

LIFE IN THE COLONY  
1 Peter 4:8-10

It was December, just over two months ago. It started out as a typical Sunday worship service at New Salem Missionary Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. The Wednesday before at a Bible study two women, Beverly Milam and Terry Bell, had a disagreement that became very verbal. During the service that Sunday morning when the choir finished singing Bell along with other choir members left the choir loft, but as she did so she was confronted by Milam. Bell says she told Milam that she was not going to get involved in something during church. Bell's daughter, Charra Lumpkin, intervened. At that point the two women's accounts of what happened diverge. Bell claims that Milam hit her daughter. Milam claims that a friend of Bell's struck her in the face with an umbrella. Milam says someone grabbed her by the hair and threw her to the ground. Family members of both women jumped in and a full on brawl ensued. Police and paramedics had to be called to break it up and to treat the injured. Charges were later filed.

Welcome to life in the body of Christ. Does this sound like the behavior of people who claim to believe in and follow the Person who said, "**Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also**" (Matthew 5:39)? Obviously brawls in a worship service are not the norm. But the kind of dissension that led to the brawl is common. It is so common that it could easily cause us to think that whatever is going on in the church, it has nothing to do with the Spirit of Jesus, and if that's so, why bother with it?

Early on in life I felt church was something to be endured. I thought very little about it. I only knew I didn't enjoy it. Then came a period of great growth and enthusiasm in my Christian life, but almost all of the impetus for that growth came through parachurch organizations. It was while I was in seminary that I began to discover the beauty and power of what God intended the church to be. I found that it has incredible potential to be a game changer in the lives of people. God intends for the church to play a significant part in changing the lives of people. The church is to be a life affirming, life giving change agent. How will that happen?

**PREMISE: THE CHURCH IS TO BE A COLONY OF HEAVEN**

Consider for a moment Philippians 3:20. In that verse Paul contrasted followers of Jesus with people who have their frame of reference and their loyalty rooted in this

world. He wrote of Christians, “**But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.**”

Philippi was a Roman colony, and that was a big deal to them. It was viewed as a bit of Rome planted in Macedonia. In his commentary on Philippians Gerald Hawthorne wrote of the people of Philippi, “They were a people proud of their city, proud of their ties with Rome, proud to observe Roman customs and obey Roman laws, proud to be Roman citizens. *Philippi was a reproduction of Rome.*”

Paul makes a profound statement that both excites me and depresses me. It is that our citizenship is in heaven. The Greek word he used was *politeuma*, from which we get our word “politics.” It meant “the state...to which we as citizens belong.” In other words Paul was saying “it’s great that you’re a Roman colony and that you live as though your city actually was Rome, but you Christians now have a higher calling. You are a colony of heaven. You should observe the customs of heaven and obey the laws of heaven.”

Have you ever noticed the names of some places back east? There’s New York, New Jersey, New Hampshire. What do they have in common? York, Jersey, and Hampshire were all places in England. The people who came here thought of establishing those same places here in the New World. Those from York wanted to live in New York. Same with Jersey. They saw themselves as Englishmen, living as part of England with English laws and culture. Their colony was England transplanted to a new place. The church should be called New Heaven because it is supposed to be a bit of heaven transplanted here into this world.

I said this both excites and depresses me. It depresses me because we all know that the church doesn’t much resemble heaven. After years of ministry in the church to my chagrin and sadness I could tell you many stories of often petty interpersonal conflicts that are rampant in the church. Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale is a great church that was pastored for many years by James Kennedy. When he retired he was replaced by another godly man named Tullian Tchividjian. Within months a group within the church started clamoring for removal of the new pastor. Among other things they were upset because he didn’t wear a robe on Sundays like Kennedy had and he didn’t preach politics. Listen to how life was for this good man. He recalls, “It was tremendously uncomfortable coming to worship every Sunday morning during that time not knowing who liked you and who hated you. There were people in the choir who, when I would stand up to preach, would get up and walk out. People would grab me in the hallway between services and

say ‘You’re ruining this church and I’m going to do everything I can to stop you.’ I would go out to my car and it would be keyed. Some people would stop at nothing to intimidate.” Does that sound like heaven to you?

Author Donald Miller related his dismay when he was informed by a friend who worked in the technical department of a megachurch that telecasts their services that the ushers were instructed to seat good looking people in the front rows where they would be seen on camera. Is that how they do it in heaven?

