

CHANGING THE OIL MATTERS

Colossians 3:13-14

Last year in June the LA Times had an article that reported on an unusual incident involving a judge in Florida named John Murphy. During a trial he got into a disagreement with a public defender named Andrew Weinstock. At one point the judge said to the attorney "If I had a rock I would throw it at you right now." Weinstock didn't take that well and so Murphy said, "If you want to fight let's go out back." They went to a hallway behind the bench and got into a fist fight that had to be broken up by two deputies.

That's bad but in the book *God In Slow Motion* Mike Nappa reported something even worse. A number of years ago an operation was underway at the Medical Center of Central Massachusetts in Worcester, Massachusetts. Dr. Mohan Korgaonkar was operating on an elderly woman assisted by an anesthesiologist named Dr. Kwok Wei Chan. No one seemed to know what started the problem but somehow the two doctors became unhappy with each other. At one point Chan muttered a profanity at the surgeon who responded by firing a cotton swab back at him. Chan retaliated with a shove, they began shouting at each other, then they got into an all-out wrestling, punching, name calling brawl in the operating room as the patient peacefully slept through the whole thing. They fought until they got tired, then they finished the operation.

People have difficulty getting along. Do I need to mention the church in Colorado that blew up, including harassing phone calls in the night and fights over whether the word should be pronounced Alleluia or Hallelujah? We all are familiar with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The tale can be traced back to Thomas Mallory in the 15th century, but elements of it can be found as far back as the 12th century. Arthur was given the round table as part of Guinevere's dowry when he married her. It was so large 150 knights could sit at it. It was round so all would be seen and treated as equal. To Arthur it represented "a perfect world, where love and goodness would spread throughout every vein of life in Britain." It was a beautiful dream, one of equality, commitment to nobility, truth and to God himself.

Sadly the legend tells us the dream did not last. Human nature exerted itself. Jealousy reared its head, factions and power struggles came along, unfaithfulness caused broken relationships and it all ended in civil war. The dream died forever. Why tell such a tale? It is a depiction of one of the tragedies of the human condition. We have the dream of living in peace and harmony. Throughout history

there have been many attempts to create places where humans can live in total unity. But the tale asserts that it won't last. It might start out beautifully, but it won't be long before human nature has its way. In the end the dream will always be crushed by selfishness, division, jealousy, envy, power struggles, conflict and even violence at times.

This somber reality presents us with a dilemma when we consider Paul's message in Colossians 3. In verses 10-11 he claimed that believers in Jesus are "chosen, holy and beloved" and that in this body of believers there are no divisions. There are no Jews, Gentiles, barbarians, slaves, free, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, rich poor, white collar, blue collar. There are only God's children. In other words, this is the place where the dream of unity is alive. In Ephesians 4:4-6 Paul wrote, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." Jesus' prayer in John 17 was that we would be one as he and his Father in heaven were one.

Nice dream. But the legend of King Arthur asserts that it can only happen if the church is made up of something other than human beings. Paul knew that as well as you and I do. He didn't even require the legend of Arthur to know that. So he gave us some instructions on how we are to relate to one another in the body of Christ so that we can keep that oneness that Jesus prayed about. In Ephesians 4:3 Paul said we should "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit." In this part of Colossians he tells us what effort is required. We saw last week that it takes compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. This week in verses 13-14 he will tell us about three other crucial components to unity. Here is what we must do to keep the unity of the Spirit of Jesus.

WE NEED TO BE BEARERS

We are to "bear with" each other. The Greek word Paul used there meant to put up with or "endure" each other. It is the same word he used in 1 Corinthians 4:12 when he wrote, "We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it." So part of keeping unity is enduring each other the way we would endure some hardship.

One thing I love about the Bible is its hard-nosed realism. It definitely does not have a starry-eyed view of what life in the church is going to be like. It never suggests that since we all have this new life in Christ we are all going to be instantly changed into adorable, cuddly creatures. It is not going to be the church of the Care Bears. It is going to be a community of flawed human beings who are

in the process of being renewed and restored to the image of God. Emphasis on process. Because the process is not complete there are going to be some rough edges on us that chafe each other. There are going to be some inexplicable and potentially annoying quirks to deal with. In other words, there are going to be some things about people in the body of Christ that you will just have to endure.

