

Colossians 3:12-17: Fraternity, Unity, and Higher Responsibility

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Thesis Statement

As Christians we are “God’s chosen people” and are therefore “holy and loved” by God¹; therefore, we are to live lives with a sense of fraternity, unity, and with the responsibility of upholding the image of the Christian name in our every word and deed.

Outline—Colossians 3:12-17

- I. Rules for Holy Living (3:1-17)
 - i. Do these things (3:12-17)²
 1. **Fraternity (vv. 12-14)**
 - a. Clothe with fruits of the Spirit (3:12)
 - b. Forgive as the Lord forgave (3:13)
 - c. Love (3:14)
 2. **Unity (v.16)**
 - a. Let Peace of Christ rule (3:15)
 3. **Elevated Responsibility (vv. 16-17)**
 - a. Let word of Christ Rule (3:16)
 - i. Learn as you worship, and read the Bible
 - b. Do all things in the name of God

¹ Baker, Kenneth L. *Zondervan NIV Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI USA: Zondervan, 2002. Colossians 3:12 (All Scripture references are from the Zondervan NIV Study Bible and will hereafter be cited as “Baker, Kenneth L. NIV Study Bible, Book chapter:verse”)

² Bolded terms are topics of this paper.

Introduction

Joel got excited when his philosophy teacher announced an in-class assignment in which the class would be put into pairs to research a specific topic of the Judaeo-Christian philosophies. As his teacher said “Joel and Chris, you will research...” “*It never fails.*” Joel thinks. “*I think the teachers assign Chris as my partner on purpose. All the teachers here must know that I can’t stand him so they assign him to my group every time just to see what happens.*” Not wanting to give a bad impression to his teacher, Joel remains silent in his objections to working with Chris. Joel, with a sneer in the general direction of Chris, leaves class as quickly as he can.

The next day, Joel is intentionally late to class, dreading every minute he will have to spend with Chris. Joel begins to think of ways he can make the day as miserable for Chris as possible. As Joel entered the library, he saw Chris, already smiling, walks up to Joel. “Hi Joel! Are you ready to get started? I’ve already got a great website we can use to look up some information about Christianity and it’s views on brotherly love. My youth pastor told us about it last night.” “Yeah. Great.” Joel replied, “Let’s just get this over with.” As Chris and Joel continued their research and started answering the questions they had been assigned, Joel did little to nothing to help, and would belittle Chris with every typo and every idea gone bad. Chris continued undaunted, talking all the time about how much he was enjoying the assignment.

After only about half an hour Joel finally had heard enough and said, “Why is this so interesting to you? All of this is the same thing I’ve heard in church all my life; I don’t really need to be hearing it at school too.” Chris explained all about how much he had changed since he had become a Christian a few months before, and that every bit of information he could get was just such a blessing. This made Joel think for a minute about what they were studying, and how he had been acting. He shrugged it off, and continued on listening to Chris talk about how

he was in the past and how he was different now. The bell rang, and the two of them turned in their assignment and left, Joel not saying a word to Chris as he walked out of the door.

Historical-Cultural Context

The letter to the Colossians was written at around 60 AD, which was during the Roman imprisonment of Paul. Colossae was located on the Lycus River, almost exactly centered between the Aegean Sea and the Euphrates River, so it quickly became one of the major cities on that East-West trade route. Colossae was, historically, an important city, having been a stopping place of Xerxes and Cyrus the Younger. By the time of Paul's letter to Colossae, it had greatly diminished in its greatness, due to the up and coming cities of Hierapolis and Laodicea. By AD 61, the decline of the city of Colossae was probably at its peak, because of a large earthquake that took place in the valley area nearby.³ Timothy, a Laodicean, was an important part of the spread of the Church to Colossae. Timothy's work both directly in Colossae, and through one of the converts he made, Epaphras, made the church in Colossae grow quickly.

