

## Pathway to Perfect Harmony Colossians 3:11-17

This is going to be a stand-alone sermon today because we've got a couple weeks before I start the next series. I'm preaching on a text that has come to mind often in the past few months as I've seen us struggle through this difficult season as a church. In the past few months you may have felt afraid for many reasons because of all the uncertainty, disoriented by all the changes, confused by all the conflicting information, offended by false accusations, restricted by new rules and regulations, frustrated by the words and actions of others, and more. We are in uncharted waters and it continues to be difficult to know how to proceed.

To make matters worse, I've seen two prevailing political perspectives rise to the surface, fueled by the two opposing major political parties and the supporting media behind each. They have been feeding us all kinds of conflicting information and creating a culture of fear and confusion and I think a lot of people think they have to follow one of them – that one of them must be right and the other one wrong. There are so many different opinions and perspectives out there and there's some kind of study or information that will basically back up anything you want to believe. So at this point what I've seen people do is believe what they want to believe and find articles, videos, and information to back it up.

And one of the most troubling things in the middle of all of this is how our relationships with other people have suffered. We've ended up with major differences, disagreements, and a lot of tension and conflict. Good friends, family members, and fellow church members land on opposite sides of these issues and you have to deal with frustration, anger, disbelief. People shake their heads at each other and can't believe anyone can come to those conclusions.

If you look at your life you have probably had awkward or even heated discussions with acquaintances and friends. You probably think differently about some people in the church because of their views and actions related to these issues. People probably think differently about you. There's division in places that 6 months ago you never thought would happen. You may also look at your actions and feel ashamed about things you've said or done in moments of frustration. You said things you wish you could take back. You posted something on Facebook.

Your anger bubbled over and you cast insults and accusations. It's been really difficult and we're still in the middle of it.

So I want to bring some direction from God's word into this situation and into your relationships with other people, especially when it comes to fellow believers and people in this church family that you may now have conflict and tension with. I believe the Bible presents us with a path to move forward that's much different than what you're seeing and experiencing in the world, and it's a way that I believe if you want to follow Jesus in these matters, you're going to have to take a major step back from the news and the politics – to tune it out and walk away and follow a biblical path forward.

The key passage for today is Colossians 3:11-17 and we will look at several other supporting passages. This is a passage that is very fitting for our situation. It was written to a church, that like most churches, existed in a culture that was full of division, full of politics, full of stereotypes, full of relational conflict – very similar to our cultural context today. From within that culture, people were turning to Jesus and becoming Christians and then gathering together in the church. And they brought all their cultural division with them. And it was a major threat to the church – it's a major threat to every church, including ours, which has been made very clear in recent months.

If the people brought their politics, stereotypes, and accompanying ways of relating to people into the church, it would eventually diminish and destroy the church. But the apostle Paul showed them a different way that I believe is extremely relevant and worthy of our full attention.

Colossians 3:11

*<sup>11</sup> Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.*

What do you think he means by "Here"? Based on the context I think he means "Here in Christ and here in the church family." As we gather before Christ to seek him and follow him and worship him together, *there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free.*

This is a list of some of the major political, religious, and social factions in the city that were in opposition to each other. Greeks and Jews were at odds with each other – the circumcised and the uncircumcised. There was deep opposition, strong stereotypes, strong preconceptions and assumptions, and major division. You don't hang out with people from the other crowd. If they end up together there's tension and conflict immediately. There was ethnocentric pride and arrogance, judgment and condemnation, devaluing of each other, slander, gossip, accusations, hardness, unwillingness to listen or see the other point of view. Unwillingness to come together. Major separation and deep-seeded bitterness, animosity, and rivalry. One side thought the other side were monsters. It reminds me of the division we see in politics today.

Then you have the division in different social classes. There were barbarians, Scythians, slaves, and free. I'm not going to go into details, but there was major stereotyping going on. Major discrimination. Casting judgment. Feelings of superiority. Feelings of disgust. Each group kept to themselves. They didn't associate with those across the line.

