

"All I Want for Christmas is You-Christ | Colossians 3: 12-17

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Introduction

There are two kinds of Christians: those who listen to Christmas music during Advent and the true hardliners, the truly orthodox, who wait until Christmas to shout their properly-timed "Hark!" alongside the herald angels. By this metric, my family prove to be true hymnody heretics. We not only start listening to Christmas music before *Advent*, we start the whole process *before Thanksgiving*. And I know we're not alone. There are more of you out there. You pre-Turkey day decorators.

[Oh, the shame! And you dare to call yourselves Anglican?]

This year we headed out to Home Depot to buy some extra Christmas lights. In the car, I asked my daughter, "Ok, what's our first Christmas song of the year: Silent Night, O Come All Ye Faithful, O Christmas Tree by the Oxford choir?" Instead, a little part of my soul shriveled up as I did hear uttered unto me, Mariah Carey, 'All I want for Christmas is You.' It's the kind of request that can turn a Christmas enthusiast into a Christmas Grinch, faster than the Who's down in Whoville can sing Bahoo Booray in their strange Seussian tongues (and that, without an interpreter)!

Quickly, I interjected 'How about, Feliz Navidad!' 'Sure!' she replied. Crisis averted. Christmas is saved!

And it's not just the music. It's the decorations, the lights, the tree, the traditions—and the movies. O the movies, and the timeless characters!

I wonder, though, if you've also ever felt a strange sense of *heaviness* during this season alongside the usual light-hearted yuletide happiness? Maybe it's the state of the world, the suffering, the sadness, the seeming hopelessness. The wars abroad and the wars being waged inside our own hearts.

I love the togetherness that comes with the beloved spirit of cultural Christmas just as much as the next guy. Peace on earth, good will. We need more of those virtues, wherever they come from. But, I do wonder if such a focus on generic

holiday nostalgia has, in some real way, caused the manger towards which we journey in Advent to be—in the end— functionally emptied. And, to the extent that it has, will such a scenario suffice for abiding Christian hope? I hardly think it will.

I've become convinced that the vague and secular notion of 'the magic of Christmas,' as charming as it is, cannot bear the weight of a weary world that longs to rejoice. Only Emmanuel, 'God with us' can. Jesus—the "fullness of God in bodily form" (Col. 2:9), the Word who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), "the only begotten Son of God" (Nicene Creed; cf. John 1:18; 3:16). Only Jesus, who paradoxically comes to us as a baby in a manger can bear that weight.

Yes, I'm convinced that what we need most this Christmas and every Christmas is not generic sentimentalism; what we need most is Jesus—his presence, his peace, his love, and his power.

In today's passage from Colossians 3, Paul offers us a way of understanding how the presence and peace of Jesus continues to transform the world, so long after his advent, atoning death, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Father, around 33 AD. We'll explore today's passage in two parts.

First, we'll look at verses 12-14. There we'll see that by "putting on Christ" believers become channels—not merely of religion, or philosophy, or ethical principles—but channels of *Jesus himself*, his real presence. Second, in verses 15-17, we'll explore how through "putting on Christ" believers become channels of Christ's peace. Channels of Christ's Presence and Channels of Christ's Peace. If these two propositions are true; Christmas truly delivers on Advent's promises.

Let's start by focusing on what it means to be channels of Christ's presence in the world for the sake of the world and for the *life* of the world.

I. Channels of Christ's Presence

Look with me, if you would at Colossians 3 verse 12. The Bible says, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."

I confess. Whenever I read a passage like this in the Bible, my first thought is not ‘wow, how profoundly unique’ but rather ‘wow, how profoundly *conventional*.’ Aside from the idea of “humility” as a virtue (which was not a popular concept in the Greco-Roman world), lists like these are largely unremarkable in their ancient context. *Everyone* spoke like this in the ancient world—even atheists. Even in our contemporary context, is it that hard or radical to be kind, compassionate, and generically nice? Don’t agnostic secular humanists do that? Can’t Muslims, Buddhists, Bah’ai and other faiths behave virtuously?

