

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ *Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.* ¹⁴ *And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

¹⁵ *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.* ¹⁶ *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.* ¹⁷ *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17)*

Are You Ready for a Gift Exchange?

How many gift exchanges did you participate in this year? There was one here at school on the Friday before Christmas. My wife had one at work at about the same time. The faculty and staff here had a very tongue-in-cheek, white elephant gift exchange just a couple of days before Christmas. So how many did you have? Between kids at school and work and relatives, some of you might have participated in quite a few. I bet you thought you were all done – even if you had one or two after Christmas because you had to get to both sides of the family. Today's the 28th of December and most of those should be over. Well, not so fast. There is one more gift exchange, right here at church. St. Paul talks about in our text for this morning. **Are you ready for a gift exchange?**

I.

Did you bring a gift? You can't come to a gift exchange if you don't have a gift to give. And we are going to have one here today. But don't worry. It's not a physical gift exchange. It's a spiritual one. That's what St. Paul was talking about. He was talking about the gifts we all now give because we have received the gift God gave us on the first Christmas. God gave us Jesus, his Son, our brother, our Savior. Now, God calls us to exchange gifts with each other. **Are you ready for a gift exchange? Give each other Christian love.**

In the verses right before our reading, Paul is talking about the change that Jesus makes in our lives. He talks about the New Man who God put there and about the unity we enjoy with all other Christians everywhere. Of course, that's kind of an abstract point. You and I are united with every believer on earth and even with all the saints in heaven. But what good does it do us? So Paul talks about how our lives are supposed to be different now. He says, **"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."** Those are the gifts God now calls us to give each other because God has given us his Son. He tells us to clothe ourselves with these characteristics. What does he mean? Well, what do people see when they see you? I have a Christmas tie that my mother-in-law gave me. It has a picture of the star of Bethlehem on it. I really only wear it this time of year. Every year, someone comments on it. The way you dress is the way you show yourself to the world. You make a conscious decision before you go to church or to work or school or to a New Year's Eve party. A big part of that decision is how you want people to see you. God tells us to clothe ourselves with these Christian virtues. He means that these things are what people should see when they see us.

The things he lists here all go together. Compassion and kindness are really almost the same thing. They're how we treat people, especially when they're in trouble. It's getting a cup of coffee for your spouse because you know they're tired or loading the dishwasher without being asked, just to be helpful. It's shoveling the walk of that neighbor who isn't getting around so well anymore. If you think about it, what kindness and compassion have in common is service. They help someone else, rather than thinking about me and what I want or need. To do that, you have to be humble. If your head is so big that you would never kneel to help someone else out, this is going to be pretty hard for you. Kindness and compassion require gentleness and patience. Gentleness, in particular, is something that I find to be quite difficult. Our society has made such a virtue of the quick one-liner that I fear sometimes I'm hurting people's feelings when I really should be more gentle. How about you? And patience – it's almost impossible to be kind and compassionate without having to wait for the person you're trying to help. That may be frustrating, but it just goes with the territory.

Paul goes on to talk about the flip side: **“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”** Who in this church is hard for you to put up with? God is calling you to make an extra effort to bear with that person. Who has not exchanged kindness and compassion with you this year? Who has hurt your feelings and made you angry? God is calling you to forgive that person, just like Jesus forgave you. Paul says, **“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.”** The angels sang, “Peace on earth” when Jesus came. They weren’t talking about political peace, but peace with God. That leads us to work to be at peace with each other. If we all exchanged forgiveness for hurt, kindness and compassion for need and loss, humility for haste and self-absorption, what a wonderful Christmas this would be! Jesus did all those things for us. God calls us to take the gifts we received at his manger and his cross and give them to each other, over and over again.

Are we prepared to exchange those gifts this year? Paul is talking to believers here, about our relationship with other believers, so even though much of what he says could apply in our office or our neighborhood or on the highway, let’s focus on our fellow Christians. Paul is talking about love here. Do we exchange love with the members of our family? Do we exchange it with the people who sit in the pews around us here? Are there fellow Christians that you wouldn’t greet here or anywhere else because of something that lies between you? Today, God calls us to put all that behind us because we are his forgiven and dearly loved children. He sent Jesus into this world to make us his own and now he calls us to live like people whose sin he has taken away. God gave us the gift of love even when we were unwilling to share it. God gave us the gift of Christ, who came to take away all our sin and lovelessness. God has erased all our failures to exchange his gift. That sin is gone forever. Show him that you understand that. Show him the change that Christmas truly makes in our hearts. God gave us the gift of his love when he gave us his Son. Let’s give each other the love of Christ, every day.

