

Series Colossians

This Message Keep Looking Up

Scripture Colossians 3:1-11

The Apostle Paul had a unique way of blending very deep theological teaching needed by his readers with exhortations for them to adjust their lifestyles to fit his teaching. Paul provided the rationale and understanding for what it meant to be new persons in Christ, and then he called his readers to a Christ-honoring way of life.

In chapters 1 and 2 Paul presented a great amount of significant information about Jesus Christ: He is the transcendent God, the Creator and Sustainer of everything, the Reconciler of all who place their faith in Him. Christ was also God's link with the human race, the One who became incarnate in flesh, who reconciled humanity to God through His physical body, and the One through whom the fullness of God is passed on to His followers.

This theological teaching directly refuted the doctrinal errors of teachers who were creating confusion among the members of the Colossian fellowship. According to Paul, these teachers were leading believers back into the "shadows" of legalistic regulations and traditions. The false teachers did not believe that the salvation of Jesus was sufficient. They advocated rules and practices that they thought would help believers gain additional favor with God.

Paul did not want his readers to listen to teachers who were enslaved to the world, the law, and the flesh. He wanted his readers to go on growing in the Lord by faith; that is, through the same process in which they had originally entered into their relationship with Christ. Paul knew that spiritual growth would not happen through human efforts, but only through confidence in the fullness of the indwelling presence of Christ Jesus. The whole aim of Paul was for believers to enjoy the fullness of their personal relationship with Christ Jesus.

In chapter 3 Paul became very practical. He urged his readers to think and act according to their identity in Christ. He had previously written that the believers had been rescued by Christ “from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son” (*Colossians 1:13*). He had written that believers had “died with Christ to the basic principles of this world” (*Colossians 2:20*), and were “made alive with Christ” (*Colossians 2:13*). He wanted them to know that they had been set free from the restrictions and powers which previously held them in bondage (*Colossians 2:13-15*). He wanted them to know that they were the possessors of the fullness of Christ (*Colossians 2:10*).

Because of their identity with Christ, Paul urged his readers to center their lives on Christ; to have their entire outlook on life shaped by their relationship with Christ. For Paul, the objective of the believer was a Christ-like quality of life. He knew that goodness without godliness was impossible. As we read notice what he advises.

Read Colossians 3:1-11.

Paul begins this passage with three significant statements: “You have been raised with Christ,” “your life is now hidden with Christ in God,” and “you will appear with Christ in glory.” These statements indicate the tight spiritual union which exists between the Redeemer and the redeemed. The phrase, “with Christ,” appears numerous times in this letter.

Notice the believer’s present position in Christ. Just as Christ was raised from the deadness of the grave, God reaches into the deadness of sinful people to give them new life. And not only that, but, just as Christ was raised up to heaven, believers have also been raised to “where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” This position is presently “hidden” from the sight of humans, but, according to the third of the three statements, the “hiddenness” of believers will end when Christ is revealed at the end of the age.

These are realities that can be recognized only by faith. It is the task of the indwelling Holy Spirit to make the reality of each believer’s spiritual position with Christ really real. The Holy Spirit is, in fact, given to every believer as a guarantee that they have a relationship with God. Scripture declares that we are to live by faith and not by sight.

Paul explained all this in greater detail in his letter to the Ephesian fellowship, which he wrote about the same time as this letter to the Colossian church. He prayed that the believers in Ephesus would know the “incomparably great power of God for us who believe.” “That power,” Paul wrote, “is like the working of his mighty strength which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms” (*Ephesians 1:19-20*). A few verses later he restated this truth, “Because of his great love for us, God ... made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions, ... and raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (*Ephesians 2:4-7*).

Commentators describe these references to the believer’s union with Christ as “the root principles of the Christian life.” These words link back to the crucial statement in chapter 2, “Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught” (*Colossians 2:6*). The first faith step taken by believers is “receiving Christ Jesus as Lord.” From that beginning, believers are expected to “continue to live in Christ Jesus” by means of the same faith.

Notice the phrase in verse 4, “When Christ, who is our life.” Christ is the One who provided the possibility of spiritual life to humanity. He is the One who made it possible for individuals to become the spiritual children of God. And it is He whose life dwells in believers in the person of the Holy Spirit. As Paul wrote in his letter to the fellowship in Rome, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you” (*Romans 8:11*).

On the basis of the believer’s identity with Christ, believers are urged to do several practical things: “to set their hearts on things above,” “to set their minds on things above, not on earthly things,” “to put to death practices that belong to the earthly nature” (verse 5), and “to rid themselves of practices that characterized the unregenerate self” (verse 8).

We can summarize these exhortations by saying that the quality of believers’ day by day lives must be in keeping with their position in Christ. This means that believers must fix their desires on what is pleasing to God, and that every aspect of their lives must be shaped by their relationship with Christ. The verbs in these exhortations are present imperatives, indicating the need for continuing action. Literally believers are to “to keep on seeking things above,” “to keep on putting to death practices which belong to the earthly nature,” etc.

There might be a slight difference in meaning between the phrases “set your hearts on things above” and “set your minds on things above.” The heart represents the emotional attachment of a person to something. We might say, “My heart is set on” having something that is attractive, appealing, and desirable to me. The mind refers to the choices and decisions which act on the desires of the heart. Obviously the heart and mind work together to determine the direction a person takes in life.

