

PUT ON THE NEW

by Ray C. Stedman

There was a popular song some years ago, sung by Bing Crosby and others of my generation, that went like this:

You've got to accentuate the positive,
Eliminate the negative,
Latch on to the affirmative,
And don't mess with Mr. In-between.

Those lyrics are an accurate description of the passage we have before us in Colossians, chapter 3, beginning with verse 12. Listen to these affirmative words:

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

There are the positive qualities of Christian living. Through this entire section the apostle has written in terms of putting off and putting on clothes. That suggests that this ought to be done every morning. As God's chosen people we ought to put on daily these qualities that reflect the character of Jesus. Each of these terms could be used of him. So when you get up, start out by putting on these qualities of grace.

How do you get up in the morning? Some have great difficulty. Some can leap out of bed, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, ready to face the day immediately, but others drag along for a couple of hours, needing a cup of coffee to get them going. It is reported that Albert Einstein once said, "The problem with the speed of light is, it comes too early in the morning!" I once heard a Southern Baptist preacher in Atlanta confess before a group of pastors, "I don't even believe in God before 10:30 in the morning!" No matter what time you get started, however, Paul's word is, "clothe yourselves." When you get up, deliberately put on these qualities of life. The reason, of course, is because you can put them on. That is the argument throughout this whole letter. You are a new man, a new woman in Christ, therefore, you can begin to live that way. So do it! That is the apostle's exhortation.

There is much confusion among believers at this point. Many seem to find great difficulty putting on these positive virtues as they begin their day or throughout the day. That is probably because they have never thoroughly understood, or perhaps have not practiced, what the apostle said earlier: "Put off the old man." Learn to recognize the characteristics of the old life: the self-centered, praise-loving, prideful flesh in every one of us. Reject that! Put it off! Do as Paul says in the previous paragraph: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature." Treat it as though you are dead to it. That is Paul's argument in Romans 6: "Consider yourselves to be dead, indeed, unto sin." And you can, because God has given you a new basis of operation!

Listen to Robert Schuller, and other advocates of "positive thinking" or "possibility thinking." What are they saying? Just what this paragraph says, "Put on these positive qualities. Think positively. Face the day with courage and confidence." As we saw in our last study, "thumbs up" is to be the symbol of the Christian life. These men make a strong and biblical plea to do this. But the problem with their message, and the reason why oftentimes their plea is misleading, is that they fail to make the careful distinction that Scripture makes between the old man and the new man. These positive admonitions are not addressed to the old life. That is to be put away. There is a negative quality of living, which precedes the positive. We must reject this appeal which comes to us so easily from our past experience. It still haunts us as new creations in Christ, because it has taken over our brain patterns and past programming. We still, all too easily, play over in our minds the old movies of the past. But this is to be put aside. If we do that, then we can respond to these exhortations to be

what God has now made us to be. So, when you start your day, begin this way. Put away the old reactions and then clothe yourself, put on deliberately, in your thinking, these seven qualities that reflect the life and temperament of Jesus.

The first one is "compassion." "Clothe yourselves with compassion." Literally the word is, "bowels of sympathy." The ancients believed that the emotions originated in the bowels. We don't think that way, although we get close to it when we say, "I've got a gut feeling." I recently heard the story of the little girl who was asked to describe the parts of man. She said, "Man has three parts: the brainium, the chester, and the abominable cavity. The brainium holds the brain, the chester holds the heart, and the abominable cavity holds the bowels, of which there are five: a, e, i, o and u." Many seem to be as confused about their humanity as that little girl. We must understand what these phrases mean. Compassion is what we would call a "heart of pity." It is a sense of sympathy, of empathy with someone. When you come to the breakfast table, come with compassion: compassion for that strange looking creature, her hair up in curlers, shuffling around the kitchen in old slippers. Come with compassion for that gruff, stubble-faced fellow, isolated behind his morning newspaper, ignoring everybody; or those children who are trying to get everything together before they go to school. Approach life with compassion; that is what Paul is saying. Put it on when you get up in the morning. You are a new man, or new woman; therefore, live that way!

After that, going a step further, comes "kindness." Kindness is action that reveals compassion, action that arises out of a sense of sympathy. It can take many different forms---a smile, a kind word, a pat on the shoulder, an invitation to lunch, an offer of help. We are to put on compassion and kindness as we start our day and throughout the day.

