

Colossians 3:1–4:6

PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN LIVING / 3:1–17

Whereas chapter 2 was mostly a criticism of false teachers, this section affirms the Christian's new position in Christ. In chapter 2, Paul exposed the wrong reasons for self-denial. Chapter 3:1–4 functions like Romans 12:1–2. It provides a powerful transition from the theoretical discussion of chapters 1 and 2 to the practical issues of chapters 3 and 4. In chapter 3, Paul explains true Christian behavior—putting on the new self by accepting Christ and regarding the earthly nature as dead. We change our moral and ethical behavior by letting Christ live within us, so that he can shape us into what we should be.

3:1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Paul did not want to leave his readers with merely a negative dimension to their faith—for example, “Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world” (2:20 niv)—so he turned their focus to the positive. They had died, but they had also been raised. The Greek words in the phrase *since ... you have been raised with Christ* express certainty. There was no doubt in Paul's mind of the sincerity of the Colossians' faith. Once dead in their sins, they had been raised from death, just as Christ had been raised from the dead by God's power (3:3–4 will explain this). They had received new life from God through the power of the Holy Spirit. They did not need to struggle and work to attain that life, as the false teachers were trying to tell them; they already had new life! What remained was to work out its implications in daily life. Because they had been raised, they had a clear responsibility to Christ, who had raised them.

In the Bible, the “heart” is the center of one's being. Jesus had told his followers, “Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:20–21 niv). Paul explained that their hearts should be *set ... on things above*. The Greek word for “set” (*zeteo*) means to seek something out with a desire to possess it. Their hearts should be seeking after what is above (in the spiritual, eternal world) in contrast to what is below (in the earthly, transitory world). Paul contrasted the desirable “things” with the basic principles of the universe (2:20) and the human commands and teachings (2:22–23). They were to get their direction from Christ, not from the ascetic principles discussed in 2:8–23.

The other religious teachers stressed “heavenly things” also, but Paul was appealing to the highest power of all, the exalted Christ. The believers must take their focus off the world and turn it to Christ, who *is seated at the right hand of God*. Jesus had told his accusers that “from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God” (Luke 22:69 niv). Even David saw the coming Messiah and his position: “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’ ” (Psalm 110:1 niv). Christ's seat at God's right hand reveals his power, authority, and position as both judge and advocate.

Because the believers had been raised with Christ, they were participating with Christ in the spiritual realm to which he had been exalted. Indeed, Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6 niv). The Colossian believers already had experienced this exaltation; they needed to set their hearts and treasures there so that they would live out their lives on earth as citizens of heaven.

DUAL CITIZENSHIP

Christians have one calling and two venues, one purpose and two passports. We are to both love God with our heart and soul and love our neighbor as ourselves. And we do that here and now, where we are, with the life God has given us.

Proper strategy for this lifelong calling requires us to set our minds on Christ daily. In practical terms, that means we

- regard money as a means to do God’s will, not merely to accumulate or to use for our own pleasure;
- find a spouse who shares our desire to seek Christ and things above;
- not set our hearts on clothes, cars, and entertainment options;
- find a church that is spiritually on the move;
- get the best training we can for our particular area of service, whether medical school or ministry, jazz performance or journalism.

We must do our best for Christ.

3:2 Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. Setting their “hearts on things above” (3:1) meant “striving” to put heaven’s priorities into daily practice. Setting their *minds on things above* meant “concentrating” on the eternal rather than the temporal, letting their thoughts dwell in the realm of Christ. They were to focus on the Lord Jesus. Thoughts can influence actions, so if the believers would place their thoughts above and not on the earth, their actions would please God. The ascetics stressed the body; Paul stressed commitment of the whole person, not mindless bodily discipline. *Not on things on the earth* refers to the legalistic rituals, the false methods used to achieve holiness, and even to the basic principles of the world described in chapter 2.

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

The Bible uses many illustrations to teach what happens when we choose to let Jesus be Lord of our lives. Following are some of the most vivid pictures.

1. Because Christ died for us, we have been crucified with him.	Romans 6:2–13; 7:4–6 2 Corinthians 5:14 Galatians 2:20; 5:24; 6:14 Colossians 2:20; 3:3–5 1 Peter 2:24
2. Our old, rebellious nature died with Christ.	Romans 6:6; 7:4–6 Colossians 3:9–10
3. Christ’s resurrection guarantees our new life now and eternal life with him later.	Romans 6:4, 11 Colossians 2:12–13; 3:1, 3

This process is depicted in baptism (Colossians 2:12), based on our faith in Christ: (1) the old sinful nature dies (crucified), (2) we are ready to receive a new life (buried), and (3) Christ gives us new life (resurrected).

But on what “things” were they to set their minds? Paul had explained this in another letter: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing,

whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8 nrsv; see also Colossians 3:12).

They were not to live as ascetics in some mystical, visionary realm; rather, Paul was saying that, by setting their hearts and minds above, their lives on this earth would be pleasing to God and would help accomplish Christ’s work.

3:3 For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. The Greek aorist tense in the phrase, *for you died* connotes that we died when Christ died. It happened at a point in history. In Christ’s death, all believers died (2:20). Then, like a seed buried in the earth, believers’ real lives are hidden from the world, just as Christ’s glory is hidden, only to be revealed when he returns (3:3–4). The spiritual lives of believers are *hidden* inner lives that are in union *with Christ* who has brought them to be with him *in God*. Their new life is a mystery, a secret.

Paul often wrote about how believers already possess the life of Christ, having died and risen with him, yet do not fully possess the perfection and eternal body they will have upon Christ’s return. In the meantime, they are “not yet.” That their lives are “hidden” means they are concealed and safe, hidden from public view. Just as Christ’s glory was real but hidden until the Mount of Transfiguration, so we have a glory that is hidden and will be revealed when Christ returns. This is not only a future hope; it is an accomplished fact. Believers’ salvation is sure, so they are to live each day for Christ and in expectation of his promises.

YOU DIED, SO LIVE!

