

Sunday, October 17, 2021

Living Into Our New Identity

(Message 7; Series: *Extreme Discipleship: Living into our Mission*)
(Colossians 3:1-10)

Scripture:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Message:

Elizabeth Morris was at home two days before Christmas, when, at 10:40 p.m., she received the phone call every parent dreads: “Mrs. Morris, this is the hospital. Your son has been in an accident.”

Another young man—with a blood alcohol level three times the legal limit—had crossed the center lane and smashed head-on into her son’s car. The drunk driver was barely injured; her son Ted was dead. Elizabeth and her husband Frank were devastated. Their only child, a well-behaved son with a bright future, was gone. Their anger only escalated when they learned that the 24-year-old who killed him was only given probation.

Her anger consumed her; she ached for revenge. She frequently tracked him to see if she could catch him violating his probation, so he’d have to go to prison. Meanwhile, her anger was driving a wedge between her and Frank and their friends.

Then, one day it dawned on her - her heavenly father had also lost his only son; she remembered that before Jesus died (for Elizabeth’s sins), he had said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Elizabeth

decided it would take an *act of will* to forgive the man who killed her only son. But over time, she did.

Her attitude began to change. Her relationship with her husband improved; she and Frank started building a relationship with their son's killer, Tommy Pigage. Through their witness, Tommy gave his life to Jesus Christ.

Frank, a pastor, baptized Tommy. As Tommy emerged from water, they hugged and cried together. Frank officiated at Tommy's wedding. Today the Morris' see Tommy and his wife at church every Sunday. Together, they worship their gracious God.

We wonder, "How in the world can anyone do that, even a Christian?" Paul, in **Colossians 3**, asks, "*How can a follower of Jesus NOT do that?*" because those who have received (God's) grace are to extend (God's) grace. Following Jesus is never easy; discipleship is always demanding. But being gracious is just what Jesus followers do because disciples of Jesus live in a different world with a new identity.

These first four verses in **Colossians 3** constitute one of the most important passages in the New Testament related to living the Christian life. In these verses, Paul reminds us there are two realities, two worlds, two kingdoms and no one can live and find their identity in both.

A NEW IDENTITY

Paul begins by reminding us there are "things above" and "things below"; i.e., there are heavenly, spiritual things and there are earthly routine things.

All earthly things – the things we see, touch, taste, smell – are all decaying and will eventually all die. All the work put into this building, into our homes, businesses, portfolios, and bodies will not last. We've tried cosmetics, vitamins, exercise, doctoring to extend our life – but the truth is, we will all die. That may sound pessimistic. It's not; it's just a reality check; just a statement of truth.

By contrast, heavenly things – the things we know, feel, imagine, long for in our heart and soul – are all growing, bearing fruit, and storing up treasures that will last forever. Heavenly things bring life and peace.

Romans 8:5-6 – "*For those who live according to the flesh [earthly] set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit [heavenly] set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*"

Everyone needs to make a choice of which world to live in because, as both Jesus and Paul note, we can't live in both. Children of God, disciples of Jesus, live in the real world. Which world are you living in?

Paul challenges those who identify with being a disciple of Jesus to do three things:

First, set your heart on things above.

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (3:1).

This above world is centered around Jesus' journey. After becoming one of us, Christ died on a cross, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sits enthroned above until his return. Then Paul says our being united with Christ (i.e., being his disciple) binds us to each of these steps.

When Jesus rose from the dead, those in Christ rose with him. Where he goes, we go. When Jesus ascended, we did too.

Those of us who have experienced the death of a child, know that he or she is already in heaven with Jesus. That is, a part of us, part of our heart, is already in heaven. Heaven is a place we think about often, look forward to, and value in our life. It impacts how we live.

Likewise with Jesus, if we're united with him, and he is already in heaven, a part of us is already there – above, Paul says – in our true and final home. It should be only natural that we think about and seek after "above things," that we value and reflect on that reality, and that it impacts how we live here day by day. It means we invite Christ into our hearts, spend time with Jesus, and seek to be more and more like him (who is in heaven sitting on the throne).

