

Sunday, October 24, 2021

## Putting on Love

(Message 8; Series: *Extreme Discipleship: Living into our Mission*)  
(Colossians 3:11-14)

### Scripture:

*<sup>11</sup>Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*

*<sup>12</sup>Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup>Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup>And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

### Message:

One of the fundamental marks of the Christian community is **living together** with people who are **not like** us, people who are challenging to love, people we wouldn't normally socialize with. (Loving lovable people just like us is considerable easier).

Think for a moment about the people in your life. Scroll your mental Rolodex. Picture a difficult person, someone that's not easy for you to love naturally. Maybe someone down the row or sitting in front of you. There are probably several at work – not to mention the in-laws.

Mary Southerland, in her book, calls them, **sandpaper people**. They rub us the wrong way; they have this abrasive quality in their personality. Let me give you a few clues to recognize them.

- If you get a message to call this person, you wish they hadn't called.
- When you're with them, you can feel energy draining out of your body.
- You may feel guilty for how you treat them, but you can't break the pattern.
- After being with this person, you may try to calm yourself by overeating, or biting your fingernails.

How many of you would say you have **at least one** sandpaper person in your life? Most of us do. Raise your hands, would you, so we can get a sense of this?

Okay. (Now, stand up, point your finger at them and call out their name...just kidding ☺). And how many of us are the difficult person in someone else's life?

Truth is, and this may be hard to believe, but it is a good thing, to have a few difficult people in our lives because the way we treat difficult people **reveals** the condition of our **heart** and **helps** us grow spiritually.

**The mark of God's community is loving people who we would ordinarily not like or love.** This mark is most clearly seen in **Jesus**. And Jesus announces that God wants everyone – all kinds of people - to be a part of his new community—tax collectors, fisherman, zealots, Galileans and Judeans were among the twelve. And Jesus welcomed prostitutes, a Roman centurion, and a Samaritan adulteress. With Jesus' dying breath, he invites a criminal being crucified into this gracious, grace-filled, grace-extending community.

Philip Yancy retells a story from the Boston Globe of a woman and her fiancée who went to the Boston Hyatt Hotel to plan their wedding reception. They pored over the menu; they selected china, silver, a cake and the flower arrangements. The bill came to \$30,000. They left a 50% deposit. Days before the announcements were to hit the mailbox, the groom got cold feet and backed out. When his angry fiancée returned to the Hyatt to cancel, she discovered the contract was binding and she could go ahead with the banquet or forfeit the deposit. The jilted bride decided to go ahead with the party—not a wedding banquet, but a big blowout.

Ten years before, she had been living in a homeless shelter. She had gotten back on her feet. She decided to use her savings to treat the down-and-outs of Boston to a night on the town. So instead of a wedding reception, there was a party. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken—in honor of the groom and sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served hors d'oeuvres to senior citizens propped up by crutches and aluminum walkers. Bag ladies, vagrants and addicts ate chocolate wedding cake.

Jesus says, *"Invite everybody—especially those you think might otherwise miss out on the banquet."*

## **DIVERSE**

**After Jesus ascended, the church took this command very **seriously**. So did Paul. He writes, *"There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, Barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all."* (3:11)**

Paul is writing about old divisions and old labels that separated people, made people angry with each other, and kept them from being a community. Paul says, *“Those things don’t matter anymore; they shouldn’t keep us apart.”*

- “Greeks” and “Jews” didn’t get along. The Greeks considered all non-Greeks as uncultured **barbarians**; Jews considered all non-Jews as pagan gentiles.
- Circumcised people considered uncircumcised people as **unclean** and **pagan**. In fact, if they came to synagogue, they were asked, *“Are you circumcised?”* before they would speak to them, touch them, or eat with them)
- Educated Greeks had **contempt** for Barbarians (anyone who didn’t speak Greek). Scythians are an interesting group of especially repulsive Barbarians. They were called “wild beasts.” The Greek Historian Herodotus says when the Scythians went to war, they drank the blood of their victims, used their scalps as napkins, and their skulls as soup bowls.
- Slaves and free people were on **opposite ends** of the social and economic spectrum (and that’s the way the free people wanted to keep it). Slaves were not considered human beings. Aristotle said slaves were living tools and had no rights. They could be beaten or even killed without penalty. (Up to a third of the population of Colossae may have been slaves; including, probably, a good percentage of the church).

