

IN CHRIST ALONE (5) Living to Please God
Colossians 3:1-17

Wangaratta, 2/11/14

I've been thinking a lot this week about living the Christian life; prompted by the passage we're up to in our studies in Colossians. I don't know about you, but I'm often disappointed with my own efforts in this. I'm not exactly sure what I expected, but I've always understood the Christian life to be a living, growing thing. I've been a Christian now for at least fifty years. That's a long time! I hope I'm still growing! By now, I thought I would have had more answers to life's questions than I do; I thought I would have mastered more of life's challenges, than I sometimes feel I have. Is this normal – or have I been a bit slack?

One verse "jumped out at me" from our passage this week, verse 3, from Colossians 3. I've been thinking about it a lot; and I've included it in our outlines as a key verse to what I want to say this morning: "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God."

Sometimes, Paul tells us things we should do. He's not at all slow in handing out good advice, and sometimes quite specific instructions about living the Christian life. He doesn't do that here. This is a simple statement of fact, involving something in the past, that has ongoing implications for how we live now. And that caught my attention. Paul is saying to me, and you, and to everyone who has accepted God's offer of salvation through Jesus: "You died!" Past tense. It happened. But that wasn't the finish. "Your life is now hidden" – present tense – describing our lives as they are now – hidden, "with Christ, in God."

Let me suggest there is plenty in this one verse to occupy your thoughts for quite some time! Why "hidden" with Christ? What does this actually mean?

I mentioned last time I spoke, that I grew up in a Christian family, with the support of the church – a great introduction to our faith. I've always regarded the "official" start to my life as a Christian as less than ideal. I "went forward" at an evangelistic rally when I was about thirteen, after a message and an appeal I later regarded as manipulative. The speaker almost literally "frightened hell" out of me that night (not necessarily a bad thing!)

But fear is a poor motivator. It easily turns faith into a kind of insurance policy, with being good, doing the right thing, going to church, the premium you pay for the benefit you hope to receive one day. I don't like paying insurance premiums!

If the official start to my Christian life was less than ideal, what has kept me there? I became captivated by the life of Jesus! Such a beautiful life, as I discovered it, and later studied it through the gospels. I became especially intrigued by the choices Jesus made. He didn't have to be here. He chose to come, and I can only imagine what this must have cost him; I expect to understand this more clearly when I see for myself where he lived previously.

He could have chosen any form of human life on earth. He chose to be a servant. In life he faced many difficulties, and difficult people. He refused to give up; and he refused an easier way when it was offered to him. As God himself he could have chosen any way he liked to conclude his time of service on earth. He chose obedience to his Father's will. He chose the cross.

I'm fascinated by the way he dealt with people. So strong, and firm, and decisive when required; but kind and compassionate always; gentle and considerate, understanding of the needs and limitations of those around him.

I want to be like this man! "For you died, and your life is now hidden, with Christ, in God."

The next verse, verse 4, also intrigues me; and we note there is a "when" and a "then" in this verse; another reminder that we live in the "Not Yet." We have already "died". Our lives are right now "hidden with Christ in God." (Praise God!) But Christ – and our new lives with him – are "above" – seated at the right hand of God...and I'm struggling along on earth, waiting for him to appear... in glory!

As always, the question becomes, "How do I live in the meantime... in this "in between" time? How do I bring more of this "life that is already mine" into this life of mine right here and now? I've been thinking a lot about these things this week.

Fortunately, I haven't been left to "nut all this out" by myself! Paul has some things to say here that help. And we're reminded in the opening verses of our reading that it's all

I. A Question of Focus.

For our outlines this morning, I've called it firstly:

A. Loving the Things Jesus Loves.

Now Paul will go on to give us specifics; he's a very practical man. But before we find ourselves rushing off to do things, he challenges our attitudes and our focus. "Since then, you have been raised with Christ," he writes, "set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."

