

Colossians 3:1-11 – All Change

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“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” (Corinthians 3:1-11)

Introduction

When I was 12 years old, I went on a school trip to Belgium. As if that wasn't bad enough, I had to stay for a whole week with a Belgian family. It was under the guise of learning to speak French, but looking back I think it was just an excuse for our French teacher, Monsieur Da Court, to go home for a week. Well, on my first day there, the father of my host family collected me from the station and took me out to see the sights of Brussels. The sights of Brussels! On our excursion round these 'sites' we happened upon some other Belgians this guy happened to know, and he introduced me to them in French. I don't know what he said, it was in French, but without any warning a rather attractive teenage girl suddenly grasped me by the shoulders and, to my complete astonishment, kissed me. On both cheeks.

At the time, I was in an all-boys boarding school, so I only really had a vague idea of what girls even were. And now, one had just kissed me! I felt dazed – a poor, confused 12 year old, lost in a dream world. . . until some time later when I discovered that all this kissing stuff was nothing more than a standard Belgian greeting. Now, to the Belgians, this was elementary stuff, it needed no explanation – of course I was going to get kissed by girls, I was in Belgium for goodness' sake! But at the time I had no idea that this is what was going on. . .

I mention this, not merely to finally get it off my chest after all this time, but because we face a similar thing in our passage this morning – in fact in most of Paul's writing. He mentions so many huge topics in passing as he writes, taking it for granted that the elementary teaching is there – that the reader knows exactly what he's talking about. This is why his letters can often seem so cryptic to us. There is a wealth of unspoken information that is simply taken as read. Now while that's fine for the Colossians, or the Ephesians, or the Corinthians, for us, reading these letters two thousand years later, not having had the benefit of Paul's teaching programme, it leaves us with a lot of investigation and legwork to do.

When Paul writes to the Colossian church, here, about dying with Christ and being raised with Christ, and Christ *being* our life, he is simply assuming that the reader has had this elementary teaching. And yet I reckon most of us have a vague idea at best as to what he really means. But this really is elementary teaching, vital for our walk with God, and our growth toward maturity as Christians. If we haven't grasped what he's talking about and understood it for ourselves, we will be constantly disappointed and disillusioned in our walk with God. We will not produce the fruit of maturity, but will struggle to make progress in our walk with Him. We will not seek our security in God alone, but find ourselves seeking it in money, or popularity, or our families and the things of this world. We will not have complete assurance of our salvation, but will be constantly drawn into doubt and worry. We will not build on the rock of Christ, but on the sinking sands of worldly wisdom and thinking. We will not shine as the lights that we should be, but will find ourselves being just like everybody else.

So I make no apologies for the elementary teaching we will be focussing on this morning. It is vital for our walk with God, and my longing is that we would all clearly understand these things, and so press on to maturity as Christians.

Dead and Alive

Last Sunday evening, Sean took us through the closing verses of Colossians 2, and if you missed this you can download the talk on the church website. Don't be put off by the length of the talk, it was packed with good content. I want to kick off reading the closing verses of the passage Sean covered: *"Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom... but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.*" (2:20-23) What he's saying is that, imposing rules on yourself to grow in holiness and maturity doesn't work. Although it may have some external effect – for example, if you have a rule not to buy cakes and chocolate, you have a greater chance of not satisfying your greed, or if you have a rule not to mix with certain people who lead you into gossip, you have a greater chance of not gossiping, and so on – although there may be some external change, such physical restraints make no difference to the root problem; the heart from which our evil desires come. There is a place for rules, but, in themselves, they are worthless.

However, a mere five verses later, in our passage, Paul reels off a great list of rules: *"Put to death. . . sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed. . . rid yourselves of. . . anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language. . . Do not lie."* This leaves us with two options. Option A: Paul is massively contracting himself, or Option B: he has said something in the four intervening verses that are the real key for pressing on to maturity and holy living. And just in case there is any uncertainty, the answer is: Option B.

So let's look at these first four verses of chapter 3 again. In them Paul covers some of the most fundamental teaching about who we are: *"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."*

Maybe on hearing this, the Colossians would have smacked their heads and said, “Of course! Why didn't we think of that?!” By contrast Paul's words tend to have us scratching our heads wondering what exactly he's talking about. “How and in what way did we die? How have we been raised with Christ? What does he mean that our life is hidden with Christ, and *is* Christ?” The Colossians knew what Paul meant, because it was elementary teaching for new believers. He doesn't even begin to unpack it for us here. So to help us get a handle on this most fundamental and vital truth about who we are, we're going to pull together the teaching that is spread throughout Paul's letters.

