**Bear with and forgive one another**

Text: Colossians 3:12-14

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**Scriptures:** 2 Peter 3:8-10; Colossians 3:1-17

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 103, 449, 513, 479, 523

**Series:** The ‘one anothers’ of Scripture (#7)

**Theme:** The Apostle Paul and Timothy write to the Colossian church about putting on the new self of Christ’s character, including bearing with one another and forgiving one another as the Lord had forgiven them.

**Proposition:** Brothers and sisters in the Lord, bear with and forgive one another as Christ has forgiven you.

**Introduction**

Do you find that some people irritate or frustrate you? Perhaps they have a very different personality, abilities, or temperament to you and ‘rub you up the wrong way’. Perhaps they don’t see things the same way as you. Perhaps they don’t behave the way you expect them to. Perhaps they have tattoos, wear a tiki round their neck, put on shorts to church, can’t pronounce your name correctly, have vocal opinions about politics, COVID, vaccinations, or musical instruments in worship services.

Some people try to cope with the frustrations, disappointments, hurts and injustices which result from entering into relationships by simply avoiding the people they don’t get on with. In a congregational setting like this, avoidance is not too difficult. You could just keep yourself permanently ‘socially distanced’ from the person who irritates you and be careful not to approach them to engage in conversation.

In their book entitled ‘Relationships: a mess worth making’, authors Paul David Tripp and Tim Lane recognise that ‘relationships are messy and hurtful’. They both admit that they’ve never been in a relationship that hasn’t disappointed them in some way. Tripp and Lane helpfully note that ‘*God has created us for community – vertical community with God and horizontal community with each other. We shouldn’t run away from the messiness of community. We shouldn’t try to avoid imperfect people’*. Truth is – if you avoid imperfect people, you’ll end up completely alone and apart from all other human beings. Even then you won’t have avoided all imperfect people because you’ll still be stuck with you!

Christ shows us in His Word a better way than being ‘socially distanced’, a way which glorifies Him by reflecting His perfect character in the fellowship between brothers and sisters in the church. The ‘one anothers’ of Scripture are all about relationships for believers with other disciples of Christ. These commands of God all reveal the different ways in which we are called to love one another just as Christ has loved us (John 13:34-35). So far in this preaching series we’ve looked at: bearing one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2); being kind to one another (Ephesians 4:32); encouraging one another (1 Thess 5:11); accepting one another (Romans 15:7); and submitting to one another (Ephesians 5:21). Next week, I plan for us to focus on “*show hospitality to one another without grumbling*” (1 Peter 4:9).

Today we’ll look at Colossians 3:13 “*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*”. This verse is embedded in a portion of Scripture dealing with the new inter-personal character ‘clothing’ of the Christian. We’ll begin by looking at the relational heart of Christ, before focussing on bearing with one another and then forgiving one another.

1. **The tender heart Christ**

If human relationships in a fallen world are messy and hurtful at times, how can we embrace them in a way which glorifies God, especially in the church? The very best way to live with the disorder and disarray of human relationships is to be like Jesus. In His humanity, Christ grew up ‘*in favour with God and man*’ (Luke 2:52). His Heavenly Father was ‘*well pleased*’ with Him (Matt 3:17). The difficulties that He experienced with those who were disappointed in Him, who hated Him, betrayed Him and who plotted to kill Him were not due to any weakness, fault, or sin in Him. Why? because His heart is pure, He is perfect and He, for His part, enters into relationships with people like you and me without any mess.

His perfect ‘relational heart’ can be described by the closely related words ‘compassionate’, ‘kind’, ‘humble’, ‘meek’ and ‘patient’. These virtues make up the five items of ‘character clothing’ that the Apostle Paul exhorts the Colossian believer to ‘wear’ in 3:12: “*Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience*”. These five attributes all reflect innermost feelings of tender sensitivity, affection, and heartfelt emotion.