“For you died” means that we should have as little desire for improper worldly pleasures as a dead person would have. The Christian’s real home is where Christ lives (John 14:2–3). This truth provides a different perspective on our lives here on earth. To “set your mind on things above” means to look at life from God’s perspective and to seek what he desires. This provides the antidote to materialism; we gain the proper perspective on material goods when we take God’s view of them. It also provides the antidote to sensuality. By seeking what Christ desires, we have the power to break our obsession with pleasure and leisure activities. But it also provides the antidote to empty religiosity because following Christ means loving and serving in this world. Regard the world around you as God does; then you will live in harmony with him.

3:4 When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Christ himself gives to believers new, divine life. He is the source, power, and goal of all Christian growth. This life is “hidden” (3:3), and though believers are safe and raised with him, their full potential is yet to be revealed. One day, when Christ *appears* in his glory, believers will also *appear with him in glory*. The divine life of Christ will be revealed fully and will glorify us (reveal our true potential as children of God). This verse tells further why we should orient ourselves to heaven, not to earth. Our true glory will come from heaven. Earthly glory is transitory and illusory; only heaven’s glory will last. We will be transformed at Christ’s coming. Creation itself “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God,” and we “groan inwardly while we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:19, 23 niv). Yet we have the promise that “those whom he justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:30 nrsv). The apostle John wrote, “We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2 niv). This time of glorification will be at Christ’s second coming, described in 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17.

Christians look forward to the new heaven and new earth that God has promised, and they wait for God's new order that will free the world of sin, sickness, and evil. "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20 niv). In the meantime, they go with Christ into the world, where they heal people's bodies and souls and fight the evil effects of sin. Christ gives us power to live for him now, and he gives us hope for the future—he will return. In the rest of this chapter Paul explains how Christians should act *now* in order to be prepared for Christ's return.

CHRIST, YOUR LIFE

By realizing that Christ is our life, we can have a new attitude about anything that happens to us. If the love of your life should get sick or die or leave you for someone else, in all your hurt, you know that your life is still secure in Christ. He fills the void and loves you with love that cannot die.

If a hurricane should turn your home into toothpicks or you get bad news from a doctor or your factory closes and jobs are scarce, in all the mixed feelings and frustrations, your life is stable in Christ. He walks with you in the storm.

When death approaches and you wonder about the unknown, your life will be hand in hand with Christ, who will lead you home.

Share the Good News with someone else this week. In God's plan, the best is yet to come.

3:5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: While Paul opposed the false teachers' asceticism and regulations, he still forbade certain activities that had no part in believers' lives. If the Colossian believers were to live as examples of Christ, they had to *put to death* certain aspects of the *earthly nature*. "Earthly nature" refers simply to the sinful nature, the old self. Again, Paul was describing the "already" and "not yet" of believers' lives. Although they had died with Christ and had been raised with him, they were still susceptible to temptation and the evils of the sinful nature. Just like diseased limbs of a tree, these practices must be cut off. It would take conscious, daily decisions to remove anything that supported or fed the desires of the earthly nature and to rely, instead, on the Holy Spirit's power. Believers are not to live as they lived before. They died and were raised with Christ, so their lives must show evidence that they are new creations. (See Romans 6:11 and 8:13 for more on "put to death.")

Two sets of sins are listed. The first five refer to sexual sin; the second five to sins of speech. These first five were related to the cultural background of the Colossians and were particularly deadly to the life of the church (3:7).

Sexual immorality (*porneia*). Any form of illicit sexual relationship. The term serves to spotlight forbidden sexual behavior between people or indirect participation as an audience. We derive our term "pornography" from this Greek word. In contrast to the loose morals of the ancient Greek world, believers ought to show self-discipline and obedience to God in this area.

Impurity (*akatharsia*). Moral uncleanness. Perhaps no sexual act has taken place, but the person exhibits a crudeness or insensitivity in sexual matters. Like the other characteristics mentioned on this list, impurity points to activities before knowing Christ and should have no place in a believer's life.

Lust (*pathos*). Evil sexual passion that leads to excessive sexual immorality and perversion. (See Romans 1:26; 1 Thessalonians 4:5.)

Evil desire (*epithumia*). Wanting something that is sinister and vile in order to satisfy one's desires (see also Galatians 5:16). Sinful human nature cannot help but have evil desires. Thus Paul admonished the Colossian believers to get rid of the evil desires that could easily control them and which had been part of their lives before Christ.

Greed [*pleonexia*] (**which is idolatry**) Relentless urge to get more for oneself. In this context, Paul may have been focusing on greed for satisfying evil desires and for sexual immorality. The greed is described as *idolatry* because its focus is on filling desires rather than on God.

3:6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. The *wrath of God* refers to God's judgment on these kinds of behavior. (The words *on those who are disobedient* are not included in some Greek manuscripts.) God does not reveal his wrath arbitrarily; his perfect moral nature will not permit sin and wickedness to go unpunished. While wrath occurs at present in the natural consequences of sinful behavior, the final culmination of God's wrath *is coming*—with future and final punishment of evil. People may try to get around it, but there is punishment for evil for those who have not believed in Christ as Savior. This wrath is described in other references:

- “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God's wrath” (John 3:36 nrsv).
- “But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed” (Romans 2:5 nrsv).
- “When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:7–9 nrsv).
- “Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15 nrsv).

SEX AND SPIRITUALITY

Can a growing Christian still enjoy sex? Some Christians have taught that sexual satisfaction is incompatible with spiritual growth. Francis of Assisi went so far as to never look at a woman during his adult life. Puritans are often portrayed as sexually cold because they tried hard to keep stern rules.

The warning in this verse is not against sex, but against sexual perversion. Where's the line?

The Bible everywhere celebrates heterosexual, monogamous marriage as the proper situation for sexual fulfillment. Christian men and women should be open to true love—and to sexual intimacy—within the commitment to lifelong fidelity. That is God's way. The rest is dangerous and futile. Stay away. Sexual sin and perversion will drain your energies and turn your heart away from God.

3:7 These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. The Colossian believers had previously been caught up in the world, conducting their lives without concern about the sins that Paul listed above. They had been dead in their sins (2:13); that all changed when they came to know Christ.

