

Growing Up
Colossians 3:5-17
11/8/2020
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What does it mean to have emotionally healthy spirituality? Do we know that the scriptures actually care about emotional health and not just our intellectual strength? We turn to a passage which may at first glance seem not to be a place that we would turn to for such a subject as growing up emotionally and spiritually. It's Colossians 3. And as Paul writes to the church about what it looks like to go from what they once were in their old ways of living to their new selves in Christ, he's showing us the pathway of emotionally healthy spiritual maturity.

Hear now God's word, Colossians 3:5-17.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, 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. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me briefly.

Father, we now ask that your word would be open to us richly, that your Holy Spirit would give us a vision for what it means to grow up in Christ and what changes need to take place in us that we might be mature and healthy as we seek to grow not only individually, but as a church. But by growth, I don't mean numerically. Lord, we know that you will add to the number of your people. We desire to grow in such a way that increasingly this becomes a place where we bear with one another. We pray with and for one another. We learn to love and practice compassion but to do so in a way that puts the glory and grace of Christ on display for all who are hurting and need mending. We pray this in Jesus's name. Help the teacher. Amen.

I've shared with you before some of my interesting and perhaps surprising entertainment enjoyment. Generally, this involves rather short videos. I've told you about my pension for enjoying kitty cat or dog videos doing crazy stuff. I love giving voiceovers to animals. Ever since I was a young child, we always gave a voice to our cats. We do that now with our dogs. I'm just weird. Maybe you don't do that, and I don't know why you don't.

But one of the things that I really enjoy, particularly in the age of Tik Tok and Twitter, is when you hear the things that children say with their cute little child voices, and they call it the craziest or the

darndest things that kids say. But what's great is when somebody will hear a recording of a child's voice saying something crazy, and they put it as a voiceover with an adult. What you have is an adult body, face, and presence voicing the sound of a child. I don't know why, but I just find that particularly entertaining and funny because it's juxtaposed. It's the fact that it doesn't fit that makes it funny, and we now are paying attention to something that a child says because we're putting it in a different context. It kind of puts it in bold relief.

What's interesting is when you juxtapose another two things, it's oftentimes not funny. When we see fully formed adults who act emotionally like adolescents, that's not funny. Sometimes it can be hurtful. Sometimes it can be distancing and, frankly, very painful to watch. And sometimes we see it in ourselves.

It's very easy to pay attention to what the scriptures say with regard to even how I first learned of the gospel. How I first understood the gospel was you're to be a good boy and not a bad one. And I heard it talked about in various ways. Be good girls and boys so you can have those external behavioral markers. Again, I grew up in the south where it was very clear you knew what the external behavioral markers were and weren't.

What's interesting is that it's very possible, even now having known Christ all these years and having pastored in various states in very different church contexts, to have very strong intellectual understanding of the gospel and even faithful assent and yet still remain emotionally not far beyond a middle schooler. Do we understand that what God actually intends for us is more than just behavioral modification? He actually desires that we not only understand the call of the gospel and the claims that it makes upon us but actually desires and intends to make us emotionally mature and not just intellectually sharp is it relates to theology.

This morning as we look at this passage together, I want you to see that Paul is calling us to a deconstructing of the old self which requires an understanding of it. Secondly, He calls us to living the new life of what it means to be in Christ. Thirdly, as a community, we're called to be nurturing this new life together. It's deconstructing the old self, living the new life, and nurturing the new life. Let's go through this together.

Deconstructing the old self. Here, Paul makes very clear as he gives this list that when we're honest, when we hear verse 5 read, we tend to attach to it external behaviors. At least, a lot of the time, that's what comes to mind. He says, "to put to death," to literally do away with, "sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." Generally, we tend to attach external behaviors to those things. On the one hand, it seems as though what he's concerned about is our external behavior.