* **Compassion** is concern over the needs, suffering and grief of others. The Greek word here literally means ‘to bear with’ or ‘to suffer with’. Jesus is compassionate “*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*” (Matt 9:36). The tender heart of our Heavenly Father is expressed with this word, translated ‘mercies here “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of**mercies and God of all comfort*” (2 Cor 1:3). The compassion of God is an expression of His love. “*As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him*” (Ps 103:13).
* **Kindness** is a tender concern for others. Kindness delights in contributing to the well-being and happiness of others. The Lord God is ‘*kind in all his works*’ (Ps 145:13). Jesus demonstrated kindness in many ways. Remember when He healed the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue saying, ‘*Little girl, I say to you, arise*’ (Mark 5:41)? It would have been sufficient just to perform the miracle to show His divine power, but He also had a tender concern for the twelve-year-old girl, telling those there to give her something to eat (Mark 5:43). Kindness has been described as “*the overflowing of self upon others*”. It is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). Kindness treats others as we would wish to be treated ourselves. The excellent woman described in Proverbs chapter 31 ‘*opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of* ***kindness*** *is on her tongue*’ (v26).
* **Humility** was despised in the ancient Roman/Greek world as a sign of weakness, but it is a key characteristic of Christ who “*being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*”. (Phil 2:8). Human humility honours God who ‘*opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble*’ (James 4:6).
* **Gentleness** describes "a wild horse that's been tamed". Gentleness here is power under control. A gentle person here is one who has been tamed by the grace of God through the ongoing sanctifying work of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Think of the gentleness of Christ in confronting sinners, like the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). He is always full of grace and truth.
* **Patience** describes the ability to hold one's feeling in restraint and to bear up under the oversights and wrongs afflicted by others without retaliating. It is manifest by the quality of forbearance under provocation. Patience is closely connected to the word which follows in our text ‘bearing with’. As we heard from 2 Peter 3, we continue to live on this earth not because the Lord is slow to fulfil his promise of the New Heavens and New Earth, but because He is patient “*not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance*” (2 Pet 3:9).

God’s call to each one of us, brothers and sisters in Christ - His chosen ones, holy and beloved - is to put on these characteristics of our Saviour: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.

Are you fully committed to doing this by putting away what is ‘earthly in you’ (Col 3:5)?

Changing our ‘character clothing’ with the help of the Holy Spirit enables us to fulfil the Law of Christ in ‘bearing with one another’ which brings us to our second point:

1. **Bearing with one another**

Are the irritations and frustrations that we have with others over what are usually minor matters really that important? Is ‘bearing with one another’ worth making the effort for? Think about toothpaste in a marriage. The husband, for example, likes to carefully fold and roll the toothpaste tube, whereas the wife prefers to grab it in the middle and squeeze. The ‘folding’ seems a bit excessive to the ‘non-folder’, whereas the squeezing is seen as careless and rude to the other. At first it can be funny. One squeezes, the other rolls. Repeat and it starts to become irritating. The wife starts to squeeze even when she wasn’t brushing her teeth. The husband sneaks back to the bathroom to roll, roll, roll. After sneaking and squeezing, tiptoeing and rolling for two weeks, the inevitable happens and they finally meet face to face in their bathroom with all hands on the toothpaste. Yelling, crying and conflict follow. It is silly but it is serious.

I could continue with examples from home life like loading the dishwasher or putting down the toilet seat. Here in our congregation, I could mention selecting the type of coffee we serve, whether babies are permitted to cry for a while during the service, or our reaction to those who may arrive late or go out during our worship services. Whatever the causes of our personal irritations and frustrations, they are important because they have the potential to develop into either conflict in relationships or estrangement from one another. This is as true in marriage and home life as it is in church life.

In our text: “*bearing with one another” (Col 3:13a), t*he Greek word translated ‘bearing with’ literally means to hold one’s self up or hold one’s self back from falling. Bearing with means to forbear, to be patient with. It flows on from the last of the five characteristics of Christ in the previous verse ‘patience’. We could also use the word ‘tolerate’ to describe ‘bearing with’ someone else as long as we don’t confuse this with the modern use of the word ‘tolerance’ which has come to mean accepting what is evil and calling it good.