Many centuries ago, a certain young man from a rural setting went to live in a large city and fell in with the wrong crowd. He lived a wild and dissolute life, becoming involved in many hurtful things which almost destroyed him. But he heard a preacher one day and though he did not particularly appreciate his preaching, he was struck by the man. He went to hear him again, and soon that preacher was able to lead him to Christ. That young man has become famous as the great St Augustine. This is what Augustine wrote of Ambrose, pastor of the cathedral in Milan: "I began to love him, not at first as a teacher of the truth, which I despaired of finding in the church, but as a fellow creature who was kind to me." What an open door kindness can be!

The third quality is "humility," which John Stott rightly calls "the rarest and fairest of all Christian virtues." The chief Christian virtue is humility because it is the exact opposite of the worst of sins, which is pride. Thus, we are to put on humility, to think humbly of ourselves. As the apostle puts it in another place, we are to "regard others as better than ourselves." We are not to consider ourselves in any way as superior to others. A modern proverb puts it well, we are to remember that "all of us are made in the same mold, only some are moldier than others!"

The fourth quality is "gentleness," a familiar word that is oftentimes translated "meekness." Not weakness, meekness! I like the definition that says meekness is "strength under control." It is real strength, but it does not have to display itself or show off how strong it is. This is what our Lord beautifully displayed. He described himself as "meek and lowly in heart." The first curriculum of the Holy Spirit is that we must do what Jesus said, "take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart." That is what we are to learn as we go on. Here is another excellent definition of meekness: "a willingness to waive one's rights for a good cause." Set aside your rights! Do not demand that you be satisfied, but, for the sake of a good cause be willing to suffer loss. Meekness is the exact opposite of rudeness and abrasiveness.

The fifth quality is "patience." Literally, it is longsuffering, the enduring of another's exasperating conduct without flying into a rage. It is a negative term. It is holding back, restraining yourself from becoming upset or speaking sharply or shrilly to somebody by our mate, your child, whoever whose conduct you find difficult and exasperating.

Linked with patience is the sixth quality, "forbearance." "Bear with one another." This is similar to longsuffering, but it is the positive side. Literally it is "to uphold and support" someone. Not only to restrain yourself but to support others, encourage them. It is a great Christian quality.

The last quality (which I feel the apostle deliberately put last) is "forgiving one another"---"Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." What a beautiful thing it is to find forgiveness in a Christian's heart! It does not mean that we are not to air a grievance we may feel. We are told in Scripture that if we have something against another to "go to the other and tell him his or her fault between you and him alone." We do not have to repress every feeling of injustice or unfairness that we feel. We are to say how we feel, but, having done that---this is the point---having gotten it out, forget it. Forgive it. Put it away. No longer let yourself think about it. Our model, of course, is Christ's treatment of us. That is what he did when we came to him. He forgave the unkind thoughts, the blasphemous attitudes, the grievous, hurtful sins that we have done. The Old Testament tells us that when we come to him he "casts our transgressions into the depths of the sea." And, as dear Corrie Ten Boom used to say, he puts up a sign that says, "No Fishing."

It is helpful to remember that forgiveness means at least three things. First, it means that we are not to bring up to the person whom we have forgiven the thing we forgave. We are to treat him as though it did not happen. We are not to constantly harass him or her with reminders of the evil things they did in the past. Some marriages stumble greatly at this point because the partners not only get hysterical, they get historical! They go back over the past, ready to trot it out and rehash it once more. That shows that it has never truly been forgiven in the first place. God does not do that. How terrible it would be if he did---if we had constantly to face reminders from him of the awful things of our past!

The second thing forgiveness means is that we do not tell anybody else about the matter that is forgiven. We do not gossip about it to others. It is not that we actually erase it from memory---we may think of it from time to time---but we are not to dwell on it. We are not to allow it to take over again, to awaken feelings of resentment and unfairness and play it all over again. We can do that because we ourselves have been forgiven. Let us remember how graciously God has set aside our own failures.

Then the third thing forgiveness means is: you do not remind yourself of what has been forgiven! Even in your private thoughts you never allow the offense to come up and to color your attitude toward the one you have forgiven. If it does come up, you must put it away and remind yourself that you too need to be forgiven. You do not want people mulling over your sins and dredging them up all the time. No, forgiveness means to put it aside even to yourself because that is what Christ has done for us.