3:8 But now you must get rid of all such things— Precisely because of their new life in Christ, the believers are to put to death the deeds and desires of the earthly nature (3:5) and *get rid of* those things listed above and others listed below. “Get rid of” means to put off or disrobe. The old, filthy clothes must be taken off before the new clothes can be put on. The believer “removes” the old life of sin and “puts on” the new life of Christ. The Colossian believers had experienced this; Paul asked that they act it out in their lives.

Not only did they need to deal with sexual immorality in all its variations, they also needed to deal with misused anger that often spilled over into evil speech.

Anger (*orge*). A continuous attitude of hatred that remains bottled up within. This could refer to what is under the surface, while “rage” (below) refers to what bursts out. Anger would destroy the harmony and unity Paul called for among the believers.

Rage (*thumos*). Outbursts of anger or quick temper for selfish reasons. This could mean continual and uncontrolled behavior.

Malice (*kakia*). Doing evil despite the good that has been received. This word is a general term referring to an evil force that destroys relationships. It can mean anything from trouble to wickedness. It is a deliberate attempt to harm another person.

Slander (*blasphemia*). Destroying another person’s good reputation by lies, gossip, spreading rumors, etc. Malice often manifests itself through slander. From the Greek word we get our word “blasphemy,” a term used to describe speaking against God. The Greeks used the word for defamation of character. Again, this destroys human relationships.

Filthy language (*aisxrologia*). Crude talk, abrasive language, expletives. Paul admonished the believers that such language must be caught and stopped before it escapes their mouths.

These behaviors have no place in any Christian or in any church. These are part of the “old life” before knowing Christ. Christians must resolutely “put off” these repulsive sins of anger and speech so that they can “put on” Christ’s attitudes and actions.

Sometimes Christians and churches fall into the trap of concentrating on one of these lists to the exclusion of the other. Some churches might be horrified at sexual sin in the congregation, all the while ignoring backbiting and gossip. On the other hand, some churches want so much to keep peace and quiet that they will not confront sin, even sexual sin. But Paul doesn’t leave room for any such behavior. The believers were called to get rid of it *all*.

WHISPERS

“Did you hear ... ?”

“Did you know ... ?”

“I really shouldn’t say this, but ...”

These opening lines create more anger and hurt every day than all the flat tires on Los Angeles freeways each year. In the church, especially, malice and slander lead to embitterment and dissension. Add to them an occasional temper tantrum and the crudeness of filthy language and we get a picture of exactly what Paul was urging the Colossians to avoid. New life in Christ overcomes these wrongs.

Jesus wants to clean your life and your church of sexual sin and verbal sin. There’s no place in the kingdom of God for hedonistic sexual experimentation or gossip, rage, and backbiting. In their place, witness to the world like a lighthouse at midnight by displaying love, faith, and hope.

3:9–10 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices. Because Jesus Christ is “the truth” (John 14:6), believers ought to practice truth in all areas of life. They should *not lie to one another*. Lying to others disrupts unity by destroying trust. It tears down relationships and may lead to serious conflict in a church. Lying can take place in words said as well as words left unsaid. Believers should not exaggerate statistics, pass on rumors or gossip, or say things to build up their own image at others’ expense. Instead, because they *have stripped off the old self with its practices*, they should be committed to telling the truth.

What is that “old self” or “old nature”? It was each person before he or she came to know Christ. The person was enslaved to sin, bound to the earth, without hope. But believers **have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.** The *new self* or “new nature” from Christ frees us from sin, sets our hearts on “things above” (3:1), and gives us the hope of eternity. Paul was appealing to the commitment the believers had made, urging them to remain true to their confession of faith. They were to rid themselves of the old life and *put on* the new way of living given by Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit.

But how can this be accomplished? How can people “put off” and “put on”? Paul explained that they are not left alone in the process. This new self *is being renewed in knowledge*. Every Christian is in a continuing education program. Renewal is constantly needed in the believer’s battle against sin and the old self. The “knowledge” referred to here is personal knowledge of Christ that is *in the image of its Creator*. The goal of the knowledge is Christlikeness. The more believers know of Christ and his work, the more they are being changed to be like him. Because this process is lifelong, we must never stop learning and obeying. There is no justification for drifting along, but there is an incentive to find the rich treasures of growing in him. It takes practice, ongoing review, patience, and concentration to keep in line with God’s will.

WELCOME BROTHER, WELCOME SISTER

The gospel is color-blind because Jesus died for all races. The gospel is gender-blind because women and men in equal measure need the renewal Christ gives. The gospel is religion-blind because Jesus brings the truth of God to confront all the idols that people have fashioned.

Shaped by such a gospel, should the church reflect a preference in its welcome to new brothers and sisters in Christ?

We know that church history is full of prejudice, and we know that such bigotry is wrong. So today, do something about it. Dust off your church’s welcome mat. In small group Bible study, in worship format, in elections to leadership, start showing the many faces of God’s people. Let love embrace what prejudice fears.

3:11 Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. *Here* (that is, “in Christ” and in the new creation, the church) there should be no barriers of nationality, race, education level, social standing, wealth, gender, religion, or power (see also Galatians 3:26–28; 6:15). Paul pointed out four groupings that were of particular importance in the Greek culture:

(1) Racial or national distinctions, such as between Greeks and Jews. The spread of the Greek culture and civilization meant that a Greek person (regardless of his or her country of origin) could feel pride in a privileged position and would look down on the Jews and their persistent clinging to an ancient culture. The Jews, meanwhile, would look down on Greeks as heathen, immoral, and outside of God’s grace for the chosen nation.

(2) Religious distinctions, such as between those who have been circumcised (Jews) and those who are uncircumcised (Gentiles). The Greeks (above) would fit in among the Gentiles. Circumcision, the physical mark of the male Jew, was prized as part of the covenant of God with his chosen people. If practiced at all by Gentiles, it was as part of a heathen cult; most often, the Gentiles were uncircumcised, and they mocked the seriousness of the rite for the Jews.

(3) Cultural distinctions, such as between barbarians (a contemptuous name Greeks used for people unfamiliar with Greek language and culture) and Scythians. Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, wrote

that these were wild and primitive tribal people, living near the Black Sea, who were considered little better than beasts, fit only for slavery.

(4) Economic or social distinctions, such as between slaves and free people. Slavery was common in the ancient world. Paul would have special words for the relationships between masters and slaves (3:22–4:1).

