

This is sermon #9 in a series of sermons called, "Reviewing the Basics." In the last sermon we considered the question, "How does Salvation Change Us?" The focus of that sermon was on how God changes us when he saves us. We looked at the new birth and some of the many other terms that the Bible uses to refer to the change that happens to people when God saves them. The focus of that sermon was on the change that God produces in us in salvation. In this sermon we will consider the kind of life that results from that change. The last sermon was about what God does. This sermon is about what we do as a result of what God does.

We saw this same relationship when we looked at the beginning of the Christian life. We saw that God effectually calls us from spiritual deadness to spiritual life and then we looked at the faith and repentance that we do as a result of what God does. We are looking at the same thing, but from two different angles – namely the beginning of the Christian life and the on-going nature of the Christian life. And so this evening we will consider some of what the Bible teaches about how we are to live as a result of the change that God works in us when we are saved. And so, "How shall we then live?" And for footnote purposes I will acknowledge that that particular question is the title of a book by the late Francis Schaeffer. That particular a sequence of words is not original to me, but it does fit with the sequence of questions that I am basing this series of sermons around. So – "How shall we then live?"

This, of course, is a vast subject in the Bible. The Bible has a lot to say about how we should live. What I want to do in this sermon is consider some of the main ideas and categories that describe the shape of the Christian life as we find them in Colossians 3:1-17. We will not be looking at everything in this passage. Just a few things.

Verse 1 says, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." The idea of being raised with Christ is the idea that we focused on in the last sermon, although we did not consider that terminology. To be raised with Christ is to be brought from spiritual death to spiritual life. As we have seen, the Bible refers to that change in many different ways. The rest of these verses give a lot of details about the life those who are raised with Christ are called to live.

Verses 1 and 2 tell us that we are to "seek the things that are above" and to "Set [our] minds on things that are above not on things that are on earth." Now we can easily mistake what Paul is saying here and many have done so. Paul is not saying that we should withdraw from this earthly life as much as possible and spend all of our time thinking about heaven. What he means is that we should not focus on the things of earth apart from our relationship to Christ. In the verses that follow he tells us to give a lot of attention to the things of this life. In verses 12 and following he tells us to be kind and compassionate, to live together in peace and love. You can't do those things by ignoring other people and focusing only on the things of heaven.

By telling us to "Set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth," Paul is telling us to prioritize our relationship with Christ and that includes looking at the things on earth from Christ's perspective. Christ is in heaven. But he is very much thinking about what is going on, on earth. He is seated at God's right hand which means he is ruling the universe. He is directing it according to the plan and purpose of

God. He is bringing the kingdom of God. He is building his church. “Set[ting] your minds on things that are above, and not on things that are on earth,” means prioritizing our relationship with God and that involves worship and fellowship with God, but it also involves looking at the things of earth from a heavenly perspective.

Certainly we are to “seek the things that are above” by having a living active relationship with God. The most fundamental thing that happens when God changes us in salvation is that we are reconciled to God and that includes having been given hearts that love God. In Jesus’ summary of the law he says that the first and great commandment is that we are to love God with all our hearts and when we are given new hearts, we begin to do that. We are a long way from loving God with the passion that we should have, but there is a beginning of that. That will mean an appetite for worship, for prayer, for listening to God speak in his word, for growing in the knowledge of God. The most fundamental thing that happens when we are saved is that God becomes very important to us and we look at life from the perspective of the word of God.

Paul gives us an example of the contrast between setting our minds on earthly things and setting our minds on things that are above in Philippians 3:19-20. He describes unbelievers in verse 19, “Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” And then he describes believers in verse 20, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.” To “seek the things that are above” and to “set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” means to live as citizens of heaven and to be “awaiting a Saviour” from heaven.

Setting our minds on earthly things from the perspective of our text means living in this world apart from God – living for the things of this life – not living life in relationship with God and in the light of his kingdom. And setting our minds on things above means thinking about life and living life from the perspective of heaven where Christ is ruling at the right hand of God.

It involves what we think about. Paul says that we are “Set our minds on the things that are above.” The Bible has a lot to say about our thoughts. Romans 8:5 says “Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” The Bible is very concerned about our actions. But our actions are determined by our thoughts and so what we think about is an indication of whether we are spiritually dead, or we are spiritually alive.

