

Becoming Like Jesus In Christian Community

Letter to the Colossians

Before I lived in a Christian Community for four years, I always thought that living with other Christians would be the closest thing to heaven on earth. I can remember one day hearing a father of one family share his exasperation over another Christian family in the same community who didn't believe in disciplining their children. This little guy used to go around punching the other little kids and the parents never reprimanded him or disciplined him. No amount of protest by other parents made any difference. Eventually this father said to his son "The next time Joel punches you Christopher, you punch him back as hard as you can." He did, and you can imagine the strife that caused!

This passage of scripture is about loving difficult people and being a Christian in difficult relationships. One of the fundamental characteristics of Christian community is that people begin to live in love who never would have done so otherwise. The church in Colossae was made up of as many different people as Westlake church. When he writes to this church, the Apostle Paul has a word from the Lord for them. I'm reading from Chapter 3, verses 11-14.

"Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." (Colossians 3:11 – 14)

Verse 11 tells us that in the Christian community there is no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, Barbarian, Scythian, slave or free. Christ is all, and is in all. Let's put that in our context as an International Church. There is no longer American or Armenian, Swiss or South African, English or Eritrean, Australian or Austrian, French or Finish, German or Ghanaian, Irish or Italian, Kenyan or Korean, Norwegians or New Zealanders – Christ is all, and in all. This is the way the church is meant to be. When Christ is at the centre, all other distinctions don't count.

Jesus Does The Choosing, Not Us.

One of the things the Lord does to get us ready for heaven is to put us with people we normally wouldn't choose to be with. All over the world there has been a growing new way of thinking where Christians are saying "I don't need the church". "I'll just worship with a few like minded people." Do you know why you need the church? Because the church is full of awkward, angular people who sometimes rub you up the wrong way. How is God going to grow the character of Christ in you if you just gather with nice people like yourself? What are you going to do when you get to heaven? Are you going to ask to live with the nice people? God put you with some awkward people so you would grow.

When we get to follow Jesus is that he gets to choose our friends. When Jesus invited the first disciples to follow him, they didn't get to pick who the other disciples were. The only choice they had was to follow him. It's the same in the church. We don't get to pick who to be in Christian community with. Jesus does that. If you look at the gospels and the description of Jesus, you will see he invites anyone and everyone to be part of God's new community. Tax collectors, prostitutes, a Roman Centurion, a Samaritan adulteress, a criminal being crucified on a cross – he invites them all into this gracious, grace filled, new community. Most of the stories of Jesus told make this point that God is very serious about opening his community to anybody and everybody.

Philip Yancey quotes a story from the Boston Globe which is really a modern version of a parable that Jesus told. Accompanied by her fiancé, a woman went into the Hyatt hotel in downtown Boston and ordered the meal where the wedding banquet was going to be. Both of them had expensive tastes, and they chose the right china and the right flower arrangements. The bill came to 13,000 dollars. After leaving a cheque for half that amount as a down payment, the couple went home. The day the invitations were to go out, the groom got cold

feet. He backed out. The woman went to the hotel to cancel the booking only to hear the bad news that she was only entitled to a 1300 dollar refund out of the 13,000 dollars that was due for the meal payment. It was a binding contract. She had two options. She could forfeit the money she had paid for the down payment, or go ahead with the banquet. She decided to go ahead with the banquet. Ten years before she had been living in a homeless shelter. She had this wild notion that she would like to treat the down and outs of Boston to a night on the town. In June of 1990 the Hyatt hotel in downtown Boston hosted a most unusual party. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken, in honour of the groom she said. She sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters throughout the city. Bag ladies, vagrants, senior citizens on crutches and drug addicts were served by waiters in tuxedos. The guests danced the night away to big band music.

Jesus ended his story by telling people to go out into the streets and bring in those who needed a party. He wanted to his house to be filled, and his house is a very big house and it's not filled yet.

