

Colossians: The Incomparable Christ – Exposition of Colossians XII

Colossians 3:1-8

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Turn with me in your Bibles to Colossians, chapter 3. You remember that all along of our study in this Book, we have said that Paul has focused on the incomparable Christ. He has attempted to teach us that Christ is supreme, in Him is all blessedness, and therefore we are not to seek blessedness outside of Him. He is the all-sufficient Christ. In chapter 1 Paul focuses on the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In chapter 2 we see the apostle Paul deliver five warnings against those who might call in to question the all-sufficiency of the incomparable Christ. We saw him speak against persuasive speech drawing us away from the sufficiency of Jesus Christ in verse 4 of chapter 2. We saw him speak against false speculation leading us away from Christ in verse 8 of chapter 2. We saw him speak against a legalism, a bowing down to man-made rules and rituals leading us away from the all-sufficiency of Christ in verse 16 of chapter 2. We saw Paul speak against angel worship and all forms of false worship in chapter 2.

And again at the very end in verse 20, we saw him speak against the abuse of the body for the supposed sake of spiritual good. Asceticism, it's called. All of these things he warns against in chapter 2. And again he reminds us throughout that chapter that when we are in fellowship with Christ, when we are in relation to Christ, when we are united to Christ from that flows all the fullness that we could ever hope for in the Christian life. We don't find fullness in the Christian life by starting with Christ and then obtaining some second subsequent blessing that really leads us into spiritual fullness, though all fullness is found in Christ. We grow in that fullness, but it is found in Christ, not by searching some place else. Forgiveness is found in Christ. There is no name under heaven whereby we can be saved, whereby we can be forgiven, except His name. And finally, freedom is found in Christ, for it is only in Christ and under His rule that we find freedom. These things Paul has stressed in chapter 1 and chapter 2.

When we come to verse 1 of chapter 3, we come to a turning point in this letter. Paul is moving from setting forth the doctrine of the incomparable Christ, and now he is going to begin to apply that doctrine to Christian living. Let us now hear

the word of the living God, inspired, infallible, inerrant.

Colossians 3:1-8

Our Lord and our God, this is Your word, and as such it is meant for our upbuilding, our edification. It is also meant for our reproof and correction. As we come to this word, cause us to come with our hearts in such a posture that we are ready to be changed and corrected by it. This means, oh Lord, that we must come not judging this word, but being judged by this word. But how sweet it is, oh God, to be sought out and judged by You and so corrected and sent down the way of life. Do this for us, we pray, by the work of the Spirit, and cause us to be hearers and doers of the word, all for the glory of Christ we ask it in His name, Amen.

As we turn to chapter 3 in the book of Colossians, Paul is now concerned with the practical effects of his teaching for Christian living. It is not that what he has been saying in the previous two chapters is impractical. Not at all. Far from it. In fact, the apostle Paul would argue if we do not understand the teaching, the doctrine, the theology that he has set forth in the first two chapters, we will not know how to live the Christian life. And I want you to see the apostle Paul move in the first two chapters from a focus on the person of Christ and the work of Christ in chapter 3, verse 1 all the way down to chapter 4, verse 6 to a focus on Christian living. He moves from telling us who Christ is, what He has done, how we are united to Him, how we bind all fullness to Him, to then telling you in light of fact that we have been united to Christ, you ought to live this way. Paul moves from the person of Christ to Christian living. Looked at another way, he moves from giving us doctrine of Christ, doctrine about Christ, theology of Christ, to the topic of godliness or holiness. Why? Because for the apostle Paul, doctrine never has done what it is intended to do until it leads us to godliness, because knowing notions is not God's ultimate goal for us. Conformity to the image of Christ is the ultimate goal. And doctrine is for the purpose of leading us to that godliness and holiness. Another way of looking at it is this way. In the first two chapters Paul shows us who Christ is and who we are in Christ. Theologians say he shows us the indicative - what we are, how we are, how we stand in Christ. What we have been made in Christ. He does that in the first two chapters.

Beginning in chapter 3, verse 1, he tells us what we ought to do because we are in Christ. The indicative theologians say and the imperatives, what we are, our standing in Christ, what we ought to do because we are in Christ. In other words, he puts it this way, to say it in a nutshell. You are in Christ. Now be who you are. You are in Christ. Now act in such a way that it is consistent with what you profess to be and what you have in fact been made in Jesus Christ. You are united to Christ. These truths are true about you. Now live in a way which reflects consistency which flows out of the reality of being united to Christ.

