

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Two Key Principles for a Gospel People

We have said a number of times over the last few weeks that this is a crucial moment in the life of the church. Three weeks ago, we celebrated our fiftieth anniversary; last week, we said a fond farewell and thanks to our moderator, David Wise; yesterday, Charmaine was ordained as a minister in the Baptist Union, and inducted into the ministry in this church.

We have been using these important occasions to ask what kind of church we'd like to be as we move forward into the next fifty years of our life. So, we have been thinking about what it means to be a 'gospel people', a people of the gospel, a people whose lives – both individually and together – are shaped by the gospel.

We began at our golden jubilee service by thinking about three foundation stones for a gospel people. We looked at 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, where Paul talks about the gospel, and we saw that the passage tells us that a gospel people will be *focused on Christ*, particularly on his death and resurrection; it tells us that a gospel people will be *rooted in Scripture*; and it tells us that a gospel people will be *saved by God*. Three foundation stones for a gospel people – focused on Christ, rooted in Scripture, saved by God.

Then, the following week, we reminded ourselves that as important as foundation stones are, they are meant to be built on. All the way through 1 Corinthians, Paul shows how the gospel transforms the way we think, the way we behave, and the way we relate to people inside and outside the church. There is little point in saying we are a people who are focused on Christ, rooted in Scripture, and saved by God if, in fact, there is no real proof that we are building on those foundations, if there is no hard evidence that the gospel is bearing fruit in our daily lives.

So, we then had a look at five core values for a gospel people: that we are to be a *prophetic* community, an *inclusive* community, a *sacrificial* community, a *missionary* community, and a *worshipping* community. These five core values, we said, flow from who Jesus is, what Jesus does, and what Jesus wants of us, his disciples. Yesterday, in Charmaine's induction service, we took those words on our lips as Charmaine took up office in this church, promising that we would seek to be the gospel people Christ calls us to be.

And so we come to today. And in this little gap between the service yesterday and Charmaine beginning her ministry here tomorrow, I want us to look again at what it means to be a gospel people. We've had three foundation stones for a gospel people, five core values for a gospel people, and today we have two key principles for a gospel people, and they are key principles which flow out of Colossians 3:12-17.

I would like us to think about two things: first, the *qualities* at the centre of our relationship; second, the *person* at the centre of our relationship. People sometimes use this passage for their weddings, and it's great for married couples, but it's directed first and foremost to the church, the people of the gospel.

1. Live the qualities at the centre of our relationship

So, what about the qualities at the centre of a relationship? Paul has already called the Colossians to 'put off' certain qualities that destroy personal relationships – anger, slander, lies. Now he calls them to 'put on' certain qualities.

The image is that of clothing. And it's one we're all familiar with. On special days – like weddings, or special wedding anniversaries, or Golden Jubilee celebrations, or ordination

and induction services, we *put off* our 'scruffs' and we *put on* our 'smarts'. (Well, most of us do anyway...) So, verse 12 reads: 'clothe yourselves... with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.' God has a set of designer clothes for us, which has to do with living a certain way of life, demonstrating in our life particular qualities.

And notice that they're all to do with how we relate to each other. Look at them again, in verse 12.

Compassion – a tenderness, a deep sensitivity to the sorrows of others.

Kindness – kindness follows compassion, as I act on my attitude to others in need.

Humility – an attitude about myself, the opposite of pride, not self-importance or self-seeking, but a self that looks to others and for their best interests.

Gentleness – not rude or harsh or uncaring or insensitive or hostile or brittle, but gentle. We know that in all relationships – whether in the workplace between employers and employees, between colleagues and colleagues; or in the home between husbands and wives, and between parents and children; or in friendships – gentleness is crucial, because it values the other person; it nurtures people.

Patience – or endurance, not compulsive or lacking self-control. A patience which gives people room and space and time, to learn and develop. We all want to be on the receiving end of that sort of patience, but we need to make sure we're on the giving end too.

So, we can see how important it is not to expect that I will ever be able to join a group of Christians where I don't need to exercise compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience towards them, and they don't need to exercise those qualities towards me.

Then Paul goes on in verse 13 to speak of *forbearance* and *forgiveness*: 'Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.'

