

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 16, 2020**

WHATEVER YOU DO (4)

Colossians 3:12a, 15-17

As we continue to think together about the kind of people God wants us to be as *His* people, and the clothing of a Christ-like character in which He wants us to dress, let me share with you two brief prayers I encourage you to make your own.

The first comes from George Macdonald, the 19th-century Scottish author who inspired C.S. Lewis. Macdonald's book *Diary of an Old Soul* includes this prayer:

“Lord, in Your Spirit’s hurricane, I pray,
Strip my soul naked – dress it then Your way.”

This prayer captures the heart of Paul and the heart of God Himself, who wants us all to be dressed *His* way, in the clothing of a Christ-like character that reflects *His* character – a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and, above all, love (Colossians 3:12-14).

The second prayer comes from Peter Marshall, the famous Presbyterian pastor who served as Chaplain of the United States Senate, who was known for his practical, down-to-earth prayers. Marshall once prayed: “Lord, when we are wrong, make us willing to change. And when we are right, make us easy to live with.”

Amen to that. Wouldn't our lives be better, and the lives of the people in our lives be better, if we made this our prayer, and then lived it out with the help of the Holy Spirit?

As God's chosen people, who are holy (which means, set apart by God and for God) and dearly loved, we must choose to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and to put on the spiritual clothing that points to the presence and grace of the Lord Jesus in our lives.

MONERGISM AND SYNERGISM

Your salvation (and mine) is totally the work of God. The theological word for this is *monergism*. It means that our salvation is completely the work of God. You and I contribute absolutely nothing to our salvation – except our sin. Nothing – except our need for it. There is nothing you can *do*, nothing you *can* do, to contribute to God's saving work in your life. From beginning to end, it is all God's initiative. It is all by God's grace – not by human works of any kind, so that no one is able to boast (Ephesians 2:9). Salvation is by grace alone. Yes, it is received by faith. But even faith is a gift from God. The faith to believe the gospel, the faith to trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, comes from God Himself. Faith is not a work we

produce in order to be saved. Faith is a gift that God gives, so that we may believe and be saved.

Salvation is *monergistic*. It is all the work of God. On the other hand, your sanctification – your growth in grace and godliness – is *synergistic*. It involves synergy between the Holy Spirit and you. So, when Paul tells us about the qualities of a Christ-like character we are to wear like clothing, when he says, “this is the kind of people you are to be as followers of Jesus,” he means that you and I are to actively cooperate with the Holy Spirit to develop these virtues so that the life of Jesus will be seen in us, and the influence of Jesus will continue to spread in this broken, mixed-up world.

Do you see that? And do you see who you are in the eyes of God Himself?

WHO YOU ARE

Our culture tries to divide us and define us by using distinctions such as one’s race or ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, economic status, and even age as the defining characteristics in determining our identity. All these factors may and do affect our experience of life. But they do not define who we are. They are not the determining factors in our identity.

Our culture does not define who we are. The world does not determine our identity. Who we are is defined by God. Who we are is revealed in the Bible. The Bible declares that every person is created in the *imago Dei*, in the image of God. Even in our fallen, sinful state, we still bear the imprint of God, marred though it is. You are not defined in the eyes of God by the color of your skin or your nation of origin. You are not defined by your sex. Contrary to what many voices in our culture want you to believe, your sex (or gender) is not for you to choose. You were made in the image of God. God made us in His image. He made us male and female, for His purposes. You are not free to decide whether you want to be male or female.

You are not defined by your nation of origin or your country of citizenship. Being an American is not what ultimately defines us. Being conservative or liberal or somewhere else on the spectrum in your politics does not define you. Don’t let it define you. Don’t let other people use it to define you.

Here is who you are: You are a human being created by God in the image of God for the glory of God. Like the rest of humanity, you are a sinner who falls short of the glory of God. You are a sinner in the eyes of God, estranged from God by your sin, with no hope of being made right with God except through His sovereign mercy. You are a sinner, yes. But, by God’s grace, if you have come to know and trust and love and follow Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, you are a redeemed sinner. That is who you are. You are an adopted member of God’s family. You are a beloved son or daughter of God. You are a trophy of God’s grace. You are a living, breathing witness to God’s relentless love and power to save.

You are part of God's chosen people, as Paul says (3:12). God created you. God made you in His image. God chose you before the foundation of the world to be holy (set apart for Him) and blameless (through the imputed righteousness of Jesus credited to your account) (Ephesians 1:4). You are loved by God. You are treasured by God. You belong to God. Peter says of us: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who belong to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). *The Message* says it like this: "You are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do His work and to speak out for Him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference He has made for you" (1 Peter 2:9, *MSG*).

It doesn't matter if you are male or female, rich or poor, old or young, white or black, African, European, Middle Eastern, European, Asian, Caribbean, or any other "flavor" I haven't mentioned. Here is who you are as a follower of Jesus and a member of His body called the church: You are chosen by God. You are holy – that is, you have been set apart by God's sovereign choice and love, set apart by God to be His people and to serve His purposes in this world. You are dearly loved. God loves you with an unconditional, undying, unstoppable love. You don't have to do anything to earn it. You *can't* do anything to earn it. You can only receive it as a gift. And God's love for you will never change. It is forever. It will last forever.

Your real identity is not found in any of the things our society uses to try to divide people. It is found in the God who made you, who chose you, who loves you. Your true identity is found in Jesus, the Son of God who loves you and gave His life for you (Galatians 2:20).