This should not surprise us because that principle comes into play at the most basic level of human relationships. If two people wish to have a successful marriage they will have to put up with each other. They will have to endure some of the rough edges they will encounter. I feel sorry for Laurie because she has to deal with a lot of that. I will give you a glimpse of some of what she must put up with. Her husband snores in his sleep. At times we're talking chain saw loud from what I'm told. I believe it because there have been times when I woke myself up with my snoring. She has to put up with that.

That's hard, but it's unintentional, something I don't control. Let's talk about things I do control. There's the addiction to watching sports on television, especially football. Erma Bombeck said that any person who watches 3 football games in one day should be declared legally dead. Well, I confess, I've died on numerous occasions. Laurie doesn't hate sports, but she has the right to feel like this is just out of control. She insists sports are soap operas for men, a comment I find personally offensive.

And then there's the uselessness around the home. We are currently in one of those seasons where our house bears a resemblance to the Bermuda Triangle. Or something. We've had a faucet break. Our Blu Ray player has quit producing audio. One of the burners on our stove is not working. Our microwave died yesterday. Laurie's hair dryer died the day before. We have some other faucets leaking. And I can't fix any of it. I could also mention my eating disorder. I seem to have difficulty getting food in my mouth. Some portion of it frequently ends up on the front of my shirt. You can usually tell after a meal where I sat at the table because you just look where the biggest mess is.

Paul says we must "bear with each other." In other words, it is a two way street. I don't want to give a false impression of our marriage. I also have to put up with some quirks that my wife has. For instance, she also has her sleeping issue. She seems to feel she needs to sleep diagonally on the bed. This left me with few good options. We finally got a king bed and that has helped, but that was interesting for a number of years.

She knows what's going to happen on television shows before it happens. We were watching a show on television last week when they had a character who has appeared a couple of times on the show. At one point Laurie said, "That guy is going to die." I said, "No he's not. They have him as a character who appears periodically. They won't kill him off." Ten minutes later he died. This happens *all the time*. She's always right. It's so bad that sometimes she'll say, "What do you think is going to happen?" and I'll answer, "You're the one who writes all these shows and always know how they're going to go. You tell me." So if she's always right, guess what that means for me. I'm always wrong. This can be annoying.

You get the point. Even with two people there are myriad opportunities for us to be irritated, annoyed, impatient or even unkind toward each other. In the body of Christ the opportunities are limitless. People are going to be too talkative, too opinionated, too quiet, insensitive, unreliable, just weird in all manner of ways. We need to bear with each other in all these things. Yes, but they can be so annoying. How am I supposed to just put up with that? Here are two ideas that help me.

How would you feel if someone criticized one of your children? Most of us do not take very kindly to that. Remember that those flawed people you can be annoyed by are God's children. He delights in them more than I delight in mine. So how do you suppose he likes it when you are critical of them because of their annoying habits or personalities? I'm guessing he's none too happy about it. So see them as people in whom God delights.

A second thing we can do is live by the Laurie Law. That's what I call it because it is one of my wife's favorite verses in the Bible and one of her favorite themes in life. Philippians 4:8 says, "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things." Laurie lives by that. She looks for what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable in her husband and chooses, let me say that again, she *chooses* to think about that. She chooses to think of the fact that her husband loves her passionately, that he was a good dad, that he loves Jesus, that he has godly character. In fact, if you listened to her you would think she is married to the perfect man. That's because of what she chooses to focus on.

When people get together and talk, where does the talk usually go? It is negative, critical of the government, critical of the boss, critical of the Chargers coach, critical of Pete Carroll's play calling in the Super Bowl. The negative is powerful and colors everything. Sadly once we hear something negative about someone we

can't ever unhear it, it colors how we see the person. So live by the Laurie Law and choose to focus on what is good, right, admirable in everyone.