So, what is Paul getting at here in Colossians 3 if it’s not that Christians have a monopoly on ethics?

Well, what appears at first glance to be a pretty conventional ethical list, is actually biblical code for God’s people being instruments—or channels—for the presence of Jesus in the world.

You see, all of the virtues that we are to “put on” here in Colossians 3 are qualities that elsewhere in Scripture specifically describe Jesus. Further, the phrase, “put on” is used elsewhere in Paul to describe **putting on Christ himself**.

Consider, for example, Romans 13:14 where Paul uses the same verb to exhort the church to “**put on the Lord Jesus Christ**, and make no provision for the flesh.” And in Galatians 3:27, where Paul tells us that “as many of you as were baptized into Christ **have put on Christ**.”

If we follow along to verse 13, we see that Paul gives us more information. Virtue exists, and is formed in us, not for our own sake, *but for the sake of others*. We become like Christ, not by saying to ourselves ‘be patient, be patient, be patient’, ‘be humble, be humble, be humble’ (which usually results in us being less patient and less humble), but—as verse 13 notes—by **bearing with one another** and **forgiving one other** “as the Lord himself has forgiven you.”

But what does any of this have to do with Advent? With the real meaning of Christmas? If what people really need at the end of the Advent journey is not a philosophy, or religion, or a set of ethical precepts. If what the world really needs is not generic holiday sentimentalism but Jesus himself, this teaching in Colossians is a profoundly important instrument toward that end. How is Jesus present to a

weary world that longs to rejoice? Verses 13 and 15 tells us: Jesus is present through his church, which is his body (v. 15), as it **bears with** and **forgives** in the others-centered, self-sacrificial way of our savior (vv. 13-14).

I want to focus here on the language of “bearing with one another” that we find in verse 13. The word means **“to put up with.”** Imagine *that* as an advertisement for the re-branding of our church? “The Falls Church Anglican: we put up with one another.” But that’s what it means!

Why would *that* be a sign of Christmas hope? Because in the world apart from Christ, those who annoy us, those who step on our toes are typically treated by us with either passive-aggression or with pity, but rarely with selfless Christ-like love. We tend to treat others cordially out of a social duty to behave, but not out of a genuine love for the person, as creatures made in the image and likeness of God.

It’s simply more expedient and beneficial for us to temporarily ‘play nice.’ After all, we can always gossip about them later, as a form of self-righteous therapy for ‘putting up with’, let’s face it, someone that we consider below us. Our forbearance, in other words, is perceived by us as a *favor* to them. It’s a result of pity, rather than genuine Christ-like compassion.

Passive-aggression, however, is *not* a form of Christian patience. Passive aggression is not a Christian virtue.

- It is a recipe for retroactive rage.
- It is placing a future emotional blowout on layaway.
- Passive aggression is procrastinating at catastrophizing. The catastrophe will come, oh yes, but ‘I must be very virtuous because I’m saving the impending crisis for a little later.’

Apart from Christ it is very easy to view people as **the sum total of stepped on toes**. Our opponents become nothing more than the sum of their sins against us and our grievances against them. They’re not people in need of God’s presence; they are problems, easier to cast aside rather than to bear with.

I have found many times in my life that the closer I get to know a person, the harder it is to hate them. The more you know a person, their hurts, their hearts, their story and, especially their pain, humanize them. The closer you become, the

less likely you will be to reduce their whole being to the sum total of their perceived flaws.

It's like the Faun named Tumnus in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Once he gets to know the little girl, Lucy, who has stumbled into Narnia, he finds that he is unable to turn her over to the evil Queen as he originally had planned to do. He says to the girl, "Of course, I can't give you up to the Witch; **not now that I know you.**"

The first way that Advent and Christmas can make a difference is by replacing the false stories we tell about ourselves and others, with the true story of a God who bears with us, forgives us, and calls us to be his presence in the world by bearing with and forgiving others. As we put on Christ, we become like Christ, and we mediate his presence to the world as channels of truth-telling grace rather than channels of passive-aggression or pity.