II.

Gift exchanges are funny things. Most of the time, whoever organizes them sets a limit on how much to spend. Here at school, it was \$7-10. If you have a gift exchange at work, I bet some kind of limit was set so that people knew what level of present to buy. Because that’s true, the things we get in most of those gift exchanges are not the main gift we get that year. They aren’t usually the first thing we think of if someone asks us what we got for Christmas. And our spiritual gift exchange is something like that. Spiritually speaking, the main gift of Christmas was the baby in the manger who was true man and yet God himself. But the love God calls us to exchange is no small, cheap gift. Forgiving, being humble, showing compassion – these may be some of the hardest and the most precious gifts we will ever give. St. Paul mentions one more gift that is just as precious – and it is a gift that he does expect us to give to each other. **Are you ready for a gift exchange? Give each other the word of Christ.**

That’s what Paul says: **“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”** The word of Christ is the gospel, the good news that our Savior came. That’s the gift we’re supposed to exchange. Notice, to give this gift, that word does need to dwell in you richly. If this is not a gift you often give, the problem may be that you don’t personally spend enough time in the word to have something to give. But Paul does say that the word should dwell in us richly as we teach and as we sing. Do you teach the word? Do you exchange it with other Christians? In the Lutheran Church, our first response might be, “That’s the pastor’s job.” And it is. But clearly, God is not just speaking to pastors here. We all share in this responsibility. There are Sunday school classes to be taught. There are newer Christians who need guidance from God’s word. There are children in our homes who look up to us to share God’s Word with them and to explain it. There are young people who desperately need the example of a Christian adult in their lives, and they don’t even know it.

God calls all of us to grow in the gospel and to teach the gospel. And even if we never teach Sunday School or counsel a teenager who’s struggling or help a friend understand what God is saying better, we all do share the word when we come here. Every time we lift up our voices and sing a hymn, we are proclaiming the gospel, the word of Christ. Every time we sing the liturgy, the good news about Jesus is coming out of our mouths. If you think that doesn’t matter, pay attention to what the children around you are doing. They sing out because the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts with the good news of their Savior. When you sing out,

even though you're following words someone else wrote, you're still proclaiming Christ and the Holy Spirit is still working through that gospel. Lift up your voice here today and sing!

Does it seem like I've preached a lot of law today? Does it seem like this sermon has been full of things for you to do? It has been because the text we have before is full of God telling us what we should do. And sometimes, that means that we feel guilty because hearing about it forces us to see that we should do better. We don't show enough love. We may not even share the good news about Jesus with our own children, let alone with someone else. We don't follow what God commanded here nearly perfectly enough. If that's true about us, it is a serious sin. But that's the whole point of Christmas. God gave us his Son and he gave us a clean slate. God gave us eternal life with him because Jesus took all our sin away. And hearing that word of Christ works in us to make us new and to change the way we live here.

St. Paul says, **“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”** He's talking about faith. You know that baby who was laid in the manger. You know he grew up to die and rise for you and take all your sin away. You know that he lives in heaven today and guides all things so that you will hear and believe and make it home to heaven. God has showered spiritual Christmas presents on you. How are you going to say thank you?

Quite often, when someone gives children a gift, their mother or father will hover over them and if they don't hear a “thank you” they'll prompt one: “What do you say?” I did that when my children were little, too, and the idea, of course, is to teach them to express their gratitude when people are generous to them. But isn't it far more moving when you're on the receiving end of that thank you, if it just comes out? You can tell the child loves and appreciates your gift! Sometimes, when they want to show how much the gift means, they do little things to say thank you. God calls us all to live the same way. Be filled with thank you's for Jesus. Make your whole life a thank you to him. You know what? If you do, you won't have any trouble being humble or kind or patient. You won't have any trouble being at peace with your fellow believers. You won't have any trouble sharing the good news with them. If you make your life a thank you to God, in all that you say and do, all those things will come out naturally.

The truth is, we are not having a formal gift exchange here today. No one is going to draw your name. No one is expecting a gift wrapped package from you. But we are having a spiritual gift exchange today – a gift exchange that God willing, we will have every day until our Lord comes back. Let us exchange the love that God gave us in the manger of Bethlehem. Let us exchange the word of Christ that tells us about him. Let us do it over and over again until we do it in heaven. Amen.