In fact in Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 in verse 7 he said, "It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." It protects the reputation of others, it hopes for the best. It is choosing to see the good, not the annoying.

WE NEED TO BE GRACERS

Unfortunately we are not just annoying or insensitive. At times we do things that are just unkind or uncaring or hurtful. We may not intend them to be, but that doesn't mean they don't have that effect. How do we deal with it when we are hurt by others in the body of Christ? This is a crucial question because you are going to be hurt. One of the fundamental Reformed doctrines is called Total Depravity. It doesn't mean that we are as bad as we can be, but that we are fallen and that the fallenness has touched and warped every single part of us. Mind, body and spirit are all affected. That fallenness can taint anything and everything we do. Whether you are Reformed in your theology or not, you know that you are fallen, and so is every person on the planet. In other words, you're depraved and everyone you know is depraved. There is no point in looking for non-depraved people because you won't find them. Given that we're all in that boat that means that someone will lie to you, someone you trust will gossip about you, someone will take advantage of you, someone will not be sensitive to you, someone you love will say something in anger to you that will hurt you so deeply it feels like the wound will never heal. How do we handle this?

The typical human reaction is to nurse that hurt. It is to view the one who inflicted the hurt as evil, as the enemy. We feel justified because after all, we were the victim. We harbor the bitterness and we might even fantasize about how we can inflict equal pain on the perpetrator. We want to get revenge. In his best-selling book *The Telling Room* Michael Paterniti tells the true story of visiting his father's ancestral village in Sicily. While he was there he noticed an elderly woman whom he saw every day. She walked up a hill with her cane, struggling at a torturously slow pace up the steep road that led to the local cemetery. At her snail's pace the round trip took 6 hours, but she went every single day. He marveled and assumed that she must be driven by some undying devotion and sorrow for a deceased loved one, perhaps a husband or child. It turned out he was wrong. The locals told him she made the trip every day so she could go to the grave of her former archrival so she could spit on her grave one more time.

When we harbor resentment, when we nurse the grudge, when we hold onto the hurt, when we long for revenge we destroy relationships, obliterate unity and perhaps saddest of all, we do severe damage to our own souls. We foul our relationship with God. That bitterness is like an acid that eats away at our ability to be at peace, our ability to experience joy, and our ability to love others.

God has a better way. Verse 13 tells us to “forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.” Whatever grievance you have against anyone, forgive it. Paul says forgive it the way God has forgiven you. Do you hear what he is saying? ***Forgive everything!***

There’s something that doesn’t show up in the English translations of this verse that I think is significant. The Greek language had a very good word that meant “to forgive.” The root meaning of it was “to send away,” so it meant to send the offense away, to refuse to hold onto it. Jesus used that word in Matthew 6:14 when he said, “If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” Paul didn’t use that word in Colossians 3:13. He could have and it would have worked just fine. Instead he used the Greek verb *charizomai*. The root of it was the word *charis*, which meant grace. So the verb form meant literally meant to grace one another just as God graced us.

So how has God graced us? Romans 5:8 says, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” When we were uninterested, undeserving God pursued us. He acted at great cost to himself to bring us forgiveness. We have seen in 2:14 that he “canceled out the charge of legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned it; he has taken it away, having nailed it to the cross.” Psalm 103:12 says, “as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.” They are gone, utterly obliterated, never to be mentioned again.

Yes, it is forgiveness, but it is more than that. God continues to pour out his grace on us after we’ve been forgiven. He continues to forgive even when we fail in the same manner repeatedly. And even as we are failing he continues to shower us with good. He gives us his presence, his Spirit to be with us, he hears our prayers, he encourages us and strengthens us, he blesses us with good in this world, he gives us hope, he gives us peace and joy.

When we are commanded, let me say that again, commanded, to grace one another, we are being told to shower those against whom we might have a grievance with

forgiveness and with good, to move toward them as God has moved toward us and continually showers us with good.

