

Maintain the Unity

Colossians 3:12-14 *Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; ¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. ¹⁴ But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.*

Veld fires are often seen in winter, when the grass is dry, when the leaves are dry and on the ground, when the branches have no green inside them at all. All it then takes is a spark, or a cigarette, or the sun magnified through a dew drop, to start a fire. Fires don't have to start in a big way to become big. All fires need is a lot of fuel, and no matter how insignificant the beginning, the end result can be terrifying.

Conflict is a lot like that. Not every conflict that ends up huge begins that way. Sometimes, major conflicts begin with just an inflection in the voice, a word said or not said. Conflicts might begin with something quite insignificant or even trivial. When dealing with conflict in a marriage or between parents and children, often the original matter which sparked the conflict seems quite ridiculous: "He said nothing about the way I had arranged the lounge." "She sighed when I asked her to do something for me." But the end result can be conflicts of enormous proportions, with threats issued, insults thrown, serious and even permanent damage done to the relationship.

The key to whether a small spark becomes a raging forest fire or not is whether or not it has fuel to burn. The key to whether or not a big or small act of selfishness turns into a furious conflict depends on whether or not it has fuel to burn. What is the fuel that conflict burns?

James 4:1-2 *Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? ² You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.*

The fuel of sinful conflict is selfishness. Selfishness is to conflict what dry grass, leaves and wood are to fire. The drier the wood, the better it burns. The more selfish the heart, the more potential for conflict. That applies to marriage and family, work, society, and it applies to church unity.

So to prevent the fire of conflict the Bible tells us to do two things. Firstly, it tells us to avoid being the source of the spark in the first place. Don't discharge anger, wrath or malice. Don't discharge slander, filthy speech or lies. That's like throwing lit matches on the grass.

As an individual person, don't be the start of a possible conflict. Guard your heart; guard your tongue. Secondly, we are told what kind of fuel to be if the sparks of selfishness should land on us. It's very simple – be rain-soaked, water saturated, soggy fuel.

Have you ever tried to start a fire or keep a fire going with wood or branches that had not been dried? No matter what you try – it just smokes, or gets black underneath. All the water within just resists all attempts to ignite. In fact, a spark will do nothing. Blitz firefighters do nothing.

One type lights with a single spark; another type won't light even with a fire burning under it. That's the secret of whether or not conflict takes off.

Regardless of whether the initial incident was a spark of a misunderstanding, or possibly a fairly big flame of deliberate selfishness – if it meets the green wood of a Christlike, unselfish heart, it will not cause conflict.

So our passage here in Colossians teaches us how to be that kind of green wood. We saw in the recent sermon entitled ‘Don’t interrupt the Unity’ how not to be the spark or the flame that sets things off; now we see how to be around each other, if selfishness should land on us.

We find seven characteristics that the Bible wants us to have. These things not only neutralise the selfishness of others, they fill the church with an aroma of love that encourages more of the same.

Once again, these practices are grounded in a position. The behaviour is based upon something spiritually and internally true of you. Verse 12 tells us what that position is.

I. Your Position

You find your position in between the commas of verse 12 - *as the elect of God, holy and beloved*,. What does that mean?

Eklektos is the Greek word translated *elect*. It is similar to a number of English words. *Elected* means chosen. *Select* means *to choose*. *Eclectic* means a selection of different things or items. What do all those imply? Choice, a selection, a choosing.

Whose choice? Verse 12 tells us – Elect of *God*. God's choice. This is your position as a believer and perhaps the ultimate privilege and joy. You are chosen by God.

Have you ever stopped to think of the awesomeness of that privilege? Have you stopped to ask that unanswerable question, “Why me?”

And if you think the reason is because you did something, you haven't thought deep enough. Spurgeon put it well:

“I thought I had begun the good work myself, and I used sometimes to sit down and think, ‘Well, I sought the Lord four years before I found him,’ and I think I began to compliment myself upon the fact that I had perseveringly entreated of him in the midst of much discouragement. But one day the thought struck me, ‘How was it you came to seek God?’ and in an instant the answer came from my soul, ‘Why, because he led me to do it; he must first have shown me my need of him, or else I should never have sought him; he must have shown me his preciousness, or I never should have thought him worth seeking;’ and at once I saw the doctrines of grace as clear as possible. God must begin.”

