

Colossians 3:15-17 - Christ ruling and dwelling amongst us

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 July 2025

Preacher: Steve Palframan

[0 : 00] If you could grab a Bible and turn to Colossians chapter 3. I'm going to read to us from verse 15 to verse 17.

! So Colossians chapter 3. If you've got a church Bible, it's page 1184. 1184. Let me read it for us. Verse 15 of Colossians chapter 3.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you are called to peace and be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

We're going to spend a few moments looking at those verses. Let me pray and ask for the Lord's help. Let me pray. Father, we do pray and ask now that you might give us your help as we look at your word.

[1 : 18] Please, we pray, maybe where we're tired or distracted or just other things on our mind coming up this week. We pray, please, Lord, that you just might slow our hearts to focus on you and your word and to listen carefully, that we might hear you speak to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. We've gone this morning from studying the grand themes of Genesis 1 to 3 to now just zooming right in on essentially just two verses, so verses 15 and 16. And we're going to be looking in some detail at them, so do keep your eyes down on the passage.

And I want to start with essentially something that is a little geeky. I don't know whether there's anybody in the room who knows that there are two third-person imperatives in these verses.

Now, I was thinking who might know what a third-person imperative is. Marina, I thought you might know as a language teacher. But a third-person imperative doesn't exist in English, right? So it is when the instruction is being given to a third party and not directly to the person who is addressed or reading it.

So it doesn't really translate into English. So the imperatives, the doing verbs, are there in verse 15, it's the verb to rule, and there in verse 16, to dwell.

[2 : 35] Those are the action words. Those are the things going on. But it's not you or me who is ruling or dwelling. That instruction or imperative is not given directly to us but given to a third person, right?

You notice that if you look down. So the peace is to be ruling, right? The imperative is for peace to rule, and the message of Christ is to be dwelling richly in verse 16.

Now, I grant you that's a little bit of a nerdy observation, but it is important because it means that the sense of these verses is not so much about our action. We'll come to that in a moment.

Rather, it is our willingness to submit to the action of a third party, if you like. It is to permit the action of another. I don't know whether this ever happens in your home.

This is a sort of very British scenario, okay? Let me try and give you a British scenario, okay? So you imagine that a visitor comes to your home, your house, your flat, whatever it is, and your mum, your husband, your wife, your flatmate, whoever it is, offers them a cup of tea.

[3 : 41] And that person, because they're very British, says, oh, no, no, no, no. I had a drink four weeks ago. I'm well quenched. I don't need anything more to drink, thank you.

Please don't go to the hassle. I mean, what they really want to say is, yes, please, I'm desperately thirsty. Please give me a cup of tea. But they won't say that. And so you intervene and you say, no,

listen, allow my mum or my wife, my husband, my flatmate, allow them to make you a drink. Let them do it. Let them do it. And that's the sense here. The kids on Friday night are obsessed with allow it, right? They all say that all the time.

That is the sense here. It's allow it. Allow it. You know, let the peace of Christ rule. Let the word of Christ dwell richly. Now, the point here is then, is because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, right? The gospel which has been at the center of the book of Colossians, the gospel which, if you flick back to chapter one, is in the action of the person of the Son, the eternal Son of God, who is incarnate, who comes to redeem his people for himself.

[4 : 49] It's the Lord Jesus who they received as Lord in chapter two, verse six, who they're to continue to be rooted and built up in. And that means this Savior who is sent for them, that gospel reality is to rule and bring them peace in the church.

That's the first thing, isn't it? And then the message of that is to dwell richly with them. So let's think firstly about this peace. Gospel reality firstly means that peace, Christ's peace, is to be allowed to rule in the church.

Allow Jesus to make peace between us. Allow the gospel of peace, peace with God and peace with one another. Allow that to take hold and to rule in our church family life and be thankful for it.

I don't think it's not that hard, is it, to imagine what that's like. It's perhaps easiest, I think, to see it in distinction to other kinds of peace that you might try and negotiate. So if you think about just the terrible things that are going on in the Middle East and imagine that you're trying to negotiate some kind of peace treaty between the warring parties in the Middle East, you would enter into that situation.