Years ago I tried to help a guy in our church who had gotten into a dispute with a brother in Christ. I appealed to both of them and worked through how they should deal with each other. They both rejected everything I said and chose to go nuclear instead. After they had scorched the earth I learned that this guy had gone to another church and was publically bad mouthing me. That really irked me. He and his colleague created the problem, made it worse, asked for me to help, then rejected what I said and now he was blaming me for his troubles. I began reviewing my options for how to deal with him and came up with some juicy ones. Guess which one God said I should choose. Grace him. Forgive him. Don't get even, don't argue with him, don't trash him, don't harbor anger against him, grace him. It didn't feel nearly as satisfying as I was sure some of the other options would be, but today I can assure you it was by far the best. I did nothing that I regret or am ashamed of today, and my heart and conscience are clear. And I have no bitterness toward him today.

Lou Holtz, former football coach and now commentator on ESPN, tells a powerful story. He was the head coach at the University of Arkansas. In his 7 years there his teams had a sterling 60-21-2 record. But after a 6-5 record in 1983 he was fired. He was blindsided by it and was incensed. He determined that at his press conference the next day he would unload and rip Frank Broyles, the AD who fired him. His wife asked him to not do that, but to be gracious. He wanted to make Broyles pay, but to his credit heeded his wife's advice. He said all the right things. Soon he was offered a new position as head coach at Minnesota. He had two successful years there and then was contacted by Notre Dame. His dream job was to coach at Notre Dame. In fact, his contract at Minnesota had a Notre Dame clause in it stipulating that he would be let out of his contract if Notre Dame offered him a job. Sure enough he was offered the job and accepted it. He asked the AD at Notre Dame how they happened to contact him in the first place. He was told they had called several people for recommendations. One of them was Frank Broyles at Arkansas. Frank had recommended him and told them firing him had been a big mistake.

There are a few important things we need to know about forgiving and gracing people. Forgiving is not forgetting. The truth is that we can't forget. There is no way to undo the past. We will remember, but we can still choose not to let that memory control us. Forgiving is not excusing. It is not saying what the other person did was understandable or reasonable or okay. It is simply choosing to let go of it. Forgiving is not a feeling. If we've been hurt by someone we can easily

feel like we're not forgiving when we continue to feel the sting of the wound. But forgiveness is a choice and action, not a feeling. So it is possible to still be hurt by what was done, but choose to not let that hurt determine how we relate to the person.

Forgiving is not necessarily reconciliation. God offers forgiveness to every human. He purchased it for us at the cross. But if any of us chooses to ignore or reject God's offer we do not experience that forgiveness. We are not reconciled to God. Similarly, we may offer forgiveness to another person, but if that person never acknowledges his or her need for it, thus not repenting of the wrong, then there will be no reconciliation.

What then is forgiveness? It is a decision and a process. Forgiveness is a choice of the will, a commitment. It is a decision to not hold onto the hurt, to not pursue vengeance, but to leave it to God and to give grace to the offending party. That is a choice we must make.

William Sangster, a great Christian leader in the first half of the 20th century, at one point was addressing Christmas cards. A friend who was visiting looked through the cards and was surprised to see one addressed to a man who had viciously and publicly verbally attacked Sangster. The friend said to him, "You're not sending him a card are you? Don't you remember what he did at that meeting?" Sangster said, "Yes, but I've remembered to forget."

But secondly forgiveness is a process. It would be nice if we could just decide once to let go, to not hold on to hurt, to forgive and grace someone who has done us real harm. But unfortunately we do remember, and we do feel the sting of the wound. When that happens we can easily let the bitterness and resentment take root once again. In other words, forgiveness happens many times. We choose to grace a person, then we choose again, and again and again.

