

It is clear from this whole section about Christian character that we have been studying in Paul's letter to the Colossians that God's salvation has a lot to do with harmonious human relationships. The new humanity that God is creating in Christ is one in which people get along with one another. In verse 11, Paul had taught that in the new humanity which is being renewed in God's image the traditional divisions between human beings would not longer be causes of separation. And the Christian character traits that are encouraged in verses 12-14 all have to do with people relating to one another in ways that foster harmonious and upbuilding relationships.

In the verse that we are going to look at this evening, Paul makes explicit this idea of harmonious relationships. "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body." Peace is one of those terms in the Bible which is so prominent that you can summarize the main message of the Bible by reviewing what the Bible teaches about it. It is like love in this way. Peace is one of the great concepts in Scriptures. It is one of the great themes of the Bible. In Luke 2:14, the heavenly choir that are celebrating the birth of Christ sing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased." One of the prophetic titles that described the Lord Jesus long before he was actually born was Prince of Peace. And Colossians 1:20 the mission of Jesus is described in terms of reconciliation. "And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."

The situation that Jesus came to rectify was one of alienation and hostility. That alienation and hostility involved all relationships within the creation and Jesus' work of reconciliation is to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven. Once sin entered the world there was disharmony everywhere and God's mission of salvation in Jesus can be understood in restoring harmony in all relationships – between God and man, between man and man, between man and the rest of the creation. There will never be harmony between God and the unredeemed, but the place of eternal punishment will not be part of the renewed creation.

So peace is a very big idea in Scripture, but the peace that Paul is talking about here is peace within the church. It is rooted in peace with God through Jesus' death on the cross, but what is the focus in this whole section in Colossians is how the followers of Jesus are to relate to one another. That this is the peace that Paul is concerned about in verse 15 is clear from the fact that Paul here is talking about peace "in one body." He is talking about peace in the body of Christ. So when Paul speaks about letting "the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts" he is speaking about the inner peace that results in peace in the body. He is not concerned here with being peaceful in our hearts in the sense of not being anxious. His concern is with peace in the body of Christ and therefore the peaceful inner attitudes that lead to that.

This is an interesting thought. Paul is talking about letting the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, but his focus is not on inner tranquility, but on feeling peaceful in our attitudes towards others. So what he is talking about is feeling peaceful instead of bitter towards, or alienated from or angry with other people in the congregation.

He is talking about feeling at peace in our hearts towards other people. That is a subjective peace, but there is a different focus than the peace from knowing that all is well with our souls and the peace from not being anxious because we are trusting in God to take care of us.

This is the peace of feeling peaceful towards others in the congregation. It is the inner peace that comes from loving others and putting their needs before our own and having a forgiving spirit and being patient and meek. Our heart attitude towards our fellow believers is to be peaceful rather than warlike or antagonistic.

The word “rule” here is also interesting. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” Here is how Douglas Moo explains Paul’s intention by using the word “rule” here. “‘Rule’ translates a Greek verb that refers to the activity of the ‘umpire’ who renders verdicts in contested situations. The verb thus naturally takes on the connotation of ‘control’; the standard Greek lexicon paraphrases, let the peace of Christ ‘be the decisive factor.’ In general, then, Paul wants the Colossians to make ‘peace’ the arbiter, the factor that should be given preference over competing concerns and interests.” (Colossians and Philemon, p. 283).

So what Paul is saying, here, is that peace is to rule in our relationships and interactions with one another. That, of course, raises the question of situations in which matters of truth and principle seem to require conflict – like when Paul said in Galatians 1 that if anyone preached a gospel contrary to the gospel that he preached, he should be cursed. Sometimes, when something serious enough is at stake, we need to take a stand, we need to engage in conflict, we need to fight for a fundamental truth or principle.

If we compare Scripture with Scripture, we must conclude that Paul is not saying here that peace must be the only and decisive factor in every situation. But he is saying that even then we must conduct ourselves in such a way, we are always striving for peace. If we must engage in conflict, we must be kind and patient and humble and meek so that even then the peace of Christ is ruling in our hearts. The goal of conflict, if we must engage in it, must be peace. And the cause of conflict if it involves false teaching lies with the false teachers.

However, peace is more important than most of the issues that threaten and undermine peace in churches. The kinds of things that Paul fought about in his ministry had to do with the fundamentals of the gospel. In the vast majority of cases within churches peace is more important than the issues that cause division. That is the point that Paul is making here when he says, “let the peace of Christ **rule** in your hearts....” Peace must be the boss. Peace overrides pretty much everything else unless the issue has to do with the heart of the gospel itself. And that is underscored by the context here where Paul is urging compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, forgiving one another and above all these putting on love.