Unless or until you find your identity in who God says you are, unless or until you discover your true identity in Jesus, you will never know who you really are. You will believe the lies our culture promotes. You will search for meaning and validation in all kinds of places, but it will leave you with an emptiness in the pit of your stomach. St. Augustine, the great North African church leader, described this reality when he said: "You, O Lord, have made us for Yourself; and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in You."

Until we find our rest in Him. Only when we come to know and love God for who He is will we experience the peace of knowing who we are in relation to Him. I hope this peace is yours. I hope you have come to know this peace – the *shalom* of knowing God and His grace – in your life. If you have not, I urge you to come to Jesus in humility, in repentance and trusting faith, today. Confess the restlessness of your soul, and find your rest in Him. Let Him fill the void in your life that nothing else can ever fill.

THE ARRIVAL FALLACY

Have you ever heard of the "Arrival Fallacy"? The Arrival Fallacy is the illusion that once I reach my goal (whatever it is), once I finish my education, once I get the promotion I want, once I reach a certain level of income, once I get married, once I have kids, once my kids are out of the house, once I get the car of my dreams, once I lose 20 pounds (or 50, or whatever), once I make partner or vice-president, once I reach the top of my profession, once I retire, I will have arrived where I want to be in life, and I will be happy. I will be satisfied. I will have

peace. But you know what? It doesn't happen that way. When you arrive at the place you thought would bring you happiness, you discover there is still something missing. There is something more you want, something more you need in order to sustain that feeling of fulfillment.

Our hearts remain restless until we find our rest in God. This is the way God has constituted the human heart. God made your heart and mine to find its rest, its peace, its joy, its contentedness, its satisfaction in Him and Him alone. Everything else, if you make it the ultimate object of your desire or affection, will end up disappointing you.

THE PEACE OF CHRIST

So, what does Paul say in verse 15? "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace."

You were called to peace. Where does peace come from? Real peace comes from God. God Himself is the author or source of peace. He is, the Bible says, "the God of peace" (Romans 15:33; Philippians 4:9). Paul writes in Romans 5:1 that "since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Peace with God is the possession of pardoned sinners. J. C. Ryle has written: "Without justification" – without the act of being declared righteous by God, which is what it means to be justified – "it is impossible to have real peace. Conscience forbids it. Sin is a mountain between a (person) and God, and must be taken away. The sense of guilt lies heavy on (our) heart and must be removed. Unpardoned sin will murder peace. The true Christian knows all this well. (Our) peace arises from a consciousness of (our) sins being forgiven, and (our) guilt being put away.... (We have) peace with God, because (we are) justified" (J.C. Ryle, *Foundations of Faith*).

The peace *of* God that brings peace *with* God is promised to anyone and everyone who trusts in Jesus for salvation and turns from their sinful ways. This peace is meant for you. No matter where or how you have strayed, no matter what you have done, no matter how you have messed up, God wants you to come – or come back – to Him and receive the gift of His forgiveness and peace. In the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross, God made peace with us and with everyone who will come to Him in repentance and faith. Maybe you have been holding out on God. Maybe you have turned away from God. Maybe you're holding onto some sin or unbelief. Don't hold out any longer. Come to Jesus. Come back to Jesus. Don't wait any longer to get right with Him and receive the gift of His peace.

What does Paul say? "Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart." Does the peace of Christ rule in your heart?

There is a Peanuts cartoon in which Lucy says to Charlie Brown: "I hate everything! I hate everybody! I hate the whole world!" If you know Lucy, you can imagine her saying these things.

A perplexed Charlie Brown says to her: "But I thought you had inner peace."

To which Lucy replies: “I do have inner peace. But I still have outer obnoxiousness.”

Inner peace and outer obnoxiousness are fundamentally incompatible. They cannot exist together. If the peace of Christ rules in your heart, outer obnoxiousness has to go, because, as Paul says, “as members of one body (we) were called to peace” (3:15).

Peace, says Paul, is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Jesus says: “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9). Paul declares that the kingdom of God is not a matter of what you eat or drink (or abstain from), but of “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). He goes on to urge us to “make every effort to do what leads to peace and to edify one another” in the grace and truth of the gospel (14:19).

Peace – peace *with* God, the peace *of* God – has to work its way into our relationships with one another. It is not just peace between you and Jesus. The spiritual clothing of peace God wants each of us to put on involves how we get along with one another in our church family, how we get along with other believers, and even how we get along with people who have beliefs, values, and lifestyles that are very different from ours.

Let’s face it: In our church family, we’ve gone through a difficult, painful period of friction and conflict in the last year or more. No church is insulated from it. We’ve had times in the last year when peace was hard to find, when anger, hurt, pain, bitterness, blaming, and division came to the surface. God has been gracious to us. Have we healed completely? I don’t think so. Are we healing? I do think so. I think many of us have learned lessons about ourselves and one another that will help us not to go down the same road again. It has been painful. And humbling.

One way we can avoid experiencing this kind of conflict and pain again is to take the words of Paul in verse 15 to heart: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” Let the peace of Christ *govern* your hearts. Let your life be governed by the *Pax Christi* – the peace of Christ, a reign of peace infinitely greater than the *Pax Romana* or the *Pax Americana* or any other political rule the world has ever known. Commit yourself to the way of peace. As much as it is possible, as far as it depends on you, as Paul says, live at peace with everyone (Romans 12:18). *As far as it depends on you.*

Whatever you do, let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body – one family, the church – you were called to peace. When we are wrong, may we be willing to admit it and to change. When we’re right, may we be easy to live with. And may we do the things that make for peace.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.