Then, having given us these seven beautiful qualities, the apostle tells us to wrap it all around with the bond of love: "over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Someone has said it this way: "Put on the overcoat of love." Love ties everything together like a belt or a girdle. This, of course, is that quality of acceptance of others because you are a new person yourself. You are no longer the old person you once were. You have put that aside already. Treat the past as though you were dead to it, and be now what God has made you to be.

Do not miss the basis for all of this, given in verse 12: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved." There it is. That is something God did for us. We did not make ourselves holy. We did not elect ourselves into the kingdom of God. Jesus said once to his disciples, "You have not chosen me but I chose you and appointed you that you should bear much fruit." Though we needed to make a decision for Christ, we soon came to understand that we would never have made that decision had we not been drawn to him and chosen of him. It is his choice of us that enabled us to choose him.

It is important to note also that when the apostle calls Christians "God's chosen people" (or, as it literally says, "God's elect"), he does not mean that the church has replaced Israel. Israel is also "God's chosen people," but on a different level and for a different purpose. The promises to Israel are material: they deal with a land and a kingdom on the earth. We believe that the dreams of the prophets, so beautifully expressed by Isaiah, Amos, Hosea and others, will be fulfilled in a coming day, which Paul describes in chapter 11 of Romans. God yet has a future for his earthly people. They are still his chosen people. But the church is chosen for a different purpose. Our promises are spiritual. We are "blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ." The church, therefore, has to do with heaven, not earth. We deal with the invisible realms of reality and not the visible kingdoms around.

So, to clarify, this phrase does not mean that the church has become the "new Israel." That term is never found in Scripture. It is an unbiblical concept. But we are chosen, and we are "holy." Here is a word that means to be separate and distinct. We are intended to be different. Christians are to live differently than the world around lives. We do not run after the crowd and follow its fashions and value systems. We are expected to be different because we are different. We share a different kind of life.

Then the third phrase is, "dearly loved by God"---dear to the heart of God. There is no more powerful motivating force in our lives than to remember that we are loved by God. He loves us deeply. Why should God love us the way he does? To be such people as we are and still be loved by him is one of the amazing wonders of all time. We are never to forget this. It is our basis for action.

That thou shouldst so delight in me
and be the God Thou art,
Is darkness to my intellect,
But sunshine to my heart.

Next, the apostle moves beyond our lives as individuals, to the church, and how the body ought to function.

"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and counsel one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

What a beautiful picture that is of the functioning of the church! What should it be like when we come together in a meeting like this or when we are together away from this building? Church life is to be characterized by three P's: peace, praise, and precepts. Or, if you prefer, three T's: tranquility, thanksgiving, and teaching. As the apostle points out, it begins with peace: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." We were called to this. Churches are to live at peace.

The word "rule" here is interesting. It is the word for "act as an umpire." Baseball fans know that the man in the black suit who stands behind the catcher rules on the plays and makes the calls. He remains absolutely unruffled no matter what happens. Managers curse him and kick dirt at him, fans throw pop bottles at him, yet he remains unperturbed. That is the idea here: let the calmness of Christ rule among you. Consider Jesus in the gospels. He moves into every situation with total poise. He is not upset by others but remains calm and collected when other people are panicking around him. He is in control. That is to characterize the church in its functioning.

I was in another city recently, meeting with Christians who were divided into two factions. What they were discussing were questions of turf, of who had the right to do such and such a thing. The spokesman of one group was rather difficult. He was loud, accusatory and abrasive. The spokesman for the other party, however, remained calm and peaceful and did not react in kind. Thus, before long things began to be worked out and the meeting ended in harmony. Everybody understood one another. That is what Paul is urging here. "Let the peace of Christ rule in your midst," because that is what we are called to do. His serenity may possess our hearts and "act as an umpire" among us.

The second thing is to be thankful. We find this exhortation everywhere in Scripture. Christians are to be characterized by an attitude of gratitude about everything. Why? Because we know that we do not deserve anything. Everything comes to us as a gift of God's love. We learn from the Scriptures that we are members of a fallen race. At birth we began to manifest rebellion, treason and enmity against the things of God. We are self-centered, and opposed to others. We have all manifested that right from birth. God, in perfect justice, could have wiped out this entire race and none of us would have hope for anything in this life or beyond. But God gave it to us anyway, "God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." What a gift! And everything else comes with it: "He that spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" Does that not awaken gratitude in your heart? Christians are to have a sense of gratefulness for even a crust of bread or a glass of water because it is all undeserved. So be thankful, says the apostle. Let

thankfulness characterize your meetings. Let there be an attitude of gratitude!

