

We have been studying Christian character from Paul's instruction in his letter to the Colossians. Paul is describing what Christians ought to be like. He is telling the Colossians to put on Christian virtues as one would put on a new set of clothes. So far, we have considered compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving each other.

When our salvation is completed in the new heavens and the new earth, we will have these characteristics in perfection. Part of the glory of living in God's renewed creation is that everyone will have these characteristics so that living together will be harmonious and we will all be serving one another in love. There will be no more selfishness. We will find our joy in loving God and being loved by God and in loving other people and being loved by other people. This describes the new humanity that God is in the process of creating and that idea is a powerful motivation for us to live as close to that as we can in this life.

This belongs to the good news of salvation in Christ. The call to live this way is never given as something we have to do in order to get God to love us and forgive our sins. It comes as part of the good news. The call to live this way is addressed to people who have believed in Jesus and so are already loved and forgiven. A huge part of the blessing of salvation is that God is at work in us through his Spirit renewing us in his own image and that work of God's Spirit in our hearts and lives changes us so that living the way God is calling us to live looks attractive to us and so we are willing to put in the effort to make progress in living that way.

The beautiful thing about effort that we put into to make changes in our lives in the power of the Spirit is that it is motivated by an inner desire to live how God is changing us to live. We have been given hearts that love God and so becoming more like him is something that is attractive to us. Loving God and being attracted to the life he calls us to live go together. So, what we are doing as we seek to put on these virtues in our lives is we are pushing toward a fuller experience of our salvation. Seeking to put on these virtues in our lives is an expression of loving God.

This evening we come to the most important virtue of them all – love. Verse 14, “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” So, love is above all these other virtues. What this means is explained in the second part of the verse, love is above all the other virtues because it binds them all together in perfect harmony. So, if you imagine the other virtues as a bundle of sticks, love is the string that binds them all together. This means that all the virtues belong together, and it is love that binds them together so that they exist together in harmony in a mature person. The idea of perfection in the NT often is the same as maturity. Perfect harmony is mature harmony.

Back in 1:28 Paul had told that Colossians that his goal in proclaiming Christ to them was to “present everyone mature in Christ.” To be a mature Christian in the NT is to have made some progress in reflecting Christ's character in your life. In Christ all the virtues of Christian character exist in mature harmony and what binds them all together is love.

What this means is that the virtues of compassion and kindness and humility and meekness and patience and bearing with one another and forgiving one another are all tied together by love. They are really different ways of expressing love. Love is the big overarching virtue and all other virtues are different ways of being loving. And so, there is a unity about them. You can't have one without the others. You can't be compassionate if you are not humble. You can't be kind if you are not patient. You can't be forgiving if you are not meek. They are not exactly the same. That is why it was worthwhile to think about each of them separately. But once you do that – once you look at them separately, Paul goes on to say that they are all bound together as expressions of love. They are many; but they are also one. If you grow in one, you grow in all of them. If you are weak in one of them, you are weak in all of them. And the reason is that they are all expressions of love.

This same point is made in different ways in the NT. In Romans 13:8 Paul says that “the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” The law is about many things: obeying authority, and nurturing human life and sexual purity and many other things, but Paul is saying that these are all expressions of love and if you love you have fulfilled the law. He could have said that love binds all the commandments together in perfect harmony. We see the same thing in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 Paul's great description of love. “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Love is a lot of things. Paul lists a whole bunch of virtues and good characteristics. And he could have said that love binds all of these virtues together in perfect harmony.

So, love is the most basic category. All the other aspects of Christian living are expressions of love. But the NT makes it clear that we need to be thinking about both love itself and all the many ways that we are to show love in life. Clearly it is not good enough to say that Christian living is about loving and leave us to figure out the details. The NT gives us all kinds of instruction concerning the different ways that we are to love one another. But it also puts considerable emphasis on love itself. And that is what Paul is doing in our text when he says, “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” We are to put on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. We are to bear with one another, and we are to forgive one another and above all these we are to put on love.