The first thing that you try and do is to establish some common ground that you could build from to build peace. That's what you try and do in all conflicts. But the point here is, is that there is always common ground in your relationships in church.

[6 : 11] It is the peace of Christ. And so you are to let that rule. You are to let that flow out into your relationships with one another. And notice that we are to let it rule in our hearts.

In other words, he's not saying, is he, that Christians are never allowed to disagree with one another. That Christians are never allowed to express that disagreement with one another. Rather, it seems that in their hearts, they are to know and act on the idea that they have more in common than they do have separate to one another.

It's really challenging, isn't it? Because I think, and maybe this is just exposing myself too much to you and you're not like this, but I think it's quite easy for me to let the peace of Christ dwell in the words that I use while the sort of bitterness of my frustration dwells in my heart.

And actually, that's not what this is saying, is it? It's the peace of Christ is to dwell in our hearts, is what we have in Christ, which is to dominate how we think and feel about one another, even if we discuss things that we disagree with one another.

And actually, I think we quite often find that easier the other way around. I would rather just pretend that we're getting on okay and just harbor bitterness than I would actually talk to you about what I disagree about.

[7 : 28] And in my heart, know that you and I have enough in common in Christ to quell any disagreement. So that's what's going on here with the peace of Christ ruling over us.

Secondly, the message of Christ wants to dwell richly, and we should allow that. So verse 16, let the message of Christ dwell among you richly.

Literally, this is, you know, let the message of Christ move in, right? Take up residence. Let the message of Christ occupy. And here the images of the message of the gospel, the message of what Christ has done, that message wants to take up residence.

It wants to fill, and it wants to occupy. And what is the building that the message of Christ wants to fill? Well, notice what it is. It seems, doesn't it, from the context that the message wants to fill the gatherings of the church.

Look at verse 16 again. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

[8 : 33] Paul's assumption here is that the church are meeting together. And when they meet together, they will sing psalms, hymns, and I think more literally spiritual songs.

So it's not so much, I don't think, the sense in the Greek that the songs are sort of spontaneously given by the Spirit, which I kind of feel is implied by the NIV. Rather, it's the sense that there are songs of the spiritual realities of the gospel.

And those songs are to be so full of the gospel message that the gospel inhabits the gatherings of the church. It occupies their meetings. This reality of the gospel filling our meetings leads to some interesting details in this verse, doesn't it?

It means that one level, although psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs are, we notice, they're sung to God, aren't they? So we are singing to God with gratitude in our hearts. They are, even as we sing to God, they are to teach one another.

However, there's a, sorry, slightly distracted. There is a vertical and a horizontal direction to the singing in the church. So we sing to God, but we teach one another as we sing.

[9 : 48] So we sing to God for the benefit of one another as the gospel message fills the room with the words that we're singing. It's a really helpful image. It's this sense sort of, I don't know if you know, 2 Corinthians 2 verse 15, where we talk about the gospel being like the aroma, the aroma of Christ, which smells great to those who are being saved and smells terrible to those who are not being saved.

It's the same sense here, isn't it? It's the aroma of the gospel fills the room as the songs that we sing are preoccupied by the message of Jesus Christ. And you can see that, can't you, about how singing works.

And it's as that smell, if you like, pleases God, it does a whole lot of good to everybody who's gathered. I don't think that necessarily means that we should always sort of be looking around the room as we're singing.

Sometimes that can be helpful, can't it? But it can be quite off-putting too. We're not singing directly to each other in that sense. We are singing to God. But it means that the content of our singing is really, really important. And what we sing should rightly be focused on the affect that it has on those who are listening to and participating in that singing.

But that means, doesn't it, in the sung worship of the life of a church, really important questions are things like, is this teaching the truth? Is it rebuking gospel errors?

[11 : 06] So notice actually we'll be admonished by what we sing. I think that's quite easy. It's quite easy to promise something in the songs that we sing that we find really difficult to live in our lives. And that reality is admonishing to us, isn't it?