Those factors remind us of at least a couple of things, my friends. The first one is

this. We must never underplay the importance of knowing scriptural truth and doctrine. For the apostle Paul you cannot live the Christian life unless you understand Christian truth and that means that every single one of us must be a theologian to some extent. We don't have to teach a Systematic Theology class or an Old Testament theology class, but we all must know the basics of Christian beliefs because without them we can't live the Christian life. It is incumbent upon us to know the truth if we are going to live in a way that honors God. In fact, if we are going to receive the blessing of living in fellowship with God, we must know the truth, because the truth, Paul says, is unto godliness.

There's a flip side of that truth that we must remember as well and it's this. We must never be satisfied with mere intellectual apprehension of doctrine of scriptural truth. We must not be satisfied until that doctrine is working its way out in our life. For Paul, he expected more of Christians than that we know about God. There's a difference between knowing notions and knowing God. We can know a lot of things about God and never be in a fellowship with Him, a saving relationship with Him. Paul expects us to live in such a way that we reflect that our knowledge is not just mental knowledge, it's not just cognitive knowledge, it's not just mental knowledge that we're nodding our heads in agreement. It's something that's working through the whole of our lives. It's showing itself and how we love one another. It's showing itself and how we are loyal to the gospel, loyal to Christ, proclaiming His name, and living as if He is Lord in the world because Paul has told us that He is. We must never be satisfied with mere intellectual apprehension of doctrine. It must work itself out in our lives.

Friends, these two things, these two areas, are things where Christians make grave mistakes today. Have you ever heard someone say that Christianity is a way of life, not a doctrine. Well, you hear many evangelicals say that today. But, did you know, it was the liberals who first said that a century ago? They said it because they wanted Christianity to be a moral system, not rooted in a system of scriptural truth. But you can't have Christianity unless you have Christian truth, because Christian living is based on Christian believing which is based on the realities revealed in the word. So if we're going to grow, we must be people of the Book. If we are not people of the Book our growth will be warped in some way if we grow at all. And therefore it is absolutely essential that we grow in Christ.

Have you heard someone say Christianity is not a way of life? It's a person. Sometimes people say that, and we hear evangelicals say that as well to indicate this. Christianity is all about a relationship with God. It has nothing to do with how you live. It doesn't work itself out necessarily in holiness. Wrong, Paul said that Christianity is about a person. It's based upon a person and His work, and it's about a relationship with that person. But that relationship requires us to know something about Him and to do something in light of that knowledge. And so Christianity is a person, a doctrine and a way of life. All of those things, not just one of them. And these things we learn as we look at Colossians as a whole.

Now Paul sets before us today in these first eight verses teaching about Christian living. If we were to outline chapter 3, verse 1 all the way down to chapter 4, verse 6, we would see the apostle Paul teaching us truths about Christian living calling us to action in Christian living in a variety of areas. In verses 1 through 8 which we're going to look to today, Paul is telling us about our relationship to God, and what must be a part of that relationship.

But if we look on down to verse 9, and then down to verse 17 of chapter 3, we will see Paul giving us instructions as to how we are to relate to one another in the local church, in the congregation, in the assembly of God's people.

Then if we were to look beyond that in verse 18 and all the way down to verse 21, we would see Paul telling us how we are to live in the context of our family, in the context of our home. Family life - Christian living and family life.

And then beginning in verse 22 and down to verse 1 of chapter 4 he tells us how we are to live in relationship to those with whom we work, either those who are employers or our employees.

And finally, from verse 2 down to verse 6 he teaches us about prayer. So he's going to specific spheres of life, and he's saying this is how your union with Christ works out in a practical way in Christian living. This is how the supremacy and the all-sufficiency of Christ works out in your Christian living. Let's look at the four imperatives that the apostle Paul sets forth then in these eight verses. Colossians 3, verses 1 through 8.

I. Christians must set their hearts on things above: "Seek the things above"

First of all, notice that Paul tells us that Christians must set their hearts on things above. In verse 1 he says, "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." What is Paul saying? Paul is saying that we are to set our affections on spiritual things. That is where our heart is to be. As one old Puritan said, "Treasures are laid up in heaven only as treasures on earth are laid down. We set our hearts on things above." Notice in this passage that Paul's structure of what we are in Christ, and what we ought to do in Christ is intact.