Yes, often the church fails dismally to be an outpost of heaven. Way too often it is like every other human institution, rife with pride, pettiness, hurt feelings, jealousy, hypocrisy, competition and broken relationships. That’s why we hear people say they just don’t want to get too involved in a church because they don’t want to know about all the politics going on there. Can you imagine someone saying they don’t want to get too involved in heaven?

Despite all that, maybe because I’m an eternal optimist, I find myself still excited by the call of being a colony of heaven. I still want this church to be the exception to the rule. I want us to be captivated by that vision. Though we will never be perfect and we know that we will fail, maybe nonetheless on the whole we’ll be so excited by the possibility of actually giving people a little taste of heaven that it will revolutionize how we live, how we relate to each other and how we do things. God’s desire, and the vision that keeps calling to me, is that everyone who comes here would say, “there’s something different here.” Maybe they won’t understand it, but it will haunt them, draw them, for here they find something their hearts have always longed to experience. We humans were created for heaven. It continually draws us. We find ourselves always a little dissatisfied on this earth no matter how wonderful our circumstances may be, because we long for heaven. The church, this church, is to be the place where everyone who comes would get a brief and imperfect but very real taste of that thing they long for.

Ephesians 3:10 says “**His (God’s) intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.**” Talk about making a difference. Paul says not only is the church to make a difference in the lives of people in this age, but that it is to have a cosmic impact. Do you remember the opening chapter of Job? Beings in the spiritual realm were in God’s presence and Satan showed up. God says, “Hey you devil, what do you think of my guy Job?” Ephesians 3:10 says God is now doing that with the church.

The idea here is that those beings would look at this world, they would observe the human race and would say, “What a mess! The Ruler ought to just wipe that thing clean. It’s beyond hope. Look at how savage, how petty, how cruel, how self-obsessed and puffed up those people are.” Then God would say, “But have you looked at my church?” They would then look at his church, shake their heads and say, “Got to give you credit, Lord. You know what you’re doing!”

This world is about power, image, money, self-gratification, competition, winning. That’s the world’s way. But this church is to be a colony of a different world. This place is where we don’t value what the world values. Here it’s not about being the smartest, the strongest, the most beautiful, the richest, the thinnest. It’s not about competing with each other, but about serving each other. Here people are to experience being loved unconditionally and to see what God’s grace looks like when it pervades humans and all their relationships. Here there is to be peace and unity. Not pretend peace that masquerades seething resentment boiling away under the surface, but the real thing. Here there is to be true forgiveness and grace.

There’s a line in the movie *A Beautiful Mind* line that describes how I think about the church. The movie is about John Nash, the brilliant Nobel Prize mathematician who battled schizophrenia. In this scene when it seemed impossible for him to win that battle and that all that his wife could do was to leave him for her own safety, she refused to do so. Instead she looked him in the eye, put her hand on his cheek and said, “I need to believe that something extraordinary is possible.” It’s easy to look at the church and think it’s hopeless. What is needed is for us not to quit but to look at the church, which is not an organization, not a club, but a community of broken and flawed people, and say, “I need to believe something extraordinary is possible.” Okay, fine, but how are we going to do this extraordinary thing?

***According to 1 Peter 4:8-10 in order to accomplish the vision we must:***  
**LOVE EACH OTHER**

Above all, literally before everything else, we must love each other. Here is the first priority when it comes to being this colony of heaven. It is no surprise. We are to love each other.

Notice that Peter says not just love each other, but do so “deeply.” The literal translation of the word is to be “stretched out.” Years ago I used to play hockey with some guys from our church. I have to tell you that hockey is one of the most fun games to play, but also one of the most exhausting. When it is played right you

are pretty much going at 100% of maximum every moment you are in the game. We all know that humans can only go that hard in relatively short bursts, so hockey typically involves frequent line changes (substitutions). I recall a few games in which we only had two extra guys. That was bad news. Those nights hockey wasn't fun, it was torture. I have vivid memories of coming out of the game in total exhaustion and dropping down on the bench only to have a teammate show up saying he needed a substitute. I heaved myself off the bench and skated back onto the rink, but I knew I wouldn't be of any use to the team because my legs were so tired they were shaking. I could barely stand up, much less skate hard. My resources were being stretched to the maximum. That's the picture I want you to have in your mind when you think of loving "stretched out." Have you ever been so physically exhausted that your legs shook and felt like they were going to collapse, and one more step seemed like too much to accomplish? We are to love one another to that extent!