Then the third thing: instruct one another by means of the word. "Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly." The Word is to be well known among us. It is to be the central thing in teaching us how to live. This amazing Book, this insight into true life, is unrivaled anywhere in the world. There is nothing else that even remotely approaches it in its view of reality.

Notice, too, how the whole body is to be involved in this. We are to "teach and counsel one another," everybody--in homes, in church, in classes, in Bible study groups, in breakfast groups---should gather about the Word. We ought to thoroughly know and understand this book. Here are described marvelous mysteries which challenge the greatest minds among us. Here are simple statements that burst like rockets in our brain and illuminate the whole landscape of life. Jesus said, "He that follows me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life." This is not dead, lifeless truth! It is alive, vital, refreshing and illuminating! It dispels doubts, fears and difficulties. We are to center our lives around the Word of God.

With this Paul links also the ministry of music. I have always enjoyed Hawaiian songs and music ever since I lived in Hawaii many years ago. Once when I commented on the beauty of their music, one of the old Hawaiians said to me, "You know, the Hawaiians never had any music until the missionaries came. All the pagans do is chant. They do not know how or what to sing." The first songs the Hawaiians ever sang were hymns taught them by missionaries. Then they began to adapt them to other themes and we ended up with "Blue Hawaii," "Sweet Leilani," "The Little Grass Shack," etc. It is Christian truth that inspires the greatest music. Music belongs to the believer.

Here the apostle recognizes its powerful ministry in our lives. We are to "sing psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs." Psalms, of course, are the inspired utterances of the Book of Psalms and found also in various other books of the Bible. How marvelous is this teaching from God, put in rhythm and beauty of expression! "Hymns" are literally praise songs, responses that humans have composed to reflect with thanksgiving to what God has done. With this is linked "spiritual songs," testimony songs which reflect, again, how God has led us. If you look through any hymn book you will find these three types of songs include. We sing one of these praise songs earlier, "Joyful, Joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love." Some of the great teaching hymns, such as "And can it Be?" remind us of the wonderful love of Christ that sacrificed himself for us. There is a whole compendium of theology in that great hymn, and others like it.

As we sing we are ministering to each other, encouraging one another. You may have come to church today depressed and discouraged, but as the congregation lifted up one of these great hymns you were lifted by it as well. You began to rejoice again in spirit because the music and the words reminded you of the greatness of God. So we are to sing the truth as well as study it, with gratitude in our hearts for all that God has done.

Verse 17 moves to the arena of society and the world.

"Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

I hope you will memorize this marvelous verse and repeat it to yourself frequently. "Whatever you do"---that means the whole of life is to be related to the Lordship of Jesus. Everything in life, every activity can become an act of worship. Even routine things can be offered to Christ; done "in the name of the Lord," motivated by our relationship to him. Ruth Graham had for years a sign over her kitchen sink that said, "Divine services held here three times a day." Washing the dishes can be an act of worship if you do it in the name of the Lord, as unto him.

What a difference of motivation this makes to a Christian! You do things you do not like because you offer them willingly to the Lord as a sweet sacrifice to him. If you love someone you will do things for his or her sake that you do not particularly like doing. That is the point here. There are things that money could never pay us to do, but love will motivate us to them. If we love the Lord we offer to him the activities of our day; we do everything with a view to his glory. Fill out your income tax forms with that in mind! Meet with your boss, or your employees, "in the name of the Lord Jesus." Buy your groceries in the name of the Lord. Do your

homework in the name of the Lord Jesus. Thus, you are laboring, not for the world or its benefits, but for Christ. What a glorious picture this gives of the whole of life under the Lordship of Christ.

In the next section Paul will expand this to various relationships of life. Here, meanwhile, is his marvelous exhortation to us: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,
God of glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee,
Praising Thee their sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness,
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day!

All Thy works with joy surround Thee,
Earth and heaven reflect Thy rays,
Stars and angels sing around Thee,
Center of unbroken praise;
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
Blooming meadow, flashing sea,
Chanting bird and flowing fountain,
Call us to rejoice in Thee.

Catalog No. 4028
Colossians 3:12-17
Tenth Message
February 8, 1987

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