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Colossians 3:1–17: Who we are and what we're supposed to be.

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We are now three weeks into the new year! How exciting! Who made a new year's resolution?

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Who has broken their new year's resolution already? Thank you for your honesty! I'm happy to say I haven't broken a new year's resolution in years. I figure if I don't make them, I can't break them! It's been working for me so far.

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But, that's the thing, isn't it? Whether it's a new year's resolution or a promise we make to ourselves at some other time to do better, we tend to break it. One of the reasons for this might be because we have the wrong idea of who we are, and what we are supposed to be. Ideas that come from our culture rather than God's word. Ideas that are exemplified by the people around us. People who, at the very least, appear affluent, attractive and healthy. Such images are shoved in our face all the time. So, the impression we get is if we try to do better by losing some weight, kicking that habit, working harder, exercising more, eating healthier, then we can have a slice of that image we keep seeing.

As good as it may be to do better, this is a false image of who we are and what we're supposed to be. The Bible has a very different image of who we are and what we're supposed to be. It is an image that is unpacked for us in Colossians 3. Because, our generation isn't the first to be taken in by false images.

The believers at Colossae were being taken in by an image of being "spiritually enlightened". Commentators aren't exactly sure what this spiritual enlightenment was, but it appears to be a combination of Jewish and non-Jewish beliefs. The idea was to go on a spiritual ascent through several realms guarded by angels. So, you needed to appease the angels to make a successful ascent. As strange as this may sound to our modern ears, this was the structure that they used to view the world and each other.

We may not go around appeasing angels to make some spiritual ascent. But we do follow the images of our cultural standards of the self - whether it's to be successful, rich, attractive, socially acceptable, fit and healthy, or just plain happy. "So long as you're happy!" Have you ever heard someone say that?

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So, who are we as Christians? What is supposed to be our image? Our image is based on a new self. A new self which is different to the images we are often confronted by. A new self which is bound to the resurrection of Jesus (vv. 1–4). If you think that the death of Jesus is no different from any other death, you need to think again. Jesus not only died, but he rose from the dead. Because Jesus died and rose from the dead, we can know we have forgiveness for our sins, and have certain hope of eternal life. This changes everything! We are not to live like others who do not know God's forgiveness, who do not have the certainty of eternal life. Instead, we are to fix our eyes on the things above. We are to have a completely different outlook on life and how we are to exist in the world. This means taking off the old self, which tends to engage in behaviours that incur the wrath of God - sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, envy, anger, rage, malice, slander, abusive talk, and deceitful words (vv. 5–9). If your hope is in this life, such behaviour can make some sense. But if your hope is in eternal life, they don't make any sense.

Instead, we are to put on a new self - a new image that is very different to the images of our culture.

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But what does it mean to put on the new self? The English in our translation here is quite convoluted, mainly because the Greek is convoluted. We read “and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (v. 10). What’s being renewed? What is this knowledge? What is this image? It can be quite confusing. I suggest what is being renewed is our self and the knowledge is a new understanding. Therefore, the meaning here is to *reimagine our self as the image of God*.

In my studies, I’ve noticed that the word “reimagine” is sometimes used. So, the title of a paper might be “Reimagining *such and such a topic*”. What the author is indicating is they are taking an existing topic and putting it in a different framework to understand it in another way. What the believers at Collosea are being encouraged to do is to take the image of themselves out of this framework of a spiritual ascent and put it into the framework of the image of God and understand themselves accordingly. Therefore, what I’m suggesting is we need to take the image of ourselves out of our cultural frameworks and put it in the framework of the image of God. In other words, our image is not to conform to what our culture tells us. I'm going to go one step further and say that our self image is not even to conform to our Christian culture or our church culture. There are things in our Christian culture and our church culture that aren't helpful, and they need to be critiqued. Instead, we need to reimagine our self as bearing God’s image.