He then goes on and says in the event that you're confused, he's not speaking to the world. It's not that there's not a message for the world, but first and foremost, this message is not to the world. This message is first and foremost to the church. And he says to them in verse 7, "In these you too once walked, when you were living in them," in these ways of life. Paul is beginning to deconstruct the old self by first saying in essence, particularly in verse 7, that you used to walk in these ways of life. To be able to deconstruct the old self, we have to remember and understand how and in what ways we can be disobedient and run away from the Lord.

It happens to be my own testimony, and perhaps it's not yours. But my testimony is I can remember what it was like not to believe. I know that may not be the case for everyone, but I'll bet you can remember a time in your life, and I too can remember such a moment in part of my life of knowing Christ, when you wanted to run the opposite direction from the Lord. What were those seasons like? Perhaps you're in one now. Ask yourself the question, have you deconstructed what's going on inside of you? Have you asked yourself why you want to run from Him? Are you afraid of Him? If we don't understand the ways in which we once lived in these ways or the ways in which we are tempted to walk in these ways now even as a Christian, then we are destined to repeat the patterns.

When He says, "You too once walked in these," he doesn't want them to forget that was you. Don't forget that because I'm telling you now to turn away from those things. And you can't turn from something if you don't know where you're from.

Ask yourself, when were those seasons when you wanted to run from the Lord? Do you remember what it was like not to believe? And if you understand what was going on inside of you motivationally, what you loved, what you desired, what you lusted after, if you understand those things at a deeper level, then it enables us to hear and understand what Paul is saying when he's deconstructing the old self because he's getting ready to go deeper.

Notice what he says starting in verse 7. He says, "In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away." Now, in some sense, you would think it was going to be similar pattern to what he's just said. But notice what he says to flee from. Put away "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth." In some sense, he now goes to deconstructing the old self telling them to flee from it, but he starts from the inside.

Just parenthetically because I don't have enough time to go in here, the issue is not anger. It's okay to be angry, but it is a dangerous reality that we can easily sin in our anger. It's not that we can't be angry. Just be aware of it because anger left unnoticed and unaddressed turns into wrath. Wrath in the English comes from a really old word which means "wraith" where we get the word "wreath." Wrath is anger unaddressed which becomes knotted together like a wreath in itself so tightly wound up in you that you are so righteous in your wrath, and you're ready to pour it out in the next word, in malice. You're ready to hurt someone or something. Anger unaddressed becomes wrath which becomes the action of malice which ultimately becomes something like telling untruths and lies about other people, or willingness to believe lies about other people that are not substantiated by fact, and obscene talk.

Now, we hear obscene talk, and we think about our version of foul language. That's not what's being represented here. This is speaking of others in degrading and demeaning ways. This is celebrated, is it not, in our present day in various ways?

In some ways, I'm glad we live in a country where you can say what you want. There's a freedom there. But it doesn't mean that we are always free to speak in such ways.

But notice he doesn't start with speech because speech is just the overflow of the heart. What he says about the heart is the problem is anger left unaddressed. What's interesting is this is a very similar understanding of deconstructing the reality that external sin never starts in the external. It starts internally. It starts from our loves, our desires, what we want, what we don't want. This is a very old biblical understanding, something that I was slow in understanding even in my discipleship early on as a Christian. I thought that so long as I got the external behaviors right, then we're good. But then you eventually learn, hopefully, that the hard work of Christian growth is peeling back the layers of the onion. I thought my real problem was out there, what people could see. But the stubborn problems are what are inside my own heart.

As Christians, generally, we try to reduce things to external behavioral markers. Think about this. If you've ever been in church before, perhaps you've heard two famous words, Sodom and Gomorrah. It was this place of great sin and sexual immorality and rampant ways of disobeying and running from the Lord. What's interesting is as an early Christian, I was led to believe that that's what Sodom and Gomorrah was about. It was just a den of iniquity. It was a place where all kinds of things were just rampant and sexual immorality. But then it took until I was in my mid 20's in seminary when I realized the real problem with Sodom and Gomorrah wasn't the external behavior. It was something very much on the inside.

