

“Set Your Minds on Things That Are Above”

The Seventh in a Series of Sermons on Colossians

Texts: Colossians 3:1-11; Genesis 1:26-2:3

A new church had been established in the village of Colossae—a small, backwater town in the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor. The church was doing well, but was facing a group of false teachers advocating what is known today as the “Colossian Heresy.” This heresy combined elements of local pagan religion and Judaism. Its adherents worshiped angels, sought visions, practiced a rigorous asceticism (self-denial), but also observed Jewish feasts, new moons, and the Sabbath. All of this would have made sense in first century Greco-Roman culture—where syncretistic religions (various religions mixing together) were common—but antithetical to biblical Christianity.

Paul’s instructions to the Colossians as to how to respond to this heretical teaching was crystal clear. Do not allow false teachers who do not have the mind of Christ to pass judgment upon you when you refuse to follow their rules or spiritual principles. Religious rules and regulations taught by these false teachers may have the appearance of wisdom, but can do absolutely nothing to restrain the indulgence of the flesh (the sinful nature). In the face of this challenge, Paul exhorts the Colossians to stand firm and not allow themselves to be disqualified from the inheritance already won for them by Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.

Paul’s answer to the Colossian heresy may be crystal clear but his response raises a question which lurks in the background of all discussions of the Christian life. If the Colossians were not to be taken in by what Paul calls deceptive philosophy and humanly invented rules and spiritual principles—which he says are contrary to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ—then what standard are the Colossians to follow when seeking to live as the new creatures they now are in Christ? The answer is equally clear—the standard of conduct for the Christian is law of God as revealed to Israel on Mount Sinai. In Colossians chapter 3, Paul will exhort the Colossians to adopt a heavenly perspective while living the Christian life—in contrast to the Colossian Heresy which focuses upon earthly things which are destined to perish. This heaven-focused perspective will enable them to do those things pleasing to God and beneficial to our neighbor (as revealed in the law of God) and yet obey in such a way that they do not re-enslave themselves to the flesh (the sinful nature) which dominates all Christians before they are united to Christ.

We are now well into the second half of Paul’s letter to the Colossians (we will be considering chapter 3:1-11), which, as we have seen last time, comes in that section of Paul’s letters usually devoted to commands and instructions for all those who trust in Jesus Christ (as explained in the first half of his letters). In his death and resurrection, Jesus has already broken the power of sin (which Paul also speaks of as the “flesh”) which enslaved us to sinful desires, caused us to be drawn to false religion, and stake our eternal hopes on earthly things destined to perish.

Keeping the indicatives (statements of fact—i.e., who Jesus is and what he has done for us) and the imperatives (the commands and instructions which come to those already participants in the new creation through their union with Christ) distinct, is vital in making proper sense of Paul’s letters. The distinction between what is promised (gospel/indicative) and what is commanded (law/imperative) is the basis for the distinction between law and gospel which is so fundamental in understanding both justification (the once for all declaration that we are righteous before God) and sanctification (the process through which

God renews us more and more into the image of Jesus Christ).

As we turn to our text (verse 1 of chapter 3), Paul reminds the Colossians of the indicative of the new creation before exhorting them to think and do certain things which reflect who we are in Christ (the imperative). Notice how the imperative (the command) flows directly of the indicative (promise). The apostle writes, “*if then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*” The “if” here is rhetorical. It should be understood in the sense that “*since you have been raised with Christ,*” a statement of fact, not something which is still an open question. Paul is referring to our union with Christ, a major theme in his theology.

Paul’s doctrine of “union with Christ” refers to how we benefit from the fact that Jesus suffered and died on the cross for our sins and was then raised from the dead for our justification. After forty days of post resurrection appearances, Jesus ascended to the Father’s right hand where Jesus now rules over all things. Once we come to faith in Jesus and are justified (our sins are forgiven and we are declared righteous), the indwelling Holy Spirit creates an inseparable bond between the believer on earth and Jesus who is at God’s right hand. Because we are united to Jesus by the Holy Spirit, we participate in new life given to us by the Risen Christ. That same power which raised Jesus from the dead regenerates us and enables us to live a new life. This is what Paul is getting at when he tells the Colossians that “we have been raised with Christ,” even while we live out our lives here on earth. The sacrament of baptism is the visible sign and seal of the fact that we have been buried with Jesus and then raised with him to newness of life.