How could these barriers possibly be removed? Paul's answer: because *Christ is all, and is in all*. For all these groups of people, Christ is everything. He "is all" they need for redemption and unity. He is central and brings believers together. Christ is "in all"; he dwells in all believers so there can be no division, no prejudice. In other words, every believer is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) with a new self (3:10) by the power of Christ's indwelling Holy Spirit. In Christ, human distinctions are removed. Such distinctions are no problem for him, so they should be no problem for us. Everyone is equal at the Cross.

The Colossian church was probably made up of all kinds of people. No believer should allow prejudices from pre-Christian days to be carried into the church. Christ broke down all barriers; he accepts all who come to him. Believers, as Christ's body, must do the same. Nothing should divide believers; nothing should keep them from experiencing unity. Each believer is responsible to get rid of the sinful practices of whatever life he or she led and become a new person in Christ. Then, as part of God's body of believers on earth, each person should work as part of the whole to advance God's kingdom.

NEW CLOTHES

What does it mean to "put on the new self"? It means that your conduct should match your faith. If you are a Christian, you should act like it. To be a Christian means more than just making good resolutions and having good intentions; it means taking the right actions. This is a straightforward step that is as simple as putting on your clothes. You must rid yourself of all evil practices and immorality. Then you can commit yourself to what Christ teaches. If you have made such a commitment to Christ, are you remaining true to it? What old clothes do you need to strip off?

3:12 **Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with ...** Because believers have "put on the new self" (3:10), their clothing is pure and their lives must exhibit that purity. Why? Because they are *God's chosen people*, they are *holy*, and they are *dearly loved*.

The Greek word *eklekton* has been translated from Greek and Latin into English as the word "elect." In the Bible, God's people (the "elect") are chosen by God for a specific purpose or destiny. No one can claim to be chosen by God because of his or her heritage or good works. God freely chooses to save whomever he wills. The doctrine of election teaches that it is God's sovereign choice to save us by his goodness and mercy and not by our own merit. To have received such incredible grace from God ought to cause all believers to gladly lay aside their sinful desires in order to "put on" a nature that pleases God.

GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE

The concept of divine election has at times divided the Christian church. Calvinists strongly teach the idea that God chooses some people, who then become Christians. Wesleyans strongly teach the idea that all people are capable of choosing Christ, and when they do, God chooses them. It's a question of whose choice comes first. The spiritual deadness of all people apart from Christ argues that God *must* choose first. Democratic fairness argues that a huge benefit like eternal life must be equally available to anyone who freely says yes to God.

Solving this conundrum requires much study. On a much simpler level, personal and direct, all Christians should find common ground with this child's understanding of election:

"Sarah, who saves you?"

"Jesus saves me, Daddy."

"Can you help Jesus save you, Sarah?"

"I don't think so, Daddy. Jesus saves me all by himself."

How can believers be considered "holy"? The Holy Spirit is the one who helps us become holy. The Holy Spirit provides the power internally to do what God requires externally. Again this is one of the "already" but "not yet" components of our life in Christ. Believers are made holy in God's sight because of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, yet holiness is a progressive goal of salvation. Believers grow into persons who exhibit more and more of the character of Christ in the way they live.

All this happens because believers are so "dearly loved" by God. Only incredible love would cause God to do for believers all that he has done. More than anything, believers ought to desire to align their lives with God's will. The Colossians needed to live up to their professions of faith. They were to clothe themselves with the new attitudes and behavior exemplified by Christ (see Romans 13:14). In essence, they were to "put on Christ's clothing." In contrast to the vices listed above, Paul offered a list of virtues to be adopted as believers' strategy to live for God day by day in the social activities of life. These include

- imitating Christ's compassionate, forgiving attitude (3:12–13)
- letting love guide their lives (3:14)
- letting the peace of God rule in their hearts (3:15)
- always being thankful (3:15)
- keeping God's Word in them at all times (3:16)
- living as Jesus Christ's representative (3:17)

SINS VS. SIGNS OF LOVE

In Colossians 3:5 Paul tells us to put to death the things found in list one. In 3:8 he tells us to rid ourselves of the things found in list two. In 3:12 we're told to practice the things found in list three.

List one deals primarily with sins of sexual attitudes and behavior—they are particularly destructive because of what they do to destroy any group or church. List two deals with sins of speech—these are relationship breakers. List three contains relationship builders, which we are to express as members of Christ's body.

<i>Sins of Sexual Attitude and Behavior</i>	<i>Sins of Speech</i>	<i>Signs of Love</i>
Sexual immorality	Anger expressed	Compassion
Impurity	Rage	Kindness
Lust	Malice	Humility
Evil desires	Slander	Gentleness
Greed	Filthy language	Patience

Forgiveness

Compassion. Genuine sensitivity and heartfelt sympathy for the needs of others. This is an attribute of God, who is described as compassionate and who acted so on our behalf.

Kindness. Acting charitably, benevolently toward others, as God has done toward us. God's kindness is a continual theme in the Psalms and Prophets. Kindness takes the initiative in responding generously to others' needs. Because believers have received kindness, we ought to act that way toward others. This does not come naturally; it is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23).

Humility. An attitude of self-esteem that is neither puffed up with pride, nor self-depreciating. It is a true understanding of one's position with God. As Christ humbled himself (Philippians 2:6–11), so believers ought to humble themselves in service to the Lord and Savior.

Gentleness. Humble, considerate of others, submissive to God and his Word. Gentleness is not to be confused with weakness; instead, it means consideration for others and a willingness to give up one's rights for the sake of another. Again, Christ is our example.

Patience. Long-suffering, or putting up with people who irritate. The person might have the right to retaliate, but chooses patience instead. The Holy Spirit's work in us increases our endurance.

3:13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.

Forgive as the Lord forgave you. "Putting on" Christ affects how we treat others. It is only in the outworking of people's relationships with one another that compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience are worked out. The testing ground is when people have *grievances ... against one another*. Paul called the believers to *bear with* and *forgive* one another. "Bear with" means putting up with the "extra grace required" crowd. This is only possible for those who are clothed with patience (3:12). To "forgive" implies continual, mutual forgiveness of the problems, irritations, and grievances that occur in the congregation. In order to do either one of these actions, a Christian must do both. It takes forbearance to forgive, and forgiveness means putting up with offensive people.

