

12 Keys to Spiritual Maturity

A Spiritual Mind (#2)

By [Derek Thomas](#)

Colossians 3:1-4

John Owen (1616-1683), was one of the greatest of the Puritan preachers and teachers of the seventeenth century. Oliver Cromwell, the Chancellor of Oxford University appointed him Vice-Chancellor in 1652, a post which he held until 1657. His collected writings span some twenty-four volumes of packed, some would say prolix, sentences.

My first acquaintance with him came in 1974 in the manse of a minister, Geoffrey Thomas, with whom I lodged for a while. The volume we read together (starting at 5.00 am!), was Volume 7, "*On Spiritual Mindedness*." The contents were breathtaking, even though at times it required certain paragraphs be read more than once and notes (which are still in my copy) scribbled in the margins for elucidation. In the quarter century that has elapsed, one prevailing question that Owen asks remains in my mind: "What do you think about when you are not thinking about anything in particular?"

It's a disarmingly simple question, isn't it? But it serves as a measurement of our spiritual mindedness. When are minds in neutral, do we find ourselves drifting into thoughts about Jesus? Perhaps that sounds so pietistic (why do folk use that word negatively?) that you recoil from answering it. But Paul in this passage would have us ask such a question. He is concerned about the development of a spiritual mind. It was the theme of a well known and useful book written half way through the Twentieth Century (1949 to be exact) by a pupil of C. S. Lewis, Harry Blamires, in a book entitled, *The Christian Mind*. The way we think will determine the way we act. It was also the theme of another book, which greatly influenced me as a young Christian. The book (it was more of a booklet than a book!) was *Your Mind Matters*, by John Stott. In it, he made use of the words of Psalm 32: "Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you." Some Christians "have no understanding." They fail to use their minds in the process of spiritual formation. They are at the mercy of feeling, or whim, or impulse. And Paul is calling for a total reevaluation.

Can I say that there are some parts of God's word that serve as "keys" that unlock for us what the Christian life is essentially like, and which serve to open

up the rest of the Scriptures? I think so. And for me, this text tonight is one of them. Passages like this one help us understand what the rest of the Bible is about. In Colossians 3:1-4, Paul wants us to understand that if we are going to live a Christian life that is mature and glorifying to God, it is vitally important for us to have what we might call a correct *mind-set*. This has nothing to do with intellect. It has nothing to do with whether we have a college degree. It is not our IQ, but the disposition of our mind to focus on certain things that is in view here. The Colossians were being influenced by certain teachers to believe a form of Gnosticism which suggested that they needed secret knowledge, knowledge that as yet they did not possess, in order for them to reach the next stage in their spiritual development. Only a few possessed this knowledge. But Paul is very clear: every Christian "(has) been given fullness in Christ" (Col. 2:9). Paul isn't interested in elitism; he wants every Christian to realize what they already are in Christ. That is why, first of all, he introduces them to a familiar theme of the foundation of spiritual maturity.

1. There is a foundation to spiritual maturity

Paul mentions two things that are true of every believer. "Since, then, you *have been raised* with Christ, set your hearts on things above" (3:1), and "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For *you died*, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (3:2-3).

Paul is exhorting these Christians to do certain things because they are motivated by certain things that are true about them. They have been *raised* with Christ and they have *died* with Christ. [The logical order is the reverse: they have died and have been raised to newness of life]. This is one of the basic things every Christian needs to appreciate about what it means to be a Christian. Paul builds his entire understanding of sanctification upon this truth.

What does he mean by saying that first, we have died with Christ and then we have been raised with Christ? It is important to note that he is not issuing a call here to consecration. He is not saying, "*Die to yourself*" and "*Be raised to newness of life.*" Paul is not asking to *become* something that as yet they are not; rather, he wants them to realize what *they already are*. And in doing so, Paul is repeating something that he not only has already alluded to in this epistle (see, Colossians 2:12,13), but also that which he writes elsewhere in the formative epistles, in which he sets out the terrain of the Christian life: Ephesians and Romans. To the Ephesian Christians he had written: "[God] made us alive with Christ...and God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:5-6). Christians (*every Christian!*) shares a pew with Jesus in the heavenly realms. That should make us dizzy!

But, it is in the epistle to the Romans, and the sixth chapter, that Paul elaborates on this theme in great detail. He is responding to the suggestion that since grace

comes in response to our sin, why not sin all the more in order that we might experience all the more grace. This Antinomian suggestion is at the heart of all errant Christianity. Paul's reaction is swift and decisive: "By no means!" (Rom. 6:2). Willful continuation in sin in the expectation of grace is impossible because *we died to sin*. It is very precise language. As Christians, we are the kind of people who have died to sin. "Our old self was crucified with [Christ]" (Rom. 6:6). The point of our death is that we no longer live in the sphere that we once lived in. We are no longer under any obligation to obey our former masters. Paul's point? "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life" (Rom. 6:13). Paul is not afraid to use some of the most sublime theology to underpin his practical applications. We are to use our bodies in the service of holiness because we now serve a different Master.

In what is the first imperative in Romans, Paul urges: "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11).

But what does this reckoning involve? Let me suggest that we think of it in terms of what Danny Kaye might have made of Romans 6 and Colossians 3! I refer to the lyrics of "The Ugly Duckling".

