

Life in God's New Humanity

Back in 1989 we accepted a call to be the pastor of Bethel Church in Jackson, MI. This meant a major transition for our family. Moving from an isolated, western, rural town in Eastern Oregon to a small city in Michigan was as much a cultural dislocation as geographical.


In La Grande my boys could ride their bikes all over town without fear and did. In Jackson we lived on a fairly busy, four lane road that wasn't safe for riding. For the first time school was about four miles away and the boys were deeply offended that they had to ride a bus to school.

In Oregon we had a rust-free '68 Ford pick-up we called Ernie. It had a gun rack in the back window where we kept our rifles and shotguns during hunting seasons which stretched from September 1st to mid-January. Hunting and shooting sports were big in Eastern Oregon. In Jackson most of the men played golf.

If I told someone in La Grande that we skidded off a cattle guard into a rock jack and ended up in a bar-pit, They would have known exactly what happened. We knew how to use stretchers to open and close barbed wire gates while traveling two track roads in back country. None of those things even existed in Jackson.

The boys wore jeans to church. Several of the guys in their new youth group still wore suits and ties to church. We even discovered we had an accent. And nobody knew how to pronounce Oregon properly.

That's what happens when you move from one region to another. We had some vocabulary and ways of getting along we had to leave behind, and some new ways of thinking and acting to learn.

In a much more dramatic fashion, the transition from our  old life as part of the old man, the old humanity in Adam, to our new life as part of God's new humanity in Christ, requires transformative changes: we leave many of our old ways behind. We have to re-orient our thinking to a new, **right-side-up reality**, and we have to learn new ways of behaving consistent with who we are becoming as followers of Jesus.


We have been talking about this for the past several weeks in our study of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Last week we looked at verses 9-11: 📖 "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."

In verses 12 and following, Paul begins to give us the lay of the land in God's new humanity, the Body of Christ. He has already talked about samples of old behaviors to put to death, put aside, and strip off—immorality, slander, and lying, along with the ways those sins are energized and manifest themselves. Now, using the metaphor of clothing, he tells us what to put on: 📖 "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (Colossians 3:12-13 ESV).

Let's remind ourselves that the new self, literally the new man, is not our new nature as individual believers. 📖 Paul is describing our new identity in God's family, what it means to be *in Christ*, part of God's kingdom people, the new humanity that is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator. In Christ's body—this new man—old distinctions and divisions fade away into nothing.

Paul has identified several: racial, religious, cultural, and social—all the old barriers we used to use to classify and pigeon-hole people; all of them disappear—one-percenters and ninety-nine percenters; Calvinists and Arminians; Democrats and Republicans; *Black Lives Matter* and *All Lives Matter*; citizens and illegal aliens; vaxxers and anti-vaxxers; gun control advocates and gun rights advocates; home-schoolers, Christian-schoolers and public-schoolers; Spartans and Wolverines—even Buckeyes!


In Christ, in God's new humanity, Christ is everything and he is in everyone! 📖 So in Christ we put on "...compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."

Before he gets to those five graces,  Paul anchors us further in our new identity. Collectively and individually, we are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. You aren't somebody God is stuck with. He picked you for himself.

And guess what? That person sitting on the other side of the worship center, the one who is kind of an odd duck or irritating, God picked them too.

Americans share a peculiar conceit that we are free, autonomous individuals who feel no constraints on our choices and always decide for ourselves. That even colors how we think about our salvation. *We* came to Christ. *We* accepted the gospel. *We* chose to follow Jesus. And we truly did all those things. But what we discover after we do it is that we made all those choices because God chose us and pursued us.

We may think we were seeking God, but the underlying truth is that God sought us. *He* came to us and opened the eyes of our hearts to see his glory in the face of Christ. *He* brought us to himself. He accepted us in his beloved Son. Our salvation had nothing to do with anything noteworthy we did. We merely responded to God's generous, loving invitation which was suddenly irresistible. God chose us to have a significant part in his much larger story as a member of "Team Jesus," for which we are both humbled and profoundly grateful.

Further, when God picked us to be in his family, he also made us holy. Whatever you were before you became a Christian, when God saved you, you became a new creation.  "...you were washed, you were *sanctified*, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11 ESV). *Sanctified* means God set you apart for himself and made you special for himself.

Which means also that we are dearly loved, every single one of us. You are loved; you are God's beloved child, even when you feel unlovely and unloved. God chose you; God made you special for himself; and at every moment of every day the full intensity of God's love is focused on you. We can trust his unfailing love and faithfulness.

“Do you realize it is impossible for God to ‘try’ to love you? We all have times when we have to ‘try’ to love others, even family members. Why do we so often struggle with loving others? Because we are not love. God is love (see 1 John 4:8). He does not have to work at it” (*Relational Elder Training*, Session 5).

