

This evening we hear the word of God to us from Colossians 3:1-4. These verses function as a transition between what has been covered chapters 1 and 2 and the exhortations that dominate the rest of the letter. They summarize much of what has come before and they serve as an introduction to what comes next. Because much of what Paul writes in these verses has already been said and because we have dealt with some of the themes in earlier sermons, my treatment of this text will be different than if this sermon was not part of an ongoing series. I will give a quick summary of the parts of the passage that have already been covered and give more attention to what is new in these verses.

I want to begin by either introducing or reminding you of a set of terms that is often used to describe something that is very important about the biblical teaching on the Christian life. The truth expressed by these terms has been part of the teaching through much of what we have covered so far, but I have not used these particular terms. I want to do so now because they are a useful way of understanding the relationship between what God has done in Jesus for our salvation and the commands that follow from that. The terms that I am referring to are indicative and imperative. These are grammatical terms and that is why I tend to avoid them, but their use in this context is a helpful way to understand the significance of the commands of the Bible as they are addressed to Christians.

And indicative statement is a statement of fact. There are four of these in Colossians 3;1-4. In verse 1 Paul writes, “[Y]ou have been raised with Christ.” In verse 1 Paul also affirms that Christ is above, seated at the right hand of God. Verse 3 is also an indicative statement. “[Y]ou have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” So is verse 4, “When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” These are all statements of fact and the ones that are important for the point that I am making are the statements that affirm things about Christians. Christians have been raised with Christ. Christians have died and their lives are hidden with Christ in God. Christ is the Christian’s life and when he appears, Christians will appear with him in glory. These are all indicative statements. They assert things that are true of Christians because of God’s grace to them in Jesus Christ.

There are also imperative statements in these verses. Imperative statements are commands. So verse 1 says, “seek the things that are above. And verse 2 says “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” These are statements that tell us what to do. They are commands and so imperatives. But what is important here is not that we understand these grammatical terms as such, but that we understand the relationship between the indicatives and imperatives in the biblical teaching about salvation.

Here is the point: the imperatives are based on the indicatives. The commands are based on the facts of what is true of believers because of their relationship to Christ. The commands follow from the things that are true of Christians. We see this in verse 1. The word “if” at the beginning of verse 1 has the sense of “since” and I will use that word to make the connection clear. “Since then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above....” The reason that Christians are to seek the things that are above is that they have been

raised with Christ. The imperative is based on the indicative. The command to seek the things that are above is based on the fact that Christians have been raised with Christ. So the sequence of thought is ... because of what God has done for you in Christ follow these commands.

We see the same connection in verses 2 and 3. “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. **For** you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” We are to set our minds on things that are above because of these facts that as Christians we have died and our life is hidden with Christ in God. You see this same connection in verses 5 and 12. Verse 5, “Put to death **therefore** what is earthly in you....” Verse 12, “Put on **then**, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, etc....” The imperatives of the Christian life are rooted in the indicatives of the Christian reality.

Why is this important? It is important because it keeps together the miraculous change that God works in us through our relationship with Christ and the commands that he is telling us to obey. This is important because in the same breath we hear the command to obey and the truth that we are able to obey because of what is true of us as believers united to Christ. It is important because it means that we are not to think of God’s commands in isolation from the change that God has worked in us through the gospel. And that in turn means that when we seek to obey those commands we do not look to our own inner strength, but rather to the reality that we have been raised with Christ and have died with him.

And so the indicative/imperative terminology helps us to understand that obedience flows from our relationship with Christ. That embeds the whole obedience part of the Christian life in the life that we have in Christ and thus we are called to live in a way that is possible and not impossible. The way that God calls us to live is not impossible because of what is true of us as people who are united to Christ. The Christian life is a high calling. But it is possible and even inevitable for believers because Christ is our life.

We’ll spend a little time now on the indicatives in this passage – on the things that are true of all Christians. I mentioned that the “if” really means “since” in verse 1. That particular construction is common in the NT. The reason that the ESV translates “if” instead of “since” has to do with the way “if clauses” are often used. “If” can raise a question that is meant to be answered with a yes. A high school teacher might say to student, “If you are an adult, act like an adult.” That statement is really asking a question that expects a “yes” answer. “Are you an adult? Yes. Then act like an adult. That is like of what Paul is saying here although the tone is more positive.

Have you been raised with Christ? Yes. Then seek the things that are above. Using “if” instead of “since” draws the reader into the statement. The important thing here is to understand that Paul is not questioning whether his readers are Christians. He is exhorting them on the basis of what is true of them as Christians.

They have been raised with Christ. And later in verse 3. “[Y]ou have died....” This is not new for us. We have considered these ideas in earlier sermons. Christians because of their relationship to Christ have died to their

old way of life. They are living a new life. They died to sin. They are alive to God. A profound change has happened to them as a result of their relationship with Christ and so they died to the old way of life and are living the life that Jesus Christ has shared with them. The same life that brought him from the dead, brought them from the dead. So Christians are dead in one way – dead to their old way of life – dead to sin – and they are alive in another way – they have been raised with Christ – they are alive in Christ.