Our union with Christ helps to explain why the law of God no longer condemns us. Apart from Christ, when we are measured against his holy commandments it is clear that we have never obeyed any of them as we should. Furthermore, our inability to keep the law only frustrates us all the more. There are, of course, self-righteous people, such as the Pharisees, who somehow deceive themselves into thinking they have kept God’s commandments merely because they outwardly obey, all the while they are inwardly cursing God. They may have never hurt or killed anyone—yet they curse people silently. They may have never cheated on their spouse, but their hearts are filled with adultery. They may have never stolen so much as a rubber band, but lust after their neighbor’s new car. Outwardly people may seem to be obey, but inwardly are murders, adulterers, thieves. Jesus called them “whitewashed tombs.”

Because we are sinful (enslaved to the lusts of the flesh), the law condemns us. Our failure to obey renders us guilty before God and threatens that we will be punished for our sins. But the law as given by God is holy, righteous and good, as Paul says in Romans 7:12. The problem is not with the law. The problem is that we are sinful and cannot keep the law. The law only excites us to rebel against it and sin more frequently and grievously. The solution to human sinfulness is not more law. It is more gospel.

When we are united to Jesus through faith in an unbreakable bond effected by the Holy Spirit, our relationship to the law changes fundamentally. As Paul has told the Colossians in 2:12-14, because they are in Christ, they were “*buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.*” Once the penalty inflicted upon by the law was paid in full—by Jesus’ shed blood—and once we are united to him through the Holy Spirit’s indwelling, the law no longer stands over us in condemnation. We come to love the law. We desire to obey it because we have been buried and raised with Christ. This is the reason why in the New Testament the imperatives always come after the indicative, yet without re-enslaving us to the law which was a shadow of Christ, but remains the

revelation of God's will for each of us—the law is both the teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude.

After reminding the Colossians that they have been raised with Christ (a past tense, completed act), Paul then exhorts them to “*seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*” For a Christian struggling against the sinful flesh, and in the light of those who offer claim to offer solutions (not really solutions at all) through more rules and spiritual principles, Paul tells us it is a question of perspective. Do we focus upon earthly things which are destined to perish? Or do we focus on eternal things which do not? Paul's exhortation is simple and direct—look to Christ who is seated in heaven at the right hand of God.

The image of Jesus sitting at God's right hand is not literal—God is spirit (Jesus said in John 4:24) so he does not sit, nor have hands. The Father's “right hand” is a image of exalted rule based, in part, upon the vision given Daniel (7:13-14), where Daniel saw his night vision, “*with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*” It is also the central theme of Psalm 110,¹ where the Psalmist writes in verse 1, “*The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’*” Paul, no doubt, has both of these well-known passages in mind when he speaks of Jesus seated at the Father's right hand. Jesus has ascended into heaven, he rules all things, and will, on the last day, bring everything into full submission when Jesus returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new.

But until that day comes and faith becomes sight (to use another metaphor from Paul), instead of focusing upon spiritual principles which are the invention of men, and instead of following religious rules denying to us things that will inevitably perish, we are, instead, to think about earthly things from a heavenly perspective—eternal things which really matter and cannot perish. The things revealed by God in his word. We are to understand our sinful condition and its remedy not in the ways pagans do. They think this struggle to be a herculean task in which we must completely deny ourselves the good things which God has made, and we can only move ahead if learn the secrets of how to master our desires. Instead, Christians are to view these things in light of God's revelation in the person of Jesus.

Paul's reminder that Jesus has defeated sin and death and has already broken the power of the flesh is the reason why we focus upon him as the source of our faith and spiritual life. We united to a living, risen and ascended Savior through faith though we still are on earth. The Holy Spirit continues to apply the resurrection power of Jesus to our lives strengthening the new nature and killing off the old self (the habits of sin). These are the things we are to seek. We must stop looking within, or to blind spiritual guides if we wish to please God and help our neighbors. Instead, we are concentrate upon listening to what God tells us in his word. We are to seek Christ above, who is the source of all spiritual life and the only one who can slay the sinful passions within us.

Implied in Paul's point is the sense that we ought not feel as though Jesus is absent or far away even if we do not currently see him “face to face.” Our union with Christ ensures us that Jesus has not left us on our own nor are we distant from him.² Jesus is with us continually—speaking to us through his word,

¹ Moo, *Colossians*, 247.

² Calvin, *Colossians*, 346.

strengthening our faith through the sacraments, and causing us to feel his presence through the indwelling Holy Spirit, moving us to worship, pray, and live lives of gratitude before him.

Paul exhorts us again in verse 2, “*set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*” Earthly things will perish. We may deny our flesh for a time, but its passions will only return a short time later with a vengeance. The verb Paul uses (“to set”) means a basic mental attitude—be *determined* to do this. To set our minds (*nous*) on things above means to make a conscious and deliberate decision to learn more about the Christian faith—what is known in our tradition as catechesis. Paul tells the Colossians not to listen to the pagans. Instead they should be listening to Christ—thinking about how what they believe impacts how they live, living their lives *Coram Deo* in the presence of God.