Paul was a great realist and a wise pastor. He says to the church, 'On occasions, you will exasperate each other and wind each other up,

but you're called to forbearance.' Paul is honest about the demands of our relationship with each other; he says, 'Sometimes you'll do something wrong, or someone will do something wrong against you, and feuds could develop which will jeopardise your relationship together, but you're called to forgiveness.'

Then in the next verse, verse 14, and never very far away, *love*: 'And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.' This is the distinctive outfit, the one which ties all the others together.

But there's more... When love has its full effect, it results in *peace*. Verse 15: 'Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...' The peace of Christ which rules over disagreements and suspicion. Literally, Christ's peace acts as the 'umpire'! Just as an umpire has the final word in a contest, so the peace of Christ arbitrates between us, and so we are called to peace with one another, called to work towards a situation where Christ's peace will hold sway.

And in all of this, says Paul at the end of verse 15, 'be thankful' – we are people whose lives will be characterised by *thankfulness*.

Paul then says in verse 16: 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom...' Interestingly, we are called to *teach and admonish* one another! But it is teaching that centres on the 'message of Christ', and it is done 'in all wisdom'. Too often admonition becomes the chance to put someone down, to ride a hobby horse.

But this is not an excuse for nagging. The admonition and teaching will be based on wise reflection on the word of Christ, the word which transforms us, the word which sets up home among us. And the word which overflows into grateful worship, as Paul says: 'and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.' Some of us probably shouldn't take that too literally, or at least note that Paul says sing 'in your hearts'!

Finally, in case we think Paul is talking just about set times of worship, he reminds us that he's talking about the *whole* of life. Verse 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.'

What all this suggests, then, is a focus on *relationship*. We can't be a person like this in holy and glorious isolation. We can only show these qualities in relationship with one another. We need each other. We need each other to be the sort of gospel people we are called to be.

So, let's not take these things for granted. Let's make sure we hear what Paul says about our relationships with one another: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, love, peace, thankfulness. As we move forward as a gospel people, may God help us cultivate these qualities with one another.

But there's a second key principle...

2. Know the person at the centre of our relationship

If those are the *qualities* at the centre of our relationship, the passage also speaks about the *person* at the centre of our relationship. Our relationship is *marked* by Christ, and it is *motivated* by Christ. Fostering these qualities among us is crucial. But what matters, above all else, is the life of Christ at the heart of our life together.

You see, as Paul lists the qualities, we might be tempted to say: 'That's alright for Paul, he didn't have to live with my family, my church, my workmates, my spouse...' But Paul isn't just mouthing platitudes. These aren't just practical tips. They're centred on *Christ*, and it is from him that we get the power and the motivation to embody in our lives the qualities of which he writes. We follow the pattern set by Christ.

So, right back at the start of the passage, in verse 12, Paul addresses us as 'God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved'. These are titles of privilege – chosen by God, set apart for him, those upon whom he has placed his love. And those qualities we are called to 'put on' are qualities associated with the Lord himself. They are the characteristic of Christ himself.

The link is explicit in verse 13: 'Forgive as the Lord forgave you.' His forgiveness becomes the motive for us to turn bitterness into forgiveness. In verse 15, the peace of *Christ* should rule our lives, says Paul, 'since as members of one body you were called to peace'. It is the word of *Christ*, in verse 16 – the message which centres on Christ – which dwells among us in order for us to teach and admonish in wisdom. And in verse 17, Paul says that we do all in the name of *Christ*. We bear the name of Christ; we belong to Christ; we represent Christ and are empowered to do so.

All of which reminds us, once again, that the Christian faith is not primarily a moral code, a list of 'dos' and 'don'ts', but about what God has done in Christ for us and for the world. We begin with Jesus, with what he has done for us, and we ask what sort of people we should be as a result.

That's why a gospel people will need to keep Christ central. That's why he will need to be at the heart of our relationships with each other. That's why he provides the strength and motivation for the way our relationships work, so that his characteristics become our characteristics, his forgiveness becomes the base of our forgiveness, his peace rules our hearts, his word dwells in us richly.

What all this provides is a focus on *character*. This is not a set of rules; this is not holiness by numbers. What Paul is talking about here is the *character* of Christian relationship – not just the *qualities* at the centre of our relationship, but the *person* at the centre of our relationship, reminding us that every aspect of our life together as a gospel people is transformed by Christ.

Let's be a gospel people who live the qualities at the centre of our relationship and know the person at the centre of our relationship, and whatever we do, may we do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 5 October 2008.