

Paul's Letter to the

COLOSSIANS

LESSON 6 COLOSSIANS 3:1-11

A NEW IDENTITY | COLOSSIANS 3:1-11

In one way or another, the reality of our human experience involves our relationship to God. From a Christian perspective, the writers of the New Testament depict this reality in various ways, including being in God's kingdom; being a child of God; being in the light; being made righteous; or being in Christ. This identity is not something we have achieved. Rather it is a new or transformed reality that God established through Christ.

A change in our identity results in changed conduct, so that how we live reflects who we have become. Quite often, instructions regarding this new way of life contain two elements: exhortations to live in a given way because of our new identity; or contrasts with our former identity before the work of Christ was enacted in our lives. And in this passage from Colossians, Paul is presenting the interrelationships between our new identity and our new conduct.

Here Paul begins with the divinely established reality of our baptism, which he had previously explained to this audience in 2:12-13. In baptism we were raised with Christ (3:1a). This is the springboard for everything he will now say in our text. Because they have a resurrected reality, he exhorts the audience to seek the things above that, in this context, entails seeking conduct that reflects our resurrected life in Christ who sits in the position of power and status at God's right hand (3:1b).

The so-called "things on earth" introduced in 3:2 will be detailed as immoral behavior in 3:5 which includes sexual immorality, evil desire, and the idolatry of greed. Because we experience a death to our old identity in baptism (3:3a) we are now called upon to put such ways to death (3:5a).

Though we were raised with Christ our lives remain hidden with Christ (3:3). That is, our current physical, mortal existence in some way masks the reality of our



resurrected, eternal existence. Such a resurrection reality will only be manifested in glory with Christ at the final revealing of Christ to the world (3:4). Nevertheless, even now in the present Christ is our life because we were raised with him.

Colossians 3:8-10 uses imagery of "putting off" and "putting on" to depict a number of points about our reality and conduct. We put away ways of life detrimental to harmonious communal life such as rage, anger, evil intentions, slander, abusive language, and acting falsely to each other (3:8-9a) because we put off our old identity and its conduct (3:9a). The new reality that we put on involves ongoing divine renewal in knowledge in accord with Christ who is the image of God (3:10).

We who have heard the gospel are now clothed with a new self, clothed with what may appear at times and to some to be a life like the emperor's new clothes – we still struggle with anger, slander, abusive language, and at times give ourselves over to impurity, evil desires, and the idolatry of greed; but we are in fact clothed in Christ Jesus, raised with him, renewed in him, clothed in the majesty of not an emperor, but the King of Kings.

We are clothed "with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (3:10). That is the whole point of Paul's letter to the Colossians. It is a renewal and deepening of knowledge that restores us to our original calling as those created in the image of God – a reality which we need to preach, hear, and live each day.

COLOSSIANS 3:1-11 (NLT)

3 Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. **2** Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. **3** For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. **4** And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.

5 So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world. **6** Because of these sins, the anger of God is coming. **7** You used to do these things when your life was still part of this world. **8** But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language. **9** Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. **10** Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. **11** In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4 | NEW PRIORITIES

At the end of Colossians 2, Paul talked about what it means to have died with Christ. Now in Colossians 3, Paul will talk about what it means to have been raised to life with Christ. He begins in 3:1, *“Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God’s right hand.”* This is something that early Christians learned to celebrate. They would draw on Psalm 110:1 specifically: *“The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit in the place of honor at my right hand until I humble your enemies, making them a footstool under your feet.’”*

Early Christians would combine that idea, as Jesus himself had done, with Daniel 7 in which the Son of Man is exalted to sit beside the Ancient of Days on his throne: *“As my vision continued that night, I saw someone like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient One and was led into his presence. He was given authority, honor, and sovereignty over all the nations of the world, so that people of every race and nation and language would obey him. His rule is eternal—it will never end. His kingdom will never be destroyed.”* (Daniel 7:13-14).

The image that comes out of these texts, combined with the reality of Christ’s ascension (Acts 1), is important for understanding what it meant to be an early Christian and also a Christian today. But here’s a problem: For many Christians today, the idea of Jesus being in heaven or ascending to be with God means that Jesus is not around anymore and he’s left us by ourselves. We could come back and say Jesus has given us his Spirit, which is true. But the idea of Jesus being “absent” is not what the ascension is about. When Jesus ascends to the “right hand of God,” the “right hand” is a symbol of power. And it means, as Jesus says, *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”* (Matthew 28:18).

We might be happy to know that Jesus has all authority in heaven, but we might struggle to figure out what it means for Jesus to have “all authority” on earth. How does that work? Again and again it works out through the church being the church, bearing witness to him in its own life of love and in its service to the world, especially to the least among us. This is what it looks like when God’s kingdom is coming because Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of God.