Paul describes a community where all these people and personalities come together because of Jesus Christ. In the world, that would be unthinkable. That would be a miracle even the world would notice! The cultured next to the uncultured, the ignorant next to the educated, the powerful next to the powerless, the wealthy next to the poor. Together. In Community!

Where else in the world could something like that happen? Nowhere.

**Please understand, the early church was not devoid of conflict, dissent, or sandpaper people. The early church was still made up of (sinful) human beings.** There was the conflict between Hellenistic and Hebrew Christians caring for poor and widows (**Acts 6**), the conflict between circumcised and uncircumcised Christians (**Acts 15**), the serious conflict between Paul and Peter (**Galatians 1**). **Philemon** describes conflict between a slave and his owner (both part of the church). **Romans** details an intense conflict between those strong in the faith and those weaker in their faith. In Colossae, there was the conflicts over Gnosticism and legalism. Paul wrote to the **Corinthians** – *“There are quarrels among you. One of you says, ‘I belong to Paul.’ One of you says, ‘I belong to Apollos.’”* (**1 Corinthians 1:12**). But there was a glimmer of grace. A loving community where Christ was all! **gave hope** to a hopeless world.

The acid test of growing maturity is ability to **love people** who are different than we are; people who show a Christ-like love...

Robert Roberts writes of a fourth-grade class where the teacher introduced a new game: Balloon Stomp. A balloon is tied to every child's leg and the object of the game is to pop everyone else's balloon while protecting yours. The last person with an intact balloon wins. It is a zero-sum game: If I win, you lose. Others' successes diminish my chances. Everyone is an "enemy." It is a Darwinian contest – the survival of the fittest; and ten-year-olds are Darwinian people. They played the game vigorously; in a matter of seconds, it was over. The owner of the last balloon was now the most disliked kid in the room. It is hard to win at Balloon Stomp.

Down the hall, the same game was played by fourth-grade students with cognitive impairment. They were each given a balloon, the same instructions, and the signal to start. But apparently, they didn't fully understand the instructions. They only understood that all the balloons had to be popped. So instead of fighting each other off, they formed a balloon-stomping co-op. One little girl held her balloon down, while a little boy stomped it flat. Then he held his down for her to stomp. All the children helping one another in the great balloon stomp and when the last balloon was popped, everyone cheered.

It shouldn't not be hard to tell which one Jesus would applaud; and which one he longs for in his church and family. Because unity in diversity is the signature of God. It was his New Testament church.

## **DEVOTED**

In his love and grace, God chose us. Paul writes, "*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved...*" (**Colossians 3:12**). The text here is addressed to devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

Chosen. Not to be chosen, but already chosen. God chose you!

Holy. Set apart, like if you have a task to do and you set apart one tool. God sets us apart.

Loved. When God looks at you, God's heart wells up with love.

To be chosen means we are **loved**. There is no **gift** like being chosen (and no pain like being rejected). When I am chosen, it means someone **wants me**. When I am chosen, it means someone thinks that I have something to contribute, that I am unique and **significant**.

And God chose and died for me while I was **still** a **sinner** (**Romans 5:8**). So God's love is clearly underscored in his willingness to **choose** sandpaper

people, sinners, people far from God, and set them (you and me) apart (holy) and love us graciously and deeply.

In our world, those who are chosen, rule; those who are not chosen, serve. **Not** with **God**. God doesn't choose that way. In God's love, our *chosenness* never comes at **another's expense**. In God's love, our *chosenness* is never based on our **character** or **contributions**. In God's love, his plan for my *chosenness* is to **enhance** my life and the lives of others, not to **diminish** them. In God's love, his plan for my *chosenness* is for me to **serve** others.

Harold Boris writes of the possibility that sin is rooted in our fear of not being chosen. Adele Faber notes that the love that children crave is not being loved *equally* with siblings, for somehow *equal* always feels like less, but to be loved **specialy** (i.e., uniquely) – for one's own self, and **sufficiently** – as much as one needs to be loved. And God does. God, in his Son Jesus, shows us how it is done.

**The acid test of maturity is our ability to love people I would not naturally love as Christ would love them.** In Matthew, in his mountain message, Jesus said, "*You have heard it said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy*" [conventional wisdom]. "*But I say to you, love your enemies.*" In Luke he said, "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your father in heaven*" (cf. **Luke 6:35**).

