

Colossians 3:12–14

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.

Elect, Holy, Beloved — Three Characters of the One Who Puts On

The therefore points back to verses 9 through 11: having put off the old man and put on the new man, in whom Christ is all and in all — therefore put on these things. The ground comes before the exhortation. And the ground is described in three words: the elect of God, holy and beloved. These are the same three words that attach to the Lord Jesus — He is the chosen one, the elect; He is the holy one and the true; He is the beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased. That they should appear here in reference to every believer is a measure of the grace that has been shown to us. And these are not things to be achieved but things already constituted. It is on the ground of what God has made us that we are exhorted to exhibit these things in our pathway.

Bowels of Mercies — Inward, Deep, and Springing from Within

The word bowels in Scripture refers to the inmost recesses of a person — what we might call the heart, understood as the depth of inward feeling. Bowels of mercies means that the mercies are deep-seated, not merely surface responses to

others' needs, but flowing from something genuinely held within. Philippians 2:1 uses the same expression: *if any bowels and mercies*. This is mercy that is felt, not performed. The wicked servant in Matthew 18 is the negative illustration: he had been forgiven an enormous debt, yet took his fellow servant by the throat for a trifling amount. He had no bowels of mercies — and it showed.

Seven Graces — Inward and Outward

The seven things fall into two groups. The first three — bowels of mercies, kindness, lowliness — are attitudinal: what one is within, in one's spirit toward others. Kindness is not merely acts but the kindly spirit that lies behind them; there are no genuine acts of kindness without the spirit. Lowliness is the humbleness of mind that the Lord displayed — *learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart* (Matthew 11:29). Lowliness is not taking offence. Meekness is not giving it.

The remaining four — meekness, longsuffering, forbearing, forgiving — come into their own under external provocation. Longsuffering is patient endurance of that provocation. Forbearing one another is different from forgiving: forbearance is called for where the differences between persons are not sinful in themselves but simply trying — habits, ways of doing things, natural characteristics that can exasperate without anyone being properly at fault. Forgiving is called for when there is a genuine cause of blame. These two must not be collapsed into one.

Forgiving One Another — As Christ Also Forgave

The standard for forgiveness is given explicitly: *even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye*. There is nothing higher. Christ had every cause of blame against us. God had just grounds for the accusation. And His forgiveness was a real forgiveness — not formal, not superficial, not a saying of the words while the resentment remains. His was genuine, complete, acted upon. And ours is to be

the same.

The verse does not take sides with those who say forgiveness should be given without condition — nor with those who harbour resentment against a brother who has genuinely repented. Both errors exist. The standard corrects both: the forgiveness is to be real, as His was real. When forgiveness is real, it leaves both parties on the same level — both forgiven, both objects of mercy, neither set above the other. That is the great leveller of all complaints.

Love — The Bond of Perfectness

Above all these things — love, which is the bond of perfectness. The putting on in verse 14 is shown in italics in some translations because it is not in the original — it is implied. Love is not a separate garment to be added to the others; it is what binds all seven together and makes them a whole. Perfectness means completeness — nothing missing, all held together. The seven graces taken separately could be a human effort, a programme of self-improvement. Love binds them into something of divine character — the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Without it the graces are incomplete; with it they form a perfect whole. This is the coat of many colours, each grace a colour, and love the bond that holds them all together in completeness.

— *Study ends* —