

Last week Andrew spoke about the resurrected or new family that we have in Christ. Keying off verses in Paul's letter to the Colossians he spoke of wearing your resurrection wardrobe – garments of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. He applied these thoughts to our families. Thank you, Andrew.

When we think of family most of us think about our: moms, dads, children, maybe grandparents; and then maybe we think about our extended families, aunts, uncles, cousins. Family is important to most of us ... certainly it's been the case for me. At each church where I've been Pastor, I've been clear with folks that my priorities were thus: God first, family second, church third. But I also clarify that while I will not sacrifice my family for the church, neither will I sacrifice the church to my family. What I mean is, I want my family to be a part of the church family, on a par with others in the congregation, and as they so choose. The church is neither a platform to showcase my family, nor is it a place for their involuntary servitude.

Having a family has made alive for me these words from Paul's letter to Timothy, concerning leaders or pastors of the church: *He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)* 1 Tim. 3:4-5.

Now, back to those verses from Colossians (3:11-17) that Andrew touched on last week. They are also applicable to church – our congregation.

Church Family

We often refer to our congregation as “our church family” and in a number of ways we develop relationships that are as close and caring as those in our own families (except that we don't have to live under the same roof). In a very real sense, when we accept Christ as our Savior, we are adopted into God's family. The Apostle John writes in his gospel: *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,* John 1:12. And then in his first letter: *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!* 1 John 3:1.

Humans always find ways to divide themselves by tribe, race, national origin, and any number of other categories. Paul's letter reminds us that it matters not what a man or woman be externally, whether Jew or gentile and so on, educated or not... What makes a Christian family is Christ, who renews the individual – like I've talked about previously. The new man and new woman in

this second creation, is filled with Christ, and in whom Christ is all and everything.

Now this is a hard concept to get across, let alone put into practice. Over the centuries and millennia, the Church worldwide has been rent by division (not all of it necessarily bad). We all come to our church family with our own pre-conceptions about family, church, and even what it means to be a Christian. To their credit local churches have often been a place where forbearance (that is toleration) and forgiveness have been practiced.

By the same token sometimes we err in forbearance when we tolerate behavior and character that is not really that of the new man or new woman in Christ. I know this is hard to define – “who are you to say who is a Spirit-filled Christian and who is not?” But **Scripture is a very good guide to what a Spirit-filled community of Christ looks like.** The Church still carries valuable traditions and memories from the time of the Apostles concerning developing the character of Christ.

Christian Community

Referring to the local congregation St. Paul often used the term the **Body of Christ**. It emphasizes the connections that we all have to one another, under the direction of our head, Jesus Christ. Now, Christians are a diverse bunch. We are not all of one mold. Paul acknowledged that when he said, ***Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all,* Col. 3:11.** Okay, maybe we don't have Scythians and barbarians in our midst, but our congregation is diverse! People from many states, and from the Philippines, Asia and the Pacific, and several countries in Africa, have been drawn here to worship our heavenly Father, along with folks who were born and raised right here in Kern County. In church we do not lose our national or ethnic uniqueness, nor our personalities for that matter. Yet our devotion to Christ supersedes all that.

Scripture shows us what lives **devoted to Christ and being renewed by the Holy Spirit look like.** In his letter to the church at Colossae Paul says, ***Therefore, as God's chosen people ... clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you,* Col. 3:12-13.** We need the same good turn from others which we are bound to show them; readiness to forgive injuries. Recall Jesus' words: ***Be you merciful, as your Father is merciful,* Luke 6:36.** Could it be that we forget that we are simply great sinners who have been forgiven by Christ? Could it be that some have yet to realize how great a sinner they are?

If we want our church to be authentic as the Body of Christ, we'll need the guidance of Scripture. **There must not only be a humble demeanor, but a humble mind.** Again, recall Jesus: *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*, Matt. 11:29. "Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble ..." The three most important things we can do here is pray, pray, and pray.

Here's a passage of Scripture familiar to many Christians: **Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud**, 1 Cor. 13:4. It is often chosen by couples to be read at their wedding. However, St. Paul wrote these words to the Christian congregation at Corinth ... these words are meant for us, in our fellowship.

What's Wrong With Church?

It all sounds wonderful! So why isn't the church a better, a more holy gathering of people? ... While we are in this world, where there is so much corruption, even in our own hearts, and so much occasion for difference and contention, quarrels are bound to happen, even among the elect of God, who are holy and beloved. **Church is a lot of trouble ... filled with people who aren't perfect**, who don't live up to the model of Jesus. Some say, "Jesus yes!" ... "the church no!" Many complain that the church is full of hypocrites ... and we do give them ammunition for this. But I say there's always room for another hypocrite to come in ... and to be reformed by Christ Jesus. Critics on the outside are fond of judging those on the inside saying, "I'm just as good as those who go to church." They would be more accurate to say, "I'm just as bad as those who go to church." When you truly recognize your own sinfulness and weakness, then you'll understand the need to be in the company of those who are being re-shaped into the new man or new woman according the Christ's image.