If I really want to be like Jesus – and I do – then it has to start with my heart. I have to know and understand those things that are dear to the heart of Jesus, and ask him to help me bring my own desires into line with his. In fact, even before this, I will grow to love Jesus himself.

That isn't hard to do. He isn't hard to love (even if we men especially sometimes find it hard to talk about!). Real love begins with and will always include attraction. Appreciation is another key factor. Loving him, learning to love him more allows us, directs us, to loving the things he loves.

I struggle to "set my heart on things above" apart from this. But understanding the things that touch Jesus' heart draws me to follow him in this, albeit imperfectly.

What are these things? We quickly see that they're not things at all; Jesus' heart was and is moved by people. Follow his actions, listen to his teachings, especially his parables. The Good Shepherd loves his one lost sheep. The Good Samaritan loved his neighbour; even though his "neighbour" in this story should have been his enemy! Justice for those who struggle, and for those the world treats badly was and remains close to Jesus' heart. Follow Jesus as he lived out his priorities, and the comforts and material benefits of this life are way down on his priorities, if they feature at all. Can I learn to follow him better, and love him better; and learn to love better, the "things" that touch his heart?

Paul also mentions

B. Directing Our Thoughts Towards Him.

"Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things," Paul writes, in the sentence before our text. Again, I want to know "What does this mean? And the expression, "So heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use" comes to mind! Are we not to think about life and its responsibilities here and now, on earth? Surely this cannot be what Paul is saying! This is where God has placed us; this is where he calls us to serve him; this is our mission field. We serve him with our minds, or we don't serve him at all.

But what about our mindset? How do we think about our world, its people, its challenges and our responsibilities? What sets the direction for the way you think – and speak – about things and the people around you? Paul challenges us to "set our minds" – to "develop a mindset" – that reflects the importance we claim that Jesus has for us.

How can we do this? For me, the challenge again lies in getting to know him better. Let's immerse ourselves, in the gospels especially, but also in the letters of the New Testament, and in the Bible as a whole. This little letter we're studying together is a great exposition of the person and nature and character of Jesus. The old gospel chorus puts it well:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.

Verse 5 begins with a blunt and challenging directive, "Put to death...". That sounds drastic! Paul reminds us that if we're serious about living to please God, then

II. Some Things Have to Go.

Here's an analogy that helps me understand the Christian life and how to live it.

A. The Christian Life is Like a Bucket!

It isn't all about me striving to follow Jesus, of facing up to my failures and disappointments, resolving to do better next time (although at times it will include this.) It's more like me bringing my bucket to Jesus and asking him to fill it with himself, with his Spirit. Do I fully understand how this works? Not at all! But my Bible teaches me this, in places like verse 11 in our reading which reminds us that, "Christ is all, and is in all."

So I bring my "bucket" to Jesus, and he proceeds to fill it until it's full, and beyond. (What did David write? "My bucket runneth over..." or something like that!)

And then I look into my bucket, and as well as what Jesus puts in there, I discover something ugly and heavy. And not just one thing, a whole heap of "stones" of different shapes and sizes, taking up valuable space in my bucket, severely restricting its capacity.

Paul describes these "stones" in this passage; in a list that's representative, not exhaustive. Sexual immorality (interesting that he notes this one first!), impurity, lust, evil desires, greed.¹ And he has a second list: anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lying.² It's a horrible list. He's not saying we each have all these "stones in our buckets". He invites us to look, and he urges us to get rid of what doesn't belong there. Would your life as a Christian look better, and work more effectively, if you took something out, and made more space for Jesus?

I don't have time, or the desire to describe in detail the stones Paul lists in this passage. There's one stone there I think is particularly relevant for twenty-first century Christians, and often proves difficult to remove. Is this

B. The Last Stone...

we have to grapple with? I'm talking about the last one in Paul's first list. In with those other horrible things we don't want in our lives, Paul includes greed, which he calls "idolatry".

It's the "idolatry" bit which really hits us as to its severity. Idolatry is taking something that rightly belongs to God alone, and giving it to someone or something else. We worship idols. God hates idolatry!