This description implies a couple of things that we don't always associate with love. One is a decision of the will, the other is effort. Peter calls on us to make a deliberate and purposeful decision to love others and then to expend energy and resources to the breaking point in our effort to do so. We typically think of love in the sense of having affection for someone. We have an affinity and it produces good feelings and we call that love. We often think of it as an emotion. The way Peter is using the term here is very different. It is about choosing to love and about working hard to carry out that choice.

We all know that we humans can be somewhat difficult to deal with. John Ortberg wrote a book entitled *Everybody's Normal Til You Get To Know Them*. We know that's true. When you get close to people you find that they can be difficult at times. True of all of us. That's the human race in all its glory. That means for us to love each other so that we can get past those typical human conflicts requires serious commitment of the will and a tremendous amount of effort.

It will only be possible if we choose to love each other. This is not new, but it is radical. It calls us to radical love. It calls us to love the way God loves. In John 13:34 Jesus said, "**A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.**" So the model for our love is Jesus. We are to love each other the way he loves us. What will that mean for us? Here are two aspects of that love.

We will choose to love unlovely people. Jesus' love was not provoked by a bunch of really attractive and irresistible people. Think about this: the night before he died his closest friends, the ones he had taught were to serve each other, were arguing over which one of them was the greatest. Then when the pressure was really on, when he was going to face horror beyond our understanding, they all bailed out on him. And he knew they were going to do it. He even told them they were going to do it. But he loved them anyway.

Laurie asked me recently about the most difficult people I've ever known. I told her about a guy I knew in college. His name was Bob. He showed up my junior year. He transferred in that year and of all things he was from my home town of Bakersfield. He may well have been the most contrary person I have ever met. He was proud and arrogant and took it upon himself to prove that he knew better than you no matter what the subject. I observed that in every encounter he had with everyone it would usually require 5 minutes or less for him to have them irritated at him. The result, of course, was that people just avoided him. They'd go out of their way in order to not have to talk with him. All except one group of people. The Christians knew they were called to be that outpost of heaven, which meant they had to extend grace and try to love the guy because that's what would happen in heaven. Honestly it required a large dose of determination and teeth gritting. We'd have a Bible study and Bob would decide to join in, which meant there was not going to be any rich fellowship and edification. There was going to be a serious effort to not tell the guy to just get lost. The ministry we had started had a weekend retreat. Bob decided he wanted to come. Oh joy. He came because he had found a place that was different. It was the only place he encountered that difference in his whole life. It has been decades since I've seen Bob. But I have never forgotten the Sunday we came back from that retreat. You don't get much sleep at retreats, so I was tired. I was in my dorm room alone contemplating the unattractive prospect of hitting the books and trying to catch up on a weekend's worth of studying that I had not done while at the retreat when there was a knock at my door. I opened it, and in walked Bob. I didn't want to have to deal with Bob, but I had a good excuse because I had lots of work to do. Suddenly studying looked a lot more appealing. I was about to say, "Hey, Bob, I'm sorry but I've got a ton of work to do. I don't really have time to visit right now," when he said, "Hey, Rick, guess what I did this weekend." I said, "I don't have to guess. I know what you did. You went to the retreat. I was there, remember?" He said, "But you don't know what I did at the retreat." "Okay, what did you do?" "I received Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord." That was the only time in my life that I've heard someone say that and I wasn't excited. Oh, that's just terrific! Bob's now a brother in Christ. I'm going to

spend eternity with him. Now there's something to look forward to. Bob encountered people choosing to love him and doing it even though it was difficult. He wasn't loved because it was easy to love him.

That is how we are to love one another. The truth is that we have a church full of quirky, imperfect people. I know for a fact if you are going to be unified with me you are going to need boat loads of patience, grace, and unconditional love. I don't mean to, but I know I can frustrate and irritate some people. To have fellowship with me means you will have to accept me despite some pretty obvious flaws. Wouldn't it be amazing if we could come here and know that we will be valued, accepted and loved just as we are?

A second thing about the way Jesus loved is that he acted. He took initiative to take care of us. When we didn't deserve it without even being asked he came into this world and did the unimaginable. No one other than God himself had been thinking of him taking the punishment for our sin upon himself. Yet he dreamed up that plan and carried it out without hesitation.

