

Last week in our ongoing sermon series on Paul's letter to the Colossians, we began looking at the section of the letter in which the apostle gives instruction and exhortation to the Colossian church concerning some of the details of Christian living. We saw that the first part of the letter was largely about what God has done in Jesus for our salvation and that the second part of the letter deals with the practical implications of that salvation for Christian living. This is not an absolute division but the first two chapters are mostly about different facets of salvation in Jesus and the last two chapters are mostly about what this means for Christian living.

Perhaps the most important point that we must understand when it comes to the biblical teaching about Christian living is that it is rooted in salvation in Jesus and indeed is part of what salvation in Jesus means. It is our natural inclination to think that we need to obey God in order to earn or merit God's favor, but the gospel message is that we are brought into God's favor through believing in Jesus rather than keeping God's law and that keeping God's law is what we do as a response to God accepting us on the basis of all that Jesus has done for us.

One of the things that this means is that obedience to God's law is not an onerous burden, but it is a wonderful blessing of salvation. Salvation includes being changed so that we want to obey. We have been given to see that the way of obedience is the way of life and blessing and wellbeing. The main motivations for obedient living are love and thanksgiving and the God-given understanding that it is a wonderful blessing to be enabled by the new life in Christ to begin and grow in obedience to God's law. That must always be understood when we are studying passages in the Bible that have to do with God's law and Christian living. In the case of the verses that we are looking at this evening we must keep in mind that they are intimately related to what comes before them.

Just one example: Colossians 1:13-14 says, "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." The call to obedience comes as an implication of truths such as these. Because God has delivered us from the domain of darkness ... because God has transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved son, because we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, therefore live the good life that God has saved us in order to live.

Now in the verses we are going to look at this evening, Paul is giving more encouragement to the Colossians to do what he is telling them to do as far as fighting against sin is concerned. In verses 5-9a Paul had been urging them to put sin to death in their lives – to put away a number of sinful attitudes and behaviors. We looked at that last week. In the verses we are going to look at now Paul slips in another encouragement for them to do what he is urging them to do. They are to put sin to death and put away things like sexual immorality and anger and lying "seeing [they] have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator."

So he appeals to two things in the words that I have just quoted. He appeals to something that they had done when they became Christians and he appeals to something that God was doing in them as Christians. When, in the past, they had responded positively to the gospel message they had put off their old self and put on a new self. And the new self is one which is being renewed by God to become more like God and like Jesus.

The very basic idea here is that both becoming and being a Christian involves God working in us and us doing things at the same time. We make changes in our lives and grow towards greater obedience because God is working in us. Paul expresses this relationship between what God does and what we do in Philippians 1:12-13 where he says, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” And it is that relationship that we are seeing in our text. The Colossians had put off the old self and had put on the new self. There the focus is in what they had done when they became Christians. But the new self that they had put on is being renewed by God to become more and more like God and because both what the Colossians had done when they turned to Christ and the renewal that God was doing in their lives, they are to put sin to death in their lives and put away things like anger and malice and lying.

Now the phrases, putting off the old self and putting on the new self are very significant. And it's worth the effort that it takes to understand them because this is part of the encouragement that Paul is giving them to put away sin and grow in obedience. And so it is practical. Paul is mentioning these truths for a very practical reason – to encourage the life of putting sin to death and striving towards obedience. He understands that that can be hard and discouraging work and so he is very lavish with his encouragements.

So Christians have “put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self....” The imagery here is that of a change of clothes. The picture is of someone who has taken off old and dirty clothes and put on a new and clean set of clothes. That is the picture but what is put off and put on is not clothes but selves. The old self has been put off and the new self has been put on.

A Christian is a new person. He has repudiated his old self and has put on a new self. Paul uses similar language in 2 Corinthians 5:17 where he writes, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come.” But in our text passage, the emphasis is on what a person does when he or she becomes a Christian. Other passages emphasize what God does, but Colossians 3:9b-10 emphasize what we do when we turn to Jesus in faith and repentance. We put off the old self and we put on a new self.

Now this idea of putting off the old self and putting on the new self is much more profound than what we might think at first glance. We might use this kind of language in our everyday speech. For instance, after we have a shower and put on a fresh set of clothes we might say, “I feel like a new person.” What Paul is talking about here is something like that but much deeper. The term “old self” refers to what we are in Adam. And

the term “new self” refers to what we are in Christ. When we believe in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit we become different people in a real and profound way. We do not just feel different. We are different.

The old self/ new self-imagery is not just about individuals; it is about the great division of the whole human race. The old self refers to the human race in its relationship with Adam and the death that came upon all men because of Adam’s sin and the new self about the new human race in Christ which is made up of all of those whom God has saved and is saving and will save. In Ephesians 2:15 Paul speaks about God “[creating] one new man in Christ.” Salvation in Christ is about God creating a new humanity in Christ. And so the “old self/ new self imagery” includes individuals, but it has more to do with all of humanity in Adam and all of new humanity in Christ.