So if we have been raised to new life with Christ, Paul says to search for the things that are above: *“Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth”* (Col 3:2). In other words, we must look at this world from the point of view of heaven. It doesn’t mean we should be so heavenly minded that we’re of no earthly use. Rather, we are to share in the rule of Christ over the world.

This type of “rule” isn’t domineering, because as Jesus himself said, the rulers of this world enforce their will on others, but we’re going to do it the other way: *“Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:43-45).

That is the One whose throne we now share: *“For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God”* (Col 3:3). This sense of our true identity that we have – being already there with Christ in God – is important both for the present and for the future. When we face the death of someone we love, we want to know where they are now. As Paul says in Philippians, they are with Jesus, *“which is far better”* (Phil 1:23), and here in Colossians, *“they are hidden with Christ in God”* (3:3).

That’s all we need to know for the moment, as long as we remember it doesn’t stop there, because as Paul says in verse four: *“When Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory”* (Col 3:4). In other words, when God finishes the new creation and completes what was begun in Jesus’ resurrection and reveals Jesus as the center and ruler of it all, then we too “will be revealed with him in glory.”

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4 | NEW PRIORITIES

That is the extraordinary promise that we have now. It's not as if we have our hearts in heaven now and one day we'll go there. Rather, if we have our hearts and minds in heaven, we are of more use on earth and not less. Then, when Christ is revealed in his second coming, our currently true identity will be fully revealed in glory. And that's the point at which we will realize the true scale of values in this world.

There's a wonderful passage in C.S. Lewis' book, *The Great Divorce*, that illustrates this idea. Lewis imagines people who come up on a day trip from hell to the outskirts of the heavenly world, which is the new creation, more real than the present one. At a certain point they see someone coming by, a lady with people dancing in front of her and throwing flowers, musicians playing, and boys and girls singing.

The person telling the story assumes that the lady is a person of particular importance and he wonders who she could be. But the person he's with, who is guiding him, tells him that he never would have heard of her, "Her name on earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green."

The guide goes on to explain that Sarah Smith has this large "family" that now surrounds her because on earth she was kind and gracious to many different people, even people whom she barely knew. Every animal that came past her door, she looked after it and cared for it. Every child who was lost on the street, she became like a mother to them. As the guide explains, "In her they became themselves. And now the abundance of life she has in Christ from the Father flows over into them." She was radiating the love of God to all who met her. She was "one of the great ones," the guide says, even though on earth she was a "nobody."

That's C.S. Lewis' way of putting it, a parable of sorts, but it makes the point that our lives are presently hidden with Christ in God. Only he knows our heart, our struggles, and what it's really meant to us to live out the life of Christ and to follow him day by day. The world doesn't see that. But we know what it's like, and Christ knows what it's like. And only on the last day will we discover what those things truly meant.

Therefore, the crucial thing about Colossians 3:1-4 is to get the priorities right, particularly the mental priorities. Rather than looking to heaven and thinking we'll go there one day, we must know that we are already there with Jesus and see the world from that point of view. Heaven and earth have been brought together in Jesus, and if we are one of Jesus' people, then we are one of the places where heaven and earth intersect.

When we confess that Jesus has been raised from the dead, we're not simply making a claim about a miracle that took place two thousand years ago. The point is that when Jesus was raised from the dead, the new creation was launched. That new creation has begun already, and we are part of it and caught up in it. That new reality will remain secret and puzzling, often even to us (and certainly to the world around us), but it will be visible in the end.

Paul says this is the way to the genuinely new life that the church must model and celebrate, and that takes us into the next passage, which is one of the most central and important ethical appeals anywhere in Paul's writing.

COLOSSIANS 3:5-11 | PUTTING OFF

In Colossians 3:5-11 Paul uses an image that would have been thought of by the early church as a baptismal image. It's about taking off one set of clothes and putting on another set. When talking about what it means to be a Christian, Paul talks about things that must be put off and thrown away like dirty clothes, so that we can put on new things. This is the life of Christian virtue, of learning new habits of heart and life.

Here we start with the clothes that we are to take off: *“Put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you” (3:5)*. Paul doesn't mean that we should cease to enjoy the good things of creation and the world that God has given us. Rather, imagine that if this world was all there was, what sort of behaviors would be appropriate? This was the philosophy of the Epicureans, who believed that this earth was all there was, and heaven was far away, so “let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.” Paul would say that's what it looks like when the parts of you that belong on earth think that they can behave according to the earth. Therefore he says, *“Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world” (3:5)*.