This Greek word translated ‘bearing with’ conveys the sense of putting up with others by exercising self-restraint. ‘Put up with’ has the sense of an acceptance which requires an effort of will in the face of the attitudes and actions of others which can be immature and tiresome. ‘Bearing with’ is in the present participle form – which means that putting up with others is to be an ongoing, continuous, lifestyle for the believer. To ‘bear with’ others requires self-control when you are faced with a person who frustrates, irritates, provokes or troubles you. In the ancient Greek world, this word was used of listening patiently while others are allowed to speak. To forebear is to patiently abstain or hold back.

God is Himself forbearing, being ‘slow to anger’ (Ex 34:6; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; 103:8; 145:8). God holds back His righteous judgement (2 Pet 3:8-10). It is therefore not surprising that forbearance is a quality that God holds in high regard. Whether manifested as patience, endurance, gentleness, tolerance, or moderation, forbearance, ‘bearing with sinful people’, is woven throughout Scripture (Proverbs 25:15; Ephesians 4:2). Several of the qualities listed as the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22 have an element of bearing with others reflected in them, including love, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, and self-control.

Jesus demonstrated great forbearance with his disciples. We can easily imagine how frustrating and irritating it would have been for Jesus to spend three years in close fellowship with twelve men who were full of faults and foibles. We see this come to the surface when Jesus rebuked the weak faith of His disciples after they could not heal a demon-possessed boy. It was then that He said: "*O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.*" (Matt 17:17). Clearly from this verse we see that Christ exemplified ‘bearing with’ others during His earthly ministry.

He calls you and I to do the same because this glorifies Him and shows that we, the Body of Christ, are becoming more and more like our Lord, the Head of the church.

Are you willing to ‘bear with’ one another brothers and sisters? You may ask, what do I do if the matter is more serious than simply a minor frustration or irritation? The answer leads us to our third point:

1. **Forgiving one another**

What do you do if you have been trying to ‘bear with’ someone but what they are doing or saying is more than minor and your ‘putting up with them’ is not resulting in a godly relationship with them? The matter in view here is more significant than a toothpaste tube, loading the dishwasher, the type of coffee served at church or how much noise people make in a worship service. The next step relates to the word translated ‘complaint’ in our text. This Greek word is not used anywhere else in Scripture, but its sense seems to be any fault which is deserving of blame or censure. It certainly includes sin, but is likely to be broader in scope; including other actions which may not actually be in disobedience to God’s Law, but are unwise and unhelpful in fostering peaceful relationships with others. Here is verse 13 again: “*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*”.

I am going to ask you a direct and personal question: **Who** do you find it most difficult to forgive? Or perhaps for some, who have you found it most difficult to forgive in the past? There is a real personal cost to forgiving someone who has hurt you. You let go of the delightful sensation of ‘sweet revenge’ of ‘settling the score’ of ‘proving that you were in the right all along’.

It’s hard to forgive others – that’s why so often we really struggle to do so. Forgiving someone is **not** pretending that the offense never happened. Forgiving someone is **not** saying to the offender ‘*there are no consequences for your actions*’. Forgiving someone is **not** completely erasing the memory of the hurt and pain that you have suffered. Forgiving someone is consciously choosing not to bring the complaint up again; either within your own mind, to the person who has offended you, or to others through the sins of gossip and slander. Forgiving someone is usually a process by which we repeatedly need to exercise self-discipline in choosing not to remember the offense against us. At a neurological level it is training our brains to form new pathways whereby the hurts of the past are not repeatedly ‘re- lived’, but are progressively relegated to distant memories that are accessed in our minds less and less frequently until they are all but forgotten.