FORGIVE OR HATE

Formerly, when people had a grievance, they could challenge one another to a duel. That settled it, except when relatives of the loser decided to carry on the feud, sometimes for generations. Each crime against one side would escalate the motives for revenge.

Now with duels illegal, we use courts to "make ourselves whole" when someone has cheated or slandered us. It is a longer process, less bloody, more public, and civilized.

Jesus offers an even better way: forgive and forget. It's the new way of the gospel: let God worry about the wrongs you've suffered. Don't quench your life in bitter feuding; live renewed in love and joy.

Why did Paul call believers to do this? The church had enough enemies and troubles dealing with the outside world; they didn't need infighting or energy wasted on grievances or grudges (either held over from pre-Christian days or arising in the church) that could be worked out with forbearing and forgiving. The key to forgiving others was for the believers to (1) remember how much God had forgiven them, and (2) realize the presumption in refusing to forgive someone God had already forgiven. Remembering God's infinite love and forgiveness should help the Colossian believers love and forgive one another.

3:14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. All the virtues that Paul encouraged the believers in Colosse to develop were perfectly bound together by *love*. As they clothed themselves with these virtues, the last garment to put on was love, which, like a belt, holds all of the others in place. Literally it means “the bond of perfection.” Love pulls together the other graces in perfect, unified action. To practice any list of virtues without practicing love will lead to distortion, fragmentation, and stagnation. In any congregation, love must be used to unify the people and build them up. Those who would desire to be mature in Christ must make love a top priority. Paul regularly wrote about the priority of love:

- “If I speak in the tongues ... have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith ... if I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body ... but do not have love, I gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:1–3 nrsv).
- “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments ... are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:8–10 nrsv).
- “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13 nkjv).
- “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:14 nrsv).
- “But the fruit of the Spirit is love” (Galatians 5:22 niv).
- “Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.” (Ephesians 4:1–2 nrsv).

3:15 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body. Putting on all the virtues, with love binding them together (3:14), would lead to peace between individuals and among the members of the body of believers. The Colossian Christians should let *the peace of God* rule their hearts. To live in peace would not mean that suddenly all differences of opinion would be eliminated, but it would require that they work together despite their differences. This kind of tranquility and cooperation can’t come from mere human effort. It requires God’s help to arbitrate and enable people to get along. God calms our troubled hearts; then we can better relate to others.

The word *rule* comes from the language of athletics: Paul wanted the believers to let Christ’s peace be umpire or referee in their hearts. Peace would arbitrate, decide any argument, and thereby restrain any of the passions of the old nature that might threaten. Peace would settle any friction and strife so the believers could remain strong and unified. Peace must rule *hearts*. As in 3:1, the heart is the center of a person’s being, the center of spiritual and moral life. If peace rules there, it rules every believer’s entire life and, by extension, the life of the church.

To which refers back to “the peace of God.” The believers had been called to peace. *In one body* refers to being a single organism. The unity of the body of Christ is a strong reason for peace among the members, and the peace of God enables the members to be unified.

PEACE RULES

When we exercise the traits of compassion, kindness, humility, patience, and, above all, love, we are going to face conflict. Not everyone will be playing by these rules. Not all Christians show the self-restraint needed in conflict. How can we deal with these conflicts and live as God wants? When we are hurt by others or our gracious efforts are rebuked, we must have an umpire inside that says, “Peace.” We need to call a time-out on our passions and reactions; then we can think about the peace that God has won for us in Christ’s death. Paul does not teach “peace at any price.” Instead, he encourages believers to embrace God’s peace and be under his control as they make courageous moral decisions for the truth and the right.

And be thankful. When believers have an overriding attitude of thankfulness and when they have constant gratitude in their hearts for all that God has done for them in giving salvation and making them part of Christ's body, then other virtues to which Paul called them would be much easier to live out. Such thankfulness would also make other relationships easier, as Paul explained in following verses (3:18–4:6).

3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. The *word of Christ* referred to the message proclaimed by Christ (the gospel). For us, this means the Bible. This teaching should *dwell* (reside permanently) in each believer by his or her study and knowledge of God's Word. The gospel must also dwell in the church, which should be the center for wise teaching of the gospel message and wise advice, encouragement, or reprimand. In our attempts to reach people with felt needs, we must keep the Bible at the core of our church ministries. (See 2 Timothy 3:16–4:2 for more on the correct use of Scripture.) *Teach and admonish* refers to the whole congregation and their responsibility to teach the Word—including the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus Christ—as a means to warn and correct one another.

The *psalms, hymns and spiritual songs* were a vital part of this teaching and admonition. Although the early Christians had access to the Old Testament and freely used it (thus, Paul's reference to "psalms"), they did not yet have the New Testament or any other Christian books to study. Their stories and teachings about Christ were sometimes set to music to make them easier to memorize and pass on from person to person. Grounded in God's Word and correct doctrine, music can be an important part of Christian worship and education.

TANK UP ON THANKS

Thankfulness puts all we have in the right perspective; God has given us what we need for service, comfort, expression, and recreation. Greediness or discontent signals an attitude that says to God, "I'm not getting much of a bargain here."

Thankful people can worship wholeheartedly. Gratitude opens our hearts to God's peace and enables us to put on love. Discontented people constantly calculate what's wrong with their lot in life.

To increase your thankfulness, take an inventory of all you have (include your relationships, memories, abilities, and family, as well as material possessions). Use the inventory for prayers of gratitude. On Sunday, before worship, quit rushing around and take time to reflect on reasons for thanks. Early on Sunday morning, declare this your "thanks, faith, and hope" day. Celebrate God's goodness to you, and ask in prayer for all your needs for the week ahead.

While music can teach, its primary function may be to praise God. As believers sing, they ought to do so with *gratitude in their hearts* (see 4:2). Again, the word "heart" refers to a person's entire being. Gratitude to God overflows in praise.

3:17 And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. Earlier Paul listed a few vices and virtues to give the Colossian believers an idea of what was expected of them in their attitudes toward one another, but he did not want to regulate

every area of life with a list of rules. That would be like reverting to Pharisaism. So Paul gave this general command to cover every area of life.