You learn this from Ezekiel 16 when he says declaring to Israel and calling them to account for their disobedience to the Lord, "As I live, declares the Lord God, your sister Sodom and her daughters have not done as you and your daughters have done. Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom." So

you're expecting it to come, right? But here's what he says. "The real guilt of your sister Sodom, she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." What's interesting about that is Ezekiel is not saying there wasn't a problem with the sexual immorality but that it didn't start there. It actually started in the pride of life in the heart and seeking to use their pride and their means and ability to amass wealth for themselves with a strong disregard for those in need around them.

Note the problem wasn't wealth and affluence. The problem was the affluence was only used for their ends and not used to care for those in need. And it was like a lightbulb came on. The problem isn't out here alone. It begins in here, the problem of pride. How often sometimes we get angry which turns to wrath which turns to malice which turns to slander because someone has offended our pride. To deconstruct the old self, we must understand it's not just about the external behaviors but the internal attitudes, desires, and longings that feed it. And they rarely travel alone. They have many travel partners such as pride, covetousness, and a disregard for those around us.

Paul says okay, that's what was happening. Flee from these things. But he doesn't just say this is the bad stuff, so don't do it again. He never says that. He says something far more profound, and that's the second point which is living in the new life.

In some sense, he's wanting us to deconstruct how we once lived and that which fed it, and he means to establish us in a completely new way of understanding ourselves, and from there is a completely new way of life. Here's what he says, "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." And then he goes on with this beautiful description. You are no longer first and foremost defined by your race, your origin, your socioeconomic level, or even your gender. It's not that those things aren't important or that we don't care about those distinctions. It's that that's not what ultimately defines us.

Here's what he says it is in Christ that we find our all. Christ is all. That is the reality. And here's what's uncomfortable about what he's saying. He's saying there's a new you. But here's the problem. We're weird. And I don't mean this in the way you think I mean that, but the way Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind*, means. He uses the word "weird" as an acronym. It is you are western, you are educated, industrial, rich, and democratic. What that means is in the west, the more educated, the more wealthy, the more democratic you are, you tend to see the following. The way you define yourself has nothing to do with anything outside of you. You get to define who you are.

That is a hard message to hear then when the Bible says you no longer define who you are. Christ does. Here's what he says in verse 12, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved." It's all passive. God has called you out, drawn you to Himself, and He calls you His children. He then says, you are holy, and you are loved. This means the first and only one who defines who we are in this ethic of the gospel is who God is and who He says we are. We belong to Him.

Coming to Christ means that that begins to shape everything else. It begins to shape where I live, how I live, how I understand myself and my relationship to others whether they agree or believe as I do. But I am shaped by this relationship with my heavenly Father, with His Son, empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is difficult for us because we've been told and educated for most of our lives by our parents, by our schools, by the culture that nobody gets to define who you are. You do. But that's not what the gospel says. The good news is it is good news. We are beloved. We are children, and we've been bought with a price.

It doesn't mean we aren't free. To say that Christ is all and that we are in Him, we actually begin to understand what it means to be a human being made in the image of God in relationship with the heavenly Father forgiven through the grace of Christ and the freedom of His mercy that I can find great depth and power and meaning in who He says I am even when I don't like myself. This is why Paul can say, I don't care what others think of me. I don't even care what I think of me. What matters is what the

Lord says of me. And it doesn't mean I just treat others without regard. It means I know who I am, and I'm actually free to move into the lives of others because I've been told who I am. And I'm loved.

This new way of life begins with understanding the new you. We are united to who Jesus Christ is as Paul says here. Then he says there's the new way. He's using the image of clothing. In some sense, we receive a new identity, and we receive new clothes. And what an amazing set of clothing it is.

Now, much like the clothing we put on this morning, we had to be taught how to put on clothes. Many of us don't remember that, but you know this if you're a parent. You had to tell your children how to put on their clothes. My father had to show me how to tie a tie. He had to show me how to tighten my belt and make sure my pants are on the right direction. We know all of these things. We only do this now as second nature. But here's the problem. Old habits die hard, don't they?

