True Spirituality, True Humanity

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[0:00] So let's read together from Colossians chapter 3, verses 12-17.! And this is the word of the Lord.

And above all these, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.
And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you are called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.
And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. This is God's holy word.
Well, let me add my welcome to those of Corey. And if you'd like to turn back to that passage that he read, Colossians chapter 3, we're going to be looking particularly at verses 12-17.
[1:34] And if you are using the church Bible, I believe it's on page 936. I say I believe it's on that page because I have reached the age where I'm now noticing that the font of the church Bible is micro dots.

So I think that's the page it's on. Let's pray together because what we're going to try to do tonight is utterly, utterly impossible. Heavenly Father, we pray in our neediness, but dependent upon your greatness, that your word would be our guide.
Holy Spirit, we pray, please, that you would be our teacher. And Lord Jesus, as we think of ourselves, but also of your church, we pray that your glory would be our supreme concern.
Amen. In 1942, Britain was probably in its darkest hours of the Second World War. In that very same year, C.S. Lewis published the Screwtape Letters, letters from a senior to a junior devil.
It was a publishing phenomenon just in that first release, and it continues to be an extraordinary book. If you've not read it, you're in for a treat, and I recommend it. It's a story of, it's a collection of letters, actually, from Screwtape, a senior devil who is instructing a junior devil named Wormwood how to thwart the progress of a man, a young man, I guess, who seems to be moving from sort of an atheistic or agnosticism to an increasing likelihood of, well, as Screwtape puts it, turning to the enemy.
[3:31] And Screwtape, though, is appalled to learn that this young man has become a Christian and is starting to attend a local church.

And he warns Wormwood, who has failed already miserably, that he will not escape the usual penalties for such failure. But, I assure, Screwtape, not all is lost.
He writes, one of our great allies at present is the church itself. He points out that the lofty ideals that this young man may have about the church being the body of Christ, well, if you can somehow or other, Wormwood, get him to see that the reality may be, on any given Sunday, a little bit different.
He points out that these lofty ideals, well, they can come into question, as Screwtape puts it, when any of his church neighbors sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous.
In short, Wormwood is to let the complexities of being in a church and his own experiences collide and lead him eventually into discouragement and disdain, but actually a sort of a polite British disdain for the other Christians in that church.
[5:08] He will actually, if Wormwood is successful, resent the other Christians. In this way, the patient, the young man, will cease to consider that he is in as much need of grace and mercy as anyone else in that church.

But let me ask tonight, forgive me if this seems out of line to ask, but why is church life so complicated? And if we're honest, why does it from time to time feel so hard?

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Well, let's continue to look at Paul's pastoral application of the gospel, for that's what an epistle is. It's the application of the gospel to particular dynamics going on in a collection of churches.
Let's continue as we look at this. Now, last Sunday, as we heard, and I do very much commend and ask you to go back and listen to David's sermon. Earlier in chapter 3, Paul is telling the Colossians that it's vitally important to put off, or actually put to death, any behavior or character trait which is contrary to the life that Christ gives his people.
Well, tonight in verses 12 to 17, we hear the apostle Paul say, here's what you are to put on, and these are, I'm going to call them, they are new attributes to who they are and how they are to live.
[6:39] And these attributes matter profoundly. And here's the wonder. With these attributes, they'll begin to experience true spirituality, the spirituality for which they hoped.

And in that true spirituality, there's something even more astonishing. They begin to live true humanity. And it's these things, these attributes, that thwart the efforts of screw tape and wormwood.
So two points tonight. First, the church is to put on essential attributes. And secondly, Christ gives these attributes to the church.
So first then, the church is to put on essential attributes. Now, at least in English, the word essential has two meanings. The first is the idea of what is necessary.
What is necessary. For example, it is essential, it is necessary for you to have water, without which you will perish. Without water, you will perish.
[7:51] Well, look down with me at our passage in verse 12. And we spot things like compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

Verse 12. Look on at verse 13. Forbearance. Forgiveness of complaints. And verse 14. Love, which binds all of these together.
Paul is saying these are essential. They are necessary. Without all of these, the church will either succumb to counterfeit spiritualities or become cold, hard, cruel people.
They will lack this true spirituality. And they will lack true humanity. These are necessary. But can we step back for a moment?
Why are these necessary? Why, Paul? Why are these attributes so fundamental? And actually, why without them will we perish? Let me start this way.
[9:00] It's because whenever you have a gathering of people, you have lots of baggage.
Whenever you have a gathering of people, you have lots of baggage. Now look, in your mind's eye, picture Edinburgh Airport on a very, very busy day.