We have to remember that forgiveness is never cheap. In fact, it is costly. Imagine that you have borrowed some money, and then the person you borrowed it from said, "I choose to forgive your debt." That forgiveness is free to you, but the person has to bear the cost of it. When Toby was little one day he was practicing his slapshot out in the street. He hit one way better than he ever had. It sailed across the street, across our neighbor's yard and hit the front window on their house, breaking it. I told Toby he was going to have to pay me back for the cost of repairing that window. But quickly I forgave him, but I still was responsible for the cost. God forgives us and his forgiveness costs us nothing. It cost God the price of

the cross. When we forgive it will cost us. We have to let go of our anger and our demands and that can hurt. We need to think of the pain as the price we pay for obtaining that person's forgiveness.

One thing that can help us with forgiveness is to remember that God is the judge. Romans 12:19 says, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay says the Lord.'" When we desire to make the other person hurt as we are hurt we are telling God we don't think he's up to the job. We are putting ourselves in God's place. That is a really bad idea.

WE NEED TO BE LOVERS

In verse 14 Paul ups the ante. Putting up with others and gracing them deal mostly with handling negative things, the annoyances and the hurts that others bring into our lives. Now he turns to the positive. We not just to endure people and forgive them, we are to love them. We are to actively seek their good. We all know that car manufacturers and mechanics all tell us continually that we absolutely must change the oil in our cars. They tell us we must do this with religious devotion. Why such annoying insistence on keeping fresh oil in our cars? It is because, as we all know, there are lots of moving metal parts in our engines. As those parts are functioning they are rubbing against each other and this creates friction that will cause all kinds of havoc with the parts. We need a lubricant that will reduce the friction between the parts. Well we have lots of moving parts in our homes, families, neighborhoods and the church. And these human parts create considerably more friction than the parts in our cars. We need a lubricant to reduce the friction. God has given us a couple of lubricants. One is grace, which we've already discussed. The other is love, and it is the essential lubricant. Without love your relationships will break down much faster and catastrophically than will your car's engine without oil.

Yes, of course, we all know this. It is no surprise to hear a pastor say we're supposed to love one another. Jesus said in John 13:34-35, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Jesus' disciples got the message. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:8, "above all, love each other deeply." John wrote in 1 John 4:7, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God."

What kind of love are we talking about here? Notice Jesus said in John 13:34 that he was giving a new command. That's curious, because God had commanded his people to love their neighbor in Leviticus many hundreds of years earlier. How

was that a new command? Jesus explained. We are to love as he loved. How did he love? He loved by giving up his life, by experiencing unfathomable pain and loss to bring about good for people who misunderstood him, who failed him on a consistent basis, even people who rejected and taunted him. That's how we are to love.

We saw last week that our purpose, the reason that you and I are on the planet today, the reason that we still exist, the noble calling we have is to declare the praise of God who has called us out of darkness into his light. But doing that is not just about what we say, it is also about who we are. We want people to know God is there and to know what he is like. The problem is they can't see him. In 1 John 4:12 John said, "No one has ever seen God." Right, that's the problem. How are we to let them know that he is real and that he is worthy of all our praise? John says, "If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." In other words, people can see that he is real and see the beauty of his love through our love for each other.

So we are to love as Jesus loved. Here's how we will know that we are truly depicting the glory of God: our actions and attitudes toward a person are not determined by what that person is or does, but by the love that is inside us. 1 John 4:9 says, "This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him." He gave. He sent his son when the world was rejecting him. He was not deterred by our rebellion against him.

Philip Yancey was speaking to an audience and asked them about their experience with love and grace. One woman shocked the whole group. She said, "I feel called to minister to telephone marketers...All day long these sales callers hear people curse at them and slam the phone down." Let me pause here to say I think it's terrible that people think so poorly of telemarketers. They're about the only people who call me. They call multiple times a day to check in on me and they're always so solicitous of my wellbeing. Yeah, uh, that's so not true. They drive me crazy. They truly are a blight on modern life. I'd like to get hold of whoever came up with telemarketing. If I could get my hands on that guy I'd like to...turn him over to the vengeance of God. Anyway the woman went on, "I listen attentively to their pitch then I try to respond kindly...I ask about their personal life and whether they have any concerns I can pray for. Often they ask me to pray with them over the phone and sometimes they are in tears. They're people, after all, probably underpaid, and they're surprised when someone treats them with common courtesy." Imagine if we took that approach to loving people no matter what they do.