That means we are secure in a love that is as constant as God’s unchanging character. God isn’t fickle. His steadfast love endures forever!

Paul always connects the dots between ethical demands and spiritual identity—who we are and who we are becoming as part of God’s new humanity in Christ. Embracing this identity and orienting our interior selves in light of it is crucial to putting on the virtues that follow. It is because we have been chosen, made holy and dearly beloved, it becomes us to act in these ways.

▶ “Put on, then...compassionate hearts...” The word translated compassion is *splagchnon*. It’s a word that describes our viscera, the seat of what we call our “gut feelings.” The KJV has “bowels of mercies.” A bit crude for modern sensibilities, but that’s where the ancients located those tender feelings which respond viscerally to human need.

This is the word Jesus chose to describe what energized the Good Samaritan when he came upon the robbery victim.

Where do we today locate feelings of compassion? In our hearts, right?

The ancients used body metaphors differently. The heart was the seat of their truest self, the ops center of their core identity, where they placed their deepest longings, values and convictions. Their deepest thinking went on in our hearts.

They experienced things like compassion and tender emotions in their gut. Compassion is the tender sensitivity and empathy that makes us willing to take the time to understand another’s situation and enter into their distress. It is an essential marriage builder, and it is an essential community builder.

The polar opposite of compassion is a blend of insensitivity or indifference, being emotionally disconnected or unaware.

Psychologists have a term they use to talk about an individual's emotional awareness and self-governance. They call it "emotional intelligence" or our EQ—our emotional quotient.

▶ People with a low EQ don't manage their emotions well, and have a hard time even identifying what they're feeling. This has a negative impact on their social interactions because they can't empathize with those around them. They tend to be self-centered and blame others for interpersonal problems.

In marriage they can be afflicted with what might be described as compassion deficit disorder. They suggest solutions for their partner's distress or offer criticism instead of empathy. It's easier to try to fix someone than to feel with them. When faced with tender emotions, it feels safer to shut down inside. That usually leaves the other partner to manage their pain on their own with a mate who is culpably disengaged.

Have you ever experienced that? What do you most want? To be heard. To be understood. To be accepted and loved by someone who isn't compounding your discomfort. Attentiveness feels like compassion.

A worship song begins with the line: "Everyone needs compassion..." Exactly. Wives need it. Husbands need it. Children need it. And the people sitting around us in the pews need it. In God's new humanity compassion is a healing balm for hurting people. Clothe yourselves with compassion. Put it on. Wear it. Habituate yourself to it.


Along side compassion, Paul says, ▶ "Put on...kindness." Kindness is generous goodness. It's opposite, of course, is unkindness, meanness.

Kindness is the most giving of these virtues. It is generosity with integrity and a warm smile. It is never patronizing. In many cases kindness is compassion in action, words and responses that are helpful, encouraging, uplifting and embracing.

Unkind acts and words have a way of searing themselves in our memories. They leave ugly footprints on our souls.

Listen to this from Purdue University: “Successful intimate relationships have a balance between positive and negative feelings and actions between partners. According to relationship researcher John Gottman, the magic ratio is 5 to 1. What does this mean? This means that for every one negative feeling or interaction between partners, there must be five positive feelings or interactions. Stable and happy couples share more positive feelings and actions than negative ones. Unhappy couples tend to have more negative feelings and actions than positive ones. Partners who criticize each other, provide constant negative feedback, aren’t supportive of each other, don’t demonstrate affection or appreciation, or behave uninterested in their partner are in relationships that are out of balance.”


The Gottman Institute further states that “If the positive-to-negative ratio during conflict is 1-to-1 or less, that’s unhealthy and indicates a couple teetering on the edge of divorce.”

Negative interactions are sometimes described as the  Four Horsemen, a metaphor based on the Book of Revelation. These are contempt, criticism, defensiveness and stonewalling—withdrawing to avoid conflict.

These same four kinds of unkind interactions create alienation in all our relationships, especially our churches.

I come from a hunting tradition and have been around guns all my life. One thing I tried to impress on my boys when they were growing up is that you can’t unfire a gun. Be sure of your target before you pull the trigger.

The same thing applies to our conversations. You can’t un-say unkind words. You can’t take back unkind non-verbal messages. By the grace of God’s good Spirit, cultivate simple kindness toward your mate, your kids, your church family, the people who populate your world.

Paul’s third word is  humility. Humility is a virtue that is often badly misunderstood. It is not self-deprecation—putting yourself down or making yourself small.

Humility is first of all a matter of truth. It is properly measuring yourself against God's evaluation of you. It is being so secure in your identity as God's child—chosen, holy and dearly loved—that you can empty yourself of personal ambitions and take the place of a servant: available, teachable, responsive.

Pastor Tim Keller said humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less. "True gospel-humility means I stop connecting every experience, every conversation, with myself. In fact, I stop thinking about myself. The freedom of self-forgetfulness. The blessed rest that only self-forgetfulness brings."