In any case, what Paul is stressing here is that when people believe in Jesus and repent of their sins, they make a definite break with their old sinful selves which belongs to humanity in its relationship to Adam and they embrace a whole new self which belongs to the new humanity in its relationship to Christ. This is something that God does in saving us, but at the same time it is something that we do as a result of God’s work within us.

And so here Paul is reminding the Colossians to remember the great change they made when they became Christians. They had put off their old self with its practices. They had put on the new self which is being renewed in the image of God. Paul is reminding them of this to encourage them in the fight to put sin to death in their lives.

The practical point here is that in the whole battle against sin, it is very important that we think of ourselves as the Bible describes us as Christians. How we think of ourselves is a very important factor in how we live our lives. And the Bible has an awful lot to say about how Christians should think about themselves and most of the time it has to do with encouraging them in the fight of faith. And that is what Paul is doing here. He is telling them to put sin to death and to put away sin in their lives, but all around these commands and exhortations he is encouraging them by reminding them of who they are in Christ. And here is he reminding them, you put off the old self when you believed in Jesus. And you put on the new self. The old self was spiritually dead. It was part of who they were in Adam. The new self is spiritually alive. It is who they are in Christ and the God is at work in the new self, renewing it after the image of its creator. Remember this when you are struggling in the fight against sin.

Clearly this does not mean that the fight against sin is over. The great change from old self to new self does not mean that living the Christian life now becomes a breeze. The fact that Paul surrounds his exhortations with so much encouragement is rooted in the fact that we need encouragement because putting off sin and putting on obedience is hard – we are not always successful – growth is slow and perseverance is necessary. Think of what Paul writes in Galatians 6:9: “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” We do get weary. We are tempted to give up. Sometimes we do for a time. But that is why Paul and the other biblical authors give such a huge emphasis to the encouragement of the gospel.

But that encouragement often comes in concepts that stretch us. There are ideas to be understood that are unfamiliar and which take some effort to understand. Paul expects his readers to ponder what he is teaching them and to grow in their understanding of the blessedness of what it means to be a believer. And so it is here.

Paul encourages us to think of ourselves as having put off our old “dead-in-sin self” and put on our “new being-renewed-by-God self.” This is a beautiful thing about being a Christian. Yes – there is struggle involved. Yes – it takes effort over the long haul and so perseverance is necessary. But that perseverance comes from hope and so much of the biblical message for believers is about the wonderful blessings that are ours in Christ. So much of the biblical encouragement in the fight of faith is about the love of God for his people – about forgiveness and new life and, as here, the fact that in and through and under our struggle God is at work – slowly but surely renewing us to become more and more like himself. As many of us have grown up singing, “The work thou hast for me begun, shall by Thy grace be fully done.”

Now there is more encouragement here and this has to do with the vision or goal of the Christian life and that is to become more and more like God. Paul says that the new self which Christians have put on “is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” God is the most wonderful and glorious being imaginable and the incredible richness of human life has to do with the fact that he made us in his image. That image was greatly tarnished and distorted by the fall into sin, but one of the great goals of salvation is to renew us in God’s image which is also Christ’s image.

God made humanity in his image. That means we are like God in some ways. We are not like God in every way – otherwise we would be God and that is impossible. But God has made us like himself in many ways and that is what sets us off from the rest of creation. The key thing here is that we are designed for a relationship with God. This is an incredible privilege and blessing. God created us to enjoy knowing and worshipping and serving him. God created us to share his love – to love and to be loved. God created us for relationships both with him and other people. God created us to have dominion over the earth and so reflect his kingship. And on and on it goes. Human life is so rich because God created us in his image.

But sin had a very negative effect on that image. It is not completely erased, but it is definitely tarnished and damaged. Sin is completely unlike God. And since sin is such a big part of life there are many, many ways that we are completely unlike God. We are unlike God in our selfishness. We are unlike God in our greed and our lust and our man-centeredness. And all those ways that we are unlike God diminish us – make us less fully human and detract from the goodness of life. And so being renewed after the image of our creator is a wonderful way to understand the goal of salvation in Jesus.

And Jesus is at the heart of this teaching in Scripture. Colossians 1:15 Paul teaches that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God.” This is very helpful and enriching teaching. It means that Jesus shows us what God is like because he is God in the flesh, but he also shows us what it means to be a human being who perfectly reflects

the image of God. Jesus helps us to see the glory of God, but he also helps us to see what human beings are meant to be like. He is the perfect man. He is the perfect image of God. And so what God in salvation is working towards is us being renewed to become more and more like Jesus. In Romans 8:29 Paul writes that believers in Christ have been “predestined to be conformed to the image of [God’s] Son....”

