

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – May 20, 2018

[Colossians 3:12-17](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com.)

(Note: This text is NOT one of the given readings for this particular week in the Revised Common Lectionary. It was selected thematically to accompany Sr. High Youth Sunday this week. So don't worry that the links below take you to materials for another calendar date – that is simply an aberration for this week!)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Colossians 3:12-17 (From the *Homiletics* archive; “The Dress Code” – Dec. 27, 2015)

Today's epistle reading contains an appeal to the members of the church at Colossae to allow the love of Christ to flow through and in them to forge them into the one body of Christ -- as they have been called to be. This unit -- while containing words of wisdom that even today's Christian can readily understand -- is a charge to a church in danger of being ripped apart by false teaching.

There is not space here to take up the issue of defining the heresy present at Colossae. (Proposals for this heresy include a wide range of possibilities -- from a pagan mystery cult to Jewish-Christian mysticism and even to no formal "heresy" at all.) What can be stated is that the Pauline mission must counter false teachings that are threatening the church's understanding of Christ and, thus, the body of Christ. Our text comes after an argument countering this teaching.

The letter refers to this teaching as a "philosophy" linked with "human tradition" and "the elemental spirits of the universe" (2:8). This philosophy is most explicitly *not* from Christ (2:8). Since Christ is the "head of every ruler and authority" (2:10), and since God has triumphed over the "rulers and authorities" through Christ (2:15), it stands to reason that God has triumphed over the "elemental spirits of the universe," the very ones held responsible for a teaching that has endangered the church. Moreover, since believers have died with Christ to "the elemental spirits of the universe," then they are no longer bound by these spirits of the world (2:20). Yet, those held sway by this heresy are apparently passing judgments concerning "food and drink" or "a festival or a new moon or a sabbath" (2:16; cf. 2:21). Furthermore, the letter warns, "Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God" (2:18-19). From this exhortation, it is apparent that leanings toward such teaching threaten the unity of the body, but they also threaten the attachment of the body to the head, that is, Christ. This body imagery is an especially poignant metaphor since one of the characteristics of the false teaching is an ascetic practice, the "severe treatment of the body" (2:23). The audience receives a reminder that they have died with Christ (and thus participate in God's victory over the spirits of the universe that threaten the church's existence).

Thus, in the immediate context of 3:12-17, the Colossians hear a command to put to death "whatever in you is earthly" (v. 5), warnings to purge themselves of vices (vv. 5, 8, 9), and a reminder that the body of Christ is one that does not recognize divisions between "Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free" (v. 11). This body without division was an especially pertinent message to a cosmopolitan city full of a variety of peoples and religions. What distinguishes the Colossians now is their place in the body of Christ. The believers are reminded that, instead of being the chosen ones of those "elemental spirits of the universe," they are the elect of God, "holy and beloved" (v. 12). Therefore, they must act like it.

The sequence of virtues in verse 12 is made possible only because of their status in Christ, but their status in Christ also demands such behavior to keep the body of Christ intact. They are told to "clothe yourselves" (literally, "to put on" or "to don") with "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience" (v. 12). The OT attributes "compassion" to God (for example, Psalm 51:1; 103:4). Furthermore, this virtue continues the anthropomorphic imagery of the body (see 2:19). The phrase rendered "compassion" in the NRSV is literally, "bowels of compassion" or the "inward parts of compassion," and could be translated as "heartfelt compassion." Just as God is known for his compassion, he is also known for his "kindness" (also translated "goodness" or "generosity"; see, for example, Psalm 25:7; 31:19; Jeremiah 33:11). Though the false teachers appear to have humility (2:23), the author exhorts the Colossians to don it. Elsewhere in the Pauline letters, Christ's actions are the epitome of humility (consider the Philippian hymn, Philippians 2:6-11). Furthermore, in contrast to being "puffed up" by false teaching and passing judgments on others (2:16, 18), "meekness," which was attributed to Christ in 2 Corinthians 10:1, should mark those in the body of Christ. The exhortation to exhibit "patience" or "long-suffering" is further elaborated by the instructions in verse 13 to bear with one another, and to forgive each one as Christ has forgiven. Finally, above all these virtues, they must clothe themselves with love (v. 14; see also 1 Corinthians 13:4, 13). Love is the "bond of perfection" (NRSV "love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony"). To play with the clothing metaphor, love is the last garment that holds the whole outfit together (the suspenders, belt, overcoat, tie, scarf, etc.). Love is not optional. Love is "the bond."

Verse 15 reiterates the body metaphor and reminds the Colossians that they, as God's chosen ones, were chosen to be one body in Christ. This is possible if the "peace of Christ" rules in their hearts. Talk of the ruling "peace of Christ" runs counter to the Roman peace that in fact ruled Colossae. *Pax Romana* came at the expense of war, but the peace of Christ exhibits love and forgiveness. Only when the believers have put on all these virtues and have allowed the peace of Christ to unite them will they be able to teach and admonish one another in all wisdom (v. 16). In contrast, the false teachers only appear to have wisdom (2:23).

Therefore, the Colossians should be thankful for their status in Christ (v. 15b). Instead of spouting out traditions that are not from God, they are able to sing "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God" (v. 16). Instead of having the appearance of wisdom by following false teachings (2:23), they are called to exhibit virtues characteristic of God and modeled by Christ (vv. 12-14). They are no longer enslaved to any human traditions or teachings from the "elemental spirits of the universe." Christ's death and resurrection freed them from such chains. Now, they must exhibit their status in a new bond, a bond of love. This bond courses throughout the body and keeps the body connected. Only by remembering their position in Christ will the body stay connected to the Head and avoid the real threats posed by the false teachings endangering the Colossian church. If believers will remember the Lord Jesus in everything that they do (v. 17), they will not fall prey to false notions of wisdom and deceitful philosophy.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out another commentary available for this text (and others!) at WorkingPreacher.org.

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?