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Colossians 3:12–17, ESV

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Proverbs 3-3, ESV

*³ Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck;
write them on the tablet of your heart.*

Cassius Clay.

When I was a little boy, I happened to be in Las Vegas with my father. One morning, we were in a restaurant in a casino. I don't remember why we were in Las Vegas. But we were eating in a casino because the food was cheap. As the waitress was sitting us down, I noticed that there was a big table next to us, set up for perhaps six people, and in the center of the table was a sign that said,

“Reserved for Cassius Clay”. I only have something very brief and simple to say about this, but I’ll get back to it.

I’d like to talk about kindness today, about giving and about receiving kindness. Our first passage is from Colossians. We’ve talked about Colossians recently, and here is a bit of background material on Colossians. The letter to the Colossians was written to the Christians in a city called Colossae, in what is now Turkey; it was a prosperous city, with a textile and wool-dyeing industry. The church there was probably founded by a follower of Paul. Although Paul is the stated author of the letter, many scholars question this, as it contains a vocabulary not found in his other letters, and the letter doesn’t focus on Paul’s favorite topics of righteousness and justification by faith. So, it’s likely that the letter was simply attributed to Paul as a way of honoring him. By the way, Paul, had never been to Colossae at the time the letter was written. One purpose of the letter is to argue the divinity and saving powers of Jesus Christ. Another is to teach us how to live in this world as faithful people, and in a way that honors God. In our old way of doing things, we lived cruel and selfish lives, but now we are to have compassionate hearts, and to live with humility and kindness. We are to be forgiving, always. We are to be humble with other people and to think of others instead of thinking only of ourselves.

We're looking at a quote from Chapter 3. Our pseudo-Paul has just finished talking about false teachers and how they corrupt the true teachings of Christ. Now, he turns to advice on how we should live our daily lives in the context of these teachings of Jesus. He's telling us that as believers, we have a new life in Christ. The author of the letter is hinting at a metaphor, suggesting, but not saying in a completely direct way, that as we change our character to be more Christlike, it is like putting on new clothes. My favorite part of this passage is the very beginning: *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.* This, to me, is **the** key to being a true Christian in today's world, and it's amazing how important this advice is for us today in a technologically-advanced America, where we are tempted to do anything we have to do to get ahead of other people. We are beloved by God, and we are to be holy, in honor of that God who made us in God's image. Being holy, respecting the love that God gives us, means being compassionate. Being kind. We should have humility to the point of meekness, where we do not assume that those around us have to treat us with great respect. We do not place ourselves in a lofty position above others. And we are to be patient with others. It's easy to go through the day focused on what we are trying to accomplish, thinking only about our world and our problems. We forget

to be empathetic and see the world from someone else's perspective. Recently, as I was working as a chaplain at Boulder Community Hospital, I happened to be in the emergency room, and a nurse, with zero provocation from me, lit into me and yelled angrily at me about something that she thought I had done – but I hadn't actually done whatever it was. Well, this was in the middle of the Covid crisis, and that nurse, I'm sure, was worried about staying alive in light of the fact that she was caring for deathly ill people with a dangerous, highly contagious disease. This was a particularly pronounced situation, and I would have been a callous fool if I had not seen things from her perspective. So, of course, I didn't respond angrily. But how often, in much more subtle situations, do we not stop to think about what someone else might be going through when they don't seem to treat us fairly or with due respect? So, in sum, we are to be compassionate, humble, meek, and empathetic, especially when someone is unkind to us.

Our second passage is a proverb. And again, we've looked at Proverbs recently. These are pithy, wise sayings written by a class of holy people called Sages and then collected into the Book of Proverbs, perhaps in part by King Solomon himself. Our proverb says: *Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.* As a bit of background, the Hebrew word that is translated as "steadfast love"

actually means loyalty to one's covenant with God. This is a love that refers to a willingness to suffer in order to live up to one's obligations. It is a love of duty and ethical responsibility. Binding this love to one's neck or writing them on the tablet of one's heart is poetically powerful, but it is also reminiscent of an ancient Jewish practice of taking certain powerful lines of scripture, of the Bible, and copying them down, then placing them in a leather case, and then tying them to one's head while praying. Some Jews still follow this practice today. So, this proverb doesn't just say that we should love others so much that we are willing to keep that love extremely close to us. It means that we should look at the love that we have for God and for other people as a primary aspect of our faith, and that this Christian love is a sort of holy scripture that is as close to us, as personal and important to us, as is humanly possible.