The Father wants us to **resemble Jesus**. Why? Because the Father makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good. It is the mark of God that he loves all people – "*for God so loved the world*" – people who are rough around the edges and people who have smooth edges; people who love him back and people who don't; people who obey him and people who defy him.

**Loving** others (as ourselves) – both our friends and our enemies, both the lovable and the **unlovable**; both those who are like me and those who aren't; both those I want to love and those I don't; both sandpaper people and silk people – is the acid test of growing in maturity. Anyone can love people that love them and are nice to them.

**Most of us prefer not to talk about this too much, but** for some, the convicting work of Holy Spirit is going on right now because there's a difficult person in your life who you haven't yet shown much love... (Perhaps you're not even trying). But if Spirit is convicting you, please listen carefully. Don't go through life trapped in resentment and hostility toward a difficult person or toward sandpaper people. Many hold on to the illusion that we could live in community if all the other people were healthy...like us. God calls us in community with *Greeks and Jews, circumcised and uncircumcised, with Barbarian and Scythians, with slaves and freed.*

God wants us to resemble him. We resemble him when we love the unlovely. Sandpaper people reveal our heart and encourage us to grow in maturity. The signature of God is the ability to love folks who are hard to love

## DIFFICULT

**Paul instructs us to “Clothe ourselves...” (3:12) and provides us with another list.** In removing our clothes infested with sin and evil (sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language) we need to put on clean clothes: **compassion**, kindness, **humility**, gentleness, and **patience**.

- Compassion. Before Christians seasoned the world with salt, there was little compassion. The aged were left to die; unwanted babies were thrown in the town dump; the handicapped were shunned; widows were ignored; orphans were left to roam the streets.
- Kindness is a form of generosity, a willingness to put others before ourselves; making a small sacrifice for someone else’s benefit.
- Humility. The world sees humility as cowardice, being a door mat or a sucker. But when Jesus bent over to wash his disciples’ feet, humility was changed for eternity. It is Christ-like to serve another.
- Gentleness or meekness is a simplicity of character that is uncomplicated because its focus is on doing the will of God.
- Patience is the self-restraint when tempted with evil, the refusal to avenge wrong, the ability to engage the slow work of God.

Paul exhorts us to put this clothing on; to allow people to see it on us...

- I cry during Hallmark commercials and movies, so I’m compassionate, right?
- I imagine myself being very generous; and if I had a bunch more money, I would be.
- I once did a random act of kindness; so I’m good, right?
- I’m gentle and patient with my children when I peak in to see if their sleeping before I go to bed. I’m making progress, right?

This is why community is so important. The test of my spiritual growth and maturity is what I actually do with real people in Christian **community** – a community that includes some *sandpaper people*.

**Christian community is never easy.** Christian community is not supposed to be easy. No one grows and matures when things are easy. Henry Nouwen

said, “Community is where person you least want to live with always lives.” But it is always the place Jesus lives too.

## **DISCIPLINED (I.e., so how do I begin to love difficult people?)**

**First, Paul says we need to “*Bear with them*”** (i.e., learn to tolerate one another; cf. **3:13**). I like this command. It shows Paul realistic about real people. He has experienced *sandpaper people*.

Obviously, this is the **first step**, not the ultimate goal. The goal, Jesus explained, is to **love one another**, to love our enemies, to love sandpaper people, to love the unlovely. Like Jesus, the spiritually mature are praying for their “enemies,” are willing to sacrifice for the unlovable, rejoice when a sandpaper person succeeds, and serves under-resourced with seeking recognition.

You may be down the path in loving the unlovable, but if not, “bearing with them” offers us a realistic place to get started. It’s a starter verse. Like the command to love our enemies; it offers us some training wheels for people not ready to ride solo.

What does “bear with them” mean? It means we realize this “difficult” person (for us) is as loved by God as we are, is created in God’s image just as we are, and is as much a part of Christ’s community as we are. “Bearing with them” means we don’t pass **judgment** on them, and we don’t try to push them out of community. Specifically, it means we don’t gossip about or demean them; we don’t assume the worst about them. In fact, we assume our perception of them may be distorted. (This is where the humility clothing is important.).

