

RELATIONSHIPS IN A HEALTHY CHURCH

Colossians 3v11-15

Everyone here will have had some painful experience of a friendship hitting troubled times – some of us in our very early years. We are also aware of high profile relationship break downs – Peter and Katie if you read the tabloids, Messrs Keegan and Ashley this week if you are a Newcastle fan. But sadly, many of us have seen relationships implode in the church. And when this causes irretrievable breakdown – even church splits – it becomes a contradiction of the gospel. It is as serious as that.

Here unity in relationships is said to be the mark of a genuine Christian community. This was a big issue in multi-cultural cities like Colosse in the first century. Paul lists a catalogue of barriers which separated people, but which he says are now obsolete in the church of Jesus. **v11. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised**, probably the biggest issue in the earliest days of the church when none Jews were believing the gospel; **Barbarian, Scythian**; Greek's thought of themselves as the sophisticates of the ancient world so they looked down on nations outside the reach of Greek culture; they called them "barbarians". "Scythians" was a term used to describe races considered little more than primitive savages; **slave or free**; "slaves" were not even classified as human beings - they were property, their master's could do what they liked with them. Everyone looked down on someone. And exclusive Jews looked down on all of them!

But Jesus makes friends out of enemies. He deliberately included people who were not natural "mates" among His twelve disciples e.g. Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot. There is no barrier Christ cannot deal with, whether race, nationality, upbringing, culture, age, social class, economic differences, personality, mannerisms, theology.

Even so, good relationships don't just happen. It is still possible to have tensions, misunderstandings and serious difficulties between us in a local church. It is vital we know how to build good relationships, so Paul's gives some practical instructions.

1. Look at one another through God's eyes. (v11,12)

This is an important key - learning to see as God sees, to think as God thinks. *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways."* (Isaiah 55v8)

- He sees Christ in each of us: **Christ is all, and is in all. (v11)**
- He considers all of us to be His **chosen people (v12)**
- He regards each of us as **holy (v12)** i.e. set apart for Him
- He looks on each of us with love: We are **dearly loved (v12)**

What a different way of looking at each other! This is a radically different way of thinking. It will change our attitude towards one another. These things are much more important than any differences that might divide us.

And this new way of thinking shapes the decisions we make.

2. Decide what “clothes” you are going to wear. (v12-14)

Before going out you decide what to wear. If it's a cold day, or a wedding, or a long climb up a mountain, or a day on the beach in the Bahamas you dress appropriately. Your choice is deliberate. So, Paul says it is the same with relationships. God has provided you with a full wardrobe. There is nothing lacking. **v12: Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.** And there is something else. In the wardrobe there is a special garment that holds together everything else. **v14: And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.** This is *God's* love Paul is talking about. This is what makes it at all possible for us.

So, come on, clothe yourselves with these things! This is a decision *you* make. It is a matter of the will not feelings. Make up your mind to dress / to be like this.

v12: clothe yourselves with compassion: it is easy to become hardened, immune to other's situation: cf. Jesus and the man full of leprosy; **kindness:** it might be just the smallest word, gesture or smile; **humility:** deciding to put others before yourself; letting them take the applause; being willing to serve – like Jesus washing the disciples feet; **gentleness:** with the “bruised reeds” - the vulnerable; or when provoked & it is easier to explode; **patience:** (literally ‘large hearted’) when exasperated, when disappointed.

These are matching clothes. It would be strange to turn up at a wedding with your best suit jacket and swimming shorts. So, combine these things – **compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.** In fact, it is difficult to put on one of these items without the others. They go together so perfectly.

3. Know how to act when problems arise. (v13-15)

And they will! Be sure of it. We know what relationship problems can do – they can divide and cause deep seated resentment. It is tragic when Christians fall out or whole churches are split because we should be different! So what can we do when a problem arises? It's good to have a plan – like it's good to know the fire drill! There are some pointers here:

First, **Bear with each other (v13)** Literally, put up with each other! Now, if this was the only suggestion it would be woefully inadequate. But set alongside other things it is important i.e. stick in there! Be persistent; don't let relationships go without a fight!

Second, forgive one another: **forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (v13)** This is so important. Forgiveness is a vital key to unlock chains of bitterness and anger. Remember the parable Jesus told about a servant who owed 10,000 talents (millions of £'s) and his fellow servant who owed 100 denarii (a paltry sum). We have been forgiven like this. So we should be ready to forgive one another. Are you still nursing some resentment you need to let go?

Third, **let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.** This is a word picture from the Greek Games where there was a person appointed to settle disputes and his word was final. Here it is Jesus and he settles it first in your heart. This is a heart issue! He stops your arteries from hardening. He deals deeply and inwardly with everything that might divide us – so we can be tender hearted with one another.

Fourth: one of our highest callings is to demonstrate unity in Christ: **since as members of one body you were called to peace (v15).** It was one of the big themes of Jesus great prayer on the eve of His death. (See John 17) So *“make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit.”* (Ephesians 4v3).

It is by loving one another that the world will know that something supernatural has happened among us.

John Wilthew. October 2009.

KAY: This is something that cannot be counterfeited.

Message Summary

RELATIONSHIPS IN A HEALTHY CHURCH

Read Colossians 3v11-15

Unity in relationships is a mark of a genuine Christian community. This was a big issue in places like Colosse. In **verse 11** Paul lists a catalogue of cultural barriers which separated people. Everyone looked down on someone. But Jesus makes friends out of enemies. Even so, good relationships don't just happen. We still have to work through our differences. So Paul's gives practical instructions.

1. Look at one another through God's eyes.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." (Isaiah 55v8)

- He sees Christ in each of us: **Christ is all, and is in all. (v11)**
- He considers all of us to be His **chosen people (v12)**
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These things are much more important than any differences that might divide us.

2. Decide what "clothes" you are going to wear.

Before going out you decide what to wear. It is the same with relationships. **Verse 12** tells us what to put on! And in the wardrobe there is a special garment that holds together everything else – God's love. See **verse 14**. Make up your mind to be like this. These are "matching" clothes!

3. Know how to act when problems arise. (v13-15)

And they will! Be sure of it. So what can we do when a problem arises?

- **Bear with each other (v13)** i.e. stick in there! don't let relationships go without a fight!
- **Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (v13)**
- **Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.** This is a heart issue! Christ deals deeply and inwardly with everything that might divide us.
- Make unity a priority: **since as members of one body you were called to peace (v15)** By loving one another the world sees that something supernatural has happened among us.

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What kind of barriers can separate us today? In what ways have you come across this e.g. at school, work, in your neighbourhood, in church life?
2. Look again at how God sees each of us in vv11,12. How might looking at one another through God's eyes help our relationships?
3. Come up with some good, down-to-earth examples of - compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.
4. When a problem arises between us as Christians what big advantages do we have to be able to resolve them?