Is it rebuking gospel errors? Is the tune fitting? Is it helping us? Is the way we play and sing making the content of the music the focus or just the musicians the focus?

Is the song so complicated that we can't understand it? Or is it so repetitive that we're mindlessly singing and have forgotten what we're singing at all? But notice that the implication here as well is that everyone is singing.

Do you notice that too? As you teach and admonish one another. It's not as someone is up the front performing a song to you that you're taught and admonished.

It's as we listen to one another. It's something that we are all engaged with. It is the voices of the congregation that are the instrument of the church. And so then that leads to other questions about what we sing like, is it possible for everybody to join in with this?

[12 : 13] I think often in church that impinges on some of the things that we quite like to sing but are perhaps so complicated for new Christians or new believers to join in with.

Maybe we should focus on singing simple songs that children can sing or that people who have English as a second language can also join in as well. It's all sort of culturally related, isn't it? Is it so musically complicated that only trained musicians can join in?

Is it so culturally located that it makes no sense of the diversity of our church? Is the language playing? Is the tune so high that there's only about three people in church who can hit it? And one of those, they can't really, but no one's telling them.

You know? Interestingly, the imperative verb here, to dwell, or the third person imperative, as we now know, is moderated by an adverb, isn't it?

Richly. In other words, it's not good enough for your church gatherings to have a latent whiff of the gospel, if that's right, to fill on this smelling image.

[13 : 14] You know the sort of smell that you have in your kitchen like three or four days after you've had a curry, that you can kind of, you can still smell it. It's not that pleasant, but you still kind of know it was there at a point.

It's not that. It's more that it's to be the richness of the gospel, is to be in everything that we're singing together. So it's the beauty of it being freshly cooked. And that's what we are smelling. And so the gospel is to dwell richly. You know, the gospel is to be, you know, to pick up the kind of dwelling language. The gospel is to, you know, thoroughly unpacked in the church.

It's to have put its pictures on the wall, right? It's to have unpacked its clothes into the drawers. It's right at home there, the gospel, because we're singing it all the time. It's saturating our meetings. It's inescapable for anyone who comes. All this means, though, doesn't it, that what then is the enemy of the gatherings of the church? I mean, I know the devil is the enemy, but thoughtlessness is the enemy, isn't it?

[14:17] The sort of thoughtless going through the motions is the enemy, because actually our gatherings are to be the conscious, gospel-saturated meetings that do us good.

And notice, just as we finish, this emphasis on thankfulness. Okay, so it comes, doesn't it, at the end of verse 15, let the peace of Christ rule in your heart, since as members of one body you are called to peace, and be thankful.

And then verse 16, let the message of Christ dwell among you richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

Both have the same root in Greek. They're both the charis word, the grace word. And it makes sense, doesn't it? If this is a third-person imperative, right, if the ruling peace and the dwelling gospel are things that we are allowing, you know, allow it, right, then thankfulness is the right instruction, isn't it?

We are thankful that peace rules in our relationships in church. Peace rules and gospel dwells because that is being done in the church by the Spirit, through the gospel, but by us.

[15:28] We are just allowing it. You know, I hope you know this, in a right sense, me as the pastor of the church here, I don't do the work here. God does it.

Thankfully, he uses me, Lord willing, and he also uses you as you raise your voices and sing. All of us are involved in the ministry of the gospel in the life of the church as we sing together.

And as the smell of Jesus and the wonder of the gospel floods the room, God is at work for the sake of his glory, dwelling richly here through the gospel, bringing the peace of Christ to rule in our relationships, in our hearts.

And so singing is a really important part of church life. It's how we enjoy the gospel, and it's how we flood the room with the smell of Christ. I was going to give you a moment for questions or comments.

So now's your chance to have a little shuffle and ask a question or make a comment. And I'll have a go at answering. I am not the fount of all knowledge, so you will find that out very quickly if you ask a question.

[16:36] But likewise, I don't want to drop it on you and then run. Say any comments or questions on what we've looked at. Don't be shy.