Church is not really a museum of saints, but a hospital for sinners. One of the challenges for any church family is that we put on the clothing of Christ, but the tattered and dirty clothes of the old life still cling – true for pastors and people both. The old self, ruled by a sin-laden viewpoint, remains embedded in our fallen human nature. Our salvation in Christ is done, but the reforming of our sinful nature continues ... that's the work of the Holy Spirit, and only in those who are willing. The fact is, churches are filled with people at various stages of new growth, along with some who are not really willing to allow the Holy Spirit to reform them. No wonder we don't look like a perfect, holy community!

Nonetheless we expect, I daresay God expects, Christian people to show spiritual progress toward a character and lifestyle that brings honor to God. So easily do churches fall into institutionalism: "doing church" rather than "being church." We must continually ask what kind of church family are we? And ask ourselves, "Am I growing more like Jesus?"

Hearts Strangely Warmed

So, what are we to do? How can we be a church as described in the Bible? **Holiness is a consequence of God's action in people, not their efforts to be holy.** It's a matter of the Holy Spirit working in and through them. This is hard for us to realize because we're talking about spiritual matters and our human nature is so attached to worldly ways of understanding that we can hardly enter the spiritual realm. This has certainly been the case for me for many years.

It takes resurrection power to live up to the model of Jesus. Those whose hearts have been "strangely warmed," as John Wesley put it, will become the new family of Christ. This is why St. Paul writes: ***Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom... Col. 3:16.*** "Dwell" does not mean make a short stay, or an occasional visit, but to take up residence, in the largest measure, and with the greatest influence; so as to fill and govern the whole soul.¹ The Greek word here for dwell is *ενοικεῖτω*, meaning to keep house not as a servant, who is under another's control, but as a master, who has a right to prescribe to and direct all under his roof. The word of Christ must dwell in us; always at hand, ready in everything to have its due influence and use.²

The word of Christ must not only keep house in our hearts but keep a good house. Many have the word of Christ dwelling in them, but it dwells in them but poorly; it has no mighty force and influence upon them. The word of Christ must dwell in us, not in all notion and speculation, to make us experts, but in all wisdom, to make us good Christians. Wisdom is to apply what Scripture says to ourselves, before we apply to it others. The soul prospers when the word of God dwells in it richly.³

Character Counts

John Wesley is seldom listed among the major theological and ethical thinkers of the 18th century, though Wesley was familiar with the writings of all of them. Yet one could say that Wesley's influence has been more profound and lasting than all of them. He undertook to nurture actual communities in which the Christian ethic could be regularly cultivated and practiced. He was a coach and mentor for personal accountability so that individuals did in fact grow in the stature of Christ Jesus.⁴ This is our purpose too, for **individuals transformed by the resurrection power of Christ will transform society.** We're in an era where this very purpose seems to have been left by the wayside in many churches. The garments of the drifting culture have been put on by many Christians, rather than the garments of Christ. We may lament the state of our nation and national leaders, but do we lament that so many in church are bereft of biblical

knowledge that is put into practice in their own lives? We must ask ourselves: have I biblical knowledge and have I put it into practice? Christian influence is needed at every level if the civil society is to survive. It is the genuine Christians who will be the influencers. All the more reason to focus on what our mission statement says about our purpose: to bring people to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. If transformation is not happening, then our connections with God are getting fuzzy.

What can you do about it? Be here every Sunday to absorb Scripture and message. Open your Bible and read every day so that the words of truth sink into your being. Pray every day for the Holy Spirit to enlighten your mind and heart to what is revealed in Scripture. Get into a small group that studies the Bible and where you can share your spiritual growth with others – iron sharpens iron. Character formation is our aim... character that brings us to live in a manner that is pleasing and acceptable to God. Now more important than ever for ...

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, Eph. 3:10-11.

Sermon Take Away

When we accept Christ as our Savior, we are adopted into God's own family. *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, John 1:12.*

If transformation through Christ is not happening in our lives, then our connections with God are getting fuzzy.

Our salvation in Christ is done, but the reforming of our sinful nature continues ... that's the work of the Holy Spirit, and only in those who are willing.

¹ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, Colossians 3.

² *Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1706,) Colossians 3:12-17.

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/colossians/3.html>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings*, Vol. 4, Zondervan 2014, 27-28.