Everything the believers said and everything they did should be done *in the name of the Lord Jesus*, realizing his constant presence and bringing honor and glory to him in every aspect and activity of daily living. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31 niv). To act in someone’s name is to act on his authority; believers act as Christ’s representatives.

Paul echoed the need for a thankful spirit, as he had in 3:15 and 3:16. All we do for Christ should be done with the spirit of thankfulness for all he has done for us. Believers are not enslaved to rules about every word they speak or deed they do; instead, they freely put themselves under the Lord’s guidance because they love him, have accepted his salvation, and live to glorify him. Their thanks can go to God through Christ because Christ is the only mediator between God and people.

HONOR AND GLORY

As a Christian, you represent Christ at all times—wherever you go and with whatever you say. Believers can go about their lives—working, playing, studying, planning—and do everything to the glory of God with thanks in their hearts. What impression do people have of Christ when they see or talk with you? What changes would you make in your life in order to honor Christ?

PRINCIPLES FOR RELATIONSHIPS / 3:18–4:6

In Paul’s day, women, children, and slaves were to submit to the head of the family—slaves would submit until they were freed, male children until they grew up, and women and girls for their whole lives. Paul emphasized the equality of all believers in Christ (Galatians 3:28), but he did not suggest overthrowing Roman society to achieve it. Instead, he counseled all believers to submit to authority by choice. For husbands and wives, he taught mutual submission: husbands to wives and wives to husbands. This kind of mutual submission preserves order and harmony in the family while it increases love and respect among family members.

RULES OF SUBMISSION

The New Testament includes many instructions concerning relationships. Most people read these instructions for the other person and ignore the ones that apply to themselves. But you can’t control another person’s behavior, only your own. Start by following your own instructions and not insisting on the obedience of others first.

<i>Wives</i> , submit to your husbands (3:18).	<i>Husbands</i> , love your wives and don’t be harsh with them (3:19).
<i>Children</i> , obey your parents (3:20).	<i>Parents</i> , don’t embitter your children so that they become discouraged (3:21).
<i>Slaves</i> , obey your masters (3:22).	<i>Masters</i> , be just and fair toward your slaves (4:1).

Paul gave rules for three sets of household relationships: (1) husbands and wives, (2) parents and children, and (3) masters and slaves. In each case, there is mutual responsibility to submit and love, to obey and encourage, to work hard and be fair. Examine your family and work relationships. Do you relate to others as God intended?

3:18–19 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Why is submission of wives to husbands *fitting in the Lord*? This may have been good advice for Christian women, newly freed in Christ, who found submission difficult. Paul told them that they should willingly follow their husbands' leadership in Christ. But Paul had words for husbands as well: **Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.** It may also have been true that Christian men, used to the Roman custom of giving unlimited power to the head of the family, were not used to treating their wives with respect and love. Real spiritual leadership involves service. Just as Christ served the disciples, even to the point of washing their feet, so the husband is to serve his wife. This means putting aside his own interests in order to care for his wife. A wise and Christ-honoring husband will not abuse his leadership role. At the same time, a wise and Christ-honoring wife will not try to undermine her husband's leadership. Either approach causes disunity and friction in marriage.

What does "as is fitting in the Lord" mean? Paul stressed the full equality of women and men before the Lord (Galatians 3:28). This verse provides a check and balance for selfish or tyrannical partners. Neither partner should be arrogant or domineering; there is no room for abuse. The wife must not rule her husband's life; the husband must put his wife's interests first. There must be mutual love and respect. Husband and wife must accept mutual subordination in God's hierarchy. The Lord Jesus is the criterion for our duty. He, not society, defines what is "fitting."

SUBMISSION

Wives submitting to husbands has become a cultural battleground because many conclude that submission means that all women should take subservient positions to all men. The stereotypes could go on forever—men should be executives, women secretaries; men should be doctors, women nurses; men should be pastors, women choir directors. Feminists resist this kind of thinking as aggressively as some Christian ministries still preach chauvinistic versions of it.

Nowhere does Paul suggest that submission requires women to be silent in the face of abuse. Abuse requires outside help and mediation, and no Christian woman should imagine that resisting abuse violates Paul's mandate.

Paul taught submission of wives to husbands, with final spiritual responsibility on a husband's shoulders, for the sake of mutual fulfillment. In Ephesians 5:25–30, Paul devoted twice as many words to telling husbands to love their wives sacrificially as to telling wives to submit to their husbands. Marriage, with two lives united as one, is difficult under any circumstances. Submit to Christ and to your spouse in order to find true happiness in your marriage.

Although some people have distorted Paul's teaching on submission by giving unlimited authority to husbands, we cannot get around it. The fact is, Paul wrote that wives should submit to their husbands. The fact that a teaching is not popular is no reason to discard it. According to the Bible, the man is the spiritual head of the family, and his wife should acknowledge his leadership. There should not be a constant battle for power in the relationship. Our concept of submission must come from the Bible, demonstrated by the church to Christ (as Christ loved the church and submitted to God, 1 Corinthians

15:28; Ephesians 5:21). We must not base it on either a feminist or chauvinist view. Christian marriage involves mutual submission (Ephesians 5:21), subordinating our personal desires for the good of the loved one, and submitting ourselves to Christ as Lord. Submission is rarely a problem in homes where both partners have a strong relationship with Christ and where each is concerned for the happiness of the other.

Submitting to another person is an often misunderstood concept. It does not mean becoming a doormat. Christ—at whose name “every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth” (Philippians 2:10 nkjv)—submitted his will to the Father; we honor Christ by following his example. When we submit to God, we become more willing to obey his command to submit to others—that is, to subordinate our rights to theirs.

3:20–21 Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord. God’s design for family relationships continues in this verse. Children (*tekna*, “young children living at home”) are to obey their parents. While all young children will at times be disobedient and test their limits with their parents, as they get older and understand what they are told, God wants them to obey. Such obedience reveals an understanding of authority that can carry over into understanding God’s authority and all believers’ responsibility to obey him. A child’s obedience to his or her parents *is well pleasing to the Lord*.

