

Paul's letter to the Colossians is an inspiring and lofty vision of what the Christian life looks like. Colossians was written to a small Christian community in Colossae (in Asia Minor, modern Turkey). The believers there were struggling with outside pressures such as false teachings, old habits, and cultural pulls that threatened to water down or distort the gospel. Paul writes to remind them that Christ is supreme and sufficient. By the time we reach Chapter 3, Paul has already laid the foundation: Believers have died with Christ and have been raised with Christ. Their old life is gone; their new life is in Christ. Right before today's passage, Paul tells the Colossians to "put to death" or to "put off" old patterns of sin, and he names five sins. These are the "old clothes" that no longer fit their new life in Christ. But here Paul shifts to what they must "put on" as God's chosen, holy, and beloved people. It is the wardrobe God has picked out for us to wear. Paul offers five traits for them to wear. Each trait is rooted in the character of God. Why clothing language? Because in the ancient world, baptism often included taking off old garments and putting on a new white robe. Paul draws on this imagery to show that being "in Christ" means a real change of life: shedding the old and putting on the new. This baptismal language- this marking is not just a private decision but incorporation into a community that embodies Christ's life. Before we read God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Paul's vision is of a church where grace is practiced in daily relationships. This vision is what it looks like when our lives are shaped by Christ. God's grace doesn't just cover our regrets- it reshapes how we treat one another.

Brian McLaren calls grace the “energy of God”- the source that empowers us to live differently. We began worship by singing, *In Christ There Is No East or West*. When our identity is in Jesus Christ, the old categories hold no sway: We are no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised or not, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, Republican or Democrat. In Christ, we remove the old names that label us as “other,” and we put on “one-anothering.” Notice how many times “one another,” “another,” “each other,” “one body” are used in this passage. This is “one-anothering.” It lets us know that we’re responsible for one another in community. We hold one another accountable. This way of being is a deeply communal way of life. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is upside down from the ways of our culture. Disciples are not forced to love but hopefully do so in honor of Christ and the Body of Christ. Take *Sticks n Stones*- When I hear this phrase I always think of my childhood. You know- someone would call you a name, and you were supposed to reply, “Sticks n stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” That was a lie. Words do hurt. They hurt just as much if not more than sticks n stones. I read a blog from a colleague this week. She was brave and vulnerable enough to share that she had had a painful conversation at the beginning of the week with someone she loves- someone in her own family. She expressed her fear and concern about our country and the world, and their response came quickly and with a long sting. She was reminded that hate “teaches us to see one another not as kin, but as enemies. It convinces us to abandon our deepest values for the sake of fear, grievance, and power. It numbs us to the cruelty of our words. It teaches us to justify suffering when it befalls someone ‘on the other side.’”

She went on to say, “We can’t afford this kind of dehumanization. Not in our families. Not in our congregations. Not in our politics. Not now. The only antidote I know is to resist ‘othering’ in all its forms. We must verify what we hear. We must stay curious about the lives of people who are different from us. We must hold compassion like a flame and refuse to let it go out. Because...we all belong. We are all sacred, and none of us are free if we forget that. We are in this together” (Cameron Tribble, 10.3.25, *Who Taught You to Hate “Them?”*).

Thursday, across the world, Jewish people observed Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It is the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, a day of fasting, prayer, and reflection. At its heart, Yom Kippur invites an unflinching moral inventory: What harm have I done? Whom have I failed to see? Where has my silence become complicity? This is not shame work. It is soul work that leads to soul food. It’s not experienced as a form of punishment but of purification, a cleaning out of the clutter that keeps us from living with integrity. In an age of blame and vengeance, Yom Kippur teaches us to look inward before casting stones outward. It dares us to believe that change is still possible, that forgiveness is real, that we can begin again. Though most of us are Christian and not Jewish, all of us are in need of atonement. Our relationships cry out for mending. Our systems are corrupt with injustice. Our lives, often veer from our deepest values. Our politics pit neighbor against neighbor. Our language wounds more than it heals. Our economy rewards greed over generosity. Our institutions prioritize power over people. Our culture forgets the sacredness of the Earth. Our spirits grow

numb from too much noise and not enough meaning ” (Cameron Tribble, 10.2.25, *A Day to Begin Again*).