Douglas Moo in his commentary on this passage expresses the idea in a couple of helpful sentences. “Paul is saying ... that they are to seek to orient themselves totally to those heavenly realities.... We are to make [our] heavenly status the guidepost for all our thinking and acting.” “Believers ‘seek the things above’ by deliberately and daily committing themselves to the values of the heavenly kingdom and living out of those values.” (p. 246)

Now I want to say something about how this applies to us. There are two ways that we can apply these words to ourselves, one is by way of implication and the other is the direct way that Paul is addressing the church in this text. The way of implication is self-examination. We should consider our lives in the light of what Paul is saying here to see if we are seeking the things that are above. We have spent a bit of time thinking about what that means, and we should compare that to our lives to see if there is at least a beginning of “[setting] our minds on things that are above.” If there is nothing of that in our lives we should draw the conclusion that we are not born again and thus still need to be born again if we are going to be saved. In the sermon on assurance of salvation a few weeks ago we saw that one facet of assurance is observing in our lives the evidence of the kind of life that God works in every person he saves. In interpreting and applying the Bible we are to compare Scripture with Scripture and Scripture does tell us to compare our lives with the biblical descriptions of the Christian life for evidence of God’s grace in our lives. Let me just remind you of 1 John 2:3 which says, “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.” Well one of the biblical commandments is “seek the things that are above.” If we are not doing that to some extent, (not perfectly, but to some extent,) we are not Christians and we should face that fact and turn to Christ and begin to “seek the things that are above.” That is a legitimate and important way to apply these verses.

But it is important to note that that is not Paul’s application in these verses. Paul’s application in these verses is exhortation. When he begins verse 1 by saying, “If then you have been raised with Christ,” he is not questioning whether the Colossians have been raised with Christ. The word “if” here means “since.” What Paul is saying is “[Since] then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” That this is the correct interpretation is clear from verse 3 which says, “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” Paul is addressing the Colossians as Christians. He is not questioning their salvation. He is saying, [Because] “you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above.”

I make a point of this because this is an important feature of the NT teaching about the Christian life. Certainly, the NT calls us to test our lives to confirm that we really are Christians. But a great deal of the time it addresses the church as Christians as Paul does in these verses. And so a great deal of the time the biblical writers assume that we have examined ourselves and that there is evidence of God’s saving grace in our lives and on the basis of that they exhort us to live out that grace in our lives. We are to live lives that are consistent with the change that God has worked in us. And so we are to think – I have been raised with Christ – therefore I must seek the things that are above. This is who I am as a Christian, therefore must live accordingly. So Paul here is exhorting us to “Set [our] minds on things that are above, and not on the things that are on earth.”

Now in the rest of this passage, Paul gives more exhortations based on the fact that we have been raised with Christ. Verse 5 says, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you....” And then he mentions a whole list of things that we are to put to death in our lives: “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desires, and

covetousness, which is idolatry.” He also mentions, “anger, wrath, malice, slander and obscene talk ... and [lying.] So the Christian life involves putting a whole host of attitudes and behaviors to death.

Let me draw out a couple of points from this. This exhortation assumes that this is a process. It is addressed to those who are already Christians. It assumes that they have not yet completely put all these attitudes and behaviors to death in their lives. It assumes that Christians, those who have been raised with Christ, are not yet completely free from sexual immorality or from evil desires or from covetousness or from slander or from lying. An important feature of the Christian life is the ongoing work of putting sinful behaviors and attitudes to death. We are not set free from these attitudes and behaviors all at once. We are to take notice of them when they appear, and we are to take deliberate action against them. And we are to do that because we have been raised with Christ.

This is an important part of the Christian life. There is an ongoing process of putting sinful attitudes and behaviors to death. It means that the reality of the Christian life is not that there is no sexual immorality or covetousness or malice or other sins. The reality of the Christian life is that we will continue to sin, but at the same time we are called to put sin to death. The reality of the Christian life is change and progress, but also a long way to go. The reality of the Christian life is both obedience and struggle against disobedience.