This is not easy, but the alternative is terribly costly. The price of not letting go of the offense is to lock up your wounded heart in the dungeon of your past. This robs you of joy and peace. This seriously hampers, or completely halts, your growth in Christlikeness. This sours your relationships with others and causes you to grieve the Holy Spirit, thereby distancing you from your Heavenly Father. The longer you allow unforgiveness to fester in your heart the harder it can be to let go. It’s like a large open wound in our bodies. Leave it unattended and it will likely lead to infection which becomes more severe over time if not treated. It might even result in your death. The Scriptures warn us *“See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many become defiled”* (Heb 12:15).

Look around at the congregation today, the adults here all have mature bodies, but that does not mean that we are all spiritually mature. Unforgiveness, bitterness, anger, wrath, malice and slander can take hold in any of us and render us as immature in Christ, weak frail spiritual babies in desperate need of help. As the Word of God wisely warns us all “*Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall*” (1 Cor 10:12).

The Greek word translated ‘forgiving’ has the basic meaning of ‘to give’. Like ‘bearing with’ it is in the present participle form – which means that forgiveness is to be an ongoing continuous lifestyle for the believer. To forgive someone is to grant them a favour. It is an act of grace. To forgive is to give gratuitously, generously and in tender-hearted kindness. Forgiveness gives out of grace to help those who do not deserve it.

Forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel. Apart from God’s forgiveness of sin through the work of Christ, there is no ‘good news’. This is why the Scriptures provide us with the motivation to forgive one another, as the Lord has forgiven you (v13). This is not an optional extra to be added into the Christian life if you and I so wish. It’s not a suggestion, it is a command. Jesus said, “*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*” (Matt 6:14-15).

Are you willing to determine to forgive others who sin against you even if they have not, as yet, repented of their sin? Think about the ‘prodigal’ son in the parable that Jesus taught *"So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him”* (Luke 15:20). The father was willing to forgive his son, **before** the son confessed his sin and repented. This father had a strong heart desire, a determination, to forgive.

This determination is an act of will, not an emotion. There is a pervading attitude of love for the one who has caused the offense.There is a conscious decision not to bring to mind in such a way that bitterness arises or an unwillingness to reconcile develops. Being in a state of fully determined to forgive, when the other party is not willing to repent is really hard work, but however hard it may be for you and me, it was harder for Christ.

The determination to forgive is the attitude of love was displayed perfectly by our Lord on the cross. Gospel writer Luke records the words of Jesus *"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)* Notice that Christ was not forgiving them Himself, but petitioning that His Father would do so. Forgiveness is deliberately releasing the offender from his/her obligation to suffer penalty and make restitution/recompense.

Repentance is a confession of actual sin or offense against someone else together with a request for forgiveness. It is not merely an apology**.** An apology can merely express the emotion of the offender “I feel sorry”. When forgiveness is granted, a promise made by the one who extends grace: *“I promise not to remember this sin by bringing it up to him, to others, or to yourself”.*

Bearing with and forgiving one another is one of the ways in which we love one another just as Christ has loved us (John 13:34-35). The Apostle Paul expresses this truth in the concluding verse of our text today: “*And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony*” (Col 3:14).

The ‘one another’ commands of Scripture are directed towards those who are new creations in Christ. They are for believers, for those who earnestly desire to grow in godliness, to glorify Christ and to become more like Him. These commands are for those who desire to see the Body of Christ grow in peace, harmony and deep interpersonal relationship between brothers and sisters.

Perhaps you are someone today who has tried, or is thinking about trying, to bear with others or forgive others, but you have not as yet come to Christ ‘just as you are’, admitting your faults, offenses and sins against God and others and trusting in Him alone for forgiveness. If this describes your heart today, I have some very good news for you. God bears with you. He is compassionate, kind, and patient. Christ, the Son of God, humbly and meekly invites you to come to Him. In Him alone there is forgiveness for sins; full and free. In Him, God continues to bear with you, putting up with your ongoing sins, faults and foibles so that you can grow to be more like Him. So come to Christ!

For us, brothers and sisters in Christ, hear the Word of the Lord so that you can be a doer of that Word: *“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, 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”* (Col 3:12-13).

AMEN