When you realise God chose you not because of you, but because of Him, what can it do except humble you? To be proud of being chosen is to misunderstand the basis of choosing. But to reject election can be another form of pride.

This election by God means two things:

Firstly, you are greatly loved. It says 'beloved'. God delights in you. He loves all men, because they are made in His image. But He loves believers in a special way, because our sins are forgiven, and we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. God looks at us, and the delight He has had from eternity past in His Son is now on us, inasmuch as we and Christ are in union.

Secondly, you are set apart for Him.

This election means we are holy (set apart for God Himself, made unique and cleaned from the world). We are vessels removed from the others, to be used by Him and for Him.

II. Your Practice

In light of this special position, you are commanded to put something on. This verb *put on* is usually used for items of clothing. Something you put on your person becomes part of your appearance. It is a part of your beauty.

So, since you are chosen by God, holy and beloved, having put off the old and put on the new – put on the following attitudes and actions. Let them come to characterise you.

At first, this list can seem like a shopping list of moral requirements. But, putting them together, they are more like links in a chain. Furthermore, they are all perfectly illustrated in the life of our Lord Jesus.

1. An Open Heart – 'tender mercies'

I've mentioned before that the Greeks talked about the *splanchna* as the seat of emotion, the way we talk about the heart. They believed all the best affections resided in the *splanchna*, while the uncontrollable appetites and passions were in the *koilia*. The verb form is used of Jesus seven times in the Gospels. When Jesus saw the multitudes as sheep without a shepherd, when the leper came before Him and asked for cleansing, when the blind men asked for healing, when He saw the widow of Nain weeping for her dead son – he was *moved* with compassion. That's what this is. It is an open heart, one that sees the need, and feels it as if it were its own.

This is the heart that suffers alongside suffering, that feels the pain of another's misery. It is the heart of Christ, that wept at Lazarus' tomb, when he saw the pain that death brought.

An open heart is the opposite of a selfish heart. An open heart senses needs and feels them. A selfish heart has hardened to protect itself, to feel little or nothing, and to justify its selfishness.

1 John 3:17 *But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?*

What kind of needs? Certainly physical needs are in view here, but what if your brother simply needs encouragement? What if your sister needs guidance? What if he needs a rebuke; a visit; a reminder of a promise; a listening ear; a prayer prayed in his or her presence?

This is a deliberate action on your part – to clothe yourself with the attitude of an open heart, one that is not self-absorbed, but desirous to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. It starts by saying to the Lord, 'Give me eyes to see the needs around me.'

The next link in the chain takes it further. We might call this:

2. A Generous Hand - 'kindness'

The word *goodness* simply means kindness, benevolence, helpfulness. It is what you do after your open heart senses the need. After John penned those words about shutting up your heart from your brother's need, he wrote - **1 John 3:18** *My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed*

and in truth.

It is one thing to see your fellow brother or sister's spiritual or physical need; it is another to get down and meet the need.

Luke 10:30-37 *Then Jesus answered and said: "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. ³³ But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.' ³⁶ So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" ³⁷ And he said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

Did Christ exemplify this?

Acts 10:38 *how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.*

Is kindness your clothing? Have you put kindness on in your dealings with others?

I said a moment ago, that we need to 'get down and meet the need'. That leads us to the next link in the chain: lowness of mind or what we might call

3. A Kneeling Posture - 'humility'

As the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates, showing goodness to others means humbling yourself. It isn't glamorous to hold your sister accountable for that sin she has been struggling with. It isn't going to get you applause to quietly encourage that struggling brother.

All we need to do is to think of our Lord Jesus, on his hands and knees, scrubbing the dirty feet of his disciples. Though He was so high, yet He took a low position.

Humility is not pretending to be inferior. Humility is unconscious self-forgetfulness to meet the needs of others. It is recognising your position as a fellow-sinner saved by grace, commanded to serve.

Whenever self is starting to rear-up, and say, 'This work is too demeaning for me,' or 'I'm above this kind of work,' we need to be reminded of Christ's Words in Luke 17.