And it is hard and painful. The idea of putting to death implies painful effort. It implies the seriousness of the struggle. Paul highlights the seriousness of this struggle in verse 6 when he says, “On account of these the wrath of God is coming.” Sin is deadly. One of the sayings that is often repeated is that we are to be killing sin or it will kill us. Jesus gets at the same idea with slightly different imagery when he says in Matthew 5:30, “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”

It is important to note that the negative is positive. We are told to take radical and painful action against sin in our lives, but that is a good thing. It is a huge part of what salvation means. These attitudes and behaviors that we are to kill are deadly. They are the opposite of a good life. We are attracted to them because the sinful nature which remains in us is a twisted and destructive force in our lives and a huge part of salvation is that by God’s grace we are now see sin for the ugly and destructive thing it is and we are motivated to do the hard work of putting it to death in our lives. This is part of what it means to be set free from the power of sin. This belongs to the good news.

It is also important to not to despair when dealing with the persistence of certain sins in our lives. The reality is that Christians often deal with the same sin or sins for a long time. We can make some progress and then fall back into the sin. We can sometimes be discouraged because of how slow our progress is. Sometimes it can feel like one step forward and two steps back. It is easy to despair. That is why it is important to remind yourself and be reminded of the gospel again and again. We need to be reminded that “[t]he LORD is merciful

and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” We need to remember that “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him” (Psalm 103:8, 13).

We need to rest in God’s grace, but not use that as an excuse to give up in the fight. We need to allow the exhortations like the one before us to impact our souls so that we do not give up but re-enter the struggle again and again and again. What this will look like in each of our lives will be different, but at the same time we will all need to be putting sin to death in our lives. And the great encouragement in this passage is that we have been raised with Christ. We have the life of Christ in us through the Spirit. If we are in the fight God is at work in us and as Paul tells us in Philippians 1:6, “And I am sure of this, that he who began the good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” So, “put to death therefore what is earthly in you....”

But we are also to perform certain behaviors and nurture certain attitudes. In verse 12 Paul tells us “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,” Verse 13-14, “bearing with one another and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

All of these have to do with our relationships with other people. These verses give us some of the details of what it means to love our neighbor as our self. The Christian life can be summed up by the word, “love” – love to God and love to other people. And these verses give us some details of what love looks like in practice.

It has to do with caring for people who are struggling or suffering. We are to be compassionate people. We are to care. We are to help. We are to weep with those who weep. We are not to be indifferent. We are to be humble. We are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. We are to be aware of our own weaknesses and shortcomings. We are to remember that every gift and ability that we have is a gift. We are to live with the awareness that we are creatures created by God for his purposes. We are to remember that we are sinners.

And we are to contribute to peace and harmony by patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another. The assumption is that we are all weak and sinful and so we will be insensitive and abrasive and hurtful from time to time. We will do things we should not do. We will say things that we should not say. We will neglect things that we should not neglect. And so on. How can a bunch of people with all kinds of irritations and provocations and weakness live together in love and harmony? How can we live together in love as one body? Patience. Bearing with one another. Forgiving one another.

This is a big part of the Christian life - How we get along with other people – particularly fellow believers. There is a huge emphasis in the NT on peace and harmony and for that to be maintained among a body of imperfect people takes patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another.

We get a great description of this in Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Let me just read the last two verses of this passage. Verses 16-17, Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

This is just a little of what the Bible says about the Christian life. And we have only skimmed over this passage. But we have covered plenty for us to think about as a taste of the kind of life salvation is intended to lead to and does lead to, to some extent in this life, and will lead to in perfection when God has completed in us the work that he has begun.

It is attractive if our eyes have been opened to see the truth about life. It is the life that Jesus has lived in perfection. And it is the life we are blessed to begin to live as those who have been raised with Christ – as those who have been born again – as those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

The text gives us a lot of do's and don'ts. But the do's and don'ts are not legalistic. They are part of the good news. They are part of the gospel. Putting these things into practice is what salvation enables us to do. And they come to us as exhortations – as commands – but they are commands and exhortations that are rooted in the great change that takes place when God brings us from spiritual death to spiritual life. The Christian life takes effort on our part, but we are encouraged in the effort both by the power of the Spirit within us and from the excellency and beauty of the life that we are called to live. And so the effort and the struggle takes place in the context of thankfulness.