Love is way more than having positive thoughts about a person. It involves actively seeking that person's good. In James Hirsch's biography of the baseball great Willie Mays he tells a story that to me was a very surprising example of what this means. In 1950 Mays was signed to a contract by the then New York Giants before they moved and became the San Francisco Giants. He was assigned to a minor league team in Trenton, New Jersey. He would be the first African American not only to play on that team, but in the entire league. He went to join the team as soon as he graduated from high school in June of that year. He met the team in Hagerstown, Maryland where it was playing a road game. Unfortunately, this was the only town in their league that was south of the Mason-Dixon Line, a town that was still segregated. The team stayed in the Alexander Hotel, but African Americans were not allowed there, so Willie was sent to stay by himself in the Harmon Hotel. Being all alone made the young Mays somewhat uneasy. That night around midnight he heard a knock on his window. He opened it to discover that three of his teammates whom he had only met that day, had made their way to his hotel, climbed the fire escape and wanted to come in his room. He told them he was fine and that he could handle it. But they insisted. That night the three of them slept on the floor in his room. They got up at 6 AM and snuck back to their hotel. Those three guys put themselves at risk of punishment, possibly even their careers because they saw a young teammate in need. They saw a need and they acted. That's how we will have to love each other.



## COVER UP

Ever since the Watergate scandal that brought down Richard Nixon the words “cover up” have been bad news. All you need to do say them around someone in a leadership position and they panic. No one wants to be accused of a cover up. So when we read in verse 8 that love “**covers over a multitude of sins**” we can easily get the wrong picture. We might think of being phony and covering up for someone who has done something wrong. Or maybe we think of just stuffing. Someone has done something that hurts us and we just pretend like it never happened. That’s a terribly unhealthy way of dealing with hurts and it doesn’t work.

What Peter meant by Covering over sins was choosing to forgive them. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:32 we must “**be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.**” Not long ago when we used to put up the sign at the front of the chapel we used bungee cords to keep it up. I was taking the sign down and someone said, “Look out, Laurie. Rick’s using bungee cords.” He was alluding to the time when I lost control of a bungee cord and it sprang back and violently slammed Laurie in the face, cutting her face open. Definitely one of the worst moments of my adult life. I really hurt her. And she chose to forgive. I have to tell you that even the mention of bungee cords today still bothers me. Recalling those events even briefly dredges up a surprising amount of guilt. Laurie could make life hell for me by playing on that guilt. She has never done that, not even once. Overlooking something really has to do with not caring about it. Forgiving has to do with being hurt by someone, caring about it, and *choosing* to forgive it anyway. And true forgiveness means never letting it be a factor again. It means continuing to choose to let it go, in some cases many times over. Jesus said it means forgiving it 70 times 7.

Thomas Cranmer was a leader of the Reformation in England. He became the Archbishop of Canterbury and was ultimately martyred for his faith. Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote this about him: “To do him a hurt was to beget a kindness from him. His heart was made of such fine soil that if you planted in it the seeds of hate they blossomed love.” Would you like to be described that way? I would. To do him a hurt was to beget a kindness. That’s the kind of forgiveness we are to have for each other. Imagine if someone hurt you in some way and you responded by doing kindness for them. That’s what this body, this church is to be like, because that’s what heaven is like.



## SERVE EACH OTHER

Verses 9-10 speak of a radical way of relating that we are called to. It tells us to offer hospitality to one another not in a grudging way, not grumbling, but willingly, eagerly. Then Peter says whatever gifts we have we should use them to serve others. There are two aspects to that command that we need to put into practice. One is the attitude or approach to life, the other is the action we need to take.

The attitude is that my role is to serve. I spoke about this a few weeks ago, but it shows up again here. Here is how they do things in heaven. They serve. Jesus is equal to the Father in every way, yet chooses to serve to the point of death on a cross. No one in heaven is making an effort to get more for himself or to prove that he's better than someone else, they are all trying to serve. This is very different than our world.

Jack Chambless is a professor of economics at Valencia College in Orlando. He starts off his class by asking students to write a brief essay on what the American dream looks like to them and what they want the federal government to do to help them achieve it. He said this year about 10% of the students said they wanted the government to leave them alone. But 80% of them said they want the government to pay for their tuition, give them free health care, give them a down payment on a house and when they graduate to give them a job. They also want the government to tax wealthier people to get the money for all the things they want.

There's a lot that's disturbing about that, but the most obvious thing it tells us is that human beings want to be served. At some point in all our decisions there's a large "what about me?" component. Peter says here in the colony of heaven we approach things with a totally different perspective. We approach everything asking "what about you? How can I serve you?"