This young church, however, was plagued by conflicting philosophies—this new Christianity, plus an extreme form of Phrygian Judaism and a newly forming philosophy, Gnosticism. These elements produced the “Colossian Heresy” which is the basis for Paul's writings. Though Paul does not state directly the misunderstandings of the Colossian people, he does emphasize specific points, from which the heretical ideas can be extrapolated. The Colossian people seemed to have “assimilated Christian elements into a pseudo Judaism.” Due to Paul's writings it can be seen that the Colossians had fallen into Angel worship,⁴ and

³ Butler, Trent C., General Editor, "Colossians." Holman Bible Dictionary. 1991 ed. (Accessed through WORDsearch software, WORDsearch Corp. 2005)

⁴ Namely Michael, the patron saint of the city.

extreme asceticism.⁵ The latter was a stepping stone of the larger Gnostic heresy or “Salvation by knowledge” heresy.⁶

Literary Context

For being only 4 Chapters long, Colossians packs a surprising amount of things into its pages. Though short, Colossians follows a similar pattern of the rest of the Pauline letters—warnings, admonishments, encouragements, and practical ideas for fixing whatever the given church’s main problems were. Colossians chapters 1 and 2 are filled with Paul’s warnings about some pitfalls with which the Colossian Church is having trouble. Starting with Chapter 3, Paul moves into the idea of “Holy Living.”⁷ Paul starts by telling the Colossians several lifestyles that they should “put to death.”⁸ At verse 12, Paul begins to tell the people things that they should do, the actions that they should be making instead of the evil outlined in the previous verses. Verses 3:12-17 answer the question that must be asked by readers of 3:1-11: “How is one to avoid all these things?” Paul goes on to outline how a Christian household should look, and the importance of Prayer. The context of 3:12-17 begins mainly in 3:1 and continues on to 4:6. All

⁵ Bromiley, Geroffery W., General Editor, "Colossians, Epistle To." International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. 1988 ed.

⁶ Though what will become known as true Gnosticism would not fully evolve until circa 2nd Century AD, this early form seemed prevalent in the Phrygian area. Gnosticism is the idea that a person was not saved by faith in God, but rather through a special knowledge that came through a close relationship, a striving after, God. Many thought that a closeness to God was gained by a denial of worldly and bodily pleasures, some even went so far as to the point of self-torture to share in the pain Christ had, thereby strengthening their relationship with God. This is an idea against which Paul fought in his letters to Timothy, and it is an idea that lasted for several hundred years, not diminishing in strength until the 5th century AD.

Arendzen, J.P., “Gnosticism” in the Catholic Encyclopedia Online Edition. Available at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06592a.htm>; accessed 3 August 2004 and

Browning, W. R.F. Oxford Dictionary of the Bible. New York, NY USA: Oxford University Press, 1996.

⁷ Baker, Kenneth L . NIV Study Bible, Colossians 3:12 Section Heading

⁸ Baker, Kenneth L .NIV Study Bible, Colossians 3:5

of these verses involve the ideas of holy living and how to go about actually living that life. In the context of the entire book, verses 3:12-17 bring the philosophical ideas presented previously to a practical end: they allow the people to actually see the principles by which they should live.

Fraternity (3:12-14)

Beginning with verse 12, Paul moves from telling the Colossians what not to do into telling them what to do. Paul begins to move the people by reminding them that they are the chosen ones of God; this tells us two things: Christians are the Chosen people of God who are “holy and dearly loved” and that because they are considered to be so, they must act in accordance with that title. It is not enough that they just put off evil behavior, they must fill that space with righteousness, to “clothe [them]selves in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” Paul tells the Galatians much the same thing in Galatians 5:22, much like the Fruits of the Spirit, but now Paul urges the people to completely surround themselves with those Spirit bred virtues.

To look more deeply into the virtues Paul bids the Colossians do as holy people, there are a great many number of things to see. First, says Paul, clothe yourself in compassion. Paul uses the Greek *Oiktirmos*⁹, which does not merely mean compassion, but it is the “bowels of mercy,” or a “manifestation of pity.” It is not enough to feel bad about someone who is in pain and is struggling; it should be a deeply stirring emotion, giving all due mercy to those who need it. Next to treat each other with kindness. It is through the belief in God and the work of the Holy Spirit that men are not only saved through faith, but are made into more amicable men, men who are “sweetened” by the Gospel, as Matthew Henry put it. The mind, too, must be humble—

