

## Thankful for Family

### Introduction:

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is famously quoted as saying: “You don't choose your family. They are God's gift to you, as you are to them.” While some may choose to agree or disagree whether or not they would consider all of their family members as “gifts,” the fact remains that in the end, we don't choose our families of birth. And even when people choose to adopt, this comes more out of a sense of love than choice or preference, and parents certainly don't get to choose how their adoptive children's personalities develop over time. And adoptive kids don't get to choose their weird parents!

This is all never so highlighted as the Thanksgiving holiday, when groups of people who may share nothing in common except the same grandparent choose to get together, eat too much food, make awkward small-talk, watch football and give thanks that we only have to see some of these people once or twice a year.

We don't get to choose our relatives for family, but then, there is the family of God. We have a little bit more choice when it comes to our church families, although just like our relatives, we run into many of the same things, where there are people within the church that we have a lot in common with and really enjoy seeing week in and week out, and there are others that we may have less in common with and may have to make more effort to find things to talk about during the potluck. Although we may have the choice of which church we attend, Jesus tells in John 1:12-13 that all who believe in Him and call on his name are now a part of the same family of God.

### John 1:12-13

<sup>12</sup>Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— <sup>13</sup>children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

So even though we may not be blood-related, we are all a part of the same family, brothers and sisters together in Jesus Christ. The question we face is, as we recognize all of our similarities, quirks, and differences, how do we learn to function together as a healthy, loving family joined together in Jesus? And, just in time for the holidays, in our passage today, Paul teaches us that thankfulness is a key component to the church being transformed together as a family.

**Big Idea:** Thankfulness in Christ will transform the church family.

In our passage today, Paul gives us three areas of Christ that will transform us towards becoming a thankful church family.

**Transition:** The first area that Paul tells us we will be transformed through is the Peace of Christ. He writes in v. 15: <sup>15</sup>“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.”

## 1) Peace of Christ: The Peace of Christ transforms our interactions.

The peace of Christ stands between our relationships with one another. In the ways that we interact with one another, in our communications, in our work together, in our health and even in our conflict, the peace of Christ is meant to be present. We speak Christ to one another, and especially when we fight with one another, the peace of Christ is supposed to be there as our referee. William Barclay writes that “The tendency of any body of people is sooner or later to fly apart.” So what is it that holds us together even as our humanness causes us to occasionally clash? The peace of Christ. In fact, the phrasing here “rule in our hearts” originally would’ve conjured up images of an umpire or referee in the sports arena. And what does a referee do? Besides maintaining order on the field of play and enforcing the rules, referees help to mediate decisions made between two opposing teams.

Ernest Martin, in his commentary on Colossians, notes that peace, as Paul would’ve understood it, had a lot more to do with the Hebrew concept of Shalom, which sought to make persons and relationships whole, rather than just simply an absence of conflict. So when we submit ourselves to Christ’s peace we are looking then for His peace to be the decider rather than our own thoughts, emotions, or logic. But we are also looking for His peace to transform us and our relationships so that we can be a people who can hold together in spite of the natural tendency to pull apart.

Paul tells us to let His peace rule in our hearts; remember that to Paul, the heart was the center of the whole person, so by inviting Christ’s peace to reside in our centers, we are asking Him to transform us from the inside out.

Then Paul adds, “And be thankful.” This might seem like an oddly placed command, especially if it’s read as disconnected from the verses before it. But Paul is intentionally connecting personal transformation in Christ to the betterment of the whole family of God. So then for Paul, the command to be thankful is to remind the church that they should be thankful to be a part of a group of people who, maybe having nothing else in common except Jesus, are being built into a family held together by the Peace of Christ. Ernest Martin again writes that “The context suggests giving thanks for the privileges of belonging to the body of Christ and for his mediating presence.”

So, the Peace of Christ transforms the church into a family whose relationships are held together by Christ’s peace, and for this we should be thankful.

**Transition:** The second area that Paul tells us the church will be transformed through is the Word of Christ. He writes in v. 16: <sup>16</sup>“Let the word of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.”

