

Big idea: As God's people, put on the character and conduct of God

Introduction - Grand Design

My husband and I are fans of Grand Design, the hugely successful building and renovation program. We love the before and after. We cringe at some of the stress and problems that people expose themselves to in order to achieve their dream home. We're always amused when we can tell that Kevin McLeod thinks they're completely mad or not.

And even though we're probably never going to do a Grand Design, we've learnt a lot about building.

We know you always need a project manager. Kevin's never happy when they don't have a project manager.

Another is that there's a huge difference between having a completely empty block of land and building from scratch,

Compared to keeping part of an original building and fixing it up.

Building from scratch is a whole lot easier because when you renovate you always have to get rid of stuff.

Some of it's just ugly.

Some of it you have to scrape off, or strip off, break down because you need a blank slate, a clean surface on which to apply the new, shiny new layers.

Some of it you have to get rid of because it's just downright dangerous, like asbestos, or something unstable, or it leaks, or is full of rot or is a fire hazard.

These are usually the things that only reveal themselves to the owners once they have done their budget and they've started building. That's when the stress begins because they discover some disastrous wiring, or foundations or weakness and there's just no choice but to sink more money into something that you won't ever actually see, that won't make the house more beautiful or improve the view.

It just has to happen and its never simple and its never cheap but it needs to happen so that the renovation can proceed, so that something new can be made from something old.

And as we come to Colossians 3 there are some similarities.

Since we've been raised with Christ, since our minds are set above, since our lives are now hidden with Christ in God, since we've been made new, we need to live authentic Christian lives.

The trouble is that for each of us that means that we need a renovation.

We need to put on the character and conduct of God.

But to do that, there's some serious stripping back, cleaning up, demolition that needs to happen.

As we consider the practical outworking of compassion and how to build compassion into our everyday lives, we'll need to face up to the things we need to **put off** as well as the things we need to **put on**.

Context

Paul's letter to the Colossians is full of thankfulness (1:3). He rejoices in their faithfulness (1:4). Paul himself is probably in prison as he writes, so he also reminds and warns them of the dangers of going off track (2:8).

And what is his strongest argument? He reminds them of the person and work of Jesus and the incredible gift of grace we have received by his death for our sins (1:13-14).

It's in Colossians 1 that we have one of the clearest, most poetic, most comprehensive picture of Jesus.

Colossian 1:15

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

He continues by reminding them what they once were, aliens and enemies of God (1:21), dead in your sins (2:13).

He reminds them of their freedom in Christ and warns them against submitting to human rules (2:20-22).

So with this as background we come to chapter 3.

It's Paul's big motivational anthem.

Colossians 3:1-4

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Because we have been raised with Christ, because we have been forgiven, because we have the hope of eternal life,

Set your hearts, set your minds on things above.

We're to have a heavenly filter on every aspect of our lives, to lift our gaze from the earthly, to Christ who is our life.

So if Christ is really our life, if we are going to keep our hearts and minds set above, what is going to help us, to keep from dropping our gaze, losing our way, going off track?

The next part of chapter 3 helps us to think about two things:

What to **put off** and

What to **put on**

1. Put off

Like the demolition process that most renovations require, we need to put off, to get rid of a whole lot of ugly, dangerous stuff. Stuff that means that any attempt to live a godly life will be compromised.

Paul uses strong language because he really wants us to hear him.

This is not a carefully worded kindergarten school report: 'Emily is incredibly energetic and so keen to share ideas' which is code for 'Emily won't sit still and never stops talking'.

No, Paul is very clear.

There are two parts to this.

Firstly, in verse 5 he says '**Put to death**'. Kill, destroy, annihilate.

And the list of things we're to kill are all part of our earthly nature.

They're the things that are pretty uncomfortable to hear: '**sexual immorality, impurity, lust evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry**'.

And if we're honest, we all prefer to skim over these words and tell ourselves that they don't apply to me. I know I do.

Tim Keller says that he did a sermon series on the seven deadly sins, Kathy his wife predicted that the poorest attendance would be for the sermon on greed. And it was. We just don't think that's us.