Today Bronwyn sang a beautiful song entitled *Sticks n Stones* by Carrie Yost. Yost writes, “I don’t know about you, but I’ve made mistakes. I’ve been known to throw a stone or two. But what if we all just dropped our stones? What if we all just walked away? Lord, help us learn to build instead of break with sticks n stones.” Perhaps that was how Paul was trying to get the church in Colossae to respond. To drop their stones and walk with Christ. We are to be and do as those who represent the true nature and character of Jesus Christ in this world. These characteristics are not rules for individuals alone; they are practices that sustain a body shaped by grace. This list of virtues is just as much a way of being as it is of doing in community. However idealistic we might frame these qualities to be, verse 13 makes it clear. Believers are instructed to “bear with” and to “forgive” one another- literally- “be gracious to” one another. The combination is important. Yes, there will be disagreement among those in community and forgiveness will be necessary. These disagreements must be handled not with defensiveness or denial but with grace and forgiveness. Just like we are taught by Jesus to pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Just as those of Jewish faith observed Yom Kippur, we, too, are called to turn to God to repair what is broken- to reconcile us, to renew what is holy, to begin again.

Paul invites the community of believers to begin again by putting on this wardrobe of grace. The base layers of this wardrobe are: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Forgiveness is the garment at the heart of the wardrobe. And the final piece of the wardrobe is the belt. It's what ties or brings the entire outfit together. Love. Why does love prevail? Because Paul says that "the Lord has forgiven you." In this entire passage, the you is plural. So it's "The Lord has forgiven y'all." Why? Because Love brings these other traits to their completion- into harmony with one another. Love is, of course, the defining virtue of God. For God is love. And the source of power is not willpower but grace. This is love that shows up in one-anothering, not in othering. This is the peace of Christ that rules in our hearts and is visible to everyone. This is when someone withdraws their fist and chooses to forgive harsh and venomous words. This is when another is curious instead of judgmental and chooses to include rather than exclude. This is when one who disagrees listens more than they argue and loves her neighbor regardless. Notice that three times Paul calls the community to gratitude. The peace of Christ rules, the word of Christ dwells, gratitude overflows.

None of this is easy, especially when life gets to life'ing. People who step into the light of Jesus will come face to face with sin. Its harsh, but necessary to live in the love of God. Some people are too afraid or ashamed to come out of the shadows. Their judgement is that they stay in the shadows when they could be in the light. The shadows are their judgement, not God. They are their own worst enemies. Listen to this story told by the

author of *Ragman*, Walter "Wally" Wangerin (*Wounds Are Where Light Enters*). Wally tells of having a great time as a young boy. He was winging stones at the floodlights that shone over the campus of Concordia Junior College. It WAS a great time until Wally's father, the President of the college, suddenly appeared. "Wally," he said in a frantic voice. "What are you doing?" Wally answered, "Ahhhm, I'm winging stones." His father's big, heavy eyebrows drew up like raven wings, "Winging stones - at six-thousand-watt light bulbs of great expense. Don't. Don't you ever throw stones at light bulbs again." THUS the Command was issued. But Wally reasoned that the COMMAND was not applicable to him because he always missed- that is until the last stone of the season was thrown. He lifted the stone and for the first time in his young career he fired the perfect shot, and he stood under a rain of the finest glass, twinkling and shattered in the sunlight. And then his brother Paul said, "I'll tell. I'll tell." Wally quipped back, "Don't you ever tell, or I'll beat you up. Promise." And the promise was given. Wally's brother didn't tell that Wally had broken the bulb, but something happened to Wally in the keeping of that secret. He shut out a part of himself from his Father. The affectionate words and gestures of his father hurt him because he screamed inside, "If you knew what I'd done you wouldn't love me." And he was isolated from his father. Finally, Wally couldn't stand the isolation any longer. So then, by main force and willpower he determined to come out and tell the truth. He decided to come out of hiding. Early morning on the next day, Wally crept from his house to the Administration building of the College and entered its holiness. He walked down the hall to his father's office, entered and stood

in front of the desk where his father sat. And he blurted out the awful words: "I threw a stone and broke the lamp - the six thousand watt light bulb of great expense." Wally's words: "Slowly my father arose behind his desk. I didn't look at him. Just as slowly, he rounded the far side and came toward me with those thick eyebrows - Judgment cometh. I was prepared for the spanking. I lowered my head. But I was altogether unprepared for what my father did. I think I would not have cried if my father had spanked me. He knelt down at my side and took me in his arms and hugged me. Then I began to cry, and I couldn't stop crying! Love killed me. Grace overwhelmed me. I hadn't expected this. I hadn't expected the most undeserved thing to be forgiven." This is what it means to act in the name of the Lord Jesus. Every day as we get dressed, let's remember that as Christ's disciples, we are representatives of Christ and Christ's body in the world. Let's live each day in grateful response to God! Amen.