This peace that Paul is talking about is “the peace of Christ.” The peace of Christ is the peace that he embodies and that he brings. Christ, of course, is the model of how we are to live as the perfect human being, but by his life, death, and resurrection he brings the comprehensive peace that the Bible talks about. We have already glanced at Colossians 1:20 that says that through Jesus, God is reconciling all things to himself and that Jesus

made peace by the blood of his cross. That peace is peace with God for believers, but it also results in peace between believers as God renews us in his image so that we are growing in compassion, and kindness and all the rest of the virtues that Paul mentions in verses 12-14.

It is also interesting that Paul says we are to “**let** the peace of Christ rule in [our] hearts.” There is a passive component to this idea. The peace of Christ is what is to rule and we are to allow it to do so. There is something about pursuing peace that is passive. We are to allow peace to rule rather than being active and imposing peace on a situation.

James Dunn expresses this thought in his commentary on this passage. He says that the peace of Christ “is not something that the Colossians have to accomplish but to let happen – to let go any attempt to control and to manipulate and to let the peace of Christ be the determiner....” (p. 234). Peace is something that you let happen rather than that you make happen. If you impose peace you have tyranny. If you allow peace, you have freedom.

Now there is, of course, a place for leadership in the church, either formally or informally. But leadership in the church is servant leadership and so there is a passive aspect to it in that it is not aggressive and forceful. Peter in 1 Peter 5 tells elders, not to be domineering over those in their charge. In Galatians 6:1 Paul says that even when dealing with sins that must be confronted and dealt with, it must be done in a spirit of gentleness. So even in leadership, there is an aspect of passivity in the sense that it does not force its will on others, but teaches and shows and gently guides so that the goal is pursued in a non-coercive way, a non-dominating way.

And that is the nature of pursuing peace in general. We are to “let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.” We are to allow kindness rule, and humility rule, and meekness rule and patience rule and bearing one with one another rule and forgiveness rule and love rule. What that means is that we are not ruling. It means that our will does not come first. It means that we are not imposing our agenda or opinions on others but as Paul puts it in Philippians 2, “in humility count others more significant than yourselves” and each one looking “not only to his own interests but also to the interest of others.” There is in all of this a passivity in which we do not push ourselves forward or our opinions or ideas, but allow others to have their say and count them and their thoughts as significant. Where there is peace, there is a lot of “allowing” going on and a lot of holding ourselves back to allow others to be heard and respected.

We see this principle worked out by Paul in his teaching about how to deal with disputable matters in Romans 14 and the first part of 15. This passage uses the terminology of those who are weak in the faith and those who are strong in faith. In many of the disputable matters in our situation, it is difficult to know who is the weak one and who is the strong one, but the principles of this passage apply regardless. This passage teaches that we are “not to quarrel over opinions.” That we are not to pass judgment on those who are believers and have different opinions than we do. In verse 19 of chapter 14 Paul writes, “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” And then in chapter 15:1-3a he says, “We who are strong have an

obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself....”

This demonstrates the passive element in “letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.” We bear with the failings of others. We do not please ourselves, but please our neighbor for his good. The key to the passive element in allowing peace to rule is not pleasing ourselves but pleasing others for their good to build them up.

In most cases where peace is lacking, selfishness is at the core. And it is vital that we ask ourselves in situations where we are not allowing the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts, whether we are seeking to please ourselves or whether we are seeking to please our neighbor for his good to build him up. It may be so that in a situation of disharmony that we are truly seeking to please our neighbor for his good to build him up, but it may also be that the root of the problem is that we are seeking to please ourselves. One of the greatest struggles that all Christians face is putting ourselves before others and at the heart of the changes that God is working in us in our salvation is to change us towards putting God first and putting other people before ourselves.

Now, getting back to Colossians 3:15, Paul goes on to say that members of Christ’s church have been called to let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts. “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in only body.” That word “called” is also one of the great and important terms of the NT. It carries a lot of freight. It is a weighty word like “love” and like “peace.” It is a key salvation word.

“You were called...” This refers to God’s powerful call that brings us from spiritual death to spiritual life. The theological word is “effectual call.” In the Bible when God speaks with the intension to make something happen, it happens – like when God spoke the world into existence or when Jesus called the dead Lazarus out of the tomb. The reality behind the call that Paul is talking about here is the power of God by which God is able to accomplish his will simply by speaking. In 1 Corinthians 1:9 Paul writes to the Corinthian believers, “God is faithful, by whom you were **called** into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” That call was not simply an invitation, but an accomplishment. When God calls his people they are brought into fellowship with Jesus. The call changes them. The call is a transforming call which produces the response albeit in a way that does not violate our wills so that our response is a voluntary and joyful response.

1 Peter 2:9 refers to this same call when it says of believers that God has “called [them] out of darkness into his marvelous light.” By means of God’s powerful call, the darkness was penetrated by the light of God’s truth so that those who were blind could now see.