Paul Tripp wrote this about love: “Love is the willingness to make regular and costly sacrifices for the sake of a relationship without asking for anything in return or using your sacrifices to place the other person in your debt...Love is refusing to be self-focused or demanding, but instead looking for specific ways to serve, support and encourage even when you are busy or tired.” H. Jackson Brown was correct when he said, “Love is when the other person’s happiness is more important than your own.”

Love is not essentially a feeling. It is a commitment and an action. It is the deliberate choice to seek good for another person without regard to how deserving that person is and without any desire for something in return. It shapes how we think about others, how we speak to them, how we speak about them, how we treat them, and how we serve them. If it doesn’t touch our actions and our words, it’s not love.

CONCLUSION

It is not natural to love like that. It is not native to the human heart. What is hardwired into fallen human nature is to serve self. That means how I treat others is determined by what I get out of it. They’d better deserve it if I’m going to serve them and they’d better reciprocate by giving something back. To love, to give, to serve without expectation of return, without demand is not human. It is truly superhuman.

That’s right, this passage calls on us to be superheroes, who exercise a super power, the power to love in its purest and truest form. That presents me with a problem. Would it make sense to you if God commanded me to exercise some of the super powers of Superman? Would that be fair to expect me to be more powerful than a locomotive, faster than a speeding bullet, able to leap tall buildings at a single bound? I can’t do those things. I’ll never be able to do those things. I don’t have super powers. Neither do I have the superhuman love Jesus has. So what are we to do?

Look again at 1 John 4:7. “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.” Where does love come from? It comes from God. God is the source of love. Every single atom of love that exists in this universe came from God. Every bit of love you have ever experienced can be traced right back to God. There is no such thing as an element of love, no matter how small, that did not originate from God. But that is good news. Ephesians 3:19 says God’s love “surpasses knowledge.” In other words, it goes beyond the ability of anyone to know its dimensions. You can never find the end of it. It is literally limitless. Which means

that God has an unlimited supply of love that he wants to pour into our lives, so much that we can never drain it, so that we can keep expending it without reservation and never need to ask, “what about me?” We don’t need to ask that because we are filled up with his love, all we could ever imagine and more.

A number of years ago Laurie and I were eating at a Mexican restaurant. We were sitting outside on the restaurant’s patio on a beautiful warm evening. A little bird came and boldly landed on the edge of our table. Laurie loves animals, but she seems to have a special affinity for birds. I suspect that’s why she has loved me all these years, because I’m a birdbrain. Enchanted by the little bird Laurie broke off some little bits of tortilla chip and put them on the table so the bird could eat them. It picked up a bit of chip in its beak and flew away. But very shortly it was back. It picked up what was left of the pieces Laurie had put on the table and flew away again. Very shortly it was back once again. Laurie broke off some more chip and tossed it on the table, once again the bird picked up some in its beak and took off. My first thought was that I was seeing the reason for the expression “birdbrain.” I said, “Dude, this is dumb. Why do you keep flying away? Why don’t you just stay here where there is an unlimited supply of tortilla chips instead of flying away only to come back for more?” We thought this was pretty dumb behavior. I wouldn’t eat two bites of my food at the table then walk away to chew it and swallow it, then come back to get another bite. Wait, is this some kind of weight loss regimen? The bird was quite trim. Then I had a thought. I said, “Hey, maybe this is a mommy bird and it’s taking the chips back to the nest to feed the babies.” Next time the bird showed up Laurie fed it some more tortilla chip then watched it. She said, “Hey, Rick, you’re right. It’s going to the nest and feeding babies.” Right then I had one of those spiritual insight moments. It hit me that the mommy bird could not give the babies what it did not have. Neither can I give to other people superpower love that I do not have. The only way I can do that is if God pours it into me. I have to, like that bird, keep going back to him to tap into his infinite, ever flowing eternal love.