Paul is putting his finger on something here. This isn't about the church having certain rules about what you can and cannot do. The church is trying to follow the *one God revealed in Jesus* over against the idols. There's one goddess in particular, Aphrodite, the goddess of erotic love, who made massive demands on people in the ancient world and led many to believe that the pursuit of sexual pleasure was the way we were meant to live. And Paul says these things must be “put to death” (3:5). He uses words that cover the basic territory of the idea, and while it's impossible to spell out all the different varieties of sexual behavior that are ruled out, those things become clear as we build up from the rest of Scripture.

And Paul says quite bluntly, it's *“because of these sins, the anger of God is coming” (3:6)*. And as in Romans 1, it doesn't seem like Paul's saying the Colossians are storing up wrath for a future date, though that may be the case. **What he means is that communities that behave that way already find their lives distorted.** These things create long-lasting wounds that damage people and relationships. And Paul says, *“You used to do these things when your life was still part of this world” (3:7)*. This was a major moral challenge. In the ancient world, it was only the Jews and the early Jesus-followers who didn't regard sex as something that one should get as much of as one could. In the ancient world, illicit sexual behavior didn't have much of a social stigma attached to it. So when people looked at the early Christians, they saw them living in a new way. It was one of the distinctions of early Christianity.

This shows us something important about what's going on in Colossians. If we only read the end of Colossians 2, where Paul explains why we don't need to follow a host of external regulations, we might think that Paul is saying we don't believe in rules, that we just believe in enjoying what comes naturally. But then we get to Colossians 3 and we realize it's not like that at all. What counts in Colossians 2 is new creation. The new creation has arrived, and those old rules which were pointing forward to it are no longer relevant. What counts in Colossians 3 is also new creation, and in the new creation there is no longer sexual immorality. In the new creation we are renewed according to the image of the creator, and those who follow Jesus are to embody his ways in their own lives.

Having talked about sexual immorality in 3:5-7, Paul then moves to one of the major areas where he says that followers of Jesus must be radically different from those around them. And that concerns the areas of speech: *“But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language. Don't lie to each other” (3:8-9)*. Here he returns to the image of clothing: *“You have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds” (3:9)*. This is what baptism is all about. We take off that old set of clothes that represents the way we used to live, and now we have a new set of clothes, a new lifestyle. *“Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him” (3:10)*.

COLOSSIANS 3:5-11 | PUTTING OFF

Moreover, verse 11 reminds us of the unity we have in Jesus. No religious, cultural, racial, or social divisions are to divide Christians any longer because Jesus demolished them when he died and rose again. None of us is above the other. We are to be people who are known for being part of a worldwide family, where the old distinctions of are irrelevant: *“In this new life, it doesn’t matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us” (3:11).*

We are not to label people like this. We are all human beings made in the image of God. And if we are in Christ, we are human beings in the process of being renewed, and we must welcome, value, and cherish one another accordingly. As a part of Christ’s family, we are image bearers of Christ, tasked with the vocation of reflecting God into the world. And in our thanksgiving and praise, we are to reflect the praise of the world back to God.

That’s what this whole passage is about, how to reflect God into the world and how not to reflect the ways of the world back to itself. This opens us to the vision that Paul casts in 3:12 and onwards, of what it might actually look like to live as image bearers in God’s world.

DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever heard of someone being described as being “so heavenly minded that they’re of no earthly use?” What does that mean, and what does it look like?
2. When most people think about eternal life they probably imagine life after death. But Paul is clear in the first part of Colossians 3 that followers of Christ share in his resurrection here and now in this life. How do we cultivate a way of life that is heavenly minded? When you set your mind on things that are above, how does that affect both the way you see the world and the way you live in it?
3. Verse 5 uses the language “put to death” for “whatever in you is earthly.” What is your response to that? (e.g., Does it seem harsh? Do we feel we’ve accomplished that? Or didn’t need to do it with some of these things?) Why? Have we experienced this “death” to some things? How does that feel?
4. Paul names two main areas of behavior of the old life that is now to be abandoned. They have to do with sex and speech – two central areas of human life, both involving great potential for good and also for evil. Even though some pretend that these things are purely private matters, how does wrongdoing in these two areas of life lead to problems in relationships and in the church as a whole?
5. When talking about what it means to be a Christian, Paul uses the image of clothing to describe the things that must be taken off and thrown away like old clothes, so that we can put on new things in their place. Now that we’re in Christ, we take off the old self and put on the new self. How would you describe how someone's *identity* changes when they come to faith in Christ? In what ways has your identity changed?
6. Verse 11 reminds us of the unity we have in Jesus. No religious, cultural, racial, or social divisions divide Christians any longer because Jesus demolished them when he died and rose again. He has redeemed all of us – none of us is above the other. How have you experienced this type of unity in the body of Christ? In what ways do you think Christians and the church can and should improve in this area?