if we do this together with others so that the persecutions we bear are shared. Indeed, that is one of the key purposes of the church, as Paul goes on to explain (see next section).

Although I have only given an example of one of these moral qualities, you will be able to work out similar scenarios for the others. These are not easy options for life, they are the hardest, which is why so many people reject them in favour of the world's agendas of self interest which do not require engagement with such mutual moral concern. It is not just past generations that have observed that we demonstrate true humanity through our care for others, especially the weakest in society. For whilst this mantra is sometimes offered by non-religious organisations, its origins in history, and its origins in real life, lie in Christ; and outside of traditionally Christian countries, these humanitarian and godly sentiments are simply not found.

Forgiveness, love, binding and peace (v13-15)

All these themes found in the central verses of our passage are typical of Paul's writing. If the great moral qualities of God which the world cannot attain are to be demonstrated by God's people, then forgiveness is essential within the Body of Christ, the church. The devil tries in every way to get in amongst God's people and disrupt the desire to live a good moral life, and the mature Christian knows this and will always be prepared to forgive a brother or sister in Christ, come what may. Indeed, such forgiveness can bond people together powerfully. Paul asks any two of God's people who have a grievance against each other to forgive each other, and it is easy for us to recall that this was Jesus' teaching exactly (Matt 6:12, 18:21 etc.) It is worth noting that some have said that you cannot find parallels between the teachings of Jesus and that of Paul; but from the evidence of Colossians, this is nonsense!

Again, consistent with his theme, Paul emphasises that forgiveness is only possible on the basis of our acceptance of the Lord's forgiveness of us (the theme of parable of the unforgiving servant – Matt 18:23f.). Forgiveness, of course, is practical love; for love is meaningless as something merely spoken or as a sentiment that is blandly expressed out of context. True love is shown when problems, disagreements or differences amongst people are immediately met with understanding and forgiveness. Such love is not a matter of feelings, it is a matter of the will; for we each need to 'clothe ourselves' (3:12) with this quality, making a decision to align ourselves with Christ and seek His help to live it; it will not just 'happen'. The good news is that the more we exercise this quality of godly love (identified by the Greek word 'agape' in the New Testament), the more it binds us together, whether in personal relationships, such as in marriage, or in the life of the church. Indeed, when we exercise this love and it becomes established within us either in personal relationships or the life of the church, then the result is peace and thanksgiving; the 'unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3)

Worship! (vv16-17)

What greater cause for worship could there be than the unity we have just spoken of; a unity of God's people created by the secure knowledge that problems will be met by understanding, love and forgiveness based upon mutual recognition of the forgiveness of

Christ, and the absolute commitment to His will, not ours. The last two verses of this passage, fascinatingly, are about as close a description of worship in the early 'house' churches of the Christian church as we can find in the New Testament, and are worthy of careful examination. Occasionally in Paul's letters there are references to house churches (e.g. Nympha's church at Laodicea – see 4:15-16, and Philemon's house church in Colossae, see Phil. 2 and Col 4:9), and the picture of worship presented by these verses is one that was probably typical.

Teaching and learning were an important part of the worship life of the early church as new Christians sought to find out more about Jesus. 'Let the Word of God dwell in you richly' (3:16) is a well known phrase used to exhort people to use their Bibles, but that is not what is meant here. At the time Paul wrote, the New Testament did not exist, and the 'Word of God' probably meant the activity of retelling the stories of Jesus handed on to them since His death (only a few decades earlier). These stories would have originated with the disciples of Jesus, and they were retold for the purpose of teaching and learning. Some versions of the Bible have 'teaching and admonishing' in verse 16, but the two words describe the essential 'give and take' of education and instruction, rather than warning; it was an early form of what we call 'preaching'.

The other fascinating part of the description of worship (3:16) is the phrase 'singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God ...' This is a phrase Paul uses elsewhere (Eph 5:19), so it must represent something important. Searching through Scripture, each of the three words 'psalm', 'hymn' and 'spiritual song' has a different meaning and purpose in worship. A Psalm, of course, is a hymn of praise to God which is part of Scripture, so to sing a Psalm is to praise God using the Word of God! A hymn, on the other hand, is a form of poetry intended to express theological truth about our faith; hymns have been identified in the New Testament (for example, in Phil 2:6-11 and 1 Cor 13) but most of the hymns we know are not in the Bible, they are found in church traditions and their words play a vital role in helping people remember the truths of the Gospel by 'singing their faith'. Spiritual songs are different again, being like choruses which have repeated patterns of words which serve to offer pure worship to God (as in Psalm 150, for example, or many other modern repetitive choruses). Each is important, and has its place; the singing of scripture, the recollection of deep truth through great poems of faith, and the simple and yet profound worship of simple choruses which do no other than offer praise to God.

According to Paul, all of this is to be done in regular worship, both the singing and the learning about Jesus. It also includes prayer, the 'thanksgiving' mentioned in the next verse (3:17); and all should be done 'in the name of the Lord Jesus ...'. This is the true aim of all God's people, the open-hearted worship of the fellowship of God's people, united in love.

Discipleship

Application

Putting love into practice

There are considerable challenges for us to embrace within this Scripture; providing, of course, we have dealt with the 'old self'. The first is a challenge to put into practice the 'agape' love that lies at the centre of the moral teaching of this passage. Our inspiration is Jesus alone, and we can love only as Jesus Himself loves, and forgive only as He forgives us. It therefore seems that those who are best able to live a life of agape love are those who are most acutely aware of God's love for them.

Sometimes we are happy for people to become members of churches and hold office who come to church because they like to do so; they are searching, but do not have this sense of the personal touch of God in their lives. I have also met quite a number of clergy who would describe themselves in this way. However 'good' such people are, scriptural teaching is that until they have 'put off' the old self and know the love of Christ which gives them confidence to trust in Him alone, then they are simply not able to function in fellowship in the way that this passage describes. There are no easy answers to the personal issues which give rise to these situations, but I do believe that the church of God is compromised unless both individually and collectively, God's people have a grasp of the nature of God's love, and by His strength, seek to put it into practice.

The final few verses of this text are a challenge to us to look afresh at worship with simple eyes; teaching and learning, prayer, and three different ways to sing which together offer worship to the Lord. All these together enable people to worship, talk to God in prayer, remember their faith and use Scripture; this is simplicity, and it has much to teach us!

Ideas for what to do

- What does your baptism mean to you? Take out a sheet of paper or create a file on your computer and write down a list of words and phrases about what it means to you. Use this list as a guide to your thoughts and reflections in the coming days.
- Pray against the evils in our world that compromise all that is good. Sometimes we work so hard to try and get things right that we forget to confront evil and defeat it! Pick some evil in the world today and pray against it regularly for a period of time, and look for God's answers to your prayers.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your groups, discuss the different qualities in verse 12. Are they all essentially different things, or are they expressions of the same thing; if so, what?
2. Is forgiveness an important part of the life of your church? How can forgiveness become an important part of the life of God's people?
3. Is the description of worship given by Paul in this passage adequate for us today?

Final Prayer

Great and Mighty Lord; fix my hearts on You with such intensity that no temptations of the evil one can shake me. Keep my feet firmly on Your pathway, guide me securely through my troubles, and bring me safely into Your complete salvation and my journey's end. Through Jesus Christ I pray; AMEN