Let's begin with Adam, since that is where it all begins. We all know about Adam and what he did, but let's quickly remind ourselves. He, being the first man, made to live in and rule over the newly-created perfect world, disobeyed God, and so came under a curse. In short he became an enemy of God, a slave to sin and the desires of his body, condemned to death and eternal punishment. A perfectly just result for sinning against His almighty, Creator God.

Then in Romans 5, Paul says, *“the result of one trespass (Adam's sin) was condemnation for all men.”* (v 18). This is a very important point, which Paul does unpack to some degree here, but to help us get this clear in our thinking, let me give you an illustration.

On a number of occasions, I have had the pleasure of enjoying one of John Sage's bonfires. The beauty of them is that he makes them so well that they only need one match to get them going. Whenever I've made a bonfire, it's taken half a box of matches, together with fire-lighters, petrol and other incendiaries to get them going, and even then, they only burn on one side. But John's are a one-match-wonder. Here's the illustration:

The match it struck, flares into life and the flame is put to the firewood. This flame spreads slowly through the whole bonfire, but, long before it does that match is nothing more than a wisp of ash. However, the fire that began with that match is still the same one that is soon raging in a 30 foot high inferno. I could snatch a flaming stick from that bonfire, and light another bonfire with it, and it would still be the same fire that flared up when that match was struck.

In the same way, the life that flows through mankind is the same life that began with Adam. Though he eventually died after a mere 930 years, the life that was in him continued in his descendants. This same life has coursed down through history, not put out at flood, but continued in Noah and his family. It was the life that flowed into Abraham and the Jews, into Pharaoh and the pyramid builders, into Alexander the Great and the Greeks, into Julius Caesar and the Romans, and on flooding into all the continents of the world.

The same life that began with Adam, flows from generation to generation, into every single child that has ever been born, and this life brings with it that same curse that Adam brought upon himself through his one act of disobedience. In this way, we, and all people, were cursed in Eden six thousand year ago – thus *“the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men.”* or as Paul put it in 1 Corinthians, *“In Adam all die.”*

This phrase 'in Adam' sounds a bit odd, but actually its meaning is quite simple. Our life comes from Adam, and so we are fully united and identified with him. In a very real, spiritual sense, all mankind is 'in Adam'. Is that clear? (Check) It is vital that we understand this, because of what comes next.

In Romans 6 Paul wrote: *“Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may have a new life.”* (Romans 6:3-4)

This death, burial, and new life is echoed in a number of Paul's other letters:

- 2 Corinthians 5 says, *“We are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died* (all referring to believers). . . *therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”* (vv 14, 17)
- Galatians 2 - *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”* (v 20)
- 2 Timothy 2 - *“We died with Him, we will also live with Him.”* (v 11)
- And in our own passage, in verse 3 and 4 of chapter 3, it says, *“You died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.”*

Here again is something which is a clear, spiritual reality, yet many Christians would be hard put to explain exactly what this means and whether it has any relevance to their daily lives. Just as with Adam, it is quite simple. If we go back to our bonfire illustration. Imagine a flaming twig was snatched from the fire (I'm not recommending this – don't play with fire!), and was plunged into a bucket of water and so put out. If that twig was then put onto a new bonfire, lit with a new match, the fire that then took hold of that twig would be a completely different fire from the one that burned up that original match.

In the same way, at the moment we put our faith in Jesus' death, we died – our life that came to us from Adam ended. It was extinguished – put out – finished – done with - over. The connection with Adam ceased, and we could no longer be counted as being 'in Adam', because his life no longer flowed into us.

In that same instant we received new life – life from our resurrected Lord Jesus. Life that comes with a promise, not a curse, with freedom, not with slavery, with fellowship rather than enmity with God, not under sentence of death and eternal suffering, but with life, perfect life forever. All this comes to us through this new life we have received. Where once we were 'in Adam', now we are 'in Christ', and it's meaning is just the same. Our life comes from Jesus, and we are fully united and identified with Him – so much so that Paul refers to Him in our passage as, *“Christ, who is our life.”* In a very real, spiritual sense, we are 'in Christ' – our life is in Him, and so His life is in us, so it is no longer we that live, but Christ lives in us, and when He appears, so too will we appear with Him in glory. There is no distinction – we are fully united and identified with Him.