There are a few indicatives that are new here so we will spend a little more time with them. “Verse 3 says as believers, [Y]our life is hidden with Christ in God.” What this means is that there is a hiddenness about the life of Christ that is in us. The contrast here is between what is true of Christians now and what will be true of Christians when Christ appears. To understand what Paul means by saying that the new life of Christians is hidden with Christ in God, we must see the contrast that he is making in verse 4. “When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” Now our life is **hidden** with Christ in God. When Christ appears we will **appear** with him in glory.

There is a sense, of course, in which the life in Christ in us must be not be hidden. We are to let our light shine. We are to be witnesses. The life of Christ in us must show in our lives in tangible ways. This is an important part of the Christian calling, but that is not what Paul is talking about here.

What is talking about here is the distinction between the relative hiddenness of the life of Christ in us now and the spectacular manifestation of it when we appear with Christ in glory. The life of Christ that empowers us is a glorious thing. And Paul speaks of it in as a glorious thing. Back in chapter 2:12 he said “[Y]ou were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” It is absolutely amazing and mind-boggling that the power that brought Christ from the dead, brought us from spiritual death and we share in Christ’s life. That is a glorious thing.

But there is a hiddenness about it in the here and now. We do not look any different than unbelievers. The world denies that what we claim is even true. We are not recognized as being the possessors of the glorious resurrection life of Christ. It takes faith to see it and it takes faith to see the glory of what it means to be a Christian. The world considers us to be foolish and backwards because we think that something glorious has happened to us through our relationship to Christ. They do not believe it is real and they are able to do that because it’s not something that is obvious from the outside. So there is a hiddenness about the life of Christ in us at the present time.

But that will not always be the case. There is a time coming when our life will no longer be hidden. When Christ who is our life appears we will appear with him in glory. When Christ is glorified, we will also be glorified. The glory of what God has been working in us through Christ will be unhidden – it will be revealed – we will be recognized as people who are the recipients of the glorious transforming power of Christ’s life. Then the difference between spiritual death and spiritual life will be manifest.

Paul speaks of this in Philippians 3:21 when he writes that when Christ returns he “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

So those are the indicatives that Paul mentions in these verses. “[Y]ou have been raised with Christ.” “[Y]ou have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” And “When Christ ... appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” These things are true of all believers.

We turn now to how Paul applies these wonderful facts that are true of all believers. He says, because these things are true of you, “[S]eek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” This is what Christians are to do on the basis of all these wonderful facts that are true of them.

Now these words can be and often have been interpreted in a way that leads to an unbiblical understanding of the Christian life. They have often been interpreted to mean that this earthly life is not important; all that matters is what we think of as our religious life or spiritual life. Thus “setting your minds on things that are above and not on things that are on earth” is understood to mean that all that really matters for our relationship with God is the life of contemplation, worship, prayer, Bible study, evangelism and good works while the life of work and family and enjoying the gifts of this earthly life is of far less significance as far as pleasing God is concerned. A more extreme form of this is monasticism where people become monks or nuns, separate themselves as much as possible from the normal activities of this earthly life and spend as much of their time as possible on more spiritual pursuits. A more evangelical form of this tendency is to consider fulltime ministry work to be a higher level of pleasing God than being a fulltime mom or a student of biology or a plumber.

Now on the face of it, what Paul is saying in this passage seeks to support that vision of the Christian life. “Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” It seems that Paul here is describing a life of contemplation as opposed to a life of this-worldly activity.

This is an instance where it is easy to make a huge mistake by not taking the context into account. It is impossible to correctly interpret any passage in isolation from its immediate context and its broader context of the whole of Scripture.

There are a couple of important points that come from the immediate context. In the verses that come before our text Paul has condemned asceticism. Let me give you a definition of Ascetism. “A lifestyle characterized by few possessions or luxuries. It is an attempt to focus one’s life on religious or spiritual matters and to not be distracted by the things of the world.” (Lexham Cultural Ontology Glossary). Whatever Paul means by “setting your minds on things above, not on things that are on earth,” he does not mean ascetism. He is not advocating a view of the Christian life that denies the significance of this earthly life for living to the glory of

God. There is an important place for self-denial and self-control, but that is not incompatible with seeing this earthly life as being significant in our life with God.

Another important contextual hint that helps us to understand what Paul means when he tells Christians to “Set [their] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,” is his use of the word “earthly” in verse 5 of this same chapter. “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness which is idolatry.” Here “earthly” means sinful. In the light of that it is clear that when Paul teaches the Colossians not to set their minds on “things that are on earth,” he is speaking about sinful things. “Things that are on earth” in this context means sinful things and not the proper engagement in this earthly life.