A word of caution, however. We all know people who are so heavenly minded they are no earthly good. Paul is not exhorting us to deny or ignore the things of this world, but to interact with them from a heavenly perspective, to think about the world around us and how we live in it as thoughtful Christians, devoting to thinking and understand earthly things in light of what God says in his word. Scripture says a great deal about family, work, prayer, and worship, as well as doctrine and even theological categories such as “union with Christ.” R. C. Sproul is absolutely right when he reminds us that every Christian is a theologian, or at least should be—not as a vocation (job) but as a disciple of Jesus. That is all Paul is asking—that the Colossians be disciples (students) of Jesus and refuse to be sidetracked by paganism. We do this by focusing on heavenly things to gain perspective on things earthly. This means reading and studying our Bibles and learning the doctrines of the Christian faith. This takes work.

Again, Paul returns to the indicative (the facts of the gospel) to make his point. In verse 3, he reminds the Colossians of what he told them in 2:20, “*for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*” The Colossians died to the elemental principles of the world when they came to faith in Christ. Because they have died to these things, they are presently united to Jesus, and it is as though their very lives are hidden in Christ, i.e., made safe, by virtue of Christ’s indwelling Spirit and his rule over all things. Yet, as Paul goes on to say in verse 4, “*when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*” There is a bit of wordplay here—hidden/revealed. What was hidden in Christ (a spiritual union), will be revealed on the day of his return (when Jesus appears bodily). What is presently a mediated union—we know Jesus primarily through means, his word and sacraments—will one day become a visible and present experience, face to face. John makes a similar point in his first epistle, when he writes in 1 John 3:2,³ “*beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.*”

In light of this heavenly perspective on our earthly existence, in verses 5-11 Paul tells the Colossians how their lives ought to reflect their union with Christ. What follows is a series of imperatives (commands) which indicate the specific conduct which flows from the fact that our flesh (our sinful nature) was put to death in Christ. We are to stop living like pagans. We are to put off certain sinful acts and behaviors. Paul uses the metaphor of a change in clothing, like a person freed from jail takes off their prison jump suit which is the very symbol of shame and guilt, and puts on new clothing reflecting their freedom. There is nothing secret here, nothing invented by sinful men and women, only things revealed by God in his law, making clear to us God’s will for us once we are united to Jesus.

In verse 5, Paul exhorts the Colossians to “*put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual*

³ Moo, Colossians, 250.

immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” We “put to death,” certain behaviors because we died in Christ. As Christians, we embrace a biblical sexual ethic despite the opinion of many in our culture that this is repressive and “hateful.” The family is the foundation of society and this depends upon marriage as a union between a man and woman which reflects the relationship between Christ and his church (Ephesians 5). Sexual sin is an affront to this union, and as Paul says, is uniquely a sin against our own bodies, which is probably why so much guilt attaches to sexual sin; fornication, sexual relations before marriage; adultery, sexual relations outside of marriage; and homosexuality, sexual relations with persons of the same sex. For Christians, the marriage bed is undefiled (Hebrews 13:4), and is the proper place to enjoy sexual relations.

Impurity refers to any kind of moral corruption, but is often used in connection with sexual sin.⁴ Passion is another term for lust (unbiblical sexual desire), while evil desire refers to the pull within us toward any particular sin which we know to be a violation of God’s law. Covetousness refers to old-fashioned greed, which is a desire for more of something than what we already have. Paul draws the connection between this desire for more and idolatry—to want more than we have is to engage in idolatry and is the supreme manifestation of seeking earthly things destined to perish.⁵ Paul says much the same thing in Ephesians 5:5. *“For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.”* Those who live in such a manner will face the consequences. In verse 6, Paul warns, *“on account of these the wrath of God is coming.”* Our contemporaries, many of them professing Christians, recoil at the thought of God being angry at sin and bringing his wrath upon the earth. A loving God would never judge people, they say.

All human sin is an offense against a holy God, who must punish all those who rebel against him. God is both loving and holy. Because he is holy, any human sin is a sin against his infinite majesty, goodness, and purity. These matters are not secret because God has written his law on each and every human heart and then codified and revealed his will to Israel on Mount Sinai. No matter how hard people (ancient and modern) attempt to suppress the knowledge of God and avoid all sense of guilt and shame, the verdict is certain. The wrath of God is coming upon all those apart from Christ. If the Colossians have been doing as Paul has exhorted them, seeking Christ at the Father’s right hand, and if they have put to death the deeds of the flesh, then they will likewise understand when Paul reminds them (v. 7), *“in these you too once walked, when you were living in them.”* Christians will escape the wrath of God not because we are better than non-Christians (more righteous and lovable), but simply because we are numbered among those whom the loving God has chosen to save and rescue from the wrath to come. We once lived among the pagans. But now, by God’s grace, we do not.