This is a spiritual reality – a complete change! However, we cannot see this change – there is no sudden physical transformation that goes with it. And this is, I think, why it is so hazy in our thinking, and seems so hard to grasp hold of. The problem is, our pressing on to maturity and holy living is dependent on us first understanding this truth, and just how complete this change is. That said, there *is* a physical counterpart to

this spiritual transformation, and I believe it is the God-given key to us grasping hold of this truth. So we're going to spend a few minutes looking at the physical counterpart, which is, of course, baptism.

“All of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death”, said Romans 6, and in the previous chapter of Colossians, Paul used the phrase: *“Having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God.”*

In the years since Paul wrote these words, a wedge has been hammered between conversion and baptism. But this separation is not found in the early church. Throughout the book of Acts, we see them coming together: 3,000 were baptised at Pentecost, on the very day they received Christ. Philip baptised the eunuch having just shared the Gospel with him. Paul was baptised straight after his conversion. Peter baptised the first Gentile believers within moments of them being saved. The Philippian jailer was baptised the same night he believed. And so on. When Paul talks about baptism, there is no separation in his thinking between the spiritual baptism of dying 'in Adam' and being given new life 'in Christ', and the physical baptism of going down into the water and coming up out of the water. No separation. Except, of course, that one is spiritual and real, the other physical and a picture. So what's the point in the physical baptism, if the spiritual death and rebirth is the thing that actually makes the difference? Well, whatever it is, it must be important, since it is one of only two such physical practices handed down to us from Scripture, and the other is Communion, the one that reminds us of Jesus' own death and resurrection, and our unity in Him. That's pretty important! So baptism is also hugely important - not as a necessity for salvation, that being based only on faith in Jesus, but it is important for our walk with God.

I believe that baptism is the most effective way of communicating to a new believer exactly what has happened to them spiritually. It clearly demonstrates to the new believer that, everything that was true of them up to that point, the life that came from Adam and held a curse over them, and caused them to think and live in a certain way, has been cut off – killed. Being under the water is a picture of burial – that's what you do with dead bodies, you get rid of them, you dispose of them – it hammers home the finality of what has happened. Then, on being raised up out of the water, the new believer sees and understand that they have been raised with Christ, given a new life in Him. They see this and, as long as it is also clearly taught to them, they understand this much quicker and easier than those of us who did not go through this teaching and baptism when we first believed. Can you see how important baptism is? And, of course, because it's important, it comes under huge spiritual attack:

- Baptism comes under attack through infant baptism, which weakens its link with faith and salvation
- Baptism comes under attack through the prayer of commitment, which has taken its place in many churches
- Baptism comes under attack through the use of sprinkling instead of immersion, because it removes the imagery of death/burial/resurrection
- Baptism comes under attack through the public ceremony and testimony-giving that's been built up around it, neither of which is seen in Scripture. These join forces to take the focus of the new believer away from themselves, and make it either a scary ordeal that is best delayed as long as possible, or something which is for the benefit of others – which is really isn't!

- Baptism comes under attack through well-meaning Christians suggesting it is delayed to ensure the new believer really is a Christian – as though such a thing could ever be proved! I'll remind you of what I always say about this: “Baptism is not something you do when you are ready in your walk with God, but it is something you do to ready you for your walk with God.” Remember the Ethiopian eunuch who'd just heard the Gospel. He asked “What prevents me from being baptized?” Answer? (*Nothing*)
- Baptism also comes under attack through much of the teaching that has surrounded it, either elevating it to a necessity for salvation, or lowering it to nothing more than an act of obedience, a way of achieving church membership.

If you don't get baptised at the same time as being saved (I'm not talking a few days, or weeks – I'm talking immediately, as close to the very instant as possible), then this hugely important start to your Christian life will be lacking and it could take you years of prayer and study and meditation before the truth of your spiritual rebirth becomes a reality for you.

If you are a new Christian here today, or even if you're not, maybe you've been a Christian for years, and you haven't been baptised yet, then get baptised as soon as possible. We can get this thing filled up today if you want, though a bath would suffice or the river or any other sizeable body of water. Alternatively there's a baptismal service on Easter Sunday, but I would suggest that if giving a testimony, or getting baptised in front of others is going to distract you from the focus on yourself - your death and new life – don't get baptised in a church service. This isn't a joke – it's serious advice. And that's enough for now. Let's get on and consider the outworking of this knowledge of who we are in Christ.