Listen to this interesting invention. Here's a tangible expression of this. Creator Destin Sandlin had a great idea. He created the backwards brain bicycle. Sandlin created the bicycle with an important hitch. When you turn the handle bars left, the front wheel turns right, and vice versa. Having ridden a bike his entire life, Sandlin literally cannot ride the bike that he made. His neural pathways and bodily habits are trained for a regular bicycle. His habits were very subtle. Only with extraordinary effort did Sandlin learn to ride the bike after eight months of practice. Old habits die hard. But what's interesting is that his son learned to ride the backwards bike in just two weeks.

The important lesson is this. When we seek to be made new in new ways of living, we must understand that what Paul is calling us to here is to let old habits die hard of anger, wrath, malice, slander, lying to one another as we once lived. We now have to practice these new things of 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 must forgive.

In the event that you've not heard me say it before, in the event that nobody has told you this before, these do not happen automatically once you say, I believe in Jesus. They will not happen to us by reading a lot of books. They will not happen to us because we wish them to be so. They happen only as we get on the backwards bicycle backwards to how we used to live but as the way to live now. And we're going to fall off. We're not going to forgive each other all the time. We're going to fall off and scrape our knees. We're going to be gruff instead of compassionate. We're going to be judgmental instead of empathetic. But these are what we are called to practice as God's people. Notice they're all intricately connected to what's happening in our inward emotional state.

I want to say to you, Christian, if you call on the name of Christ, do you know that although you make a mistake, you're not a mistake? Do you know that because you are now in Christ, although your circumstances are screaming out at you that things are not good, that you do not have to think everything is awful? Why? Because the Lord is your Lord. He is the Lord even of the difficult circumstance. We don't have to have black and white thinking. We don't have to play Holy Spirit and imagine what somebody else might be thinking about me or how they might respond to me. No. I can be free knowing that I have been set free through the blood and body of Christ, bought with a price, declared as a child, and loved. And I have to even practice what it means to know that. But it then means I must also ask, Lord, help me to practice this new way of life by your Spirit and by your grace.

In living this new life and this calling to a new you and the new way, Paul also intends this to be a nurturing of new life together. Now, much of my early discipleship in the 80's when I came to Christ and well on through the 90's and even onward, I noticed this tendency that we tend to think of coming to Christ and growing in Christ as something that an individual does because we're western. We're educated. We're industrial and rich and democratic. I can do this, me, myself, and Jesus.

And as a pastor, again, in multiple states and different churches, I look out at a congregation that largely doesn't really need each other because when we come into the church, we are in our little individual economic systems. And we've all been told to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps to work

hard. And those are all good things. But oftentimes it's wedded with a discipleship that is overly individualistic. When we start talking about the church and growing and nurturing life together as a people, it doesn't ring true to us. We still think of ourselves as individuals and not as a part of a rich body of interlaced relationships. But that is indeed what we are.

Paul looks at the church, and he says these things and these practices all have the language of relationship. Again, hear the words. "Compassionate hearts, practicing kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another." In other words, walking patiently, bearing other struggles and others bearing your struggles, together. It is implied in the verbs and the adverbs and the adjectives and all the nouns a plural which is us together. In other words, we cannot call ourselves compassionate, patient, forgiving if the fruit of that is not apparent in the relationships around us because Christianity is not a self-accrediting faith. It is lived in community with others as iron sharpens iron.

But this is hard. But it's also deeply baked into being human. Do you know that God has actually built it into the very DNA of being a human that we are to walk with each other even in the midst of our weaknesses? We need each other.

Even if you don't believe, consider one particular scientist, anthropologist Margaret Mead. She was once asked to identify the earliest material sign of human civilization. Obvious candidates would be the tool production, agricultural methods, and art. Her answer was a 15,000-year-old femur that had been broken and healed. The healing process, she said, for a broken femur takes approximately 6 weeks. In that time, the wounded person could not have worked, hunted, or fled from predators. He or she would need to be cared for and carried during that time of helplessness. "This kind of support," Dr. Mead pointed out, "does not occur in the rest of the animal kingdom. Our way of coping with weakness as much as our ingenious technologies and arts is what sets us apart as a species."