⁹ Strong, James. Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance, Strong’s Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries. Available on <http://www.crosswalk.com>. Accessed 15 October, 2005 Word number 3628 (All references to Greek or Hebrew roots will be from this source unless otherwise noted. It will hereafter be cited “Strong’s Word number: “)

willing to bend to those in authority over it, and willing to come down to the level of those below it, lest one become arrogant. Coincidentally, Paul also says to show gentleness. He uses the word *Prautes*¹⁰ meaning a gentleness of spirit, or meekness. This would seem to be that a harsh response is not appropriate for those who may be hurtful, but to respond as in Proverbs 15:1: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, and harsh words stir up anger.” Solomon used the Hebrew *Rak* for gentle,¹¹ which has a very similar semantic range as *Prautes*. Paul continues on to say that we should show patience, and forgive those with whom we may have grievances against, so that it can bind “them all together in a perfect unity.”

But love is to be put above all others. All of the principles for holy life that Paul outlines depend upon this final “garment.” It is love that is the bonding agent; it is love that is the capstone for the previously laid foundation of holy life.¹² Paul uses the Greek word *agape*¹³, meaning love that is unconditional. There are 4 other words for love in the Greek language: *philia* meaning the love between friends; *eros* meaning romantic love; *agape* which means unconditional; and *storge* which means natural affection.¹⁴ Paul chose to use *agape* when speaking of the love that each Christian should have between each other Christian. Paul also uses the same word when talking about the love for the Colossians for God, and it is the same word for love used in I Cor. 13.¹⁵ This same word happens to be used in Col. 3:19 as well when speaking of the love a man has for his wife. *Agape* must have been a deliberately chosen word to

¹⁰ Strong’s Word Number: 4240

¹¹ Strong’s Word Number: 7390

¹² Henry, Matthew. *Matthew Henry Bible Commentary*. *Crosswalk.com*. 26 February, 2005. <<http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/MatthewHenryComplete/mhc-com.cgi?book=col&chapter=003>>, “Colossians 3”. (Hereafter cited: Henry, Matthew)

¹³ Strong’s Word Number: 26

¹⁴ *Greek words for love*. 16 Oct. 2005. . 18 Oct. 2005.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_words_for_love>.

¹⁵ This verse correlation is supported in Mathew Henry’s Commentary

show just how much we should love each other. In John 3:16, the word *agapao*¹⁶, the verb form of this same word. It is a love so great it cannot be broken; it is the same love God shows the world.

The ideas Paul sets forth are a model for living as siblings in the Lord. The idea is that each person would treat each other with the love and respect as they would his own brother or sister, in order that the Church would have a bond as strong as a family. This is much like Matthew 12:49-50. Jesus states that “any who follow the will of my Father in Heaven” is his relative. Matthew uses the word *Adelphos*,¹⁷ which is translated as brother, but it has this meaning: “a fellow believer, united to another by the bond of affection.” It is this idea of fraternity between Christians that serves a dual purpose. It not only gives each member of this family unit a sense of belonging in their lives, but it sets up a support structure for any who may stumble, and everyone stumbles at one time or another.¹⁸

Unity (v. 15)

Paul touches only lightly on the idea of the believers being part of a singular body in this passage, but his conviction of it is very clear throughout the rest of his writings. Paul uses the word *soma*¹⁹ when he speaks of the body of Christ. This word holds both the literal meaning for a corporeal body as well as a metaphorical body such as a group of people. This metaphor gets extended into the continued role of Christ in our world, as he is the figurative head of the Church.²⁰ For all Christians to be part of one body there must be peace among them. Paul states that it is the peace of Christ that allows such a conglomeration of vastly different people to

¹⁶ Strong’s Word Number: 25

¹⁷ Strong’s Word Number: 80

¹⁸ This idea of fraternity from these verses is my own. The things it requires, and the principles it holds are supported by other Biblical texts. (See NIV Study Bible, Matt. 12:46-50)