Put it to Death

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature.” Therefore shows that Paul is drawing a conclusion from what he has just been saying. Let's follow the logic so far:

- As a Christian you have a desire and a responsibility to press on to maturity and holy living
- Imposing rules on yourself is utterly worthless, because while they can help you look good and give a 'good life', they cannot produce any real and lasting change – we want to be mature and holy, not just 'good people'
- Instead, we need to understand that we have been made new – everything that was true of us when we were in Adam, is no longer true. Now our life comes from Christ and we are fully identified with Him

Therefore. . . and so Paul lists these eleven areas of sin, and it is by no means exhaustive. Maybe these were just things he heard were going on in the church at Colossae. Insert your own areas of worldly, 'in Adam' living. The basic message though is this, and it's our title for this morning: You're different – so live different. It's nice and snappy, if somewhat grammatically imperfect. Live differently. All these things – sexual immorality, impurity, lust, anger, filthy language etc – all these things are the way those in Adam live. It's part of who they are. But we are now 'in Christ'. If you can fully understand this, and grasp the enormity of the truth of this change, you won't need a set of rules to make you live differently. You will

simply start living differently! This is exactly the same conclusion he came to in Romans 6: *“Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (That’s understanding, believing, and accepting all that is now true of you.) Therefore (the conclusion) do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.”*

“We died to sin;” he states earlier in the chapter, *“How can we live in it any longer?”* John’s first letter puts it even stronger: *“No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.”* The suggestion is not that you are unable to sin, but that, the more you understand who you are in Christ, the more you will hate sin and the whole ‘in Adam’ way of life. Why? Because you are not ‘in Adam’ any more – your whole nature has been changed and is being changed.

Our passage continues: *“Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”* What are these old and new selves? Quite simply they are Adam and Christ – the word ‘self’ here is actually the word ‘man’. *“You have taken off the old man. . .and have put on the new man”* - it is the nature that comes through the life, whether it be Adam or Christ. Paul is simply referring back again to that fundamental change which has occurred in us.

The language he is using here is of clothing – taking off a garment and putting on another. He uses the same imagery in Galatians 3:27, *“All of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”*

There was a whole term of Kidz Klub a few years back where every week I had to dress as a cowboy, and every week I found it hard to act like a cowboy until the costume went on. But the moment I put on the hat and the chaps and all the other bits, I changed. I walked differently, I talked differently, I became more like my stereotypical idea of a cowboy, with itchy trigger fingers, a ridiculous wild west accent, calling guys ‘pardner’, and girls ‘ma’am’. It was all I could do to keep myself from spitting. When the costume came off, the cowboy in me just stopped. Anyone else find that with dressing up - that, when you put on the costume, you find yourself almost instinctively acting in character? (*Hands*)

This is very similar to this putting on of Christ – when you realise that you are clothed with Christ, you begin to act differently. Not because of any rules or regulations, but because it’s natural, it comes with the costume.

While this ‘putting off’ and ‘putting on’ is something which happened when you were saved, it is also something which is ongoing and which you have to play a part in. In Ephesians 4, Paul wrote: *“You were taught (this is elementary teaching), with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, (the old man) which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self (the new man), created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”* (vv 22-24) You have to keep doing it, not keep dying ‘in Adam’ and being made new ‘in Christ’, but keep living in the reality of who you are. This is where the Bible study and meditation, prayer, fasting, solitude, serving, giving and all the other ways grow to know and love God come in. And through such things, your true nature in Christ will begin to come through more and more, and you will be increasingly like Him, and grow

in your understanding of this truth about who you are in Him. But that's all for another day. For now, all we need to take from this is that everything in our Christian life begins with this knowledge - this deep, clear certainty – that we are fundamentally different from the people we to be. We are different from all who are 'in Adam'. We are 'in Christ'.

Conclusion

Let's close with the last verse of our passage, which hammers home that complete change of identity: *“Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free. . .”* These were all considered important differences to the world at the time. It meant something to be Greek, or Jewish, or Scythian (which were the people who lived in the vast area of land to the north), it meant something to be circumcised, or not, it meant something to be barbarian or civilized, it meant something to be slave or a free person. These were marks of identity and status and separated people into clear groupings. But within the church this is all done away with: *“Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free”* - no race division, no class division, none more powerful than others, none with a higher status than others, none more special than others. In Galatians 3, Paul says, *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* (v 28). Or as he ends our passage, *“but Christ is all, and is in all.”*

Christians are expected to live differently – we know this and we're constantly reminded of it – we are expected to live differently. And for good reason, because we who are in Christ are different!