So, what exactly is love? The Christian understanding of love is rooted in God's love and particularly as that love was expressed in the cross of Jesus Christ. John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son....” 1 John 4:9-10, “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” Ephesians 5:2, “And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us....”

God's love as displayed in the cross is the foundational expression of love that is both the source and the paradigm of our love for one another. We love because God has first loved us. The love that we are to show to one another is rooted in God's love shown to us on the cross. And we understand what it means to love others by reflecting on God's love to us as it is demonstrated by the cross of Christ. The definition of the word "love" in the NT is based on God's love in sending Jesus to pay the penalty for our sins and in Jesus being willing to give his life to do that.

Here is a good definition of love taken from the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. "[Real] love is not self-centered but is willing to sacrifice its own desires for the good of others. It is this sense of self-sacrifice for others – modeled by Christ's sacrifice for us – that lies at the heart of Paul's understanding of what real love is." (p. 577).

You can see how this kind of love binds together all the other Christian virtues. Behind compassion and kindness, and humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another is this willingness to sacrifice our own desires for the good of others. And in the light of that we can understand what Paul means when after listing a number of the virtues that Christians are to put on, he says, "And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

This is the key to everything in the Christian life. It is about not being selfish or self-centered but being willing to make sacrifices – being willing to put others before ourselves – and it is about being this way because of God showing this kind of love for us in Christ. So, the love of God does not only come to us, it flows through us as well so that we are made willing to show the same kind of love to others that God has shown to us.

This comes to us as an exhortation. We are being exhorted to put on love. This is something that God is working in us, but at the same time it is something that we are to be active in nurturing in our lives. We are to consider our lives. We are to think of ways that we can show love to others. We are to consider where we are being selfish and seek to move towards being less selfish and more loving.

Part of the way to do this is to think about our lives and the people we know and think of ways that we can be more loving. We can think of our close relationships and ways that we are selfish in those relationships and seek to be more sacrificial and giving. We can think of how we use our time and think of ways in which we can make sacrifices to serve people in the church or other people that we know that could benefit from some help or a word of encouragement or a visit. We can think about how we use our money and consider whether the way that we use our money is consistent with this calling for us to put on love – to grow in sacrificing for others as a response of God's love for us.

This takes effort on our part, but that effort is sustained by God's love for us and so one of the practices that helps us to be more loving is to meditate on God's love for us shown through Jesus' death on the cross. That is certainly where the biblical teaching on love leads us. As we saw from Ephesians 5:2, we are to "walk in love as

Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Again, and again we are reminded of God’s love for us and how that is to motivate us to reflect that love in our dealings with others.

And there is also the attractiveness of this kind of living.

In our text Paul says that love “binds everything together in perfect harmony.” We saw that Paul is referring to the integration of all the virtues in those who have attained a level of maturity. Paul here is pointing out the attractiveness of people who are mature Christians in whom love for others binds together all the virtues in an attractive harmony. Paul also describes this in Ephesians 4:13 where he describes the goal of the building up of the body of Christ in which all the saints are to be involved in attaining “to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

The mature man is one in whom the Christian virtues are bound together by love in harmony. It is first of all a corporate idea in that it is the body of Christ that grows to maturity together and as a whole. But that involves individuals growing to maturity as well.

The standard of maturity is Christ. He is the ultimate mature man. He is the one in whom all the virtues are bound together by love. His life and death are the perfect example of sacrificial love. And he is attractive. As Christians our eyes have been opened to see his glory. We love him and worship him. And that inevitably means that we want to be more like him. The way that Paul speaks of love in our text shows how attractive it is and so one of the great motivators to seek to be more loving is we see the beauty of that kind of life. To be mature in love so that we are passionate about being a blessing to others is something beautiful to aspire to.

And it is not a hopeless aspiration because even though it takes intentionality and effort on our part, we are alive in Christ and God is working in our lives to renew us after the image of God. The Bible spends as much time teaching about how God is working in his people to grow them towards maturity as it does exhorting us to grow to maturity. The Bible makes it clear that growing towards maturity in Christ takes effort on our part, but it also makes it clear that God is at work in us through his Spirit to motivate us and to empower us to make progress in that effort.