Children’s obedience is balanced by Paul’s next command: **Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.** The command for children to obey does not give parents license for harsh treatment. Children must be handled with care. They need firm discipline administered in love. *Fathers* refers to both parents, although Paul’s words might stress the importance of discipline administered by fathers. The Greek word *goneis* (parents) in 3:20 includes mothers; *pateres* may mean parents (as in Hebrews 11:23), but here it is head of the household. Parents must not *embitter* their children by nagging and deriding. Belittling children, or showing by words or actions that they are unimportant to the parents, should have no place in Christian families. Discipline administered in derision ultimately discourages children, destroys their self-respect, and causes them to lose heart.

The purpose of parental discipline is to help children grow, not to exasperate and provoke them to anger or discouragement. Parenting is not easy—it takes lots of patience to raise children in a loving, Christ-honoring manner. But frustration and anger should not be causes for discipline. Instead, parents should act in love, treating their children as Jesus treats the people he loves. This is vital to children’s development and to their understanding of what Christ is like.

If the home is to be a means of grace it must be a place of rules ... the alternative to rule is not freedom but the unconstitutional (and often unconscious) tyranny of the most selfish member.

C. S. Lewis

DISCIPLINE

Many people seem afraid to correct a child for fear of stifling some aspect of his or her personality or losing his or her love. Single parents or parents who cannot spend much time with a child may be prone to indulgence. Since the time together is short, they don’t want to spend it correcting or punishing the child. But such children, especially, need the security of guidance and structure. Boundaries and guidelines will not embitter a child. Instead, they will set him or her free to live securely within the boundaries.

3:22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Paul used the same word for *obey* here as he used in 3:20 for children to obey their parents. Slaves were also to obey the commands and desires of their masters, not just when they were being watched and hoping for a reward, but at all times. They should no longer merely work for human approval, they should work so as to gain God's approval (*fearing the Lord* means reverencing him). Believers who were slaves were not set free from serving their masters, but they were set free from slavery to sin. Their ultimate Master was God himself. Paul explained that God wanted the slaves to fulfill their responsibilities in this world even as they looked forward to the next.

Slaves played a significant part in this society, with several million in the Roman Empire at this time. Slavery was sanctioned by law and was part of the empire's social makeup. Because many slaves and slave owners had become Christians, the early church had to deal straightforwardly with the question of master/slave relations. Paul's statement neither condemns nor condones slavery. On one hand, Paul was not interested in starting a revolutionary movement to attempt to destroy the order of the empire. On the other hand, Paul *was* starting a revolutionary movement that would surely subvert all that Rome found pride in. But Paul was not a political organizer, and his movement was not political. All of Paul's revolutionary zeal was developed in the context of the church as a new community in which selflessness and love constituted new relationships based not on power but on mutual affirmation. Would this destroy Rome's empire? Emphatically, yes. Would it do so by armed revolt? Certainly not.

While neither condemning nor condoning slavery, Paul told masters and slaves how to live together in Christian households. In Paul's day, women, children, and slaves had few rights. In the church, however, they had freedoms that society denied them. Paul tells husbands, parents, and masters to be caring.

Although Christians may be at different levels in earthly society, we are all equal before God. He does not play favorites; no one is more important than anyone else. Paul's letter to Philemon stresses the same point: Philemon, the master, and Onesimus, his slave, had become brothers in Christ. Perhaps Paul was thinking specifically of this master and slave (see the book of Philemon). Philemon was a slave owner in the Colossian church, and Onesimus was his slave.

WORK

Christians work first for the Lord Jesus Christ and second for the companies that write their paychecks. No matter what the job, our first goal is serving Jesus.

Does this verse mean that Christians should not join organized labor and, if necessary, strike for better wages? No. Justice in the workplace is also a Christian responsibility.

Does this verse refer to any kind of labor (is preaching a sermon holier than digging a ditch)? Not all jobs serve Christ. Jobs that violate common Christian standards cannot be sanctified by proper "attitudes." But neither are preachers holier than laborers. All people should work with grateful hearts, using the best of their minds and muscles to serve God.

Find the job that stretches your abilities, that makes you pray in the morning for God's help for the day, and that sets you to sleep at night satisfied and tired out. Then, work at it as a calling, and so witness to God's power in your life.

3:23–24 Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. Slaves had a variety of tasks—running errands, caring for or teaching children, cleaning, preparing meals, or doing menial work. Yet Paul gave their jobs a new dignity because these slaves would do their

work for the Lord, serving the Lord Christ. Slaves had little, if any, opportunity to get out of slavery, and they received little, if any, monetary compensation for their work. Obviously, they had no inheritance in this world, but Paul reminded the Christian slaves that they would ultimately be rewarded by Christ with their deserved inheritance as children of the true, eternal King. (See Luke 6:35 and Ephesians 6:7–8 for more on the Lord’s reward.)

3:25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality. Echoing his words in 3:6, Paul once again explained that judgment would be coming. Whether master or slave, the *wrongdoer will be paid back*, and those who do right will receive the inheritance as their reward (3:24). At the Judgment, God will judge without partiality. Paul explained the responsibilities of the believers. Both the Christian slave with the harsh and ruthless master and the Christian master with the lazy and untrustworthy slave knew how they were to act as believers. They also knew that God would judge wrongdoing without favoritism.

4:1 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven. Whether the master’s slaves were believers or not, Christian masters were responsible to be *right and fair* to all their slaves. What would be considered “right and fair” is difficult to determine without a full picture of slavery in ancient days. We do know that slaves may have been conquered peoples from foreign lands or people sold into slavery to recover debts. It was difficult for a slave to rise from that social caste. Often slaves were treated as less than human. Without attempting to overturn the social structure of a worldwide empire, Paul applied Christ’s inward transforming principles to the system (see the discussion on 3:22). Paul did not say that Christian masters should free all slaves; in fact, in some cases, setting them free might not have been humane. Instead, Paul explained that Christian masters should do what is right and fair, treating their slaves as human beings. To some masters, this would mean freeing their slaves; to others, it would mean treating the slaves better in terms of living quarters, remuneration, time to rest, and tone of voice.

Why should Paul command this of Christian slave masters? Because the slave masters themselves had someone to report to—their *Master in heaven*. The slave masters could hardly expect to be treated rightly and fairly by God if they refused right and fair treatment to those in their charge.

