

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17 Staying true to our faith.

When I did my teacher training way back in the day, one of the things we were taught was the importance of something called ‘positive reinforcement’. It became something of a buzz-word - or buzz-concept - in other areas of communal life as well as the classroom.

Jay and I did a stint of parenting classes when our children hit their teen years, hoping to glean some tools that made for a more peaceful life. I worked out once, that given the spread of ages of our four children, we had teens under our roof for twenty years! We felt we needed all the help we could get! Positive reinforcement was encouraged in the parenting classes as well.

The idea behind ‘positive reinforcement’ is that to help modify behaviour, it is far more effective to reinforce positive behaviour than to punish negative behaviour.

Of course bad behaviour can’t be ignored – it still has to be addressed – but we were taught that even when correcting bad behaviour, positive reinforcement is more effective than negativity or punishment

So for instance, if a child turned in a piece of school work that was obviously careless and shoddy, a teacher could find something positive to say about the piece of work, and then correct the bad behaviour by saying something like, “You’ve shown some good thinking here. Imagine how impressive your work could be next time, if you take the time to write more carefully, and show more good thinking.” Rather than saying – “This is rubbish! Your handwriting is terrible and you haven’t answered the question. Take it away and do it again!

When we look at Paul’s letter to the Colossians, we see Paul using something of the same technique.

If you were here a couple of weeks ago when I spoke on Paul’s introductory comments to this letter, you may remember that Paul expressed praise and thankfulness for the Colossian Christians’ faith, hope and love. Paul began by being complimentary and encouraging.

Today, we pick up the letter two chapters in. One of Paul’s missionary team - Epaphras – was the one who had taken the Christian message to the town of Colossae in the first place. It was through his message that the townspeople responded, and a new church was born.

The church grew in maturity and was doing well, until it began to be infiltrated by people who taught things that were a little off-base. Some of the Colossian believers were being led astray, and their focus was being diverted from Jesus. The false teaching centred around worshipping angels and having mystical experiences, diverting people from their core beliefs. They were still very spiritual, but their focus was no longer true. It was the New Age movement of the first century!

Paul began in his introductory comments with some genuine praise, but then introduced some correction to draw the believers back to the truth. He encouraged them to get their eyes back on what was central, and to focus on living a life that was pleasing to God.

On our way home from long service leave last year, we visited Merinda & Bob in their retirement place at Lake Conjola. We were able to stay for a couple of days, so Merinda had the opportunity to drag me off to a tap dancing class she had been doing (can you imagine?) One of the numbers involved dancing in a straight line, all tapping out the same steps to the music. I'm glad there was no one there I knew...

At the moment the Irish Dancers are touring. That's how it should be done! A line of dancers, all executing steps in absolute precision, true to the choreography and the rhythm of the music. It is a dramatic and powerful spectacle.

If a dancer were to break formation or were to decide to throw in a slightly different step, the unity and drama of the performance would be ruined. (A bit like how I felt in the tap dancing class!)

The Colossian Christians, in listening to these false teachers, had become like an Irish dancer out of line. Some of them had begun to believe things that were not quite true to the Gospel message. Some of them had begun to act in ways that were no longer true to their faith.

In this short passage, Paul raises a number of points which the Colossian Christians needed to address to bring their faith back into line. They are also good things for us to consider if we would like our own faith, and life together as a Christian community to be in line as well.

Interestingly, the things Paul spoke about centred around the Colossians' life together as Christians, rather than their own individual walk with God. All Paul's comments were about how they related to one another.

Listen to v12

1. **As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.**

Those words all refer to how the Colossians – and we - we should relate to other people. Note that Paul says “*clothe yourselves*”. – which is interesting! Clothing is something we intentionally put on our bodies. We choose which clothes to wear and how we wear them. In the same way, we can *choose* to behave as Paul instructs – or not. Choosing to be compassionate, kind, humble, gentle and patient is saying ‘no’ to the temptation of being self-centred.

Think back to the last disagreement you had with someone – if there’s been one in recent times 😊. Usually people argue because there is a conflict of interests. One person wants one thing and the other person wants another. The conflict arises because each person wants their own way. Self-centredness gets in the way of harmony. At such times, in our family or our church, we can insist on our own way, or **choose** to behave with compassion, kindness and humility. Perhaps it may mean giving way in an argument, or intentionally being kind to someone we’d rather ignore.

A question for us. Where can we choose to act compassionately, kindly and humbly during the coming week?

Then in v 13, Paul says:

2. **Bear with & forgive one another**

This verse suggests is that people need bearing with and people need forgiving! No one is perfect. Even members of our church or family can get under our skin. And we’re to *forgive*. Forgiveness is an active thing that we do. Often people in close communities can become passive when they’re hurt. That means, if someone has hurt us, we simply avoid them. Then we don’t have to forgive them. But Paul says *forgive* one another. Again, it’s something we need to *choose* to do. We’re not to sweep pain or conflict under the carpet. We’re to address it. We’re to *actively* forgive.

Another question for us. Is there anyone we need to forgive right now?

Then Paul in v 14, Paul says:

3. **Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.**

Love encompasses everything he has just said. If we act in love towards others – displaying the same love God showed us – then all he has said will happen naturally.

For us: How can we actively show love for members of our church family right now?

So far, Paul has been talking about things we should *do*. Now he changes his emphasis to what we should *be*. Instead of doing something active, we now are told to become more passive.

In v15 & 16, Paul uses the word *let*.

4. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts
5. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly

Paul reminds the Colossian Christians – and us – that Christ already lives within us. All we need to live the life he has called us to is already there, within us. We simply have to be conscious of that, and *let*, or *allow* these things to come forth.

If we are to *let* something happen, we need to be aware of it. If I'm to *let* someone into my house, I need to be aware that they are there at the door, waiting.

In the same way, to *let* Christ's peace rule in our hearts; to *let* Christ's word dwell in us, we simply need to be aware they are there, perhaps remind ourselves they are there - and give way.

For us: How can we become more aware of the presence of Christ within us as we relate to each other?

Finally, in this passage, Paul says

6. 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.

If we find Paul's words somewhat daunting, his closing comments are helpful:

When he says, "Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father," Paul is saying simply that we should keep our focus on Jesus – do everything in his name. That means do things on Jesus' behalf. Do things, aware that Jesus is in our skin, in our minds, on our lips - Jesus is touching the world through us. As long as remain aware of that and respond

to his prompting – we will be fulfilling all Paul has said. In fact, we'll be fulfilling the two great commandments of Jesus - to love God and love our neighbour.

For us: How can we touch someone for Jesus in our church or family or community?

And finally, whatever we do, says Paul, **we should be thankful**. If someone hands us a gift, in order to *thank* the person who gave it to us, we need to be focusing on them. As we give thanks to God, it draws our focus to him. It helps us sense his presence; it helps us look into his eyes, as it were; it draws us closer to him.

As we move into the coming week and beyond, let's ask the Holy Spirit to help us be more aware of him within, and to remind us to put God first in all things, remaining true in our service to him.

Shall we pray.