This is encouraging because it such an attractive goal. There is in human beings – even many unsaved human beings – a desire for improvement. We recognize that we are not what we should be and what we could be and there is a whole huge industry about helping us to become better people. Now apart from the gospel the goal is all wrong and the strategies are largely wrong, but the popularity of the whole self-help industry does show that it is a very common thing for human beings to know that something is wrong with their lives and that they could be much better than they are.

We’ll the gospel is the biblical answer to this desire that many people feel for self-improvement, but both the way and the goal are very different. In the gospel we do not improve ourselves, we are delivered from the sin that so diminishes our lives. The gospel tells us that we are not able by ourselves to improve ourselves. We must be saved from our sins. And that is what God has done and is doing in Christ through the Holy Spirit. But the goal of improvement is also very different from that of the world. The goal of self-improvement by the world is some vision of human living that is apart from God. The goal of salvation is that we are renewed in the image of God and that goal is the most possible worthwhile goal.

Jesus is the perfect example of perfect humanity in the image of God. Jesus is our great role model and inspiration. He is much more than that, but he is also that. Jesus lived the perfect God-centered life. Jesus perfectly lived for the glory of God. Jesus lived the perfect life of love. Jesus was truly a great man, but his greatness was the greatness of serving others – of giving his life for others. And he is the great model for us of love for God and love for man.

Now Paul in our text speaks of being renewed in knowledge after the image of God. One of the ways that we are like God is our knowledge. Much of that knowledge was lost in the fall of Adam into sin and renewal in Christ involves being renewed in knowledge after the image of God. Sin and ignorance go together. One of the great results of sin is that people look at reality and life from a completely wrong perspective and so all knowledge is tainted so that it is not truly true. Because of God’s grace human beings can know a lot of things, but the whole foundation is wrong so that the true meaning of everything is also wrong.

The point is that any knowledge that is not properly related to God is not completely true. God is the creator through Jesus and all true knowledge reveals God. To think of anything apart from God is to think of it wrongly. And here in our text, Paul says that the new self – the self in Christ – “is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”

The more we grow in true knowledge, the more we are like God. Isn't that exciting? Knowledge is so important for human wellbeing and here the Paul encourages us by teaching us that God is at work in his people renewing us in true knowledge which is a big part of being like God.

True knowledge is knowledge of God and everything in the light of God. And one of the great goals of the renewal that is in Christ is growing in that knowledge. Jesus said in John 17:3, "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." And Paul here in our text is speaking about this as a motivation to put to death what is earthly in you. If growing in true knowledge is growing to be more like God, it means reflecting God in the way we think about what is good and true and beautiful. And knowing and seeing what is truly good and true and beautiful is to see with greater clarity and revulsion the ugliness and destructiveness of sexual immorality, impurity, passion evil desire, and covetousness which is idolatry. To reflect God's knowledge in our knowledge is to see the true ugliness and destructiveness of anger wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth and lying.

The fact that the new self that we have put on when we first believed in Jesus is being renewed in knowledge after the image of God is a tremendous encouragement in the fight against sin in our lives because it means that we more and more view sin as God views sin. The more we see sin as God views sin, the more we will hate sin and that is a pretty powerful incentive to put it to death in our lives.

That growing in knowledge happens in many different ways. Here Paul is speaking about how God renews his people in knowledge. God through the work of the Holy Spirit opens our minds and hearts so that we begin to see truth as it really is. Another wonderful verse that speaks of this in 2 Corinthians 4:6 which says, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'" This is an awesome thing! This kind of knowledge is the way of life because knowledge of God is life and living in darkness is living in death.

So this knowledge comes from God's illuminating work in our hearts. It also comes from the Bible. Paul here is writing a letter to the church at Colossae and the letter is all about helping the Colossians to grow in their knowledge of God. God's word is a great part of the way that we grow in the kind of knowledge that makes us more like God. But there is also the rest of the creation. The knowledge of God is reflected in the creation and once our eyes have been opened to see the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, there is so much about God and his ways that we can learn from the creation.

Anyway – Paul's purpose in all that we have looked at this evening is to keep the exhortations to put sin to death in their gospel context. Putting sin to death is hard and it is painful and it is slow going, but Paul here and the Bible in general insists that we never think of the fight against sin apart from the good news of the gospel. That good news is multi-faceted. Here Paul as spoken about the identity of believer as those who have put off the old self – the old dead self in Adam and have put on the new self in Christ. He has reminded them that as new selves they are "being renewed in knowledge after the image" of God and of Christ. There is the

encouragement of who they are in Christ. There is the encouragement of the renewal that God is working in all new selves. There is the encouragement of the wonderful goal that God is working towards – his people becoming more and more like him and there is the encouragement of the place of knowledge in all this and the way growing to be more like God involves among other things growing in seeing everything in the light of God and from God's perspective.

So be encouraged! Whatever your particular struggle is – no matter how discouraged you might feel – be encouraged that God is calling you to press on and to do so in the knowledge that he is renewing you towards a wonderful goal in a wonderful way. He understands the struggles and the discouragements that we face and that is exactly why he is so lavish in his encouragements.