Second, set your mind (i.e., focus) on things above

"Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (3:2-3).

Setting our heart and mind on things above also means *letting go* of the things *down here*. Paul uses the word, "died." Not that we have literally died, but that any and all attraction to the treasures of this world have died within us allowing life in Jesus to blossom in us. And we are now "hidden in Christ," i.e., we are safe and secure forever.

Archbishop John Chrysostom's conversation with Byzantine Empress Eudoxia summarizes this. He refused to submit to her authority so she threatened to banish him; he said, "You can't banish me, the whole world is my Father's house." She said, "I'll have you killed." He said, "You can't, for my life is hidden with Christ in God." She threatened him, "I will take away all your treasures." "No," he said, "my treasure is in heaven and my heart is there." "Then

I will drive you away from your friends and you will have no one left.” “No, I have a friend in heaven from whom you cannot separate me.”

That is a heavenly mindset. Belonging to Christ changes everything – including the kingdom and world we live in. In his hymn, *Before the Throne of God Above*, Charitie Lees Bancroft summed it up: “*One with my Lord I cannot die. My soul is purchased by his blood. My life is safe with Christ on high, with Christ my Savior and my God*”).

We should never be so heavenly minded that we are of no earthly good (the expression goes), but rather our heavenly mindedness should transform our life here – emboldening us, empowering us, and invigorating us.

Third, wait for the things above.

“When Christ appears, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (3:4).

When we are a disciple of Jesus, we know he will return in glory and when he does so, we will be fully transformed and perfected. We will appear with him “*in glory.*” It will be amazing – unlike anything we have seen or can imagine. Suffering, fear, and doubt will all be behind us.

Meanwhile, we wait. There are two kinds of waiting: *rainy-day waiting* and *houseguest waiting*. *Rainy-day waiting* is passive. Like the child who longs to kick the ball around outside but sits unmoved by the front window waiting for the rain to stop. There is nothing to do but wait (and be bored).

Houseguest waiting is quite different. Friends or family are coming so we are rushing around the house focused on getting everything ready so the guests will feel welcomed and comfortable. This is the kind of waiting Paul has in mind. We wait in confidence. We wait in Christ. While we wait, we are actively preparing for his coming.

Everything that follows in Colossians follows these four verses.

AN IMPERATIVE

Converse with a parent in a transparent moment and they will admit that parenting can be largely a matter of corruption and bribery – especially when the family is out in public, or guests are at their home. Trying to get young children to behave is a constant challenge and the temptation to use threats of punishment or bribes for good behavior are strong.

We’ve all done it – which simply underscores how our culture works. We honor those who do well (right); we disgrace those who don’t do well (it doesn’t matter if you are president, a football coach, or a two-year-old). The technique has been remarkably effective (the reason it is so commonly used).

Christians often do it as well – even noting that God is [always] watching and is coming to judge.

The problem is, that is not Christianity – not even close. Paul already noted in the previous chapter (**2:23**) that such “*rules and practices*” are useless when it comes to “*restraining sensual indulgences*” (i.e., changing our thoughts and behaviors).

In these next few verses Paul implores us to live into our new identity by “*putting to death*” earthly (sinful) desires. The difference between those “*religious rules and practices*” and “*putting to death*” such desires is fundamental and foundational to Christianity. Paul is calling us to become [and be] who we [already] are. That is, you cannot separate who we are [our identity because of what Christ has done; **3:1-4**; the “above things”] and the way we live [in light of what Christ did; **3:5ff**]. So it is not, “do this, or else;” it is “be who you are!”

At the same time, Paul is rather forceful and explicit. His language is strong: he takes no prisoners: put these things to death; they have no place here.