II. Channels of Christ's Peace

In verses 15-17, Paul continues the theme of putting on Christ to bring his presence and peace into the world through his people, the Church. Notice again here, that this is *Christ's* peace that rules in our heart, and *Christ's* word that dwells in us. These are not virtues that we generate. These are characteristics of Christ himself as he works through us to bring people what they really need—not more self-righteous religious people; but himself.

While we are accustomed to thinking about teaching as a way that God's word dwells in us. But admonishing and singing? It is perhaps new for us to think of these as a means by which word of God dwells in us (v. 16).

Ila. Admonishment

- to counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct, admonish, warn, instruct
- admonishment **ensures that bearing with doesn't lead to burning out.**

Admonishing, done in the Spirit of peace, love, and compassion, is a form of Christian truth-telling. It is a way that the word of God brings peace to reign in our hearts, and Christ's word to take up residence in us so that we might be matured, perfected, made whole, completed.

[Vamp] People that have admonished me.:

- Recently a friend saw me about to get up on my soapbox and said ‘let me stop you before you go on a tirade.’ This was a form of gracious honesty. It was also said in an amusing manner. I thought, ‘wow, this person really knows me after a short time.’ [and then I proceeded to continue with the tirade . . . but I was grateful for the honest communication]
- We can even be admonished by our children. This past week I was in Target, in the Barbie section for what seemed like 47 years with my daughter. On the way out I asked, ‘on a scale of 1-10 how grouchy was I.’ She said ‘a 1000.’ I was hoping for a 4, but yes, admonishment helps us to grow.

IIb. Singing

We tend to think of worship music as ornamental; not instrumental to the ministry of the Word. But for Paul here in Colossians, *singing* “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” is a way in which the word takes up residence in God’s people. In other words, musical worship is a ministry of the Word.

And while I think we can thank the Lord, that Mariah Carey’s Christmas song is not included in this concept, I’m sure we can all pinpoint hymns and songs that have etched themselves into our spiritual DNA, deeply impacted our faith, and drawn us closer to God and others.

For decades, I have been praying and singing an old prayer called *The Prayer of St. Francis*.

Lord, make me a channel of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

[Vamp and Conclude on Hospital Story]

This past Friday my daughter was admitted to the ER and stayed overnight. In the midst of this the prayer I had been praying, *the Prayer of St. Francis*, gave me words to pray when things became scary overnight. During this time, I was reminded of the faith of other congregants who prayed on their knees during hospital visits in great faith, trust, and submission to God. I was reminded of people who were nearing death who exhibited unexplainable trust in God, telling me that they were thankful for their lives, and exhibiting no sense of bitterness, but rather great trust *Note she is doing well now, and discharged.

Discussion Questions

(1) How can we practice the presence of Christ by bearing with one another without burning one another out? What do holy honesty and holy limits look like?

(2) Have you ever considered singing a ministry of the Word? In what ways does the mechanism of music itself function as a channel (or instrument) of God's peace and God's word? What hymns or songs have played a significant role in your spiritual journey, and why?

(3) The journey to the manger leads us not to a manger filled with lists of ethical precepts, or the perfect systematic theology book, or even the ultimate 'philosophy.' Instead, all of these—and theology and the Bible itself—function as landmarks that leads us to a manger filled, not with more theology, but a manger filled with Jesus. In what ways does reducing Christianity to a collection of ideas miss the point that at the heart of Christianity is not abstractions but the incarnate presence of the Almighty God in the person of the Son?

(4) In what ways could cultural aspects of Christmas like themes of 'good will toward all human beings' and 'peace' be onramps that we embrace to lead people to the only thing that can bear the weight of a weary world that longs to rejoice, namely, Jesus? How can we be winsomely engaged rather than modern days Scrooges?

(5) How does the concept of being 'channels' or 'instruments' of God's peace in the Prayer of St. Francis (and in the idea of putting on Christ in Colossians) anchor us in situations in which we have no control, but long to hold on to the presence and might of Jesus Christ? How can knowing that putting on Christ is more about existing for the sake of the other, rather than self-achievement or self-perfection instead of the other, free us to grow more substantially and serve more selflessly?

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