## 2) Word of Christ: The word of Christ transforms our touchstone.

A touchstone traditionally was a dark stone such as slate that would be used to determine the quality of a soft metal or alloy. You would take the metal, like gold, and scratch it against the touchstone, and the mark left would let you know how good the gold was. Metaphorically, we talk about a touchstone as a

standard by which something is judged or recognized. So, how do you judge the quality of your life? What is your touchstone? By worldly standards, it might be by your job, or wealth and possessions, maybe the quality of your relationships, or how immaculate you keep your house and lawn, or even how much community service you perform every year.

Paul writes that we will be transformed when we make the Word of Christ our touchstone. And as a church, we are to encourage and help one another grow in understanding of that Word. When Paul writes about the “word of Christ” here, he is referring specifically to the words spoken by and written about Jesus, meaning what we read in the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Now, what does Paul mean by letting the word of Christ “dwell” in and among us? When we think of dwell, I think of to take up residence, to build a house, set a foundation, craft a life, and make a long-term presence. Paul’s encouragement here is not for the church to study Jesus’ words to learn correct doctrinal truths, but according to Martin “to have the word of Christ fully at home in the being and experience of persons and in the believing community.”

In fact, Paul’s commendation here would remind the church of Jesus’ words in **John 15:5-7** of the life-giving reality of living in Jesus and having his presence live in them. **Jesus said:** <sup>5</sup> “*I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*” <sup>6</sup> “*If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.*” <sup>7</sup> “*If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*”

In his great pamphlet “What is an Anabaptist Christian?” Palmer Becker gives three distinctive qualities to what makes Anabaptist Christians different from other streams of Christianity. The first of these is that “Jesus is the Center of our Faith,” and underneath of that is that we read the Bible from a “Christ-centered” point of view. Practically, this would mean as we read through the letter that Paul wrote to the Romans, instead of asking, “How does what Jesus said make sense in light of what Paul wrote,” we ask “How does what Paul wrote make sense in light of what Jesus said?” And this takes a little bit more effort in thinking and practice, because at times there are things that we see in Paul and other parts of the Bible whose obvious meanings might not make a lot of sense according to the words of Jesus. For example, in the OT there are many accounts of the Israelites going to war against their enemies at the command of God. And yet Jesus said to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” And so we have to do some work to think about what the authors really meant, according to the person and words of Jesus. Our touchstone, then, is not just the Bible, but it is the Bible through the lens of the words of and words about Jesus!

Again, Paul is writing these words to the community; the word was meant to dwell among you richly. Notice he uses the word “among” not “in.” The word of Christ is for the growth of the church together. And all of us are called to help one another grow through teaching and admonishing or rebuking “one another.” Paul talks elsewhere about the specific gift of teaching in the church. But in this passage, he isn’t saying that we are all called to be “teachers” but that we all have the duty to disciple one another in Christ’s word. Proverbs 27:17- <sup>17</sup> *As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.* Having the

word of Christ dwell among us only serves to transform the church when we take it as our duties to, each of us, encourage one another in that Word.

Paul closes this second area of transformation in Christ by saying that we “teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.” Just as the first command of gratitude, Paul’s words about singing and hymns aren’t meant to be read separately. He is in fact connecting the act of worship through singing as a way to teach the words of Christ to one another, with “gratitude in our hearts.” Remember, to the believers and to Paul, the heart is the center of the whole person. So to worship God with gratitude in our hearts is to worship God with our whole person, mind, body and soul.

So, when the church make the Words of Christ our touchstone we are transformed because the way in which our lives are determined to be good or worthy are now measured against the person and words of Jesus, not worldly standards. And one way that we can teach each other these words of Jesus is through gratefully singing together to the God who transforms us!

**Transition: We have discovered so far that the church becomes transformed through thankfulness for the Peace of Christ and thankfulness for the Word of Christ. Let’s now look at the final transformation of thankfulness that comes through the NAME of CHRIST.** Paul writes in v. 17: <sup>17</sup> “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.”

3) Name of Christ: The name of Christ transforms our motivation and outlook.