We were built and made to be in community and to help one another when our bones break. But so oftentimes when we're honest, the church and our workplaces don't feel like a safe place to have a broken bone healed. Or what if the broken bone happened in that community? What does a healthy environment look like?

Consider this. I want you to think of your workplace. Now, this is an author who was not writing about the church but was writing about what a healthy workplace looks like.

"A healthy workplace is a place where it is possible to give tough feedback and have difficult conversations without the need to tiptoe around the truth. A safe work environment is a place where people believe that if they make a mistake, others will not penalize or think less of them. And a safe workplace is a place where people will not resent or humiliate each other when they need help or need information."

Now, that is what this author is saying is a healthy workplace. Don't raise any hands. But how many of you have experienced that kind of healthy workplace? Many of us have not.

But I will tell you an increasing number of Christians wonder whether the church is this kind of safe place where we can actually acknowledge that we need help. Many wonder if the church is the kind of safe place to acknowledge that I'm not where I want to be, and I'm very likely not where you want me to be, but I need help. This requires patience as Paul says here, bearing with one another, which means that instead of treating people where we want them to be, we receive them where they are, and we don't try to play thought police or belief police in trying to muscle them where they need to be. Instead, we say, Lord, by your grace, I want to pray with you and for you.

In nurturing this new life, it requires that we prize community over autonomy. It means we're going to have to prize community over autonomy. We need each other. It means that we're going to have to lean into being vulnerable. And it doesn't mean we're transparent with everything with everybody, but it does mean we have a portion of relationships with whom we can begin to unpack that this is where

I'm hurting. This is where I need to go. This is what I'm believing about myself that may not be true. I don't know whether God is going to forgive me again. I don't know whether I can make it. I need help. And that person can say that without being judged or shamed or being told they should do this, this, this, and this. It means that we are able to be vulnerable increasingly with each other to practice empathy.

And this goes back to remembering our history. He says, "Forgive one another as you have been forgiven." There is no more beautiful picture of empathy than that. To forgive others as you have been forgiven requires for you to put yourself in the shoes of another suffering sinner who needs forgiveness, and you see yourself who is as deeply in need of forgiveness as anybody who will ever come to you. It doesn't mean that conversations are hard or always cozy or make us feel good, but it's at least a place where we know that we can come for forgiveness and healing.

But then in this beautiful picture of the clothing of the new self, Paul gives us, as one writer says, "the belt to tie it all together." And that is the belt of love. He says, "And above all of these, put on love which binds everything together in perfect harmony, and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts to which indeed you were called in one body and be thankful." And he says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus."

He's calling us to the twin loves. He has loved us. We, therefore, love one another which then promotes loving back to Him and then our gathering together every Sunday, and we sing hymns and songs and spiritual songs. We give thanks to God for His grace. We have more to be grateful for than to complain about. The Lord has reminded us that this love has been poured out on us through the work of Jesus Christ who has made friends of His enemies, who has made a family of those who once rejected Him, and He welcomed us into His heart into the arms of His grace, and He now gives us the Spirit. He gives us the word. He gives us the strength to do the same with each other.

Now, I don't know whether you are a Christian or not. But I do know this, that what He invites you into is something that will change everything, and it will make you new. If you are a Christian, I say to you He doesn't just stop with having you come to Him. He means to make us a people that is growing emotionally more mature, able to walk with others in the midst of suffering, able to share with others our suffering knowing that we will find forgiveness, accountability, and support, and that together we will sing a hymn of praise to the one who has begun a new kingdom, who has told us to take away the old self and has given us a new self for the purpose of His glory.

May the Lord do this in us and increasingly make us a mature glorifying body of people for the glory of Christ. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, I thank you for this people. I thank you for their patience this morning. I thank you for your word that desires and envisions us to be a people that are growing maturely from the inside out and learning to practice these things knowing that it is only by your Spirit and in community that we are to practice these things. Lord, help us. We are not where we could be, but this is where we are. And we ask you to strengthen and mature your people for the glory of Christ's name. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.