We went out to a restaurant recently and I reflected on the person who brought us our food. Restaurants used to have waiters and waitresses, but now they have "servers." I suppose that's all right since the term is probably a more accurate description of their job. It occurred to me that it is weird that this person's role is to simply serve me. The job is to be focused on taking care of the needs of the patron. I don't have that sort of relationship with anyone else in life really. I remembered the last night of our honeymoon. We went to a big restaurant in Waikiki, but we got there quite early. So Laurie and I and 3 other people were the only customers in the big restaurant. They had staff to take care of the big rush to come in the

evening, but that meant there were way more staff people than customers when we were there. It was weird having them all stand around watching us, anxious to jump in and meet any need we might have. So here's the question. When you come to the church, do you think you are sitting at the table, here to be served, or are you like the "server," here to meet the needs of others? Peter calls us to serve! That attitude particularly comes into play with our "gifts." There's an interesting thing I've watched over the past few decades relating to what we typically call "spiritual gifts." People have made a big deal out of discovering your spiritual gifts. They create lists of scriptural gifts and give tests to help you determine which ones you have. I know some people like that, but I'm not a big fan of that. It seems to me the focus of that process is off. It puts the focus on me and what gifts I have.

Peter's focus is in another direction altogether. He says, "whatever gifts" you have received, use them to serve. In other words, quit worrying about yourself and what gift you have. This is just my experience, so it really is only my opinion, not Scripture, but my experience has been if you just seek to serve other people you will naturally be moved into areas where you are gifted. That's because when you try to serve people in a way that you aren't gifted to do, somehow they're not typically ministered to.

As an example, in my younger days since I loved music I decided to learn how to play an instrument. I taught myself how to play the guitar. I worked at getting better. I worked on musical skills and got to the place where I could actually lead worship both playing and singing. The problem was, I wasn't really gifted musically. So people weren't really ministered to when I played that role. I was better than nothing, but not a lot better than nothing. Eventually that faded away in my life mostly because when I focused on actually doing what blessed and served others music didn't make the cut.

Every single one of us and whatever we can bring to minister to others is needed is this is to be a colony of heaven. We need people to organize events, make people feel welcome, teach, lead worship, serve by working with our finances, meet the practical and spiritual needs of people in every conceivable way. I love the example of a football team. To be really good a football team needs some players who are big, strong, and nearly immovable as defensive tackles. It needs some guys who are big, strong and explosively quick as defensive ends who can put pressure on the quarterback. It needs linebackers who can tackle and lightning quick defensive backs who can defend the other teams fast receivers. It needs offensive linemen, big, unselfish men who will spend the whole game blocking

people. It needs a running back with speed and power to carry the ball. It needs wide receivers with good hands and blazing speed. It needs a quarterback with a cannon arm, leadership ability, a phenomenal understanding of the game, toughness to take hits and implacable calm under pressure.

How would you do if you tried to field a football team with all 300 pound offensive lineman type guys? Or how would it work out if you went the other extreme and had all quarterbacks? You'd get killed. Or how would it be if you fielded a team where only 2 of the 11 on the field actually played and the other 9 stood around and watched. To be a colony of heaven requires each one of us playing our role, and doing so not to prove anything, not to feel good about ourselves, not to be appreciated or to get something, but simply to serve.

Heather King is a recovering alcoholic who has come to faith in Christ. She is also a writer and commentator on National Public Radio. Recently she reflected on her experience coming into the church. She said, "My first impulse was to think 'My God, I don't want to...worship with THESE nutcases. Nothing shatters our egos like worshipping with people we did not hand pick...The humiliation of discovering that we are thrown in with extremely unpromising people! People who are broken, misguided, wishy-washy, out for themselves. People who are...us.

But we don't come to church to be with people who are like us in the way we want them to be. We come because we have staked our souls on the fact that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and the church is the best place, the only place, to be while we all struggle to figure out what that means. We come because we'd be hard pressed to say which is the bigger of the two scandals of God: that he loves us, or that he loves everyone else."

When I was a kid I used to build models of ships and planes. The kits I bought always came with instructions, but they also always had a picture of the aircraft or ship on the box so you could see what it was supposed to look like. Mine never looked quite like they were supposed to. But it helped me to know what I was aiming at. We have been given instructions for having a colony of heaven. But keep the picture in front of you. Keep the vision ever there. This is what we are aiming at, that everyone who comes here would get a taste of what life is like in heaven!