I think most of you have been there. And you will see people pushing or dragging suitcases that remind you of those old Victorian steamer trunks that porters are carrying.
And you'll also spot people like myself who are trying to hope that their carry-on bag is just small enough that they can escape the scrutiny of the person who's standing there waiting to charge you more for your baggage.
Every Sunday, when the local church gathers, something very similar occurs. Let me give you some examples. What's the saying?
Wherever two or three Christians are gathered, there's at least five different opinions. And that's especially true concerning political and social matters today.
[10:07] For example, just ask... No, no, don't. I was going to give some examples. No, don't ask about political or social issues. But you know, it's also true when it comes to asking their opinion and views of what do you think this church should be like?

What should we do? I'll give some other examples. Some of us come to church and we're tired. Not because life's been difficult or bad.
It's just that we have children that seem to be nocturnal busybodies. Or we just find work exhausting. And some of us bring past wounds, family hurts, battles with addiction, failed marriages, career disappointments.
And the ever-present likelihood in a city like Edinburgh of just loneliness. We bring all that as part of baggage. Others carry bruised experiences of church, which sadly may include today's spiritual abuse, gaslighting, or bullying.
Some actually bring very idealistic, perfectionistic demands that the church be all that they need it to be.

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[11:34] So they insist. They plead. They demand. Forgetting that a lot of that demand is coming out of their own neediness. And so they leave dejected and despondent and move on to yet another church.

Now some churches, in a more positive sense, have the privilege of welcoming people from different nations, different ethnicities, different languages. But sometimes that can cause a little bit of a problem.
Because some may not understand why we do certain things in the UK and particularly in Scotland. And of course, each of us cannot totally, totally escape our individualistic, very consumerist cultures.
We bring that baggage on any given Sunday. And that's why these attributes, in verse 12 and following, are necessary. Look down with me again.
Put on compassionate hearts. Why? Because, boy, are you going to need it. Boy, are you going to need it. Put on kindness. Because there are going to be some people, including yourself, to which the only response that's helpful is being kind.
[12:49] Humility, meekness, and patience. Because, my goodness, rubbing shoulders with people from different backgrounds, different experiences, different cultures, will demand all of that.

I mean, how otherwise can any church possibly experience a healthy and life-giving culture? Now, keep in mind, please, every culture, every church, is what I meant to say.
Every church has a dominant culture. But here's the problem with culture. A culture of a church isn't just what's on its website or in its publicity.
It's the unspoken things, which are neither not said or said up front. It's the assumed values and practices. And here's the complication about all this.
The longer you are part of that church, whether as a member or even in leadership, you may well have a blind spot. You won't see the culture.
[13:57] And sadly, what we hear about some churches is that where the relationships and where the shared life, well, they become negligent because of the culture.

Or even worse, they become very harmful. And we've heard in recent years, actually in the past fortnight, I've had more and more scandals.
Which means, by the way, when you hear scandals in the church, you have victims in the church. I do appreciate that 50 or 60 years ago, when I, for example, was going to university, a visitor who was looking into Christianity, visiting a church, is more likely to have asked, is the truth here?
But today, they're more likely, a visitor looking into a church, more likely first to ask, will I be safe here?
See, healthy churches have healthy cultures. And the attributes Paul enumerates in our passage are the means by which Christ intends for this church to be healthy.
[15:18] We might ask, and I'm sure you probably have asked this from time to time, but why doesn't the Lord change us? Like instantly, like sanctify us, to use the theological term.

Why doesn't he just zap us? Because wouldn't that be a lot easier? And we could avoid all the messiness of church life and having to deal with one another. What's the saying?
Sometimes Christianity would be great were it not for the other Christians. Let me, just very, very briefly, two suggestions. First, the Lord intends to create in us a new society, a new community, not isolated individuals with their own singular relationship with him.
He loves us individually, but the Lord's covenant is with a people, plural, collective. That's why in the New Testament there are all these one another's, you know, love one another, care for one another, carry one another's burdens.
It's collective. And second, ever so briefly, you see, the Lord gives women and men agency. Call it responsibility.
[16:30] The first humans, Adam and Eve, were instructed to exercise some agency, some responsibility over creation. As Corey's been helping us to see in those early chapters, though the man and the woman rebelled, and the progeny have shared in that, that agency and responsibility has not been eradicated totally.