So, what does this mean? Well, it means that all social distinctions that are based on our cultural images are gone! “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (v. 11). Neither is there any successful or unsuccessful, rich or poor, attractive or unattractive, healthy or sick, able or disabled, black or white. If you are a Christian - if you have repented of your sins and are trusting in Jesus’ death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life - then there is only one social status available to you: in Christ. You share in the same grace as every other Christian. You share in the same baptism as every other Christian. You are held secure in the same covenant as every other Christian, never to be revoked. There is no basis for you to look up at someone else and think you need to be like them. The fact that someone can conform to cultural standards better than you is irrelevant. The fact that someone has a good full-time job, and you haven't is irrelevant. The fact that someone has a different marriage status than you is irrelevant. The fact you have a different cultural background to someone else is irrelevant. The fact that someone else has better health and fitness than you is irrelevant. The fact that someone can do more things than you is irrelevant. There is one social status for those who follow Jesus that matters - in Christ.

Well, how can this be? How can we just dismiss our cultural images so easily? This is where things become really exciting! In v. 10 Christians are described as those who have already put on the new self, which is being reimagined as the image of God. It's important to note that there’s a two-part process here. Firstly, there is a completed part of having put on the new self. All social distinctions are gone. Secondly, there is an ongoing process of reimagining of what this new self which bears the image of God looks like. So, in parallel with already having put on this new self in v. 10, there is now an imperative in v. 12 to “put on”. What I suggest then is what this image of God looks like follows in vv. 12–14.

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must

forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

What does the image of God look like? Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness (or gentleness), patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and above all, love.

What do you notice here? These have nothing to do with your situation in life. These have nothing to do with your ability. But they have everything to do with your character! Now these have far reaching implications for how you manage your situation in life and use your abilities. But your situation in life or your abilities is not what makes up the image of God. Your self image is not essentially to be affluent, attractive and healthy, or any other cultural image. Your image, as the bearer of God's image, is to be compassionate, kind, humble, meek (or gentle), patient, forbearing, forgiving, and above all loving.

When you think about it, this is who God is in his approach to us. God is compassionate in providing salvation - especially through Jesus' death and resurrection. God is kind in the abundant blessings he lavishes upon us each and every day. God is humble in wanting to restore sinners to a right relationship with him. God is gentle in holding back the full measure of his wrath for those he loves. God is patient as we steadily grow in faith, day by day, inch by inch. God forbears our wayward hearts and forgives us. And, above all. God is loving. God bears the most costly expense for our greatest gain - eternal life. This is the God of who's image we bear. This is the God that we are called to reflect in our character. This is the self image that we are to have. This is what we must be progressing towards. This is not a once-off decision like a new year's resolution. This is a thousand decisions a day to reflect God's image rather than a cultural image as we run our business, work for our employer, excel in our sport, create our art and entertainment, or however else we spend our time.

None of this is easy because all too often we are pursuing the images of our culture and what's important to us. Instead we need to be pursuing the image of God. So, what can we do to ensure we are pursuing God's image rather than a cultural image? Three quick things:

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1. We are to have the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. In other words, we are to have the utmost confidence in our Lord Jesus and his death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This is what is to be at the forefront of our minds going into the new year. Rather than pursuing a cultural image, we need to be pursuing Christ.
2. We are to have the word of Christ dwell richly in our hearts. In other words, rather than lusting after the things in the world and delighting in them, we are to have a hunger and thirst for what has been promised to us through God's word. Read about it, talk about it, and sing about it. Yes, that includes even me! We are to delight in God's word.
3. We are to give thanksgiving in all we do, whether in word or deed, in the name of Jesus. This is something that we really need to take on board. One of the issues dominating western culture at this present time is a feeling of entitlement. It is commonplace for people to feel entitled to good food, secure housing, warm clothes. They feel entitled to a job, opportunities, and self-expression. In many ways, people should have these things, and there needs to be concern when they don't. But the issue is when people feel entitled to these things. Because, when we feel entitled to something, we don't give thanks for what we receive. In our minds, we are only receiving what we deserve. Ultimately, receiving becomes more about honouring ourselves rather than God. So, we should learn to give thanks and praise to God for all things. Being thankful in everything we do and say is crucial if we are going to reflect God's image.

These three things will provide what we need for putting on the new self.

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As we move forward into the new year, let us not be taken in by our cultural images that we will most probably not obtain. Instead, let's remember who we are as people who know God's forgiveness and have certain hope of eternal life. Let's put on the new self which is a different self - the image of God which reflects who God is.