Notice in verse 1. "If you have been raised up with Christ." The *if* is not there to raise the question about whether you have or not, the point is *because you have*. Since you have been raised with Christ, therefore, live this way. Paul is telling you who you are, because you as a Christian have been united to Christ because you have been raised with Christ, therefore, set your affections on the things above. Set your desires, your yearnings, your heart on the spiritual blessings and principles which are found only in Christ. The apostle Paul knows that this is absolutely necessary for Christian growth. And it's absolutely necessary for

combating sin. Your heart must be set on God. He must be the one that you're hungering after. The blessings which are found in Him must be those blessings which are your first priority. Samuel Rutherford once said, "Desires or more grace and groanings which cannot be uttered are growing pains and we should wish to feel them more and more."

And friends, if we're not feeling them, it is a sign that God is not working in our hearts, and that we'd better do something about coming to grips with Him, doing business with Him, closing with Christ. Because Christians experience that spiritual hunger for God. Their affections are set on things above. That does not mean that we are unconcerned with temporal things. It doesn't mean that we're bad businessmen, or bad fathers. The apostle Paul is going to talk about how to be a good Christian father and mother and child and businessman, etc. in the next few verses. He's not saying don't be concerned about things, but he's saying where's your allegiance, where are your priorities? What he is saying is very close to what Jesus says when He says, seek first the kingdom of God, and its righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you. What do you thank God for most? What do you thank God for first?

We are in the thanksgiving season. And our brother, Jeff Elliott, asked me after the service, "You know a good application of this passage would be just to ask people when you think about thanking God, what are the first things that you thank Him for?" If they are primarily temporal things, temporal blessings, that may be telling something to you about the state of your soul. If you are first thankful for temporal blessings, and not for the things above, that may be telling you something. Or, if you are thankful of the temporal blessings, and not focused on the one who gives the temporal blessings, that may be telling you that something is awry in your priority of life.

Paul says first principle: Set your hearts on things above. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Is He your treasure? Are things above your treasure? This is a good test to see whether we are in Christ or not.

II. Christians must set their minds on things above: "set your mind on things above"

Secondly, the apostle Paul says beginning in verse 2 that Christians must set their minds on things above. Not only should our affections be set on God, our desires be set on God, but our minds ought to be set on God. Paul says, "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ and God. When Christ, who is our light is revealed, then you also will be revealed in glory." Now that's a difficult passage, but at least it means this.

Again, notice again how Paul tells us who we are and how we should act. "We

have died and our life is hidden with Christ.” Because of that, Paul said, because of that reality, that's who you are in Christ. You've died, because your life is hidden with Christ in God, therefore, set your thoughts on heavenly matters. Paul wants not only your hearts in glory, he wants your thoughts in glory.

Paul says that our thoughts should be focused on heavenly matters. We should be pondering them. We should be meditating on them. We should be reflecting upon them. We should be thinking about these heavenly matters. Set your mind on things above.

And what does he mean when he says “You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God?” A mysterious phrase, isn't it? But at least it means this. Though who you are is hidden before the eyes of men right now, you are the body of Christ. Though that may be hidden before the eyes of men, and though it may be obscured to your own sight as you see your imperfections, your failings, and the weakness of the church of God, our sinfulness, our foolishness, the tragic way that we fail to bear witness to who God is in this world with our lips and our lives. Though that reality may be obscured in the world, yet your life is hidden with Christ in God. Who you are is absolutely apparent to the heavenly Father, through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Paul goes on to say that one day, just like Christ will be revealed from glory to be not simply the suffering servant, but the Lord of the world so you will be revealed to be the inheritance of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. And in light of that fact you've set your thoughts in heaven. Have you ever stopped to ponder your sins and become so depressed that you could not go on and seeing what you have yet become, in seeing what you do to your brothers and sisters in Christ and to those who love you the most because of your sin, willful and otherwise? And sometimes it's the so-called unwillful sins that are the most bruising and the most brutal.

Have you ever thought and pondered on that, and have you ever juxtaposed that with what Paul says here when he says, you set your thoughts on things above because what you are may not be apparent to the world and it may not even be apparent to you, but what you are will one day be revealed. You will be stood before the Lord spotless. No moral impurity, no imperfection, absolutely complete in Christ and the whole world will know it. Paul says you set your mind on that. Lightfoot said many years ago, “You must not only seek heaven, you must think heaven.” Seeking heaven, our affections are put there, thinking heaven our thoughts are focused on the things which are above.

Again, this does not mean that we ignore temporal things. It means that our priorities are set. And as we prosecute our duties as men and women in this life, we do not forget that we are citizens of a city with foundations. And though we are pilgrims here, and though we are to live as obedient Pilgrims here doing the will of God, yet there is another home which awaits us. And there is a reality

about us which is going to be revealed, and all the praise and all the glory will not go to us, but to the Lord Himself.