But the truth is without grace, left to our own devices, we drop our gaze and our minds and hearts are not set on things above.

These are the default patterns caused by sin. We want something we don't have. It becomes an obsession. We're not getting our needs met. It's all about me. I deserve it. I'm special.

This is sin that's often invisible to others. Often it lives in our secret thoughtlife.

Invisible but insidious because it deceives us into thinking it doesn't matter.

At the heart of it is a worship of self. There's nothing new under the sun. Idolatry was the Israelites biggest weakness, and we're no different.

When we worship ourselves and not the Creator, what was pure becomes impure, what was good becomes evil.

Verse 7 says

You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived

Which echoes Colossians 2:11

Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ

Secondly, in verses 8-10 he adds sins of speech, sins of the tongue.

But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹ Do not lie to each other,

Although anger and rage can definitely have physical expressions, I think here Paul is focusing on the ways that our words can be damaging. And angry gestures or behaviour nearly always follow angry words, not the other way round.

James 1:8 describes the tongue as 'a restless evil, full of deadly poison'

And like the sexual sins, sins of the tongue can be so damaging.

The problems of the early church were nearly all centred around false teaching, twisting the word of truth, full of empty boasting and false claims.

Do not lie to each other by diluting or emptying the gospel of its distinctiveness.

When have you experienced hurt because of someone's words? Angry words, thoughtless words, gossiping words?

I think the times I've been most hurt ever were times when Christians have spoken in anger and malice. Times when I was left speechless because I expected so much more.

And of course we need to be honest with ourselves and repent of the times we have been the cause of hurt.

When we've spoken behind someone's back. I'm guessing we're all guilty of that.

When we've been angry, passive-aggressive or perhaps even silent.

Instead of lying to each other, we need to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

Verse 10 draws this part of Paul's argument, the **putting off** argument, together:

Since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

So we're to put off sexual sin and sins of speech because they're ugly and dangerous and they will get in the way of ever really being able to live an authentic Christian life.

2. Put On

In verse 12 we come to the 'Therefore'.

And I'm sure you've heard the expression, I think it must have come from Moore College, 'we need to know what the therefore is there for'.

Therefore, because Jesus is the image of the invisible God, because we have died to sin and been raised with Christ, because we are putting to death sexual sin and getting rid of anger, filthy language and lies,

Because of all this we need to **put on** the character and conduct of God.

And Paul draws this whole train of thought together a few verses down in verse 15

¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

So therefore **put on** so that we can to live as members of the body. Peacefully and thankfully.

So what are we to **put on**?

Character and conduct.

Verse 12
as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

As we draw our thinking and understanding about compassion to a conclusion, isn't it interesting that compassion, the idea of 'suffering with', is set here in the context of other qualities.

Which is consistent with all that you've learnt from this series through Exodus 33, Psalm 51, Jonah 4, Lamentations 3 and Hebrews.

Because each of those passages helped us to understand the compassionate character of God in the context of other aspects of his character, his holiness, his mercy, his power to forgive sin, his power to rebuild.

Compassion works in partnership. It's part of the fabric of authentic Christian character.

So I don't think that the list in verse 12 is multiple choice. You can't pick compassion and kindness but not humility, gentleness or patience.

It's similar to the list of the fruit of the spirit in Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Most scholars agree that they're not fruit plural but fruit singular. We can't just feel good because we've managed one or two at a time.

I think they're the components of Christian attitude that will help us to live in peace with each other.

And we need them all, working together well.

As we practice compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience we will bless others and mirror the love of God.

But Paul recognises that none of this comes easily or naturally because he says '**clothe yourself**'.

Actively decide to put these virtues on.

I think this is Paul's way acknowledging that humanly speaking we find it hard to be compassionate, kind, humble, gentle and patient all at the same time.

Imagine when I'm chatting to someone new after church. Am I, empathising with their role of caring for an elderly parent, thinking of what I might do to support them, putting aside the urge to talk about my problems, am I gentle not harsh and am I patient, not counting the time or the energy it takes, wishing that I could just get a cup of tea?