In five words, Paul reveals his deep meditation on the problems of this world, “on earth” things:

1. *Sexual immorality* covers all sexual activity outside of marriage. This is immoral simply because God has forbidden it. Sex is a wonderful thing; and since God created it, his instructions carry significant weight. They’re living together without benefit of marriage – God says “no.”
2. *Sexual impurity* refers to impure sexual habits, like pornography.
3. *Lust* at its heart is selfishness, the opposite of love. Lust is about “me, me, me” and reduces others to objects.
4. *Evil desires* extend well beyond the sexual arena and include everything that demeans or harms another while promoting my own interest first.
5. *Greed* is another form of the selfishness and self-centeredness noted in the others above. If it is all about me, there is no room for God or others.

The list is dark...and maybe a bit surprising. If we had to pick five “sins,” we might say, “murder, racism, abuse of power, physical and mental abuse; hatred and rage.” But Paul picks on sex. (There we go again, some might say. Typical Christians!). But Paul’s list is not meant to be understood as exhaustive. Paul is perhaps focused on these because they represent deep and seemingly irresistible forces that affect every one of us. And Paul’s point is, since they are deeply connected to our heart, if we don’t do something about them, they will destroy us.

Paul offers us a second list of five “sins” in verse eight: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language. Our words betray us and our heart. We might attempt to dismiss our crass statements when confronted saying, “I didn’t really mean it” or “I was only joking.” But, Paul says, they have no place in God’s world. Those in God’s kingdom are truth-tellers.

It should not escape our attention that Paul has not yet laid down any rules. He simply implores us to become more and more like Jesus.

AN INSERTION

Paul inserts an interesting verse (3:6) in between his two lists of things we need to get rid of in our lives: *“Because of these the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these (idolatrous) ways, in the life you once lived”* (before you came to Jesus).

Paul is not threatening us as disciples in the hope of motivating us to reform our ways. He is simply saying that these sins point to what is wrong with our world and why God needs to do something about it.

That is actually good news – that God will do something about it.

Paul is also reminding us that we tend to go lightly on ourselves when we are the perpetrator, but seldom go lightly when we are the victim. That reminds us of everything we need to know. It is also why Paul insists all of this is incompatible with being a disciple of Jesus. It must be put to death. We must be growing more and more like Jesus and our witness needs to be clearer and clearer.

Here is Paul’s point. We don’t do this out of fear (Fear is what religion provokes from our anxiety of what God might do if we fail). We do this out of the confidence we have because of our faithful Savior Jesus Christ and our identity as children of the Father. We are to live like, that is, be, who we are.

AN INQUIRY

So how do you die to all of this sin and evil? The common answer is simply to try harder not to do it. And when success continues to illude us, our solution is to try even harder. But the reality is, that doesn’t work. Our experience confirms it. We’ve tried unsuccessfully – multiple times. Truth is, it’s a heart issue, not primarily a behavior issue. So we need to involve the heart.

This process seems counter-intuitive. When we focus on getting rid of the evil from our life, we’re focusing on the evil. The evil becomes the center of our attention. Focusing on evil is never helpful.

The best process is to focus on Jesus Christ, on renewing our heart, and on nurturing our soul, and eventually the evil will get squeezed out.

Let me illustrate. Let's pause for thirty seconds and we'll all think about something wonderful. So think about anything you'd like except you are not to think about red monkeys. Do not think about red monkeys. Okay, think about anything - anything except red monkeys. No red monkeys...go...

(Wait thirty seconds)

Okay, moment of confession, how many of you thought about red monkeys at least once in the last thirty seconds? Being told not to think about something pretty much guarantees in our human nature we're going to be thinking about it. That is why focusing on our sin never works; we need to focus on our relationship with Jesus Christ.

SOME INITIATIVES

A disciple is one who wisely arranges his or her life around practices, relationships and experiences that disrupt the automatic flow of thoughts and feelings so their minds can be renewed, and their lives transformed. This is a process of “*preparing the soil*” so God, through his Spirit, can plant and nurture his seed in our lives.