But then they become Christians... Uncircumcised Greeks became Christians. Circumcised Jews became Christians. Barbarians became Christians. Scythians became Christians. Slaves and free became Christians. And they all ended up in the same church family... In Ephesians 2:13-16, in talking about the divisive Jew/Gentile dynamic and what Jesus did to that, Paul writes: *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility."*

The salvation and bringing together of people from opposing factions was amazing and perplexing all at the same time. It was a wonderful thing, but how is this going to work? This was an issue in most of the churches Paul worked with. So to the Colossians he writes: *"Here, [as we gather before Christ to seek him and follow him and worship him together] there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."* To the Corinthians he writes: *"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.” (1 Cor. 12:13) To the Ephesians: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—<sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Eph. 4:4-6) And to the Galatians: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28)*

When you come to Jesus all those divisive parties, factions, classes and stereotypes that used to separate you are gone. Your allegiance to them and their perspectives is replaced by your allegiance to Christ and his perspective. Don't follow their pathway forward anymore. Follow Christ's path forward. The church consists of people willing to lay down their former identities and allegiances for the sake of the glory of Christ and the salvation of other people.

Does this have anything to do with our current situation? It has everything to do with it. There couldn't be anything more relevant. In our current situation we have ended up with some very strange deeply divisive factions.

- You've got people who think COVID-19 is all a big hoax – a conspiracy by the communists or socialists or illuminati. But then you've got people who think it's very real and extremely dangerous.
- You've got people who resist government intervention and government shutdowns. And you've got people who think the government should get more involved and implementing far greater restrictions.
- You've got people who think masks are completely ineffective and dangerous and no one should wear them, and then you've got people who think masks are very effective and necessary and everyone should be wearing them.
- You've got people who think the best way to overcome the virus is widespread herd immunity and people who think the best is isolation and quarantine and eradication.
- You've got people who think racism against the black community is no different than racism against any other community and those who think racism against the black community has been purposefully cruel and worse than anything else.
- You've got people who think we should defund the police and people who strongly oppose it.

- You've got people who agree with protesting or even rioting to bring about change and those who think they should all be arrested.

There are all kinds of divisions and factions that exist in all of these issues and there are of course even more that I haven't mentioned.

Political parties and their supporting news stations have embedded themselves in all of these issues and created an atmosphere of fear and confusion to manipulate people into following their perspective and voting for their candidates come election day. And most people are getting sucked in to some degree. We are lining up one way or the other whether we know it or not – and I'm beginning to see that a lot of people in East Lincoln don't even realize it. The same thing happening in the world is happening in the church. All that divisiveness, all that controversy, all that tension, all that conflict – we bring it into the church. We bring barriers, and walls and fences and set them up between us and our brothers and sisters in Christ. We create tension, division, anger, bitterness. How are we going to make it through this?

I think Paul tells us what to do in Colossians 3:11-17. *"Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.* In our context I think he would say something like: "Here there is not conservative and liberal, Republican and Democrat, right wing and left wing, but Christ is all, and in all."

If you want to follow Jesus, you have to leave those divisive patterns and behaviors behind. The stereotypes, the judging, the slander, the insults, the arguing – whether it's face to face or on Facebook – they don't belong here and you do not relate to people who disagree with you like that anymore. That's what the world does; but that's not what followers of Christ do. Jesus died to overcome all of that, so leave it at the door. Don't follow the lead of our politicians and news reporters. Don't follow the lead of Trump or Pence or Pelosi or Biden or Fox News or CNN or conservative Talk Radio or Public Radio. And don't follow the lead of Christian leaders who are following their lead either. They are all leading you away from Christ.

Do what Jesus wants you to do. Treat people who disagree with you the way Jesus wants you to treat them. That's how we're going to get through this. And that way is found in verses 12-17.

Read Colossians 3:12-17.

*<sup>12</sup> Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, (Is that the way you've been treating people who disagree with you?...) <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Is this the kind of behavior you see in our politicians or on Fox News or CNN?) <sup>15</sup> And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. (What if you used that standard before we posted anything on Facebook? Or before we responded to someone's remark that we disagree with?)*

This is the way Jesus wants you to act toward one another in our situation and that's way different than anything else out there. It's a radical diversion from what we're being taught in the world.

Let me show you a few more places it talks about this in the Bible...

- Romans 12:13-21: *"Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. <sup>17</sup> Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." <sup>20</sup> To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*
- Ephesians 4:1-3: *"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup> with*

all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

- Philippians 2:1-4: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

What if we would all take a break from watching the news and listening to the radio and looking on Facebook and carefully meditate on these verses and actually put into practice these things? What would happen would be harmony – perfect harmony. And we would all experience a lot more peace and joy. We would remember that God is in control. And we could get back on track with what Christ has called us to do. His path is the way to make it through this mess. His path is the way to reconciliation. And his path is the way to perfect harmony.