Paul concludes this passage with probably the most transformative and most difficult of all of the commands. He tells us that we are to do everything in and through the name of Christ. Christ becomes the stamp that we put on all of our words and actions. It is His words and life that motivates our actions and outlook. If we took a really hard look at our lives and all of the “stamps” we put on our words and actions, those stamps that motivate and validate what we do, we’d probably find that we have a whole set of them outside of what we do in the name of Jesus. These stamps might look like the positions in our jobs, our education, our beliefs related to politics, government, the ways we choose to parent, our hobbies, or any other things. Whether we realize it or not, our lives get divided into two areas: the sacred, or God related areas, and the secular, or everything else outside of God. Martin writes that in this verse, Paul is eliminating this divide. He tells us that there should no longer be anything “in” or “out” side of Christ. This includes our jobs, our families, and the ways that we work together as the family of God inside and outside of the church. Christ should be the primary motivation in all that we do.

Martin writes again that “When faced with moral issues and other life decisions to which the Bible does not speak explicitly, Christians find guidance in reflecting on the principle: can this action be taken in the name of the Lord Jesus? His reputation is affected by the behavior of those who bear his name?” This might be more simply stated as “What would Jesus do?” This actually is can be a much more complex question to ask than what we might normally think. If you think about Jesus’ own life and the

way that he responded to different situations and his day, not everything was as cut and dry and “simple” to answer as we might wish. Consider, when asked about taxes, that Jesus said render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, essentially to pay your taxes. But when asked about governments and powers of the world, Jesus said that “My kingdom is not of this world,” essentially, don’t get too invested in the ways of government and politics because the kingdom of God is something completely different and separate. So, imagine what your life would truly look like if everything you do, you asked whether or not it could really bear the stamp of Jesus. How might that change your outlook and motivations regarding work, family, and time spent? What might that encourage you to do more and encourage you to do less? Imagine the transformation the church would have, altogether, if we were committed to living our lives together with the stamp of Jesus on everything we do and say?

Just like the first two areas of transformation, Paul concludes his words here with encouragement for thankfulness, this time saying that we are to give thanks to God through Jesus. What Paul is saying is that doing and saying everything in and through Jesus’ name is an act of thanksgiving to God! We don’t just offer thanks, we LIVE thanks!

### **Conclusion:**

I wonder, as we are wrapping up or have wrapped up our Thanksgiving celebrations, when we go back to our normal, everyday lives, not surrounded by holidays, family members and friends we don’t see regularly, days off of work, how thankful would we say that we normally are? It is one thing to be thankful during times set aside for this, but what does it mean to be thankful in the ordinary and mundane? Being thankful can transform the ordinary, what we might take for granted in our daily lives, to the extraordinary. It can transform those areas of conflict and struggle into areas of grace, where we recognize and thank God for the way that He is working with us through hardship. And as a community, when we root ourselves in the peace, word, and name of Jesus Christ, thankfulness transforms us from individuals and families of different backgrounds, with different lives and quirks, who may have nothing else in common other than that we live in the same area and happen to worship at the same church, into the family of God. As this is the first Sunday worshipping together in one service and as we move into the advent season next week, let’s continue to celebrate and be thankful for one another and we grow and transform into the family of God.

I’m going to close with a prayer written for thanksgiving by Ted Loder in his prayer book, *Guerillas of Grace*. Let’s pray:

“Glorious God, how curious and what a confession that we should set aside one day a year and call it Thanksgiving. I smile at the presumption, and hope you smile too. But the truth is, Holy Friend, that my words can’t carry all the praise I want them to, or that they should, no matter how many trips they make. O Glorious One, for this curious day, for the impulses that have designated it, for the gifts that grace it, for the gladness that accompanies it, for my life, for those through whom I came to be, for the friends through whom I hear and see greater worlds than otherwise I would, for all the doors of words and music and worship through which I pass to larger worlds, and for the One who brought a kingdom

to me, I pause to praise and thank you with this one more trip of words which leaves too much uncarried, but not unfelt, unlived, unloved. Thank you!"