

## How to Keep the Joy of Christmas

### Colossians 3:12-17

Hello my brothers and sisters. If I am counting correctly this is the 7<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas and the last day of 2012. Tomorrow begins our new year. This is the day when many of us remember the joys and pains that last year brought, but also plan for what we hope the new year bring. In many families and households we cleaned up the house, take out the trash and got everything out of the house that we don't want to be a part of new year of hope! But I didn't come to tell you what to get rid of, but to suggest as the scripture we just read, what to add to our lives to keep Christmas the whole year long! Our scripture is one of the classic passages that speak of the new life that the Holy Spirit works in us.

In the passage, Paul tells us to be clothed: we lay aside one coat, as it were, and put on (*enduō*) another. The one we discard is our "old self," with its "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language" (v. 8), and what we "put on" (RSV) is our "new nature" (vv. 9-10; cf. Eph. 4:24), with its "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (v. 12). What Paul is really saying is that we are to imitate Christ. The Colossians are told to forgive each other "just as the Lord has forgiven you."

Next Paul tells us to put on the inside of us, namely, the "peace of Christ," which is to "rule in your hearts" (v. 15), and the "word of Christ," which is to "dwell in you richly" (v. 16). This peace in turn expresses itself outwardly through what we teach others and through the singing of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." (**John W. Coakley**)

There are functional purposes for being clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bearing with one another, forgiving each other, binding us to each other—such work is not for the faint of heart. This is not conflict-avoidance advice. Forget putting on a happy face and accentuating the positive. This is about what to do when bare-knuckled emotional brawls break out.

Have you gotten into an argument with a family member or close friend? It seems that one word leads to another and another and before you know it you are angry and saying things you didn't mean to say. According to Paul you just need to forgive one another! Just say I'm sorry. Once my husband and I were going to purchase something that we needed, but as I remember he didn't want to spend the money. As we went he kept coming up with excuses of what was going to be wrong. After exchanging some words I felt insulted and asked for an apology when he didn't think he needed to give. Then from the back seat one of my sons said: "Dad, please apologize or we will be here forever!" We do not always need to attempt to resolve the differences. What I know is that a simple apology can drain the poison from a conflict and make peace. We too often think words of apology are a sign of weakness, but in reality they are signs of great spiritual strength!

We live in a culture that says it faintly praises kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, but these qualities are not what are taught. What is taught is being "tough" and "strong" and these are coveted reputations among our electoral candidates and civic leaders, and even in the church.

One of the main ways to keep Christmas all year long is to understand Christian discipleship training in "conflict transformation" theory and practice. The key points are:

1. Conflict is going to happen in our personal and public lives. The issue is what we do when it erupts.
2. Fear is the quality that makes conflict so explosive. Scripture has a lot to say about the struggle between faithfulness and fearfulness.
3. You do not have to be a saint or a rocket scientist to develop the skills to handle conflict. Everyone can learn to see when conflict is happening and develop habits make a calming response.
4. The traditional responses to conflict are fight or flight; but there is a third option, which Jesus taught and Paul reinforced.
5. Conflict is an opportunity to deepen relationships. Think of your nearest, dearest relationships. Chances are good that you have gone through some tough times together and come out stronger when you hung in there together.
6. Practicing nonviolence within the family of faith is the best training ground for the work of peace-making in our community and world. Dealing with conflict is part of our spiritual formation.

Practicing nonviolence is, in fact, another way of talking about forbearance and forgiveness. But let me warn you that the practice of forgiveness is neither simple nor easy. Our ability to forgive others is reflective of our lived experience of being forgiven by God. (**Kenneth L. Sehested**)

To keep the spirit of Christmas is to be "raised with Christ" (3:1-2). When we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior "[we] put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (v. 10; RSV).

First we are to being with compassion—a deep inward feeling of care toward another. Compassion will lead to kindness, lowliness, meekness, patience, and forbearance/forgiveness, all of which promote a stable and

peaceful community. And "*whatever* you do, *in word or deed*, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, *giving thanks*." (**Rollin A. Ramsaran**)

To keep Christmas all year long means we strip off the old self and put on the new. It is the contrast between what is old and what is new, what is dead and what is alive, what is on earth and what is above. It reminds us of our baptism, where the candidate strips off the old clothes before entering the baptismal waters, emerges, and is clothed anew. This newness also redefines who we are. In our renewal "there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all." (**David L. Bartlett**)

To keep Christmas, we are to put God first in our lives. We are to dress ourselves in love and compassion for each other, which makes for Christ's peace. And we are to worship with thankfulness which is both the gift of God to the church in Jesus Christ and the response that the church brings to God.

I encourage you to make Psalm 148 your song for praise for 2013:

- <sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!
- <sup>2</sup> Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!
- <sup>3</sup> Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!
- <sup>4</sup> Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!
- <sup>5</sup> Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created.
- <sup>6</sup> He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.
- <sup>7</sup> Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,
- <sup>8</sup> fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!

<sup>9</sup> Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

<sup>10</sup> Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

<sup>11</sup> Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

<sup>12</sup> Young men and women alike, old and young together!

<sup>13</sup> Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.

<sup>14</sup> He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD!

God bless and keep you as we enter this new year of compassion, kindness, humility, love, peace-making and praise. Do all in thankfulness as unto God.

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