¹⁹ Strong’s Word Number: 4983

²⁰ Baker, Kenneth L. NIV Study Bible, Eph. 5:23

happen in peace. Paul uses *eirene* for peace, in both places it occurs in Colossians. He also uses this same word in Galatians 5:22. It would seem that Paul is continuing to reaffirm the fruits of the spirit as a valid guide to holy living. This word is also used in Ephesians 2:14-15. In Ephesians, Paul is explaining that through Christ, the walls between the Jews and the Gentiles no longer exist, and a new people is forming, a people founded in Christ. A similar situation is taking place in Colossae: two philosophies (Jewish and Christian) have met and controversy is hard to avoid. Paul says to “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,” but in order to do that, a person must be a Christian, and must live a life that is striving for the will of Christ. It is interesting to note that Paul mentions peace after he mentions the conditions by which Christians should live. First familial relationship is exhorted, then peace is exhorted. Paul seems to be indirectly warning the people that even inside a group as closely knit as a church should be, there will still be conflict, but as long as everyone strives for a holy life, fraternity, and allows Christ to pour his peace upon them, any discrepancy can be dealt with in a way that is beneficial to the group.²¹

Perhaps it is the level of intimacy that a Church should have, the familial ties between all the members for which Paul says to be thankful. Even in the worst of conflicts, there is a support structure there into which a struggling member can fall. But it is not only the other people in the church that Paul was telling the Colossians to be thankful. It was also the fact that we have a loving and caring God that is willing to let his peace reign, if they just fellowship with Him. What Paul is saying is to be thankful in everything, no matter what the task. If the peace of God is truly ruling, then this will be the case, because contentment will be received in any situation, whether it is considered “bad” or “good” from a human standpoint, it’s God that brings about all

²¹ Henry, Matthew

things peaceful and all things chaotic, so it is God who can give peace in chaos; it is He who can give unity to diversity.²²

Elevated Responsibility (3:16-17)

Paul is a clear proponent of the power of the word of God, telling the Colossians to let the word dwell within their hearts. In other words, Paul told them to memorize the word so they could meditate on it at all times. This constant meditation was a way for the new Colossian Christians to grow in wisdom about Christianity, and therefore combating the heretical beliefs circulating around the Phrygian area. Being filled with the God's word will also, give us melody and a certain lyricism in our lives: the scriptures are filled with psalms and hymns to God, and if the mind is filled with them then the person, too, will be a living song to God.²³

Becoming filled with the word of God is a commandment for Christians. It is something to which Christians will be held responsible. The real question is to whom are Christians responsible? If Christians are followers of God and are filled with His word, then it is to Him that they are responsible. This responsibility permeates every part of life, and as Paul says in 3:17, "whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."²⁴ If a Christian is to do everything in the name of God, it becomes evident that those actions and those words must be carefully chosen, lest the Christian image be tarnished by human actions. This is why Paul tells the Colossians to let the word of Christ dwell within them, because only through this can the people rightly do everything in the name of Jesus Christ.²⁵ In the life where every word and deed is done in the name of God, those

²² Ironside, H. A.. Colossians (Ironside Commentaries). USA: Loizeaux Brothers (Accessed through WORDsearch software, WORDsearch Corp. 2005) (Hereafter cited as Ironside, H. A.)

²³ Ironside, H. A.

²⁴ Baker, Kenneth L .NIV Study Bible: Colossians 3:17

²⁵ This idea was my own. It's a corollary to the ideas expressed in Ironside's Commentary.

words and deeds must be the words and deeds of Christ, not of the man. Should hubris cloud the judgments of a man, he could easily find himself declaring his actions in the name of Christ, yet they are entirely his own.²⁶ In the life that is truly lived for God in every aspect, there is “no room for self-will or self-assertiveness in the life of the believer.” It is important to remember that it is God’s will that is to be done, not the will of man.²⁷ Even Jesus admitted that the will of the father superseded his will as a man.²⁸

Colossians 3:16-17 is closely related to Ephesians 5:18-20, in that both verses teach that a person should be filled with things of God: Colossians says the word of Christ, Ephesians says the Spirit. The Spirit indwells all Christians,²⁹ and both verses say to edify others with songs, hymns and psalms. Perhaps the two verses are saying the same thing. To be filled with the Word of God, a spirit-breathed document is to be filled with the Spirit.³⁰ Being a Spirit-filled being should be enough to assist people in their pursuit to uphold the values God has set forth and the responsibility of doing what is right in the name of God. This is done to uphold the visible standard of what such a claim as Christianity makes.