III. Christians must engage in spiritual execution: “Put your sin to death”

Paul goes on to say in this passage, beginning in verse 5, that Christians must engage in spiritual execution. Paul says, put your sin to death. The NIV and the King James catch it better than the New American Standard does; it's not just, *consider the members of your earthly body are dead*, it is, *put to death sin in your earthly body, in the members of your earthly body*. Paul is telling us that we are to kill sin. Richard Baxter once said, “Kill sin before it kills you.” Kill sin before it kills you. Sin, though it presents itself to you always as something that is good, will ultimately destroy you. And the apostle Paul is saying in the Christian life we must kill sin.

I want you to notice that Paul does not make mortification, the killing of sin, optional. There are some people who speak as if we can be saved by Christ without His Lordship working itself out in our life. The apostle Paul says here the Christian will be killing sin in his or her life. Paul gives a reason for that. He tells us we are to kill sin why? Verse 6. Because of these things, the wrath of God will come. Paul is saying God is going to judge the world by sin, because of sin. And therefore we must kill sin because God is going to judge sin. We cannot be ambivalent about sin. We cannot be apathetic about sin. We must kill it, we must seek to drive it out of our lives.

And notice how close this sin seems to be connected to our living. Paul says it is in the members of our earthly body. Put these things to death. He speaks of sin as if it's a body part. It's become so interwoven into our lives it needs to be ripped out and abstracted from our body, and it needs to be killed. The apostle Paul says we are to put to death sin. And he tells us specifically five things that must be done. I remind you that the city of Colossae and the Lycaonia Valley was a place like much of the Roman Empire. It was known for sexual immorality. And the apostle Paul zeroes in on sexual sin. To begin with, he says, kill immorality. Immorality in this passage refers to illicit, sexual conduct, illicit sexual sins. He says you kill it. The apostle Paul is speaking to people who have come from that context. He's concerned that they're going to be influenced by the thinking and the mind-set and behaving of their culture, and he says you kill that kind of immorality. You kill it.

But he doesn't stop with the deeds. Notice his next step. He says kill impurity. Not only immorality, but impurity. What's he speaking about? Impurity refers to the uncleanness of our thoughts. Our intentions. What he's trying to get into is our heads? He's trying to get into your thought life. He's saying don't just kill sin in your deeds, your actions; you do it in your thought life as well.

But he doesn't stop there. He moves on. He says kill immorality, impurity and passion or evil desires. What's he getting at that there? He's getting at the will. He's saying if your desires are not changed, then your thought life is going to revert to what it was doing before, and your behavior is going to revert to what it was doing before. You know that when you sin, if you secretly harbor the desire to continue that sin, you will, in fact, at some point give in to the deed itself. But if you nip the desire for the sin in the bud, then you can get it in the behavior, then you can get it in the thought life. The apostle Paul is saying I want your deeds, your thinking and your desires to be freed of sin. I want you to attack them. I want you to kill the sin in you.

And he goes on to say fourthly, that he wants us to kill greed or covetousness. Paul is saying that wanting things or persons that do not belong to us is a root of this type of sinful behavior, and therefore, covetousness is to be put aside. One of the glorious things about covetousness in the Ten Commandments is this. The other nine Commandments you can do externally. You can't covet externally. Nobody can see you covet. Well, all right sometimes people can see you covet. But you have to covet with your heart and so the apostle Paul again is getting at the heart. He's saying I just don't want you to be righteous outwardly, I want your hearts to be righteous. So don't covet because that coveting is going to lead you into an inordinate desire for things that you do not have and which do not belong to you, and that's going to leave your wills to be affected, it's going to leave your thinking to be affected, it's going to leave your behavior to be affected and don't do it.

And then the apostle Paul concludes with a death blow. He says, and by the way, that covetousness is idolatry. And you scratch your head and you say how can covetousness be equal to idolatry. And Paul is standing there waiting for you and he's telling you this way. Covetousness is idolatry because covetousness is worshiping your own will. Covetousness is saying, I am setting my will up as the standard of behavior and therefore you are worshiping your will. And what is idolatry? Worshiping anything else other than God, in any other way than the way that he has commanded. And so when we worship our wills, we become idolaters. It's yet another way that Paul and Jesus tell us that when we commit one sin, we commit them all, because they're interconnected. When you're covetous, you're idolatrous. When you are idolatrous, you are covetous. They are connected. So the apostle Paul says kill these sins.

