

“Getting Heaven Into Us” May 21, 2023

What do you do with a frustrating person?

There’s the long talker. Where despite the Group leader saying, “Let’s be mindful of time so everyone can share,” there’s a tendency for one person to not heed that, and they end up sharing a lot and eating up everyone’s time. And everyone else is visibly bogged down by it, and it throws off the night.

There’s the brash talker. This person just sort of speaks up and says whatever they want, but they’re not cognizant of how they come off to others. It tends to be pretty abrasive and out of touch with the group dynamic. Every now and then, they say something that comes off as semi-hurtful whether they meant to or not, and there’s this weird funk in the Group now where people don’t want to share because they don’t want this person speaking into them.

Then there’s the broken-record talker. Where each week, this person tends to share the same things that are tough week in and week out, like, “I love my kids and they’re challenging. I’m exhausted. I’m scattered.” When it comes to confessing sin, this person tends to say the exact same thing each week, like, “I’m grumpy. I’m having a hard time with resting, etc, etc”

- Now I’ll be honest, over the years, there have been times when I’ve been all those people.

What do you do with a frustrating person? What do you do if/when you find yourself to be the frustrating person?

That’s what we’re getting at today. **Last week, we talked about the first part (mortification), getting the Hell out of us. Today we zoom in on that second component of getting Heaven into us (vivification). So if you have a Bible, we’ll be in Colossians 3:12-17**

Colossians 3:12-17

12 Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, **13** bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. **14** And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. **15** And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. **16** 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. **17** 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.

So Paul here gives us this big vision of what it looks like to follow Jesus together. Church is to be this little outpost of Heaven and Earth. That Jesus has absorbed our sin on the Cross, He has conquered death, and now He invites everyone to lay down their lives and follow Him. So the aim is not so much about going to Heaven when you die but getting more of Heaven into you before you die. And when we do this together, all of us going in the same direction, then it ought to be the most beautiful, compelling, counter-cultural community the world has ever seen.

- Where the world is full of bitterness and anger and cynicism, when someone steps into a Gathering or a Group, they notice these people are smiling and hugging each other; who, no matter their background, they see the dignity and value of others. That even if their life is filled with painful circumstances, they’re at peace with life and where it has them.

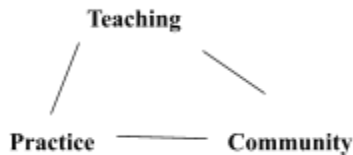
Paul says the way you do this is a two-parter. (Well, part zero is: be a Christian) Then part one, kill the sin in your life (which we talked about last week). And part two is you put on these attributes and qualities and infuse them into your life. So here, Paul's assumption is that in the Christian life, becoming like Jesus means we do stuff. That you, who are saved by grace and empowered by the Spirit, do your part to live into this because looking like these sorts of people is actually possible.

Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*

We don't believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true.

It's not enough just to believe it. But to live into what you believe, that's when the really beautiful stuff happens, when you put on this way of life.

So what I thought I'd do, just for a few minutes, is to explain how all that works. How is it that people can actually change? For those of you that love a good graphic, here's a simple way we try to explain what we've adapted from others. This is not an original thought to us, and honestly, this is more so pulling from the Bible than anything else. According to this verse, to put on the way of Jesus requires three things - teaching, community, and practicing the way of Jesus, all working together like this:



We try to do everything around these three ideas.

- **Teaching:** We want to know God's Word, and so saturate everything we do because the Bible is our north star. Scripture is Jesus' invitation to see reality for what it really is. So nearly everything we do, from how we operate on Sundays, to how we preach, to how we do LifeGroups is oriented around what the Bible says. This is why when we teach and when we gather in Groups, the expectation is that we're opening up our Bibles and talking about it. We don't become a place of Heaven on Earth if we don't.
- **Practice:** We want to do what God's Word says. We don't want to just fill your mind with what the Bible says. That's a good thing. Yes, to studying the Bible, of course. AND the Bible talks a lot about living out what the Bible says. Paul's letters were about 50/50 between theology and application. If all we do is give you theology but don't ask the question, "How do we actually live this out in a practical way?" then we're being unfaithful to Scripture and the pattern of preaching from the early church.
- **Community:** Putting on Christ is a team project. To be these sorts of people requires you to get around people and learn to do life with others. And church family is the primary vehicle by which you grow to look more like Jesus. This is why we do LifeGroups the way we do them.

Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*

Spiritual formation occurs primarily in the context of community... Long-term interpersonal relationships are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian life...It is a simple but profound biblical reality that we both grow and thrive together, or we do not grow much at all.

And this is why “church” is so critical in our discipleship to Jesus. Not just Gathering on Sunday, but committing to a body of people and getting around others who see the best and the worst parts about you, and they can speak into your life and vice versa, so you can speak into other people's lives.

So we want to pray together and confess sin together and study the Bible, and when we can, share meals together.

I get it that some people can get thrown off by that initially. But we want to “put on Christ” - and the way we do is through getting together and doing what the Bible says. So yes, confessing sin is often a hard and sometimes weird thing to practice, but we wanna be faithful to Jesus and put on what He says; and if that means some awkwardness, then I accept. If being like Jesus means I gotta step into some things that are uncomfortable, then let's do it because the outcomes are worth it.

These three concepts work together and play off each other, and this becomes the environment by which the Spirit can work in us over time to put on Christ and experience Heaven on Earth. When we do this, we become more like Jesus. But it's a slow process.

And this is what we're trying to accomplish in everything we do as a church.

This is why, when you read the early church, a common refrain they used to describe church family was called “**the school of love.**” Now, I'll be honest...sounds a little weird to call your church that. I think people might get the wrong idea.

But it's this idea that we want this place to be a training ground to become these sorts of people. “Look, you want to be a more forgiving person?” Ok, awesome. Here's how you train - get around people who will require you to practice forgiveness.

“You want to be a more loving person?” Sweet. I've got an easy way to train yourself - get around other people who will force you to practice love. (As in, not the people who you easily get along with in your same season of life, but someone who grates on you and annoys you that will require you to practice love to that person.) That's how you become a person of love.

And growth will happen, but it takes time. In the same way, if I want to be like a super swole muscle guy - it doesn't mean I go to the gym once and give myself a high five and never go back. Rather, I put myself under the regular discipline, you train your body, putting in the reps regularly, making your muscles uncomfortable if you wanna see them gain. So it is in the way of Jesus. We can't expect growth if we show up on Sundays every now and then or hang out in Group but are not engaging. We get around others, we step into the uncomfortable, and we put in the reps. And through the Spirit, the gains will come.

This is the thing we try to say often, but it bears repeating... that person in LG that frustrates you... is actually God's gift to you. James K.A. Smith says it like this, which I find pretty funny:

James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*

...one of the reasons we go to church is to learn to love people we don't really like that much.

Now I. Would. Never. But his point is stepping into community, not backing away even when it's painful, does something beautiful to your soul over time. You become a person of love. To help you put on Christ. To help you

practice becoming a person who looks more like Heaven on Earth. Personally, I would love if every Group had at least one challenging person in there so that you could practice that.

And if you're sitting there thinking... well, no one in my group frustrates me... well, I have some news you may not like... *give them that look** It *might* be you.

Do with that what you will but let's look back at the text again. Three things that pop out that Paul says to put on that I want to highlight:

- Forgiveness (v.13)
- Love (v.14)
- Gratitude (v.15)

Now those are three things he says that I think, for good reason, he highlights because as nice as they sound, they're often some of the hardest things to live out. So let's look at each one real quick:

1 - Forgiveness

In **Matthew 18**, Jesus shares what I think is one of the scariest parables. The parable of the unforgiving servant. And the main idea here is that if you've been forgiven much, then you, too, ought to forgive. Jesus has set you free from the bondage of sin by grace - something you could never ever earn. And because of that, you ought to forgive others because of how much you've been forgiven because if you don't, then you're not actually experiencing the forgiveness of Jesus in your life.

This is so countercultural to the way of the world. When someone sins against you, the natural pull is to sin against them. Or gossip. Or hold a grudge. Or back away from the relationship.

So when the person in your group says the hurtful thing, do you choose distance and bitterness, or do you choose to forgive? That will reveal whether you've truly understood the forgiveness of God in your life.

Now, I don't want to make light of what someone has done to you - But, what I do want to say is you've been set free by Jesus; you're no longer held in bondage to your sin. And if that's true of you - that will mean you are learning to forgive the people in your life who have hurt you. Set them free.

