

## New Now

### 5. Whatever you do

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My name is Jonathan and I'm a recovering procrastinator.

For the first thirty years of my life, I flew by the seat of my pants with most things. One of my towering achievements as a procrastinator was in high school, when I had to do a leaf project for science class. We had to collect and classify 40 or 50 leaves, complete with their Latin name. The day before this was due, I realized I had only managed to collect about 12 kinds of leaves. So, I just remember running outside that day and indiscriminately ripping off leaves and gluing them into a binder until about 3 in the morning when I couldn't stand to be awake anymore. I took guesses at what the names were as if it was a leaf version of Mad libs, making up something that sounded like it was Latin. None of this fooled my teacher- I got a D on that project and had to work myself out of a hole that semester. Students, don't be like me!

Something switched for me in my thirties. I'm pretty ruled by my calendar and my schedule, and now, I would rather feel prepared than procrastinate.

One of the main messages of the Colossian letter is this: don't procrastinate on living your new life in Jesus! Don't wait to be transformed and experience the fullness of Christ until after you die. You can experience the fullness of God in your life here and now. Jesus' resurrection from the dead means that the fullness of God's life is available to us now by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Last week, in the earlier section of Colossians 3, Paul encouraged us to demolish the way that our old way of life contributes to decay, division, and death.

This week, we're seeing how Paul is constructing the new life that's built on the foundation of Christ as we're raised to new life with him. While the death he talks about is figurative, it is very real. Think of it like an episode of "Extreme Home Makeover." When a home is in disrepair, at first some demolition is needed. In fact, in big remodels you take a house down to the studs and clear out all of the old stuff so that by the time renovations are done it looks brand new!

As we heard in the scripture reading, Paul uses a metaphor to paint a picture of this new life. He says to "clothe yourselves" as a representative of Christ. You know the saying, "dress for the job you want"? Well, in Colossians 3:17, Paul is saying, "get dressed for the job you have as Jesus' representative!"

And 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.

Doing everything “in the name of the Lord Jesus” means that you represent Jesus, so clothe yourself with the proper attire!

Companies will often use clothing as a way to distinguish their employees. When you wear the company uniform, it means that you are a representative of that company. That’s why I will never put on a red shirt before I shop at Target because then someone might pull me over and ask me for help! When you put on a uniform, you now have to appreciate the fact that what you say and do now represents more than just yourself. You represent the company. If I go out of my way to help someone when I’m not in uniform, I’m just a nice person. I get all the credit. If I help someone as an employee, my company gets the credit. But if I’m a jerk to someone while I’m wearing the company’s uniform, guess who’s getting a call? My boss!

Now, there’s something else about Paul’s analogy. Clothing myself is a conscious, intentional decision. When you walk to a closet, you make a decision about what you are going to wear. Earlier in verse 10, Paul says to “strip off your old sinful nature.” Get rid of it, he says. Those old clothes won’t do if we’re going to represent Christ well. Now, we want to put on something fitting for our new life. Being clothed in Christ takes intentionality.

Paul then describes what the attire is like in Colossians 3:12-14:

**<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.<sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And **over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.****

There’s no piece in your outfit that is more essential than love! In other words, to represent Christ, love like Jesus. Your fashion statement as a follower of Jesus is to put on love wherever you go!

Paul says that out of all the characteristics we want to put on, that love is the one that “binds them all together.” It’s like the rug in the *Big Lebowski* where the main character keeps talking about how his rug “really ties the room together.” Or, for you bakers, you know that when you bake you need a binding agent. You can put in all of these

ingredients, but they won't actually make what you want unless you have something like an egg to help hold everything together.

Throughout the letter, Paul is urging the church to stick together and be unified with Christ as their head. Sure, they can be kind and gentle with each other, even forgive each other and choose to not get even. But unless they love like Jesus does, none of these things will ultimately hold them together.

That's because on the surface I can treat you well, but in my heart I can still have self-seeking motives. There's a difference between being polite and being loving. In being polite, I can really just look to further my own interests. Loving someone means ultimately working for their good.

So, we want to be clear what we're talking about when we talk about love, because pretty much everyone I know would say they believe in love even if they don't believe in God. In fact, I would be willing to guess that if you took a poll of most people and you asked them what the point of life was, one of the most universally agreed upon answers is "to love." Love gets a lot of consensuses!

The issue then becomes how we define love. Love often gets reduced to sentimentality or feelings, as if I just need to conjure some warm fuzzy emotion for you if I want to love you well. But the kind of love that Paul is referring to here is robust and Jesus-centric. Paul lets Jesus define what love looks like.

So, if we want to live out the kind of love that is defined by Jesus himself, let's look at a few ways that this passage sheds light on how we do that. Jesus' love creates unlikely partnerships. In Colossians 3:15, it says,

**Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.**

Part of being called to peace means we lean into relationships with those different than us rather than reinforcing cultural divides.

One of the ways the early church did this was choosing to upend the categories and hierarchy of society. Paul refers to this in Colossians 3:11. **Here (in the church) there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free.**

These are loaded terms. Jews saw themselves as God's chosen people and superior to Gentiles, partially because of circumcision. Circumcision was one of the hot button

issues among Jewish followers of Jesus, because they needed to learn that trusting in Jesus' sacrifice was enough for someone to be in God's family.

Barbarians were really just foreigners who didn't speak Greek, and Scythian was an insulting label referring to foreigners in a specific region. Think of how the term "hillbilly" is used today and it's a bit like that, making it out like someone is less civilized or uneducated who is from the South. Roman culture was deeply suspicious of other cultures and had a way of looking down on foreigners. So these factions, Jew/Gentile, Barbarian/Scythian, were rivals. But now they are all brothers and sisters in the same church community.