The New Community

Verse 11 is a recognition by Paul that there were huge divisions in Colossian society. Yet in the community of Gods people, those who had been enemies for centuries found themselves sitting side by side. It was unthinkable. It was a miracle. One of the biggest and most violent gangs in my country is called the Mongrel Mob. They are responsible for many of the rapes, murders and drug dealing that happens in New Zealand. For many years, the president of the Mongrel Mob was a man named Tuhoe Isaacs. He earned this presidency by being tougher, more powerful, and more violent than anyone else in the gang. He is not the sort of guy you would want to meet in the daytime, let alone on a dark night. This is what he looked like. It's not just his face, but his whole body that is covered in tattoos. (photo of Tuhoe Isaacs)

In 1992, Tuhoe met Jesus and his life gradually began to change as he pulled away from a life of crime and prison that had been so much a part of him since he was a teenager. A couple of years after, he came out of the gang, Lyn and I attended a conference and witnessed a remarkable sight.

At the conference we were talking about how Christ brings about reconciliation. Attending the conference was a District Court Judge who was also a Christian. I will never forget the sight of the former gang leader and the Judge, hugging each other, both now one in Christ Jesus.

In the Colossian church slaves and free men were mixing with each other. That was unheard of. In this city of Colossae, up to a third of the people were slaves, who had no rights and were regarded by their owners as living tools. Yet in Christ they were one with their masters. Barbarians were regarded by the Greeks as being the lowest of the low. The educated were mixing with the uneducated. The rich were mixing with the poor. They were all becoming one because of Jesus Christ. Where else does that happen? But they didn't find that easy. If you read the New Testament you will find story after story of conflict in the church. Just like now, they found people who were difficult to get along with.

How Do I Begin To Love Difficult People?

The acid test of spiritual growth is the ability to love people we would not naturally love. When we are all by ourselves it's easy to think that we are doing pretty well on the Christian virtues. The test of my spiritual growth comes when I'm in community. What do I do with real people, some of whom are difficult? Christian community is not people that I naturally and easily get along with. Christian community is never easy. It's an illusion that needs to be punctured. Henri Nouwen describes it this way; Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.

1. Bear With Them.

The word that Paul uses means to put up with one another or to tolerate one another. The ultimate goal is that we are to love one another. But Paul is being very realistic here. This is the starting point. Endure them. Put up with them. Tolerate them. This is like Jesus command to love them only with training wheels attached. This is for people who are not yet ready to solo. Don't try to push them out of the community. Don't pass judgement on them. Don't try to deliberately inflict pain on them. Don't gossip about them. Don't assume the worst about them. Bearing with difficult people will begin to change you.

2. Serve Them.

When was the last time you served that difficult person in your life? Loving feelings follow loving actions. If you behave in a certain way, your feelings will tend to follow the way you are acting. If you wait for the feelings to come before you act in servant-hood ways you will wait forever. Write a note or letter to them expressing all the things you appreciate about them. Or speak to a third-party person one good thing about this person, without saying anything negative.

3. Pray For Them.

This command comes directly from Jesus. He told us to pray for those who persecute us. It's an important thing to do because it's very hard for us to pray for somebody and still stay mad at them. Ask God to bless them. Don't ask God to change them. Ask him to change you.

4. See Them.

See beneath the surface. See them as God sees them. Ask God to show you their needs rather than their faults. You can do this because you are one of God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved. Because God wants you and has chosen you, you know what it is to be accepted. Therefore you have the ability to reach out and accept other people. Just as God has accepted and forgiven you, so he wants you to treat other people the same way.

Mary Anne Burn wrote a book called "The Whisper Test". In it she says, "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 misshapen lips, crooked nose and lopsided cheeks and garbled speech. When school mates asked "What happened to your lips?", I would always tell them had fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident, than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside of my family could love me. There was however a teacher that we all adored who was different. Mrs. Leonard was a short, round, happy lady. Every year we had a hearing test, and Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class. Finally, it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher, sitting at her desk, would whisper. We would have to repeat back what she whispered. She would say 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. Seven words that changed my life. She whispered: "I wish you were my little girl." This little girl, who had always thought of herself as a loser and a reject, found out that somebody wanted her, and it changed her life.

That's what God says to the human race. "I wish you belonged to me". That's what God wants us to shout to a world that knows so much rejection.

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