It's not for the fainthearted is it? Which is why we have to be rid all the evil first.

So he says 'clothe yourself' – be purposeful, deliberate, choose these, be intentional.

And the idea of clothing has deep roots in the Bible doesn't it?

It was in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve first realised that being naked was really uncomfortable, when they suddenly felt vulnerable and ashamed, that they needed to cover themselves, to clothe themselves, to restore their dignity, so they could even think about facing God and each other (Genesis 3).

Clothing is not just protection against the elements in a practical sense or a statement of fashion and beauty at the other end of the spectrum, its often used to express belonging.

A uniform.

Belonging to a club, a tribe, a business, a school, a team, a country.

Think about how many ways clothing of some kind or another expresses a sense of belonging.

It often amuses me that there's a high school in Sydney that doesn't have a uniform, so of course, it has huge appeal to the arty, musical, dramatic, expressive kids.

But they actually create their own uniform by wearing black, having the same piercings, the same jeans torn in the same places, the same eyeliner.

And there are many ways that religion is expressed through clothing: a nuns habit, a priest's collar or robes, a Buddhist monk's saffron, a Jewish kippah. the burka.

The uniform of the Israelites was worn in their flesh. The covenant of circumcision marked them out as God's people. As distinctive and separate. As holy because God is holy.

And as Christians of the new covenant we have these: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience to mark us out as holy.

And we should never leave the house without them.

And secondly, we need to add godly conduct.

Verse 13

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Whereas verse 12 is the clothing of character verse 13 informs our conduct.

I wonder if you, like Paul, had allowed himself just one verse or less than 25 words to describe ideal Christian behaviour, what would you have written?

Love and good deeds?

Serving others?

Being gracious?

Charitable giving?

Be honest and truthful?

Keeping the ten commandments?

Do unto others?

But Paul's priority for living with each other as members of the body of Christ is bearing with each other, forgiving each other.

Verse 13 is assuming that we won't always get verse 12 perfectly right and that we'll need to go back and apologise and sometimes we'll need to be the ones who do the forgiving.

We need to put up with each other's imperfections. It's a messy business, it's inconvenient and uncomfortable. If we were all perfect it would be so much easier.

We're God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved but in this life we'll continue to stumble and we'll need to forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven us.

As he continues to do.

As we **put on** godly character and conduct, we need love to hold everything together, to **bind them all together in perfect unity** (3:14)

We can do none of this without love, the love of God that is most perfectly displayed in Jesus, the image of the invisible God.

In verse 15 Paul says

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

Peace that is the opposite of enmity because we're no longer at war with God.

And this peace will determine our relationships, our responses, our choices as we live together with all our faults and failings.

Conclusion

Years ago when we were members of a different church, we heard people talking about 'the really awful' thing that happened.

One of the members of Parish Council, put himself up to be the Treasurer, and he was well qualified and frankly, I'm not sure who that is here, but it's a lot of work.

Well I think things carried on without incident for a number of years until someone looked into a trust account that was funded by a benefactor. You know it just sat there earning interest. It was there for a rainy day but so far it hadn't been needed.

Well you've probably guessed. It was almost depleted. And joining the dots was pretty straightforward.

The police knocked on his door. His poor wife, who'd had no idea, answered it. His daughter was just about to do the HSC. Can you imagine? They had no idea. It turns out that he'd planned it right from the beginning. It was easy to do and greed captured his heart.

I think he was jailed for about 4 years. It cost him his marriage and his family not to mention his reputation. It cost him his career. It cost him many friends and many relationships.

But the beautiful part of this story is that faithful members of the church visited him in jail and he repented and maintained his faith in Jesus.

And when he was released having lost everything, good friends from the same church invited him back into fellowship, back into their bible study group, back into their lives with forgiveness.

That's being clothed with compassion isn't it? Suffering with your brother. Doing it with kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Forgiving as Jesus forgave.

⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Let's pray

Fiona Simpkin