In verse 15 when Paul says that all these people are "one body," he's saying that when we call Jesus our Lord, we put the rivalries to rest and recognize Christ at work in each other.

That's not as easy as it sounds! A lot of times it might mean that we persevere through discomfort, but it's worth it. Through the diversity within the Body of Christ, we experience the fullness of Christ.

Just a few weeks ago, I went on a trip with my seminary to Cuba to see what God is doing through the churches there. It was powerful, but it really challenged me. The culture shock of being in another part of the world where poverty and scarcity of resources is humbling for a suburban and privileged person like me. Not only was the lifestyle different, but the worship style was also! The church was Methodist, but they worshiped like Pentecostals. Cubans know how to dance and sing!

The first service we had there, they invited one of my professors to preach. He's a pastor at a predominately black Baptist church in Alabama. Here I was, with a bunch of Cuban brothers and sisters worshipping in a language I didn't know and they're making me dance. It wasn't pretty but they accepted me anyways. We were all from all points of the socio-economic spectrum. We're hearing the word of God preached from a black Baptist pastor in a Methodist Cuban church.

During the couple of weeks there, we ate every meal together. In the conversations that we had around the tables, our many differences became apparent, each conversation an opportunity to grow in community, not by avoiding our differences but by leaning in. Jesus brought us all to his table by his grace. I was deeply challenged as the Holy Spirit revealed some of my cultural blind spots and vices and helped to reveal how I need to steward the privileges that God has given me. There is a blessing in embracing the beauty in our siblings in Christ.

Today, we are going to receive communion. One of my absolute favorite things to do as a pastor is to serve communion. I can't help but to look at the faces of every single person walking forward and appreciate that as different as we are, that we are part of the same Body. It's always a holy moment. That's the significance of the loaf of bread. It's united, one whole. We all stand equally in need of the blood of Christ for our redemption. In Colossians 3:16, it says,

**Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.**

This is quite a take on how to instruct one another in the faith, and it highlights part of why we do what we do as a church together in corporate worship. As we sing to God vertically, there's a horizontal dynamic at play where we are telling each other the truth about who we are as God's children. The beauty of the music or lyrics isn't only supposed to get us to feel something, but to do something that's based on the truth of who we are in Christ.

Love can mistakenly get reduced to the realm of feelings or sentiment. In that case, we can end up sweeping problems with others under the rug and bury negative feelings, thinking that to have them somehow makes us unloving. Others of us might be more "tough love" kind of people, with an emphasis on the tough. I'll tell you a hard truth and I don't care if you walk away- I'm loving you by telling you what's true.

But a love like Jesus' incorporates both radical acceptance as well as confronting people at appropriate times. Jesus was known as a "friend of sinners" because of his radical acceptance, but his teachings were so hard that often people would walk away. Jesus' love welcomed all to his table but then he also had some hard conversations at those same tables! We don't want to just reduce love to a hollow sentimentalism, but nor do we want to just unload on people and take them down a peg in the name of "loving them."

One of the most powerful witnesses in the early church was how Christians responded to their enemies when they were persecuted. There are multiple accounts of Christians who are singing hymns as they are being put to death in coliseums and giving the kiss of peace that showed they considered each other to be family in Christ. In the midst of these displays, they would also warn their persecutors that Jesus would return to right every wrong. Their death would not be the final word! The truth of their message resonated because the love of Jesus was on display through them by the beauty of their actions and the truth of their words.

The heart of Jesus is to restore people to the image of God they were created in. This means we have to confront sin, but we also have to do so in a way that reminds one another that we are God's beloved, for whom he paid a great price.

This leads to my final point. Jesus' love is a costly love. The cross sounded absurd to most as an avenue for God's power. It was seen as an instrument of humiliation and weakness. Yet, the cross is where God revealed the greatness of his love. If we are to represent Christ, we need to expect that it will cost us to follow him in loving others. In Matthew 16:24 Jesus said to his disciples,

**“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.**

In the early church, when Roman soldiers decided to follow Jesus, they would give up killing the enemies of Rome in their wars of conquest at the risk of being tried as traitors. Prostitutes would give up their way of life which meant a loss of income and security. The wealthy would use what they had to provide for needs for their brothers and sisters. Paul, who wrote this letter, gave up his life as a religious leader in Judaism to be an itinerant church planter, ultimately being jailed and tortured for his faith.

William Seymour was a poor, half-blind black pastor who started to preach in a dusty old church on Azusa Street in Los Angeles in 1906 about how life with God was available here and now. Incredible displays of God's power broke out, many coming to know Jesus and encountering God in life-changing ways. As word spread, the meetings were packed with people from all walks of life.

Most controversially, the meetings were integrated, with interracial unity being one of the markers of this revival. Leading this was costly for Seymour. He endured racially charged attacks, even from his former mentor. But the seeds had been planted which ended up becoming known as the Azusa Street Revival and birthing the Pentecostal movement, which is now the fastest growing movement within Christianity globally. For all the accusations of fanaticism that Seymour received, this was what he said reflecting on the movement: “The Pentecostal power, when you sum it all up, is just more of God's love. If it does not bring more love, it is simply a counterfeit.”

When we follow Jesus in putting to death our old life, the Holy Spirit will come and pour out God's love on us so that we are transformed to love like Jesus.

We're about to receive communion, which is how we remember Christ's costly love for us. By partaking of these elements, it is a way of saying to God, "I want you to transform me so that I love like Jesus, no matter the cost." As we receive communion, let's invite the Spirit to speak to prompt us as to how we are to love with a love like Jesus.