2 - Love

1 John 4:20 says

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

The word "love" is the Greek word *agape*, which means this self-sacrificing love. It's the same word often used in the New Testament to describe the type of love Jesus shows to us. Jesus, who laid down his life, his wants, and his preferences so that our sin would be atoned for and we would be brought into union with God.

So to be a person of *agape* love quite literally means to learn to die to your needs and wants and preferences, moment by moment, so that you can lift someone else up.

Dorothy Day

I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.

So when the annoying person in your group begins to share, do you shut down, or do you fight that impulse and instead choose to listen and speak into them? That will reveal your love of God.

Because **1 John** is pretty black and white. If you do not lean in and learn to love your brother or sister in Christ, how can you say with confidence that the love of God dwells in you?

3 - Gratitude

1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NKJV)

in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

It's this idea that the world is filled with brokenness and bitterness. I don't know about you, but I find it way easier to complain and grumble than to be thankful.

Keller story

But yet, when that happens, I'm choosing to view the world as a closed system where God is removed and absent from the everyday affairs of life.

And yet, when I choose gratitude, I'm choosing to see my sin and the brokenness in me and around me and to defiantly say these things will not have the final word over my soul because I believe that even in the face of sin and death, there is resurrection on the other side. So even though the natural pull is to be cynical, I will instead choose thankfulness.

And when that happens, when I put on these three things in particular, according to **v.15**, the byproduct is peace. Not just an absence of conflict but a wholeness. An altogether-otherness. Shalom. Unity. When people are living out following Jesus together and putting on these things, it's like oxygen to your soul. You are changing for the better. The people around you are changing for the better. Not perfect, but slowly making progress each and every time we step into this. Slowly getting Heaven more into us.

So that when the **long talker in LifeGroup** starts on their spiel, and you're tempted to treat them rather unlovingly, you can say in your heart, "You know what? I'm glad they're here. I'm glad they have a space where they can talk through what's going on with them. And maybe someone needs to have a more pointed talk to be mindful of the time, but thank you, Jesus, for this person. You are using them to help me be a person of love."

Or when the **brash talker in LifeGroup** is shooting off at the mouth, and you're tempted to have this heart of resentment, you can say, "Jesus, thank you that you put this person in my life. You did that to teach me something a little bit more about yourself. And also - maybe pull them aside and have an honest conversation with them, and if they get offended, that's fine. But again, thank you, Jesus, for using this person to make me a person of forgiveness."

Or with **the person in your group who's a broken record**. Rather than your eyes glazing over and you being cynical, you realize God put this person into your group for a reason, so press in rather than back away. To speak into their lives. To lay a hand on them and pray for them. To remind them of what's true of them in Scripture. "God, thank you for them. Thank you that they take their sin seriously. Thank you that you're using them to make me a person who's thankful in all things."

I love especially how Paul goes on about it in v.16:

Colossians 3:16

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.

He says after all these commands to put on Christ, to live this out, to embody Heaven on Earth, he says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." Let God's Word sink into your heart more and more so you can further live this out. He basically goes on to say, Keep on pressing this into each other. Don't give up. Don't back out. Don't throw away the towel when things get tough and say, 'I need a new church or a new group or whatever' - when you hit that wall, let God's word dwell in you and remind you to love and forgive and be thankful and fight on because that's where the real growth happens. When you're hurt and you're frustrated, and you choose to press on - that's when the serious work happens, and you look more like Jesus.

So Paul says, "Sing about it. Talk about it. Do whatever you can to push together in this direction."

So, if you're not in a LG... jump in one.

- Give it the chance; risk being in it for the long haul.
- Give yourself to it ... do you realize you are there to create this... to put these things on, not just show up... hop in...

If you've been around for a while... what do you need to put on?

- Is there someone who's hurt you that you need to forgive?
- Is there someone who annoys you that you need to love?
- Are there places in your life where you need to choose gratitude over grumbling?

As we approach the communion table - 1) repentance 2) unity

Conclusion

Because this is what we're going for: Heaven and Earth in us. In here. Trying to do the best we can in the power of the Spirit to be the most compelling, beautiful community on the planet. We don't have to reinvent the wheel or come up with sexy PR: we have the best news on the planet - Jesus came to die and conquer death for sinners like you and me. And anyone can get in on this. And when we step into this - putting on the way of forgiveness and love and gratitude by letting Jesus' word dwell in us - we become this refuge to the world. This city on a hill. This place where life abounds and flourishes because Jesus is alive and at work and continues to build His Kingdom.