That is the call that Paul is referring to in our text when he says that the Colossians had been called to “let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts ... in one body.” Clearly Paul is telling the Colossians to do something, but that exhortation to let peace rule is rooted in what God has already done when he powerfully and effectually

called them in one body. They had been united to the body of Christ by means of God's powerful call and now they are being exhorted to live out the implications of that by letting the peace of Christ rule in their hearts.

So this is one of the things that believers are effectually called to do – to let the peace of Christ rule in their hearts – so that there will be peace and harmony in the body of Christ. This is a huge part of God's goal in calling them to be part of his church – that the church might be one in peace and harmony and love. This is very important to God. This is a key part of his plan for the renewal of all things. This is one of the great accomplishments of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

This is how we are called to live together in the body of Christ. There is an interesting angle on this in Paul's teaching about the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. This is one of the key passages in the NT concerning the unity of the body of Christ which is the church. This is one of the passages which teaches that everyone in the body has been gifted for the common good and that the various gifts that God gives his people are all to contribute to the unity of the body. Verse 12 says, "For as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." Verse 13, "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit."

Paul goes on to say that each part of the body is important and significant, in that context he makes the profound point that the less dramatic gifts are indispensable and greater honor is to be bestowed on the weaker members. In verse 24-25 he says, "But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another." So he is talking about peace. "No division in the body." And one of the important principles of peace in the body is giving greater honor to the part that lacked it. That means that the people who are not naturally honored because they are weaker or their gifts are not of the kind that get noticed and honored, they are to be given greater honor that there may be no division in the body.

Romans 12:10 says that we are to "Outdo one another in showing honor." There is to be a competition among the members of the body of Christ, but it is not the competition of getting honor, but in seeking to outdo one another in showing honor to others. And the people who are to receive the greatest honor are the people least likely to be honored naturally. This is the kind of thinking that Paul seeks to invoke by mentioning the one body in our text. "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body." Peace and unity go together. We are one body in Christ. And one of the great principles of unity that Paul teaches is that we outdo one another in showing honor and that we give the greatest honor to the weakest and the least likely to be honored because of their weakness.

It is hard to over emphasize the importance of peace and harmony in the NT teaching about the church. That does not mean peace at all costs. There are situations where love for God and love for our neighbor requires taking a stand as we see Jesus doing and as we see the apostles doing in various places in the NT. If the clear teaching of the word of God in doctrine or life is being denied, it is never loving to allow that to continue

without confronting it and sometimes love requires conflict. But even then these verses that we have been looking at still apply for the way that we are to relate to others in the church, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, forgiving one another and above all loving one another. Even in necessary conflict we are to be peacemakers.

But much of the time conflict and tensions and disunity have nothing to do with the clear teaching of the word of God in doctrine or Christian living. Often they have to do with Romans 14 calls disputable matters. Often they have to do with selfishness, stubbornness, inflexibility, pride, insisting on things going our way. Often disunity has to do with thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought and a failure to be patient and to bear with one another and to honor one another. Often disunity has to do with a failure to appreciate how important peace is in the NT teaching about the church. I think that it is accurate to say that in most cases, at least in churches that love the truth, peace is much more important than the kind of issues that cause disunity.

Now I do not want to give the impression that our church is having particular problems in this area. We are blessed with a high degree of peace and harmony. In the last words of verse 15 Paul calls us to be thankful and we have much to be thankful for. It is also significant that Paul's exhortation to peace and harmony is addressed to a church that was not having great problems with disunity. There was the matter of the false teaching that Paul addressed in this letter and false teaching always causes disunity. But must also remember how Paul begins this letter. He writes in 1:3-4, "we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints..."

But still Paul teaches the church as he does because even though there was reason to be thankful, there was still a need for growth in every area and so it is with us. We can and should be thankful for the peace that we do enjoy. We can and should acknowledge that it is a gift of God – a gift of grace and the outworking of salvation in our lives. We have nothing that we have not received.

And there is always lots of room for growth. I'm sure that we all have heard things this evening that convict us of sin. Who of us can say that we are always allowing the peace of Christ to rule in our hearts? Must we not all confess that there are times when other attitudes are ruling and they are not of Christ at all?

Thankfully, if we are trusting in Jesus and seeking to please him also in this area, our sins are all forgiven and we living in the love and grace of God for Jesus sake. We are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved and God through his word here is calling us to something that is beautiful and profoundly enjoyable – peace and harmony and love. We have experienced enough of it to know that it is the way of life and blessing. We are made for relationships – first with God and then with one another. It is in relationships that we experience the blessedness of life as God designed it and as he is restoring it through Christ in the church. Peace and harmony are wonderful to experience and worth experiencing in a deeper way. That is what God is working towards in us and that is what he is calling us to allow to rule in our hearts.

“And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.” “Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!”