Masters and slaves who followed Paul’s advice would be able to serve or be served in their daily routines, and yet come together to worship as brothers and sisters in the Lord without any disruption.

WHO’S WORKING FOR WHOM?

Paul’s instructions encourage responsibility and integrity on the job. Christian employees should do their jobs as if Jesus Christ were their supervisor. And Christian employers should treat their employees fairly and with respect. Can you be trusted to do your best, even when the boss is not around? Do you work hard and with enthusiasm? Do you treat your employees as people, not machines? Employers should pay fair wages and treat their employees justly. Leaders should take care of their volunteers and not abuse them. If you have responsibility over others, make sure you do what is just and fair. Remember that no matter whom you work for, and no matter who works for you, the One you ultimately should want to please is your Father in heaven. You are accountable to him.

4:2 Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. As he began to draw his letter to a close, Paul turned his focus back to the church as a whole, reminding the Colossians of their corporate responsibilities.

The believers were responsible to pray; prayer was their lifeline to God. To *devote* themselves to prayer meant that they should be persistent and unwilling to give up, even though their prayers may seem to go unanswered. Paul's advice to the Thessalonians to "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17 niv) has the same meaning. Their devotion to prayer did not mean that they should spend all their time on their knees, but that they should have a prayerful attitude at all times. This attitude would be built upon acknowledging their dependence on God, realizing his presence within them, and determining to obey him fully. Then they would find it natural to pray frequent, spontaneous, short prayers. A prayerful attitude is not a substitute for regular times of prayer but should be an outgrowth of those times.

They also ought to be *keeping alert* in prayer. Paul may have been referring to not dozing off, to being alert in their devotion, or to being alert for God's answers and then thankful when they came. More likely, he was focusing on the anticipation of the Lord's coming. The Lord could return at any time, so believers should be found alert and waiting.

As Paul had mentioned several times (1:3, 12; 2:7; 3:15–17), the believers ought always to be thankful. Thankfulness implies understanding all that God has done and anticipating what he promises.

TIRED OF PRAYING?

Have you ever grown tired of praying for something or someone? Paul says we should be devoted and alert in prayer. Our vigilance is an expression of our faith that God answers our prayers. Faith shouldn't die if the answers come slowly, for the delay may be God's way of working his will in our lives. When you feel tired of praying, know that God is present, always listening, always answering—maybe not in ways you had hoped, but in ways that he knows are best.

4:3 And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. The Colossian believers could have a part in Paul's worldwide ministry by praying for him and his coworkers. Paul requested prayer for himself and for Timothy (1:1) that God would *open a door* for their message. Perhaps Paul was implying prayer for his release so that he could continue traveling and preaching. More likely he was simply praying for opportunities to preach in spite of his imprisonment, and "open doors" of reception to the message. Although Paul was *in chains* for preaching the gospel, the chains could not stop the message. Even in prison, he would preach. The *mystery of Christ* is Christ himself as presented in the gospel—the Good News of salvation (as in 1:26–27). The whole focus of Paul's life was to tell others about Christ, explaining and preaching this wonderful mystery.

KEEP IT CLEAR

God created us to love and serve him, but we have not done so because of our sin. We cannot remove this barrier of sin nor save ourselves. Only Christ can save us. He died in our place to free us to love and serve God. By trusting in Christ as Savior, we can begin this relationship with God immediately.

This is the essence of the gospel, the Good News. Paul asked for prayer that he could proclaim this good news about Christ clearly—we can ask for the same. No matter what approach to evangelism we use, whether emphasizing lifestyle and example or whether building relationships, we must keep the simple message clear.

4:4 Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Paul asked not only for open doors to “proclaim the mystery of Christ” (4:3), but also for the ability to proclaim that mystery *clearly*. In other words, Paul wanted to be able to “reveal” the mystery so that many could hear and believe. This was his compulsion; he had been called (Acts 9:15; 26:17–20).

4:5 Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Paul reminded the believers of their responsibility to be wise in the way they acted toward non-Christians (*outsiders*). Paul was observing that while the Christian fellowship does (and should) make some allowances for the mistakes of its own, the world will not. Christians’ behavior toward unbelievers should be above reproach. Elsewhere, Paul wrote that the believers’ daily lives and hard work should win the respect of outsiders (1 Thessalonians 4:12). The believers were not to hide from the world in a secret organization; instead, they were to live in the world. They were to *make the most of every opportunity* to share the gospel with unbelievers. Paul was communicating a sense of urgency (see Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 5:15–16). The Colossians were to take full advantage of their means to win others. But their actions and their evangelistic efforts should be done wisely, strategically, and ethically.

4:6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone. The believers were to be wise in how they acted (4:5), but their witness should be more than actions alone. The spoken word would be the communication method; therefore, they should be wise in how they spoke.

Speech that is *gracious* is kind and courteous. Speech that is *seasoned with salt* is interesting (as opposed to dull), invites interaction (as opposed to refusing to listen and discuss), adds “spice” to a discussion (by penetrating to deeper levels), and is pure and wholesome (as opposed to “filthy language,” 3:8). According to the parallel passage in Ephesians 4:29, the salt symbolizes that which preserves our conversation from being corrupt. Believers who are “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13; Mark 9:49–50; Luke 14:34) should have speech that is tasteful. Believers should always be ready to answer questions about their faith and be ready to share words of personal testimony. As Peter wrote: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience” (1 Peter 3:15–16 niv).

No Christian should have a dull, tiresome, know-it-all monologue of his faith. Instead, Christians, who have the most exciting news in the world to share, should be able to share that message with excitement, ability to invoke interest, an understanding of the basics, a willingness to listen and discuss, and a desire to answer everyone’s questions graciously.

SALTY SPEECH

The way words are spoken is as important as the words themselves. When we tell others about Christ, we should always be gracious in what we say. No matter how much sense the message makes, we lose our effectiveness if we are not courteous. Just as we like to be respected, we must respect others if we want them to listen to what we have to say.

Life Application Bible Commentary Barton, B. B., & Comfort, P. W. (1995). Philippians, Colossians, Philemon (pp. 228–230). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.