In all things that are done, it is to be done in the name of God, Paul says that we also are to be thankful in all situations. This is another aspect of the Spirit-filled life. As the Spirit helps keep the actions of a person in line, so, too, does this fill the person with a sense of joy. This joy is from the knowledge that the Spirit is always there guiding and assisting even in the times that may seem hard and hopeless. The Christian can take heart in the knowledge that

²⁶ These are my thoughts.

²⁷ Ironside, H. A. This is a back-up for my thoughts.

²⁸ Baker, Kenneth L .NIV Study Bible: John 6:38 (this correlation was made via a note in H.A. Ironside’s commentary)

²⁹ Baker, Kenneth L .NIV Study Bible: I Corinthians 3:16

³⁰ Ironside, H. A.

he is never alone, and as long as he is following God's will, the Spirit will give the strength and guidance necessary.³¹ For that, the Christian should be continually thankful.

Application

Joel got to school the next day was promptly greeted by Chris. "Hey Joel, I just wanted to ask you a few questions about the assignment yesterday." Joel rolled his eyes, sighed and replied "Okay. What?" Chris said "Well, yesterday you said that you heard all the stuff that we were researching in church. I just, well, never knew you went to church. I was just doing some more looking at what we were talking about, and I came across this verse that I wasn't sure what it meant. Since you've gone to church, do you think you could explain it to me?" At this, Joel really began to get uncomfortable. Finally, after several silent seconds, Joel agreed to take a look. "Sure, I'll let you know. What's the verse?" "Well, it's this verse in Colossians. It's talking about how the believers are in one body and peace should reign. What does all that mean? It just seems kind of weird to me." For the first time in a long time, Joel felt the Spirit inside him stir. He read and reread the verse, and feeling himself becoming convicted and convicted again for the way he treated so many people. He thought about how miserable things had been the past several months, with the constant bad attitude. He thought about how Chris, this new Christian, had no idea that he, Joel, was a Christian. "Chris," Joel said, "I'm not sure exactly what it means either, but I'll bet if we do some research on it, we can figure it out. What do you say we get together after school today?" Chris was obviously taken aback at this, but immediately agreed. "Well, we better get to class. I'll see you after school, Chris." "yea...yeah! See you then!"

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³¹ Baker, Kenneth L. NIV Study Bible: Job 42:2

How often do we find ourselves in the same situation that Joel found himself? How often do we just get tired of living by the rules and ignore the Spirit within us? As Christians, we, just like the Colossians, are called to live holy lives—lives set apart from the rest of the world. What kind of example are we setting for others if we are indistinguishable from non-Christians? It is our responsibility to do everything in our power to reach as many lost as we can for Jesus Christ. If we do not follow the guidelines Paul sets forth in Colossians 3:12-17, then we will fail miserably in that task. Look at the things he says to do: surround yourself with compassion, kindness, gentleness, humility, patience, and most of all, Love. Is it not kindness that is the quickest to disarm the angry? Is it not the best policy to be gentle with those whom we try to convert to Christ? Likewise, each of us are gifted in specific ways—no one of us can be an effective witness to all people—but we do not have to be. We are placed in the body of Christ; each member has his own purpose and his own talents. Each talent is used to be an effective witness to a specific kind of person. In this respect, we are in no different a situation as the Colossians. The city of Colossae was a melting pot of Greek, Phrygian, Roman, and Jewish cultures; the United States is a melting pot of a world of cultures—each set of people needs their own kind of witness. The foundation comes from the fruits of the Spirit, it is capped with love. If we fill ourselves with the Word of God, the Spirit can more effectively communicate with us through it; as a result, we become ever more effective witnesses for God. By keeping scripture in our hearts, we have the songs written to glorify God are present within our very beings and we become as those songs: holy, glorifying agents of the Lord Jesus Christ. In this, we are able to be the family we are meant to be: the united body moving simultaneously for the same goal: the reaching of the lost. We will shine as a beacon in the dark world, upholders of what it means to be a holy, dearly loved being: a Christian.

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