I come by a fair amount of arrogance naturally. The men in my extended family are not renowned for their humility. My sister Betty remembers a conversation with my father in which he said: "My brothers and I often disagree about things, and they always think they are right. But I've discovered that I am usually the one that who is right."

I am my father's child. It's in my genes. ...It's in my fallen, sinful self, who and what I was as part of the old humanity that wants to lift itself above others.

And the thing is, my arrogance is usually a cover for feelings of deep inadequacy; scary questions about whether or not I've got what it takes; fears about being found out. So I present myself as confident, competent, smarter than others, intimidating.

Keith and Kristyn Getty are among my favorite contemporary Christian artists. Their lyrics are exquisitely thoughtful. In a recent song, *My Worth Is Not in What I Own*, they have these lines:

"Two wonders here that I confess: My worth and my unworthiness;
My value fixed—my ransom paid at the cross."

The cross of Christ is the place where arrogance is laid down and forsaken. It is there I see my true worth in God's sight, and my absolute unworthiness in God's sight. God gave his Son to rescue us and restore us to himself. Our unworthiness demanded the life of God the Son in exchange for ours.

I love the third verse of *Rock of Ages*: “Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to your cross I cling. Naked here before your face; helpless I cry out for grace. Foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me Savior for I die.”

The eternal God had to die to rescue us! That’s the mess we were in. At the cross we are completely exposed, known and loved. That is worth and significance enough for any person! At the cross we are set free to serve others in humility and love.

Humility is in the middle of this list of virtues, and with good reason. Without humility, all the other graces are impossible. The proud person is condescending, but not kind. And the condescending person is never compassionate.

Arrogance does not produce gentleness. It can be hard and cruel, but not gentle. Nor will arrogance produce patience. It takes a humble soul to wait patiently for others.

Humility is found in the heart of love, for the humble person turns their focus outward to rejoice at the abilities and achievements of others, and to serve the needs and even the failings of others. Humility is central in marriage, in friendship, and in the healthy life of a flourishing congregation.

Put on humility.

▶ The fourth grace Paul urges is meekness. I prefer the NIV here. It translates with the term “gentleness.” Meekness doesn’t quite do it for me. It’s a “Caspar Milquetoast” kind of word. For some reason gentleness connects with me and is one of my favorite aspirational words.

One of the ways the ancients used “gentleness” was to describe a horse that was perfectly trained—all the power of a draft horse under perfect control by its owner.

Marv is a friend who lives in Amish country. While visiting him once, we stopped to talk to an Amish farmer who was plowing with a team of massive Percherons. They had hooves the size of dinner plates. While we stood there talking, the farmer’s six year old boy was playing around and under those horses, even in between their legs. His team stood calmly without flinching. They were powerful, but gentle.


A gentle person has great strengths tempered by godly self-management whose power is available to serve others. If I could choose a likely synonym it might be safe. It's opposite is harsh.


My friend, Doug Bytwerk, and I frequently meet for coffee or a meal together. When the waitress asks if we want separate checks, Doug with frequently reply: "Absolutely! I wouldn't pay for the steam off of his coffee."

Male humor can be like that, full of barbs and sarcasm. We talk trash with our friends as a goofy way of expressing affection. Guys get that mostly.

By the way, men, wives don't get it. My wife doesn't. I'm guessing your wife doesn't either. Men, find ways to let your wife know that your strength is on her side, it's safe, approachable, even when you are having hard conversations.

Marriages and churches all go through rough patches, but we don't have to be rough people. Be safe for one another. God's family should be the safest place in the world. In the humility of love, put on gentleness.


The fifth virtue Paul tells us to clothe ourselves with is patience. The word he chose here describes putting up with difficult people.

In the wisdom God gave him, Solomon said: "A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back" (Proverbs 29:11 ESV). A whole lot of success in relationships is learning to quietly hold back your reaction, especially to stuff that really doesn't matter—cutting each other some slack. We don't always have to give someone a piece of our mind, especially if it's a piece we can't afford to lose.

How often do we hear the excuse: "I was just expressing my opinion!" That is a cruel justification for impulsive words.

Put on patience.

We'll have to save verse 13 for next week.

Paul is urging us to adopt the very character of our Lord Jesus Christ: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience..." I have been reminded recently how much I still need to inhabit these.

Understand who you are in God's sight. God picked you for himself. He is making you holy, special for him. He loves you with an everlasting love. In the strength and security of that position, clothe yourself with these virtues: compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness/gentleness, and patience.

This is a short verse, easy to memorize. It is one of those that is indeed memorable! Hide it in your heart. Pray it into your life. These graces define Kingdom culture, reflect the presence of God's Spirit in us, and are essential for healthy relationships, healthy homes, healthy churches.

Benediction:

“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Hebrews 13:20–21 ESV).