Humans are still agents in every society. So it is in the church. We have responsibility, we have agency for our own life, but also for helping other people.
You see, God progressively renews his people and changes his people through one another. And we are often the secondary means the Lord uses for good in other people's lives.

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And that's why, that's why these attributes are necessary. And that's why Paul urges the Colossians to put on these necessary attributes. attributes.
But there's a second meaning, at least in English, to the word essential. Essential speaks of something or someone's intrinsic or basic or most significant quality.
[17:49] For example, you go into Edinburgh Newtown and you see Georgian buildings and they have an essential feature architecturally. You spot them. You say, yep, that's Georgian. Or you have a friend that you'd like to hang out with and you just enjoy being with this person and you like the person.

And so you may say basically to me, well, she's just essentially a delightful person. Look again at the attributes in verses 12 to 14.
Look, they're not abstract concepts. They are meant to be action. They are attributes with legs. But they're not just actions.
They're also descriptors. of who the church is meant to be. It begins actually in verse 12. I didn't read it. But look at verse 12. Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved.
That's who you are in Christ. So the attributes that you were to put on, yes, they're action, but they're also descriptors. And now, look again at the attributes.
[18:59] Sorry, I know I've been asking you to do that, but there's a reason for it. Look more closely. A compassionate heart, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with others, forgiving as the Lord is forgiven.

Do those attributes remind you of anyone? Aren't they the very attributes of the Lord Jesus himself? Do you see what Paul is saying?
These attributes which involve your agency, yes, but they're actually becoming your identity. They become your essence. Why? Because of who you are united to Christ, which leads me to my second and final point.
Yes, you are to put on these essential attributes, but don't forget, secondly, Christ gives these attributes to the church. Let's catch our breath just for a moment.
Going back to the Screwtape letters, Screwtape writes to Wormwood with scathing sarcasm and disdain. It oozes out between the lines of that book.
[20:12] There's a malevolence. Wormwood is failing, but so is Screwtape. But the ultimate explanation for their failure is not their incompetence.

It is that Christ is far better than all the diabolical efforts hell itself can throw at Christ's people, His church. Christ, what have we been seeing in this letter?
Christ, in Him is the fullness, the wisdom, the true spirituality which the Colossians had seemingly longed for but looked in the wrong direction. But it's in union with Him.
Everything is already theirs. In Him is what they need to live, not just a new spirituality, but a new humanity.
He is building His church, preserving His church in the midst of attacks within and without. Chapter 3, verse 3, He is the one in whom the life of the church is hidden.
[21:19] In fact, verse 4 of chapter 3, in Christ, the church is progressively being transformed so that on a day to come, the church herself will appear in glory.

Yes, the Lord Jesus will be gloriously revealed, but so will His bride, so will His church, so will individual believers. They will be gloriously transformed.
But in the meantime, the church is provided with the wherewithal, the exercise true spirituality, so to live out true humanity. Verse 15, to which Corey already referred, let the peace of Christ rule.
The word actually means govern or control. Let the peace of Christ govern or control your hearts. What is this?
Well, chapter 1, verse 2, God gives grace and peace as a gift. But that is actually the peace which Christ procured for us in the forgiveness of our sins.
[22:25] Chapter 1, verse 14. A peace which He establishes because of His shed blood on the cross. Chapter 1, verse 20. And accordingly, what Paul is saying is that His peace can govern or rule our hearts.

Hearts often troubled, frightened, confused, and discouraged. His peace helps the church. Do you notice this in verse 15? It helps the church be united because the church is called to be united, to be one body, a unity which simultaneously rejoices in its diversity.
It doesn't do away with it. His peace can rightly soothe church troubles. I want to say this carefully.