Luke 17:7-10 *And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and sit down to eat'? ⁸ But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink'? ⁹ Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. ¹⁰ So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'*

It's like washing feet. It needed to be done, and lowness of mind said, "This service needs to happen, and my reputation must come second".

Another reason for this is that people struggle to receive goodness from others. Our pride gets in the way. Humility and selflessness make it that bit easier to receive. Everyone knows when they are being served by someone haughty and impressed with their own charity.

Humility makes the goodness you give out easier to receive.

Sometimes you need to make sure your goodness is mixed with a good dose of humility to make it easy to swallow.

The fourth link in this chain we might call

4. A Gentle Touch - 'meekness'

Gentleness. I still have a vivid memory as a three year old of picking up snails and not being able to do so without breaking the shells. I wasn't coordinated enough to apply just enough tension between my fingers to hold the shell so it wouldn't drop, but not so much that it would break. I had not learned to control or moderate my strength.

All of us know how to be gentle when it comes to fragile objects – china, eggs, crystal, expensive electronics. We are careful because we know it is breakable.

When we seek to minister to others, we must be aware of the fact that people's souls are made of gentle stuff. A mom can wash her son in cold water with a scrubbing brush, or in warm water with a sponge.

There is no need to be harsh, sharp or intolerant of each other when the gentle approach will do.

Matthew 12:20 *A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench,*

Think of how Jesus dealt with a prostitute weeping at his feet, a Roman centurion with a sick servant, ignorant disciples asking simpleton questions, a Pharisee still in the fear of man meeting Him at night.

Why do you think it is that the children were brought to Him for Him to bless? Because He was rough, sharp-tongued and cruel? We read He took them up in His arms.

Romans 15:1 *We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*

5. A Flexible Approach.

The last three things on this list all suggest opposition. To be longsuffering is to put up with what is stretching you, placing pressure upon you. Forbearing is absorbing irritations, weaknesses, disappointments patiently so as to avoid any conflict or contention.

In the face of unfavorable circumstances, you are quiet, patient – absorbing the load of another's person's thoughtlessness, apathy, indifference, selfishness.

And on top of that, if there is some complaint we have against one another, we are to be granting forgiveness the way it has been granted to us – freely.

Forgiveness is a generous, overflowing granting of favour, as one to whom money is no issue. Why? Because Christ has forgiven us and paid any debt against us.

These attitudes are like the steel rods in concrete. Not only do they strengthen the concrete to take more load, they allow some flexibility, so it won't be brittle. We have all known people who are very brittle in their dealings with other people – they crack very easily. Christians are to stretch, bear the load – and if cracks appear – we fill them up with the cement of forgiveness.

Well, do we need to think hard to see these in our Lord? When He was contradicted by arrogant Pharisees; when He was rejected by proud Jews; when He was slandered by false witnesses; when He was hit and spat in the face; when He was stripped of His clothes and put in a mock robe; when He was scourged with a Roman cat-of-nine-tails; when He was crucified like a murderer or thug, and the mockery and taunts continued even then. How did He respond to those?

What kind of conflict fuel is a heart filled with longsuffering, forbearance and forgiveness? It is very wet wood; very hard to ignite.

So if we combine these five things – an open heart, a kind hand, a kneeling posture, a gentle touch and a flexible response – what kind of relationships are we going to foster?

Do you think the fires of selfishness can spread into conflict if we are putting these attitudes on like our uniform.

And then to cap it off, Paul says, Above all these, put on love. Love therefore includes but goes beyond these mentioned. It is what binds together in maturity and perfect wholeness, apart from it, the body will not reach maturity.

Why do we love one another? For Christ's sake. We are His chosen Bride, members of His Body. He saves us as individuals, but he saves us into a corporate Body, that we are to love and submit to.

It's not unusual for secret societies to have special things they wear – rings, necklaces, undergarments, that identify them as part of the Lodge or the Group.

Christians have never had a physical uniform. The uniform we are to put on is mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, forbearance and forgiveness.

'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples -if you have love, one for another.'

Now this is not given to us as a possible approach, or as one method among many others. God has commanded us. He says – “As My chosen ones – this is how you are to clothe yourselves for one another.”