Yes. Yeah. Yes. So what if we're really stubborn and we find it difficult to be peaceful with one another, I guess?

Is that what you're saying? Yeah. So I think, Florence, that's why that verse is there, because it implies that it's difficult.

So if it wasn't a problem, he wouldn't have written it. So it is a problem in the life of the church to let peace at rule. So it's a, yeah. But I think when I'm struggling to get on with another Christian, or when there's tension in the church, actually, the irony is that we shouldn't focus necessarily just on the tension itself, but we should focus on what we have in common in the Lord Jesus, and know that that there will resolve it.

It's such a shame, isn't it, that Christians are so good at fighting about things that don't really matter. And I think it's been one of the great testimonies of the merger of our churches.

[18:13] And I know that music has been one of the things that have been quite different in the two churches. But actually, this opportunity to let the peace of Christ rule in our church by acknowledging that what we have in common in the Lord Jesus is more important than things that push us apart.

This is a really practical outworking of that, isn't it? So, yeah. So if you're stubborn and you find it difficult, the answer is, go back to Christ, isn't it? Yeah. Yeah.

It's a helpful question. Any other questions? Yes. Why does God want us to sing? That's a brilliant question.

I think God has made us to be singers, right? The way that we express joy is by singing, isn't it? It's what we do when we gather. It's something that we're excited about, we sing about.

Something that we love, we sing about. Something that we enjoy, we sing about. It's the way the Lord has made us. And ultimately, he's made us that way because we are to sing praises to him.

[19 : 16] Isn't it interesting that you can't really enjoy something without expressing it? A long time ago, I used to play golf. I gave it up because I was not very good at it. And, yeah, I'm kind of not posh enough to play golf.

Anyway, and I realized that slowly. So I used to go on my own because I thought it was kind of a relaxing thing. And I remember only once doing an incredible shot on a par three and landing right on the green on the edge of the flag with my first shot.

It never happened normally, but I did it once. There was nobody there to see it. It was kind of disappointing because really it's the opportunity to express something that brings the joy to it, isn't it?

And so God wants us to sing because in some ways expressing to God how brilliant he is and what he's done for us helps us enjoy it too.

Yeah. That's a really, really great question. Any other questions? I wonder if singing songs like repeating songs helps us get it into ourselves.

[20 : 34] yes yes Yeah.

But it might not get in our hearts in a way because we've heard it so much. Yeah. And a new song might be challenging. Yeah. There's so many different ways to fall off the horse on there.

So obviously the fences are there about we don't want to sing heresy, right? But once you've kind of committed to not singing heresy, you want to sing songs that are simple and repetitive in order to get gospel truth just repeating in your mind.

Say, like, the Lord is by my side is a really helpful expression. It's a really simple song that kids can sing. And you go away going, the Lord is by my side or Lord, I need you, right?

That song came from a woman who was working at home just realizing in the middle of her day, I need the Lord, right? It's a great reminder. But if that's all you sing, you just actually miss out on the richness of teaching doctrine through singing.

[22 : 02] And so doctrinally rich songs are also really important. But if all you sing is those, you can just kind of end up with indigestion, can't you? Because you're just like, oh my goodness. There's like so many points of systematic theology flying at me right now in this song that I can't possibly digest all of these.

And we all have slightly different capacities for each one of those, don't we? And so I think there's a saying could be said for like joyfully uplifting songs and lamenting songs.

Churches can be terrible places if you're sad. And actually churches should be places where you can lament. But also there are churches which only ever seem to lament and don't ever seem to enjoy and rejoice in the gospel.

So there's those tensions as well, aren't there? Now, it's fair to say that that means that we'll not always get it right, isn't it? And we will always make mistakes. And it's always helpful to have people say, hey, I just think we could sing.

It'd be great for us to sing a few more songs that are just simple and reflective on one idea. Could we please sing some more of those? This is a suggestion. Or do you know what? We could sing some songs with more doctrinal content.

[23 : 05] You know, what about this one? So yeah, because you're balancing all those things. I mean, yeah. Great. Good. We'll leave it there.

Yeah. Good.