The Colossians now are exhorted, *“but now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another.”* Sexual sin (like that associated with Greco-Roman paganism) is to be put to death. Other vices (also violations of God’s law) are to be “put off,” which may be an allusion to the biblical metaphor of clothing (soiled and dirty) as something to be removed because offensive.⁶ To put it simply as possible—the Colossians are to stop acting in anger and in rage, they are to cease acting with ill-will toward their neighbor (malice), they are not to tell lies about

⁴ Moo, Colossians, 256.

⁵ Bruce, Colossians, 144.

⁶ Bruce, Colossians, 145.

them or speak evil of them (slander). They are also not to let obscene talk (which would include swearing, telling dirty jokes, etc.) come out of their mouths. The Colossians are to be truth tellers, not liars. This list applies to all of God's people.

Again, these imperatives (commands) arise directly from the indicative, when Paul adds at the end of verse 9-10 "*seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.*" When Jesus died on the cross, there is a powerful sense in which we died with him by virtue of our union with him. We have put off the old self. The contrary is also true. By virtue of our union with Christ in his resurrection, we are made a new self (a new person), we are now regenerate, alive, and no longer dead in sin. A profound and fundamental change has taken place with us. This change (regeneration—union with Christ) completely re-orient us in consideration to sin and death. Apart from Christ (in Adam) sinful behavior was the very essence of our being. The things Paul tells the Colossians to stop doing, characterized us. Now that we are in Christ, these sins are a contradiction. We still commit these same sins, but we see them as an offense, something we struggle to stop doing, something which is out of place given who we now are in Christ.

There are two very important points which flow from this. The first is Paul speaks of our new self, being renewed after the image of our creator. Here, of course, Paul has in mind the creation account of which the high point is God's creation of Adam and Eve as divine image-bearers (about which we read in Genesis 1:26-2:3). The divine image was terribly defaced in Adam's fall into sin (we are born with a sinful nature and guilty of Adam's sin), which is now being restored through the indwelling Holy Spirit and through our union with Christ. This restoration of the divine image will finally be complete on the day of resurrection when we receive our glorified bodies. What was lost in Adam's fall will be recovered and gloried on the last day. But Jesus is presently renewing that image in us. Since we are new people, we are to act like it.

The second point is Paul's stress upon putting to death certain sins, while putting others "away" so that the old self, now dead, begins to manifest the new. This clearly reflects Christian baptism, which captures the image of people dying to sin and self and rising to new life in Christ. Paul's language echoes Romans 6:3-6. "*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.*" The unregenerate person is enslaved by the flesh. When made alive in Christ—through regeneration and faith—and then united to Jesus by the Holy Spirit, the old self begins to die off (mortification) and the new self comes alive (vivification).

The conduct which Paul expects from the Colossians (and us), described as dying to sin and putting off other sinful behavior, is the manifestation of the fact that all believers are in union with Christ (through faith in his saving work). By seeking the heavenly things above, we will come to understand these things to be sin, and we will desire more and more to be free from them. While this is a life-time process and will only come to an end on the day we die and enter heaven, nevertheless, this is how we respond to those judge us by human standards, who seek to teach us "secret principles" and who desire to disqualify us from our inheritance. We set our minds on things that are above. As we do this, we will die to sinful behavior. We will put off sinful conduct. God's image is being restored us in. As Paul says we will stop judging people by human, earthly standards, which is why in Christ's church, there is no "*Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free,*" because "*Christ is all, and in*

all,” for those who are united to him by faith. We are a new people, a new society. Earthly things divided us. Seeking heavenly things together unites us.

Beloved, we are dead to sin. So let us act like it and put to death sexual sin and idolatry. We have put on Christ in our baptism. So let us put off those things which harm our neighbor. We are united to Christ’s death and resurrection through faith, so set your minds on things that are above. These are the things which should characterize our lives in the presence of a pagan and increasingly anti-Christian culture. Rules, regulations, religious experience, asceticism and rigorous self-denial make sense to our pagan neighbors. But these things are not of Christ, they are humanly devised. As we reflect our union with Christ and put to death sexual sin and idolatry, as we put off those things which harm our neighbor, we will not only make progress in fighting the indulgence of the flesh, but we might be a bright light in very dark age, and our neighbors may desire to hear the gospel of Christ and learn of his death and resurrection.

So let us heed Paul’s exhortation. “Set your minds on things that are above.” Let us live our lives in light of our union with Christ.