There once was an ugly duckling
With feathers all stubby and brown
And the other birds said in so many words
Get out of town
Get out, get out, get out of town
And he went with a quack and a waddle and a quack
In a flurry of eiderdown
That poor little ugly duckling
Went wandering far and near
But at every place they said to his face
Now get out, get out, get out of here
And he went with a quack and a waddle and a quack
And a very unhappy tear
All through the wintertime he hid himself away
Ashamed to show his face, afraid of what others might say
All through the winter in his lonely clump of wheat
Till a flock of swans spied him there and very soon agreed
You're a very fine swan indeed!
A swan? Me a swan? Ah, go on!
And he said yes, you're a swan
Take a look at yourself in the lake and you'll see
And he looked, and he saw, and he said
I am a swan! Wheeeeeeeeeee!
I'm not such an ugly duckling
No feathers all stubby and brown

For in fact these birds in so many words said
The best in town, the best, the best
The best in town
Not a quack, not a quack, not a waddle or a quack
But a glide and a whistle and a snowy white back
And a head so noble and high
Say who's an ugly duckling?
Not !!
Not !!

Realizing ("counting") that our old self is dead and that we have been raised with Christ is a bit like the ugly duckling realizing that he was not a duck at all, but a graceful and beautiful swan. The motivation (and its only one motivation among many others) for godly living is realizing the wonder of what has happened to you. When it dawns on you, "Can this really be true of me?" everything changes.

But this is only the foundation. Paul wants to build something upon this ground. He wants us, in particular, to focus our gaze upwards.

2. Focus to Spiritual Maturity

There are two verbs employed in these opening two verses (the NIV confuses the issue a little by employing the same word, 'set' for both): "Set your hearts" (Col. 3:1, NASV renders it "keep seeking"), and "set your minds" (Col. 3:2). The first verb has to do with what we *desire* and *seek after*, and the other with *what we think*.

It is a good test of where we are spiritually, that we ask ourselves the fundamental questions: what is my chief aim in life? For what do I really live? What controls the way I engineer the priorities of my life? The answers to these questions tell me where my heart really is. If I have been raised into this new life then my affections and desires are focused on Jesus Christ who is above. It echoes the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt 6:21). Jesus is confronting us with basic choices: are we to live for this world or are we to live for the world to come? And Jesus' answer is simple: laying up treasures on earth (as the sole motivation of our existence) is wrong for three reasons. First, it is just plain daft! We cannot take our treasures with us into the world to come and excavations of the Pyramid burial sites have revealed the futility of it! Second, it is destructive —destructive, that is, of spiritual life and maturity, for the energy that keeps us focused on "earthly things" will prevent us drawing the energy that comes from seeking those things which are "above." Spiritual sensitivity is blunted to the degree we fail to focus on what really matters. And thirdly, it is in the long run disastrous because serving two masters destroys, as the account of Jesus' conversation with the Rich Young Ruler reveals. That young man's dream for wealth (wealth at the

expense of everything else, as it turned out) ruined his soul and Jesus could give him no words to assure him of eternal life while he stubbornly persisted in that course of life (see Mark 10:17-31). Concentration of things above will keep us from establishing wrong priorities with things below. Following Jesus involves self-denial of the most painful kind. We must be prepared to deny ourselves everything for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Do you know that statement by Jim Elliot? "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." He wrote it in his journal on October 28, 1949. Elliot was to pay the ultimate price for his discipleship when his life would be taken. That may not be the price demanded of us, but the willingness to give everything for the cause of the kingdom of God must be the same.

Such determined insistence on spiritual mindedness (spiritual desires and spiritual thoughts) is derided today as it has always been. Too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use, is the saying bandied about as though it were a truism. But it isn't true! In fact, as C. S. Lewis says, I think in *Mere Christianity*, such a mind-set has been the one most influential in changing *this world* for the better. Those whose hearts were most sensitive to earthly concerns and abuses were invariably of a heavenly frame of mind. It was certainly true of the philanthropist William Wilberforce, the prison reformer Elizabeth Fry, the founders of children's homes Thomas Barnardo and George Muller, and the founder of the Salvation Army William Booth, to name just a few.

If there is a foundation and a focus to spiritual maturity, there is also a method.

3. Method to Spiritual Maturity

There are a number of very practical things that Paul would have us grasp in these verses as to the methodology we are to employ in securing spiritual maturity. These include the following two:

First, we must engage in a feeding of our minds on the Lord Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the Scriptures. Note that Paul says we are to seek those things which are above, "where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1). He is quoting Psalm 110, of course, one of the most well known and often cited Messianic Psalms in the canon of Scripture! And what that tells us is that Paul scoured his Bible to find Jesus. He meditated on the Scriptures and thereby got to know Jesus better. Later in this epistle he will exhort in the following manner: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16). If Christ's word isn't dwelling in us richly, then neither is Christ Himself dwelling in us richly. The most basic way to grow in grace is to read the word of God to greater profit, finding in it, on every page, God's remedy for sin and ruin in the provision of His Son for our salvation.

Secondly, and perhaps this is the most basic of all, we need to appreciate that what goes in my mind transforms the whole of my life. If I understand the riches of His grace then I will live differently. If I don't Jesus will recede in my Christian life.

The question you have to ask yourself is, What do you think of Jesus? Do you love Him now more (not as much as, but MORE) than you did a year ago? If not, then do not go to sleep tonight before you pour out your heart to Him and beg Him that you would. What if you say, "I've lost my love for Him and I don't know how to get it back." Come back to His word, praise Him in the company of His people. Never has any one sought for Him who did not find Him.

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