

The Church in the Valley: Church at Work

A message based on

Colossians 3:1-17

Followers of Jesus:

If we were to define the church based on the words we just read, we would say the church is filled with some pretty messed up people. There are members there who have some work to do as far as character flaws go. People go there because they are dealing daily with sins that keep them from functioning in a healthy, truly human way. Don't kid yourself. This church in the valley, called Duncan Christian Reformed Church, is dealing with the same sorts of sins as described here. You ask, "Do these things happen in this church in the valley?" Things aren't any different today than they were in Colosse, or Laodicea, or Hierapolis.

They do, sometimes when no one is looking. That's when we know who we really are, the way we are when no one is looking. They show themselves in other ways, too, peeking out every once in a while for us, and others to see. These are the real issues the church needs to work at, not these counterfeit issues that we discussed last week; issues of man-made rules that, if we'd just keep them then everything will be in order, the church will then be well-run. In some ways it is easier to deal with the man-made stuff. It makes us feel like we're accomplishing something, like we're getting somewhere. But the man-made stuff is only dealing with surface issues, not issues that really matter.

So Paul goes into some detail about what the real issues are. They are issues of the heart, issues that go down deep inside, issues that are often hidden underneath. Here we have what we could call Paul's ten commands. He lists here 10 sins, 10 character flaws, 10 ways we all can mess up our lives with. But we don't just have 10 sins here. We also have 10 counter-balanced character builders. There always must be a balance in the life of the follower of Jesus. In other words, there are 10 things to die to; and there are 10 things we need to bring to life. There are ten things we need to strip off, like an old dirty, stinky, sweaty shirt; strip off, and throw away. There are ten things we need to put on like a fresh clean shirt.

These verses describe the church at work. Let's take a look at the work we are called to do. Please remember that we don't do the work in our own strength. We do it connected to Christ. We do it because Christ is in us. Another way of putting this is, we do these things because of what God has done to us, what God is doing in us. He is making us human again, the way he intended it in the beginning. He is making us more like Jesus who is the image of the invisible God. What has God done to us? He has put us "into" Christ. What does that mean? It means that when Christ died, we died with him. It means that when Christ was buried, we were buried with him. It means that when Christ rose again by the power of God, we rose with him by the power of God. This we don't need to make happen. It already has. God did this to us as followers of Jesus.

But we have a responsibility, too; that is, God has given us the ability to respond to what he has done. We need to act on what he has done. With his help, through the working of his Spirit in us – the Spirit of Christ – we can make this happen, make it real in our lives. Let me say just this, though. This is a struggle! This can be a painful experience. It is not easy. Sometimes it hurts. That's because the cross of Jesus Christ, the cross we're called to carry, is sometimes an excruciatingly painful thing. It was, after all, an instrument of torture meant to inflict as severe pain as possible. This, again, is why it seems so much easier to make up some man-made rules and make sure we keep them. But those will not help us get at the real issues. The real issues are much harder.

Sexual immorality (that is, inappropriate activity before and during marriage to someone we're not married to)

Impurity (that is connected with the first one)

Lust

Evil desires (again connected to the first one, yet more expansive)

Greed (which is described as idolatry, the desire for more, more, more; coveting)

Notice in the list, that it begins with an outward expression, an act; and then moves on down deeper into issues that are hidden for the most part, underneath.

Anger (which is there all the time)

Rage (what we would call "losing it")

Malice (generally being mean, wanting to inflict harm on someone)

Slander (giving a bad report about someone else)

Filthy language from your lips

And then, just to make sure we don't try to weasel our way out and say, "These things don't happen to me, I have no problem with them," it is written:

Do not lie to each other...

This gives us another clue as to how to handle these things. We can't see it in our English language, but every time we read the word "you" here, it's not you as an individual member of the church. It's you together, all of you together. This, you see, is the church at work helping each other be real, and honest. We can't deal with these things in a large group like this one here. It is better, and this is what the early church was known for, to deal with them in small groups of people who, because they meet on a regular basis, really get to know each other.

The music group Jars of Clay has a song called "Dead Man (Carry Me)." In it they tell about attending an "empty funeral." You know what kind that is? It's a funeral where we might hear how great the person was, but hear nothing about God, or Jesus, or the resurrection. The song goes on to say that the empty funeral was better than being at a party with people you don't even know. How well do we know people in this church? We might know what they do for a living, who their favourite team is, how many children they have if they are married; but that's not really knowing someone. The chorus of the song goes like this:

So carry me,
I'm just a dead man
Lying on the carpet
Can't find a heartbeat
Make me breathe,
I want to be a new man

Tired of the old one
Out with the old plan (Jars of Clay, "Dead Man (Carry Me)."

We really get to know someone when we hear about their struggles, how messed up they really are, how messed up we all are, and in how many ways we fail to really be human. This needs to be heard today in this church in the valley. We are all messed up, we all need Jesus, not one of us is better than the other, we all have struggles.

This is why we need to counter-balance the sins, with an equal amount of positive character building. The list Paul tells us to wear in verses 12 through to 17, begins with the character trait called

Compassion

Without compassion for others, we really won't be able to help them. Without it, we'll come across as better than they are. We'll come judging instead of loving. We'll come condemning, instead of encouraging. Compassionate people are people who imitate the Savior, who was well known for his compassion. Compassionate people will view the other as a fellow-struggler, messed up just like they are. None of us have arrived and are complete. We need each other to help us be human again.

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. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (3:12-14).

**Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts
And be thankful
Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom
... do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks (Col 3:15-17).**