

Proper 13C – “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing 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.” Col. 3.12-14

Good Housekeeping Magazine gave six ways to learn everything a woman ever needs to know about a man before she decides to marry him: 1) watch him drive in heavy traffic. 2) Play tennis with him. 3) Listen to him talk to his mother when he doesn't know you're listening. 4) See how he treats those who serve him (waiters, maids). 5) Notice what he's willing to spend his money to buy. 6) Look at his friends. And if you still can't make up your mind, then look at his shoes. A man who keeps his shoes in good repair generally tends to the rest of his life too. Character counts.

And on this theme of character CS Lewis wrote, “Surely what a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of man he is. If there are rats in a cellar, you are most likely to see

them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats; it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way, the suddenness of the provocation does not make me ill-tempered; it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am.” We might wish that confirming the state of our character was simply a matter of taking periodic tests conducted at a predetermined time with standardized tests and cool, unbiased judges. But this is sadly not the case. Our character, our moral fibre, our nature, is tested at the most inopportune time, with the lights shining in our eyes and other, equally feeble humans serving as our judges.

So we come to end of our brief consideration of Paul’s letter to the Colossian Christians and find that he is exhorting them, encouraging them, reminding them that because their nature has changed, their character must change. We have seen how they had come from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. They had been transferred, they had been bought in the open slave market from the master of this world, they had been set free. And who had effected this mighty redemption? It is the Father’s work in his Son who is the very image of the Father, the head of all creation, before all things,

beneath all things, in whom all things hold together. He is the head of the Church. He is the firstborn from the dead. And it is by his death and resurrection that the Colossians who once were enemies of God had now been made his children.

But they had been tempted in their youth to follow after the Jewish philosophies and traditions that seemed to contain within them such piety and holiness. They had thought to adopt an older and wiser religion that claimed exclusive access to the true God. For to the Israelites had been given the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Messiah. Should not the Colossians, then, adopt the Jewish festivals and diet and practice? Paul warned them against such a mistake. All these have an appearance of wisdom and holiness, even as they attempt to bind the will and combat the desires of the flesh, but they are of no value. True holiness and righteousness before the Father can only be found in Christ Jesus the Lord. It is only by holding fast to the Head that the body has life. It is only through faith in Christ, newborn

though the Colossians faith was, that they may grow up into Christian maturity.

So, then, Paul writes to the Colossians that if they have been raised with Christ their lives must have a particular character. If it is true that thru faith and baptism they have been buried with Christ, and thru the power of God have been raised with him then their lives must indicate a change. It is indeed true that the Father had come and found them in the squalor of their former lives, chained in sin having no hope but the judgment. He saved them in their sin, but not to remain there. No he saved them from their sin. It is to present them holy and blameless that Christ died and rose again. It is to the end that they be rooted and built up in Christ that they have received him. They have received a new suit of clothes for the wedding. They must put off the old and put on the new. So we too, the elect, those called by God to newness of life, must diligently desire this new character, seek it out and manifest it in our lives.

So we must ask, how do you know what the Christian character is? What does a holy and changed life look like? How shall we who claim

the name of Christ behave ourselves in this endeavor? Though Paul was capable of the most developed theological discourse his end was always practical. The Colossians and we must show forth Christ before God and before our fellow man in our minds, in our actions and in the very core principle dictating our lives.

What is the state of mind of the natural man, the human being who has not been made a new creation in Jesus by the gracious intervention of the Holy Ghost? It is selfish. By describing it as such I am not calling names. I am not judging so much as I am describing a state of affairs. The natural state of humanity is to be concerned with itself, its own comforts and cares. The active principle is self-preservation and self-advancement. Even so, Paul describes the former character of the Colossians as marked by lust and by wrath each ending in idolatry. But isn't idolatry worship of false gods? What do sexual sins and anger have to do with idols and pagan worship? The self-serving person gives themselves what they want when they want it. They are the goal of their existence. They have become their own god.

But Paul wrote the Colossians that this was no longer their state of affairs. They had put off their old nature like filthy rags, and had now put on the white robe of baptism. They had put on Jesus Christ. They were being renewed, being sanctified, being remade from the inside out into the image of the God who had made them. Their minds were being changed. Instead of selfishness they were to put on compassion and kindness. Compassion: a deep sympathy for the needs and suffering of others. Kindness: the art of loving care for others.

Compassion and kindness are the polar opposites to the character of the natural man.

But not only should our minds be changed toward our neighbors, but our actions must reflect this renovation as well. The character of the natural man is marked by his grasping after his own well-being and the fulfillment of his own desires. Our impatience, our short temper, our anxieties about the future belie our character. But the Christian character is to reflect the new nature that we have in Christ. As we relate to others we must be humble and gentle and patient. The walls of the old house are being torn down and the new ones have been thrown up to resemble the one who came and died for us. What is this strange work that Paul calls us to imitate, for it is indeed strange to

the old man? It is the work of the Holy Ghost in our midst. It is the gift of grace purifying us. It is the example of Jesus himself that is leading us on. For Paul holds out to the Colossians and to us this very day the truth that we forgive because we have been forgiven.

So we see then that the new way of being has come and has brought with it a new principle that is enlivening and guiding it. For the old nature was chained by selfishness but the new is bound together in love. It is Christ who is all and in all. It is he that makes the Father known to the creation even as he is making all things new. And the Father is love. The Son, in his willingness to depart the joys of heaven and take upon himself our human nature and suffer on our behalf, is all love. The Holy Ghost, the Comforter, the Advocate, he is the very bond of love between Father and Son. And if anyone is led by the Spirit of God, he is a son of God. Love is the rule and the motive. Love, not the emotion so much as the selfless act of charity, is the character of those who are bound into the very being of God himself.

So you see, my dear friends, that Christian character is not optional for those who have taken upon themselves the name of the Savior.

Sanctification, the work of God, and our participation with his grace to put to death the works of the flesh and living in newness of life, is necessary. While we may say with all confidence that those whom God has called to be his children and has made them so by his grace will never fall from that saving grace. Our assurance rests firmly in Jesus and his death upon the cross. But the careless man, who gives no thought to his character, may not rest easily upon some profession made years ago. No, we must put off the old nature and put on the new. If we, through sloth, refuse to improve upon the grace that God has given do we not resist the Holy Ghost. It is God's will that we be sanctified. Will we resist him?

And if God is not our judge, surely our neighbor is. For the world looks on as the Church is plagued by discord and division. The Christian family fares no better than the world with broken marriages, substance abuse and selfishness. The Church has no answer to war and refuses to follow her king in the ways of peace. The world watches and our character is judged. The world demands an answer and the Church can only stutter. The Church claims that it has faith. The world coolly asks to see our works.

Shall we not then commit ourselves to Christ yet again? Shall we not hold onto the Head from which comes all our health and life and be bound together in him? Let us cultivate the works of righteousness that we may bring forth a harvest of good fruit. For our heavenly Father expects a harvest at our hands. He expects to receive a return of profit on the talents that he has distributed among us. Let us come before his presence praising him for the grace that he has poured into our hearts waving before him the first fruits of holy lives.