How easily we start to love the things of this world! How hard it is to give this up. I'm sure I took that stone out yesterday. Here it is, back again, and bigger than ever! Let me recommend the "two Gs" as a means of dealing with greed: Gratitude, and Generosity. Gratitude shifts my attention away from what I don't have, onto what I do, and the One who gave it to me. Generosity acknowledges I already have more than I need, and the privilege of sharing this with others.

¹ Colossians 3:5

² Colossians 3:8, 9

Have you taken a look in your “bucket” lately? The Christian life is more than an endless striving to do better; it’s clearing the way for Jesus to fill us with all he has to share.

And then Paul changes the analogy, to talk about

III. A New Set of Clothes.

Take another look at the beautiful set of qualities Paul urges us to put on. They may not be the more spectacular qualities the world values, but taken together, and practised consistently, they’re very attractive: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. We understand why Paul urges us to “clothe ourselves” with these things; they’re not the kind of qualities many of us find we have naturally. As we consider them more closely we recognise them as

A. The Way Jesus Dealt with Others.

See him feed the five thousand who really should have provided for themselves. Watch as he brings a young girl back to life and hands her to her grateful parents. Blind Bartimaeus receives his sight. Jesus washes his disciples’ feet. He touches a man with leprosy, and heals him. He rebukes Peter, and the other disciples at times; for at times they need rebuking – but always so they might grow as his disciples. See him restore Peter to a place of ministry and leadership in the church, after Peter’s disastrous denial. How can Christians, and the church, down through the ages, have failed so often to put on these “clothes” Jesus wore; and in so doing failed to treat people the way Jesus taught us we should? Can we, not so much “do better”, as “put on” the clothing Jesus wears and now provides for us?

Paul singles out one quality, or action, that Jesus spoke about often. He didn’t just talk about it; he gave us

B. A Model of Forgiveness.

“Forgive one another,” Paul urges us, “if anyone has a grievance against someone.” And in case some of us don’t understand what he means here, he adds, “Forgive – as the Lord forgave you.”

Paul is writing to Christians here. In the first two chapters of his letter he’s been discussing doctrine; reinforcing the importance, the centrality of Jesus and all he is. But this is never only abstract theory. All God has provided through Jesus, all we’ve come to know and understand about him, is for our benefit, to help us live the kind of lives the Bible tells us please God.

Forgiveness is vital; because God knows we live in a world where others will treat us badly; and we will take our turns in being less than we might be to those around us.

“Father, forgive them,”³ Jesus prayed, referring to those who were right then preparing to crucify him. We understand his forgiveness extends to us today, just as responsible for his death as those who passed the sentence, and those who hammered in the nails. “Forgive, as the Lord forgave you,”⁴ Paul tells us. Forgiveness is part of the outfit Jesus provides, and Paul urges us to put on. How are you going with this one?

C. Love Completes the Outfit.

“Over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”⁵ As they say, it isn’t rocket science! But while it may not be so hard to understand, it’s been the point of failure, for individuals and the church, down through the generations.

“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels,” Paul writes in his best known teaching about love, “but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”⁶

To take up the Colossian analogy: without love, we’re semi-naked, inadequately clothed, missing the main thing. “Love one another,” Jesus taught us, “As I have loved you.”⁷

My purpose this morning, reflecting I believe Paul’s purpose in this part of his letter, is not to deliver some kind of pep talk urging us all to do better. God provides us, through Jesus, with everything we need to please him in the way we live. It’s not all about us striving. It’s about us preparing our hearts, clearing the way to receive, joyfully embracing everything God wants to pour into us.

It does involve an element of “doing”; but even in this, Jesus is present. “Whatever you do,” Paul writes, “whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

As we get to know and understand him better, can we make this our practice?

³ Luke 23:34

⁴ Colossians 3:13b

⁵ Colossians 3:14

⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

⁷ John 13:34