The believer is to stay “focused on” things above, rather than on earthly things. This requires the believer to concentrate on the ways of God and to resist the inclinations, the ways, of the human nature. This does not mean that the believer must withdraw from all the activities of this world to engage only in contemplation of eternity and heaven. The verses that follow make it quite clear that Paul expected believers to be engaged in necessary activities of this world, such as employment and income, food, concern for one’s spouse, concern for health. “Earthly things” are not necessarily evil. However even things which are harmless in themselves will become harmful if they are permitted to take the place that properly belongs to God. When that happens, it is called “idolatry.” The lesson here is that life in this world must be measured against the greater world of eternity. Believers must evaluate everything against their heavenly orientation and loyalty.

In the first 4 verses of this chapter Paul described the great change in the believer’s spiritual status that takes place through born-again regeneration. Believers are “raised with Christ,” and their lives are “hidden with Christ.” Beginning in verse 5 Paul explains the implications of the believers’ unity with Christ. The format of this chapter is typical of Paul’s style of writing. He first explains what it means to be in a relationship with Christ and then he gives instructions about how to apply that truth to practical living.

Let me give an introductory summary of verses 5 through 10: For those in Christ the old former life is over and a new kind of life in Christ has begun. Believers must consider themselves dead to behaviors associated with their old earthly nature. The new life provided by Christ must have full control over the believer because Christ is the “life” dynamic in the believer.

The key to godly living is to “put to death” the “earthly nature.” This subject of dying to the earthly sin nature appears often in the writings of Paul. For example in his letter to the church fellowship in Rome he wrote the following very important words: “We were ... buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, ... because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ... In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (*Romans 6:4-11*).

The verb “put to death” is a very strong Greek word. It requires believers to completely exterminate the old way of life. The form of the verb (aorist imperative) indicates that the action is to be undertaken decisively, with a sense of urgency. Both the meaning and the force of the verb indicate that believers must do whatever is necessary to avoid behaviors associated with the earthly nature. The list of sins in verse 5 is representative of the character of the earthly nature.

In verses 6 and 7 Paul gave two reasons why the sins listed in verse 5 must not exist in the lives of the Colossian believers. First, they are sins that bring “the wrath of God.” Paul assumed that his readers understood this statement; he did not explain it. There are many Scripture passages that make clear that God’s judgment on disobedient people is certain. Second, the sins mentioned in verse 5 were typical of the behaviors of unsaved people. “You used to walk in these ways,” wrote Paul. They were part of “the life you once lived.” The two verbs in verse 7, “used to walk” and “once lived,” are past tense verbs, emphasizing that this kind of life belonged to the past and should no longer be part of believers’ lives.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that believers are expected to change their attitudes and lifestyles on their own. There are two sides to Paul's instructions. We are to "count (consider) ourselves dead to sin," and "count ourselves alive to God in Christ Jesus." The great benefit of regeneration is the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ. The life of the born-again individual must reflect the life of Christ. As verse 3 states, "Our lives are now hidden with Christ in God." This means that the "incomparably great power of God is available for us who believe," empowering us to have our hearts and minds "set on things above, and not on earthly things."

The list of sins in verse 5 has to do with the earthly nature — the inner human nature of the unregenerate sinner. There are different kind of sins listed in verses 8 and 9. This new list of sins is representative of outward pagan behavior. They are relational and social sins. After "putting to death" the inner earthly nature, the Colossian believers were then to "rid themselves" of ungodly thoughts and actions towards others.

Paul used an interesting metaphor to illustrate the change in behavior expected of believers. He compared the "old self" to a filthy garment which must be stripped off the body and discarded and the regenerated "new self" to the new clean garment which replaces it. That describes what believers are expected to do: put off their evil ways and put on the ways of Christ.

The goal of the believer is to become "conformed to the likeness of Christ" (*Romans 8:29*). That's what the last part of verse 10 declares: The "new self" "is being renewed (or changed) ... in the image of its Creator," who is Christ Jesus. The phrase "renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" indicates that the more believers learn about Christ and the ways of God, the more they will be conformed to the likeness of Christ. That's why Paul instructed his readers to "set their hearts and minds on things above."

Individuals who are "renewed" in the image of their Creator will discover that the distinctions of the old life have no significance. They discover that the gospel message does not make one group of people more valuable or important than others. The sociology of the faith community is egalitarian. In Christ there are none of the national and traditional, tribal and geographical, social and cultural and religious divisions that presently distinguish one people group from another.

The phrase “Christ is all, and is in all” restates the principle of Christ’s lordship over everything. “Christ is all” means that Christ is all that matters. Paul was convinced of the power of Christ to so change people that all their differences would blend together, all distinctions would be done away. The key is to stay focused on Christ. He is the Head of His body, the Church. When believers stay connected to “the Head, the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow” (*Colossians 2:19*). For our own good, loyalty to Christ must take precedence over all earthly matters. Jesus Christ is all that people need for new birth and spiritual growth. He indwells every believer and permeates all the relationships of life. He is all that matters to those who have placed their faith in Him.