Now this can be encouraging, but it can also be discouraging. It can be discouraging to be reminded that God is at work in us through his Spirit to grow us towards maturity when we consider how little progress we have made. Whenever, we think about something like love and how important it is to grow in love and how wonderful it is to grow in love and how God is working in us to grow us in love, we will be aware of how little progress we have made and how far we still have to do. And we may ask ourselves why there is still so much selfishness in us if God is at work in us renewing us into his image. You would think that we would have made more progress by now when you think of all the verses that teach us how the power of God is working in us to renew our lives.

One of the things we must understand to put this in perspective is that a passage like the one we are looking at is not describing how far the Colossians have come, but where they need to grow. The reality is that the power of God working in us does not make change easy and effortless. This is part of the mystery of the relationship between God's work in us through his Spirit and the necessity for us to be active in our own growth. God does not treat us like puppets. He works within us without violating our basic humanity so that moving away from selfishness towards being more loving is going to be experienced like any other kind of growth towards accomplishing something worthwhile.

Pretty much anything worth accomplishing in life takes persistent effort and a lot of time. Think of how many years we go to school to learn the skills we need to live life in the world. Think of how many years it takes to become a mature adult – how much time and experience and failure is involved. Think of how a toddler has a hissy fit when he is told to do something that he does not want to do and then the whole process that takes place before mature adult can deal with something that does not go his way by taking it in stride. The growth toward maturity takes a lot of time and effort and there are vast differences between people in how fast they grow and how mature they become.

And God working in us to renew us after the image of Christ does not bypass this whole process. It is absolutely supernatural in the sense that those in whom the Holy Spirit is not working will not even want to grow towards maturity in Christ and there is no power in them to do so. But when God does work, he gives the desire and he gives the power, but in doing that he does not bypass the way he has designed us as human beings. He designed us to grow and mature and learn skills and grow through time and persistent effort and being taught and learning from examples and experience in life.

And interesting example of this is Jesus. Luke 2:52 describes Jesus growth as a teenager. "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man." Jesus had the Holy Spirit without measure. And yet his growth in wisdom and in favor with God happened alongside his growth in stature – his physical growth – which is to say that the process of Jesus growing in maturity was a thoroughly human process even though he had the Spirit without measure.

That I think is very encouraging when we think about growing away from selfishness and towards the maturity of sacrificial love. It only happens because believers have the life of Christ in them, but at the same times it happens through the regular process of growing towards maturity – the regular process of acquiring a skill or overcoming a character weakness. Change and personal growth is a complex process that involves many different factors and influences. It does not happen without personal effort and intentionality and it takes time.

So be encouraged and not discouraged when you hear the Bible saying that God is at work in his people to renew them towards Christlikeness. God is at work in his people and they will make progress, but that progress is not going to be like being carried along with the wind. The result of God at work in us is that we will

want to grow – in the case of this text – we will want to become less self-centered and more willing to sacrifice to bless others. And then we will consider our lives, seek to make changes, often fail, pick up and try again, be renewed in desire through the Word and Sacraments and worship and prayer, be inspired by the example of others, thankfully rejoice when we do love others, and grow through the experience of life including the hard times and frustrations. And so, it goes.

Hearing a message like this is part of the process. The word of God is proclaimed. We focus our attention on what God is calling us to do. This evening, “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” We are reminded of God’s love for us in Christ. We are reminded of what Christian love is. We are reminded of the attractiveness of mature love which binds together all the other virtues. We are reminded how God is working in believers to renew them towards maturity in Christ. And we are told – put on this virtue of love.

The word of God is a primary means that God uses to change us. It changes our hearts. It changes our desires. It motivates us to do what it says. And so, we think about what we have heard, and we think about how to put it into practice in our lives. And we ask the Lord to help us to do what we have resolved to do.

And when we see sin brought to the light by the word of God, we know that we are justified by faith and so we have peace with God. We know that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We know that God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness if we confess our sins. We know that we are God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved as we seek to grow towards what we will one day be in perfection.

So, let us hear and respond to the word of God to us this evening. “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.