Now let me hasten to say that we do not mortify sin in order to gain favor with God. God's favor must rest upon us before we are able to mortify sin and that's why Ebenezer Erskine once said, "The Christian mortifies sin because he is at peace with God. The legalist mortifies sin to try to be at peace with God." We mortify sin in our life not to gain favor with God. We mortify sin because the grace of God is present in our lives, and because we desire to be conformed to the image of the one that He has destined us to be conformed to the image of. Paul says mortify sin. No passive approach to sin does he have. We are to kill it. We

are to mortify it.

IV. Christians must lay aside the practice of sin: Put aside sin.

And that leads him to his comments in verse 8. Christians must not only set their hearts on things above, they must not only set their minds on things above, they must not only desire to kill sin, but they must lay aside the practice of sin. Paul says put aside sin. In them, in these things, you also once walked when you were living in them. But now you also put them aside, anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive speech from your mouth. Paul says, 'You congregation, you were once captured by this.' This is a very encouraging word as discouraging as it might seem at first. Paul is acknowledging that these people had real struggles with deadly sins which were destroying their lives.

Very often, even though we don't believe in preparationism, we act in the Christian church as if we have to scrub ourselves up in order to come to Christ, because we wouldn't want any unseemly sinners coming to Christ, would we, at First Presbyterian Church. The apostle Paul says this godly church at Colossae was filled with people whose lives had been characterized by anger and malice and rage and all sorts of sexual impurities, but they've been changed in Christ and as a witness to the world. But it reminds us, my friends, that there is hope for us. Because even if the rest of the world doesn't know what's going on in our hearts, we know what's going on in our hearts sometime, and we don't want the rest of the world to know it because we don't think they will accept us. The apostle Paul is saying, I know what you're struggling with. Paul wouldn't be talking to these Colossians about these things if they weren't struggling with them. That would be a waste of his time and theirs. Paul is speaking about these things because these are things we as Christians continue to struggle with, and the quicker we fess up to that, the quicker we can get about the working of continuing Christian repentance and mortification of sin.

And the apostle Paul again says, lay aside this, specifically. He doesn't speak in generalities because you can't fight sin in generalities. You've got to fight it specifically. Why? Because when you repent in generalities, you never own up to the reality of the sin that is destroying you and destroying the fellowship of God. And so Paul goes to specifics. Notice what he says. Anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive speech. Look at the logic again to this bifold description of sin. Anger refers to that burning hatred for other people. A burning hatred. Wrath in this context refers to those outbursts of passion, that rage that we have, that ungodly rage that we have for others. Malice refers to ill-will towards one's neighbor. Slander refers to railing or defaming another's character, and abusive speech refers to those destructive words that we use to tear people down. The apostle Paul says people who are captured by sin are people who are internally conflicted. They are filled with rage, and that rage pours over in the life of their speech. You want to see a person characterized by ungodliness and by the grip

of Satan on them, they are filled with anger, they are bitter inside and it pours over in their speech, either in their general speech or in their abusive speech to other people. And the apostle Paul says to these Colossians, "Don't you live that way because that's not who you are. That's what you were, but that's not what you are now. Be who you are, and therefore kill sin."

Now why is he having to say that? Because when we become Christians, we do not become immediately sinlessly perfected. You can breathe a sigh of relief. You don't have to be perfect yet. One day you will be. Not here, but there. Now, you must grow. Augustine said the church was a hospital where sick sinners get well and that it is. But those sick sinners are not being simply ministered to by the great physician of the soul, they are actively involved in their own treatment. By the Holy Spirit and the work of sanctification, they strive to kill sin. Are you striving to kill sin? It is one of the marks of Christian growth. Are you locating, identifying and then seeking out and destroying sin in your life which is destroying you and destroying your relationships with others? It's a sign that the spirit is at work in you, if you are.

Do you have not a clue how to fight against sin, have you come this morning not believing, not trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ, not knowing fellowship with Him, let me say very quickly, you can't fight sin apart from Christ. You are dead in sin and the only way you can fight sin is when by union with Christ you have been made dead to sin. Then you can fight the remnants of sin in your life. And that you can only do by bowing the knee to Christ and receiving Him as the all sufficient Savior who brings fullness and freedom and forgiveness. Let's look to Him in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we bless your Holy Name and ask that You would cause Your word to break forth in light and godliness in our lives, for Christ's sake, Amen.

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