A third important contextual matter that helps us to understand what Paul means when he tells us to “set [our] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” is what he deals with in the rest of the letter. He tells them to put to death sins in their lives. And then he tells them the kinds of behaviors and attitudes they are to put on in their lives. Things like compassionate hearts, bearing with one another and loving one another. In verse 17 of chapter 3 he says, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, to **everything** in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” He deals with worship, but also with marriage, parenting, obeying earthly masters, masters treating their servants justly and fairly. He calls them to prayer for his missionary work, but also to walk in wisdom and make the best use of the time.

Clearly when Paul tells us to “set [our] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” he does not mean that Christians should minimize the significance of this earthly life. The things that he goes on to talk about are all about living this earthly life to the glory of God. What then does Paul mean by this exhortation? Let’s consider it closely.

First since they have been raised with Christ they are to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” Verse 2 says basically the same thing. “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” What exactly is Paul telling us to do?

He is telling us to seek and to set our minds on heavenly things. And he makes a point of saying that Christ is in heaven, seated at the right hand of God. The things that are above are to be sought and we are to set our minds upon them because that is where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. The most significant thing about the things that are above is that that is where Christ is, and the fact that he is seated at the right hand of God. And so seeking the things that above is to think about life in the light of heavenly realities especially the fact that Christ is in heaven sitting at God’s right hand. And the significance of Christ being in heaven and at God’s right hand is that he has won the victory over sin and death – he is ruling all things in heaven and on earth with the goal of bringing about the fullness of the kingdom of God.

The point of setting their minds on the things that are above is not simply to contemplate the things that are above, but to look at their lives and all of life from the perspective of the fact that Christ is in heaven ruling over all things until he has destroyed all his enemies. The rest of the letter demonstrates the way of life that is to result from seeking the things above and setting their minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.

And it is important to remind ourselves that the reason they are to seek the things that are above and to set their minds on the things that are above is that they have been raised with Christ and they have died with Christ and their life is hidden with Christ in God and when Christ appears they will also appear with him in glory. Because all these things are true of them they are to think of this life from the perspective of heavenly things – Jesus on the throne ruling all things as he works out the implications of his victory in the lives of his people – in the building of the church and towards the renewal of all things.

Here is how Douglas Moo puts it in his commentary on this passage. Paul is saying “that they are to seek to orient themselves totally to these heavenly realities. We are not to strive for a heavenly status, since that has already been freely given us in Christ. Rather we are to make that heavenly status the guidepost for all our thinking and acting. ... Believers “seek the things above” by deliberately and daily committing ourselves to the values of the heavenly kingdom and living out of those values.” (p. 246).

So we are to remember what is true of us in Christ and we are further to know that because of all that is true of us in Christ we are to think deeply about life in this world in the light of Christ and the fact that he is ruling over all toward the full coming of the kingdom of God. And the result of that thinking is to be putting sin to death and living a life of love and compassion and worship and doing everything in the name of the Lord Jesus and good marriages and obedient children and people who do their daily work heartily as for the Lord and not for men.

What is actually commanded here is to seek and to set your minds on things above. The word seek implies some effort. Think of the parable of the woman who had ten silver coins and lost one of them. She seeks diligently until she finds it. You seek something because it is valuable – because it is important to you. Paul is telling us that on the basis of all the wonderful things that are true of us in Christ we must seek the things that are above. This is not some half-hearted endeavour. Seeking implies effort.

And the call to set our minds on things that are above and not things that are on earth has to do with our minds – with our thinking – with our thought life. But this is not to be simply intellectual. Mind and heart are to go together. Truth and love are to go together. And so are thinking and doing. That is clear from all the practical exhortations that follow here.

But the life of the mind is important. That is clear from the progression of thought in this passage. As he gears up to give a whole bunch of practical exhortations, he tells the Colossians to set their minds on things above –

to think deeply about life from the perspective of heaven and from the perspective of Christ – who he is – what he has done – what he is doing – what he will do. And he is telling us to do this thinking in the light of the fact that we have been raised with Christ, died with Christ and will appear with him in glory.

We are to think deeply about who we are in Christ and we are to think deeply about life in the light of Christ. That encompasses the big picture of the plan of God in Christ and it involves our embeddedness in that plan because of our relationship with Christ.

And it remains for us to think about what we think about. What occupies our minds? What do we seek? Where does the effort in our thinking go? Are we thinking of the things of earth in the light of heaven or do we just think about the things of earth? Are we thinking about life with God or are we thinking about life without bringing God into the picture?

Paul is saying here that our thoughts must be consistent with who we are in Christ. If we have been raised with Christ – if we have died and our life is hidden with Christ in God – if we are going to appear with Christ in glory – let us think about things that are consistent with these glorious realities. That is really Paul's point in these verses. May our thoughts reflect the reality of who we are in Christ.