Bearing patiently with difficult people will begin to change us. In the fourth century, a woman wanted to grow in patience (cf. **3:12**). Her spiritual director told her to take in an elderly, complaining, short-tempered woman into her home. She constantly scolded the devout lady and gave her ample opportunity to practice her virtues of meekness and love.

We need all *sandpaper people*, at least one, in our life. If we were in community just with wonderful people, we won’t **grow**.

**Second, and it is a bit costly, “*forgive one another if you have any grievance against someone.*” (3:13)**

Forgiveness, as we have said numerous times, always **costs someone** something. As a result, forgiveness never comes naturally. But Christian community needs forgiving members in order to survive. That means everyone: pastors and parishioners, young and old, the aggressor and the victim. Some situations are highly complicated and may require professional

mediation, but **forgiveness** in the family of God is essential – because we all mess up.

We can't be naïve. But it does require an act of will. But it is part of our new clothes. It is the next step in our spiritual maturity. Being with sandpaper people, knowing we're probably a sandpaper person to someone, requires we're willing to forgive and be forgiven.

**Third, “put on love.” (3:14). If forgiving someone was hard, loving them is even harder.**

Paul isn't talking about sappy romantic feelings: “*I'll love you if you love me and you make me happy.*” Paul is talking about *agape* love – love that always seeks the best for others even if they don't love us back.

When was the last time you walked an **extra mile** or did an act of service for your *sandpaper person*? We usually wait until we feel like loving someone before we do something nice for them. But in Christ's community, loving feelings follow loving actions. If we serve someone, we learn to love them.

Most people have never *served* their difficult person; some people have served their difficult person a time or two; few people serve their difficult person over a long period of time. Only mature followers of Jesus can do that. But if we did, it would surprise them. They probably wouldn't know how to respond.

Gary Smalley tells of a husband who hadn't made a loving gesture for his wife for a very long time. He finally decided to. He came home with a box of candy in one hand and a bouquet of flowers in the other. She started to cry. He asked her, “What's wrong?” She said, “I had a terrible day. The school bus never came, and I had to take the kids to school. The washing machine broke. Billy twisted his ankle in gym, and I had to take him to the emergency room. And now, you come home drunk.”

Do an act of service for a *sandpaper person* in your life this week: Write an appreciative note; say something kind about that person to a third party, reach out to someone who sees life a bit different than you—a Greek, Jew, circumcised, uncircumcised, slave, free – even a barbarian ☺.

**One of the best things you can do for you *sandpaper people* is to pray for them.** Jesus tells us pray for those that persecute you for our enemies, for difficult people.

This is important because it is very hard to **pray** for someone and stay angry with them. Don't ask God to “take them.” Don't ask God to “change them.” Ask God to “bless them.” (If you want to pray for change, ask, “*God, change me. Give me a tender heart...*”). Pray for a difficult person every day for the next two



weeks and see what God does. You're two weeks away from significant change in a difficult relationship...because you love them.

**Fourth and finally, see them as God sees them. See them as people for whom Christ died. See them as people God called “chosen, holy and dearly loved.” See them as your brothers and sisters in Jesus. See them as members of Christ’s community “bound all together in perfect unity” (3:14).**

**Anne Berg tells her story in “The Whisper Test.” She writes,** “I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate. When I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked, a little girl with a misshapen lip, a crooked nose, lopsided teeth and garbled speech.

“When schoolmates asked, ‘What happened to your lip?’ I’d tell them I’d fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. I was convinced no one outside of my family loved me.

“There was a teacher in the second grade we all adored. Mrs. Leonard was short, round, happy, a sparkling lady. One day, Mrs. Leonard gave a hearing test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn.

“I knew from past years, we would stand against the door and cover one ear. The teacher sitting at her desk would whisper and we would have to repeat it back—things like ‘the sky is blue’ or ‘do you have new shoes’.

“I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my entire life. Mrs. Leonard said in her whisper, “I wish you were my little girl.”

**So, it is with the kingdom of God.** On the cross God whispered to you, to me, to whole world: “*I wish you belonged to me.*” And now God longs for his Church to shout the Good News to a world: “**Come in, all of you,** [even people who believe they’re locked outside, even difficult people like you and me,] until God says, “*My house is full.*”

**Please stand for closing prayer.**

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