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His peace can rightly soothe church troubles not by denying them, not by repressing them, not by a strong leadership putting them down, but by dealing with them honestly and with suitable care. Because remember, what makes a healthy church healthy is not the absence of differences of opinion or of even conflict or relationship tensions.
[23:50] It's how that church deals with them when those issues arise. But also verse 16, see to the word of Christ. I take it that the word of Christ to which Paul is referring here is actually the gospel which he had earlier enumerated in chapter 1 verses 5 to 8.

this word carries the gospel. The gospel is all application. It's a pronouncement of what has been achieved and from that pronouncement comes all the time application.
Not just when we only initially become Christians, but the gospel still has application as you continue as a Christian, as a disciple.
It's the word of Christ which we now have as scripture for it is the word of Christ that is probably the chief means by which Christ pastors his church. His word helps the church live with true spirituality and then true humanity.
And notice this especially. The word of Christ creates in the church a thankfulness. Thankfulness is a major theme in this epistle. You go back and look at it.
[25:04] It's always there. Thankfulness, you see, looks gratefully away from ourselves towards the one who is faithful, true, and kind to us.

And do you notice that thankfulness is a remarkable insight that Paul has here, I think.
Thankfulness is frequently beautifully expressed musically.
We've been doing that tonight in hymns and spiritual songs and singing psalms. There is something profoundly affective about music that it can actually be a means by which there's teaching and admonition.
And it's a shared responsibility. Listen, as I close, life in the local church, life in the local church is not for the timid and it's certainly not for the fainthearted.
And that's just not for leadership. It's for all of us. It can be hard as well as often being richly rewarding. But the higher our doctrine of the church, the more realistically hopeful we will be.
[26:20] We will have a high doctrine of the church as we are governed by the word of God, through the ministry of the spirit of God, as the son of God achieves his purposes to the glory of God.

My goodness, that was a mouthful and I wrote it. Let me say it again. We will have a high view of the church as we are governed by the word of God, through the ministry of the spirit of God, as the son of God achieves his purposes for the glory of God.
Because you see, Jesus is the head of the church, the church, the true church, the church, invisible church throughout all of history. And he intends with all his wisdom and his grace, chapter 3, verse 10.
It's a beautiful expression. It may not come up entirely as clear in English as it does in the Greek. There's a suggestion that he's doing a new creation and he's using creation language in verse 10. And Jesus is intending to bring that out. The church never loses its diversity, a rich ethnic, cultural, historical diversity, but is gloriously unified in one head, Christ, who is in all and is all.
[27:34] True spirituality, true humanity will be lived out as he does. True spirituality, true humanity will be lived out maybe not in grand attention-grabbing ways, but rather in quiet, ordinary, but beautiful ways of kindness, of forgiveness, of encouragement, and of care.

We don't always see things progressing because we are, at the moment, still a work in progress. There's a story of a boy who visited a stone sculpture artist.
What's the word I'm looking for? Sculptor. Yeah, there was a story of a boy visiting a sculptor, and every day the young lad looked in and watched this artist work on a huge piece of marble, and day after day he watched the artist chip and smooth out the marble, and as the weeks passed, the boy began to see with amazement.
What was once a massive stone in the studio was now becoming under the skilled hands of the artist a huge, majestic, Arabian stallion on its hind legs, rising up.
And on the last day the artist turned to look at the young boy. Well, what do you think? He asked. with wide-eyed wonder, the boy responded, Mister, how did you know there was a horse in there?
[29:28] Look, we can't picture, we really can't. All that Christ, the grand artist, will accomplish in us, his church, his new humanity. what we know is right here and now we are to put off and to put

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on essential attributes.

There are no shortcuts, but he gives the church these essential attributes. He does. At times we wonder if it's all worth it.

At times some of us will think of Tolkien's The Long Retreat because we won't look victorious. But one day so don't lose heart because one day, one day that is certain, it's the most certain thing in your life, one day you and I will be utterly staggered and astonished at what Jesus has accomplished in his church, including you if you are his.

Because you will see then a new humanity lived out with one another, a true spirituality for an eternity full of exquisite glory as God's people in God's place enjoying forever God's blessing.

Let's pray together. And if I may, I'd like to use a very, very old prayer. O God of unchangeable power and light eternal, look favorably upon the body of thy whole church and by thy eternal providence accomplish the salvation of man that all the world may see and know that what was fallen has been lifted up and what was grown old has been made new.

[31:28] And that all things are restored by him through whom they were made even thy son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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