I've seen Cadets do ropes – rope ladders, rope bridges, rope courses – sometimes under protest, sometimes kicking and screaming, sometimes very slowly (okay, that was just me) - but it was part of being a Cadet so they did it; they did it with encouragement; they did it successfully. That's not unlike the spiritual disciplines that help us prepare the soil for God's work of transformation.

Speed is not the determining factor; it doesn't really matter if it comes naturally or not, if you are a disciple of Jesus, you just do it. It is who you are. I know people, for example, who automatically say “no” to praying in public - even around the family table - and their prayer life never grows. No one has to offer the perfect prayer the first time or the thousandth time. Jesus gives us a lifetime to learn. But we will never grow unless we're willing to be stretched, inconvenienced, uncomfortable, and challenged. The call to discipleship, the call to follow Jesus, is the call to a life of ongoing rigorous training.

No one successful completed the Boston Marathon earlier this week by just gathering information about the course, or by simply planning to attend. They all entered an intensive training program. In fact, their entire life revolved around it for the last few months – at least.

We need training in (at least) three primary areas...

First, we must renew our heart and mind by renewing our *will*. That is, we must *will*, resolve, commit to - and this is a daily conscious decision - to die to sin. Are we going to live into our new identity? If so, Paul says there are some things we will need to put to death. He mentions a few examples. Most of us are aware of the ones in our life that need to go.

This doesn't mean we'll never do these things again as long as we live; it does mean we're going to do all we can to extinguish sin from our life by getting closer and closer to Jesus. This means we're (willfully) committed to pay whatever price is necessary to get free from sin, or as Paul says, to die to it.

This begins by naming it. Sexual immorality, lust, greed, anger, filthy language, etc. It continues by taking the first step in the opposite direction: cutting off the affair, using your computer only when others are present, going for counseling, confessing to an accountability partner, going to AA, seeing a spiritual director, etc. The first step is always the hardest.

Don't lie to or deceive yourself. Sin does not die of natural causes. It has to be put to death. Take the first step. It will take God's power; and he will help - after that first step.

Second, we must renew our heart and mind by monitoring our *mind*. The Psalmist, in **Psalm 139:23**, invited God to, "*Search me, O God, know my thoughts; try me and know my heart.*"

Our busyness, along with numerous other factors, allows us to walk week after week unaware of what's going on in our heart and soul. That has to change. We need to become more aware of where our heart and mind are.

Coming home from a family vacation, Marilyn and I would need to empty out the car and trailer: "Everyone help; take your stuff and help us unpack." Instead, all three boys would just walk into the house. I'm thinking: "What is the matter with these lazy kids?" Can you imagine a 13, 16, and 18-year-old who don't just jump at their father's request? Where did these children get such slothful genes? Certainly not from my side of the family." (I didn't say that last part out loud - until now.) (They all eventually returned to help - when I was about done.)

Such thoughts don't bring growth in our relationship. And then I wonder, "What does God think about me when I don't respond to his request?" It certainly doesn't enhance our relationship.

We need to monitor and be conscious of our thoughts. They come from someplace, something triggers them, and our thoughts eventually impact our behavior - both words and actions.

Third, we must renew our heart and mind by spending time with Jesus through Scripture and prayer. The only way to become more like Christ is to intentionally spend more time with him. The best way for us to do that is by internalizing his words and having extended conversations with him.

If we just drift through life, we will never be transformed, we'll never be able to do Christ-like, counter-cultural, incredible things like Elizabeth Morris. Are we committed to taking that first step?

After church one Sunday morning, the little girl asked her dad, "Daddy, what did the preacher mean when he said you have to have Jesus inside of you?"

"Well, honey, that means when you believe in Jesus, he comes to live inside of you."

"Daddy, how big is Jesus?"

"I don't know honey, maybe five and a half to six feet."

She looked down at her three-foot, forty-pound body and then up at her dad, and said, "Daddy, you know he's going to stick out."

Actually, that's the point. Jesus needs to stick out of our life, so the world can see.

Please stand for closing prayer.

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