What's also true is that love isn't something that we discover or invent on our own. We are taught by the people around us just what love is. While we are children, the folks who raise us, who put us to bed at night, who make sure we are fed and clothed and healthy, that we are happy and secure, and who rescue us when we are in danger or frightened - they are the ones who give us the ability to love others. They do this by showing us their love. And the faithful love of a Christian is also something that is taught and passed on.

This is the reason that I paired our two Bible passages today. The first says: *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.* Our second passage says: *Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart.* When we hold that love that close to us, we can't help but emanate that love as we proceed through life. It is so much a part of us, that others see and feel it. So, when we put on our new clothes of the faithful, when we become truly compassionate, kind, humble, meek, and patient, we enable other people to take our love for God and for humanity, to take the responsibility we have for living Christ-like lives, and live the same way. Others will bind that steadfast love to their necks, others will write that love on the tablets of their hearts - *if we give it to them.* That's why Christianity is a proselytizing faith. It's a politically incorrect thing today, to actively work to spread your faith to others. But people don't understand that this is a very unique thing we do. We're not trying to make people watch the same TV shows we watch. We're not trying to make people vote the way we do. We're not trying to spread an addiction to cigarettes or alcohol or vaping. We're trying to make them look into their hearts and minds and find a deep, binding love for God and for all of God's children. And we want them to then pass that on to others.

So, let me get back to Cassius Clay, which was, of course, Muhammad Ali's name before he changed his name. When I was that young boy in Las Vegas, sitting at a breakfast table in a casino restaurant, my father pointed at the sign on the table near us and explained that Cassius Clay was an up and coming, very young, but also very famous already, boxer. He said that Cassius Clay might prove to be one of the best fighters ever. Then, Cassius Clay walked in with an entourage. I remember expecting him to be big and to swagger in with a cocky look on his face. He was big, alright, but there was no swagger. He simply sat down calmly. I was, of course, staring at him. He noticed. I don't remember exactly what happened, but I think he smiled or winked at me, or perhaps motioned at me. At any extent, I got up and walked over to his table. I said my name was Buzzy. He said his name was Cassius. He stuck his giant hand out and I shook it. He was very gentle. He didn't squeeze my hand. I don't remember what I said or what he said. But I do remember his kindness and the pleasure he got at being good to some little boy in a restaurant. This is a story that I have told to many, many people. It had a huge impact on me. For the rest of Muhammad Ali's life, whenever I saw him on TV, even when he was being a showman and loudly boasting that he was the "greatest", I saw that young man, with a modest

smile, taking a moment to be kind to a child. He planted something in me that lasted.

It doesn't take much for us to give someone the gift of compassion, kindness, humility and meekness. In fact, we get something out of it. It feels good to do that for someone. That's how God made us, to feel rewarded when we are nice, when we make someone happy, when we lift someone up.

After I got back to my table, my father was grinning. I've talked about him a lot in our church. He grew up on the street, in a very literal sense. He fought in World War II and was a Sargent in the Marine Corps, a sharpshooter. He led a team that had a very high casualty rate because what they did was so dangerous. When his men were trapped behind enemy lines at Guadalcanal, he went out alone and found food for them. He had heard what Cassius Clay said to me and saw him shake my hand. My father said something about me having a lot of nerve, walking right up to him like that. I had never heard of Cassius Clay, and I said something like, well, Dad, you said that he's a famous fighter. I wanted to meet him. My father said that he was very happy to learn that at least one young, famous man was a good person who knew how to treat a young boy. Just remember that we can do that for other people and for their children. All we have to do is keep our eyes and ears open for the opportunity. Someone walks

up to us or we find ourselves near someone who might be changed, in a big and permanent way, by an expression of Godly love. We just have to be looking for the opportunity – and then take action. Please pray with me.

God, we are rather radically imperfect. We believe in you, and in return, your son believes in us. That faith that Jesus has in us led him to be beaten, humiliated, and murdered. Then, he left the tomb. He arose from death. Each of us can arise from death, from the death of living a life that is unethical, immoral, or criminal. We can rise from the death of hatred, envy, viciousness, and brutality. We can rise from the death of selfishness, egotism, and vengeance. Our faith, when backed up by our actions, is how we arise from death. Please guide us, keep your hand on our shoulder, poke us in the back, do whatever is necessary to help us remember to always do our best to serve you by serving your people. And we thank you for being so flexible, so forgiving with us. Thank you for letting us be imperfect every day of our lives, while being so greatly rewarded for simply doing what we can in our limited way to make the world a better temporary home for those around us. May we hold our love for you so close to us that everyone with whom we come into contact begins to feel the same way. Amen.