

December 7, 2008

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Let Heaven Fill Your Thoughts

Colossians 3:1-7

In chapter 2 Paul presents the wonderful truth that those who are Christ's have been made complete in Him. There is nothing outside of Christ Himself that we need to look for to find purpose and fulfillment and complete joy. He has given us new hearts and we have been buried with Him in baptism and raised up with Him by faith – our sins are forgiven and we stand justified before God in Christ and with Him victorious over all the forces of hell. Everything relates to Him – everything answers to Him – everything finds its relevance and meaning in Christ.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Colossians 3:1 *If* it is true of you that you have been raised up with Christ – if you are truly a believer – then your perspective will be heavenly. The word **seek** here is in the present active tense which is best translated as **keep seeking**. In other words, you have begun to seek – now keep at it. Give yourself to finding out about the things above. If you are truly saved, you **will** find yourself seeking the things above. If you are in reality born from above as Jesus told Nicodemus he must be to see the kingdom, then the things of above are going to dominate your thinking. When you were just a lost pagan – you weren't seeking – you didn't give much thought to heavenly things. In fact, unless the Father had mercy on you and began to draw your heart and senses to Himself – you would have been earthbound in your thinking until the day they put you in the ground. But now you have this inner passion to know God and be known by Him.

Paul wasn't saying **seek the things above** to get these Colossians suddenly thinking about what they ought to be thinking about because they never had. In other words this is not a legal command that we must follow to be a Christian. The problem with the Colossians is that they had let their minds wander to earthly realms and focus on discussions of food and drink and ceremonies and philosophies and aesthetic practices and regulations that Paul said were not only of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh – but were causing them to miss the enjoyment of Christ. And so Paul is bringing them back to Christ.

The church today has, in large measure, has veered off-center in its message and its mission in the world. The prevailing message seems to be one of personal life-enhancement rather than God-exalting. Dr. Larry Crabb gives a stunning analysis of the extent to which the evangelical church has missed the mark:

'Helping people to feel loved and worthwhile has become the central mission of the church. We are learning not to worship God in self-denial and costly service, but to embrace our inner child, heal our memories, overcome addictions, lift our depression, improve our self-images, establish, self-preserving boundaries, substitute self-love for self-hatred, and replace shame with an affirming acceptance of who we are...as a result we happily camp on biblical ideas that help us feel loved and accepted, and we pass over Scripture that calls us to higher ground. We twist wonderful truths about God's acceptance, His redeeming love, and our new identity in Christ into a basis for honoring ourselves...we have rearranged things so that God is now worthy of honor because He has honored us...'

This was the dangerous ground into which the Colossian church was walking, and Paul was exhorting them to look up not down – look at Jesus, not yourselves. And then he defines what he means by **keep seeking** the things above: *Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.* Colossians 3:2 A literal translation is **'mind the things above'**. To set your mind is a conscious effort of the will. The word translated **set your mind** here refers to an attitude or disposition of the mind. Paul is saying, 'Have this frame of mind – have this as your sphere of thinking – set your mind on above things.' I like how the NLT puts this verse: **'Let heaven fill your thoughts'**. How big a part does thinking about eternity play in your thinking? How much time do you spend thinking about heaven? And when I say heaven, I am not just talking about the place we go after we die. I am talking about the things above – all the things. Most particularly about God Himself.

As we were reminded last week, the first and greatest commandment is to love God supremely – with all our heart, and soul and mind and strength. And I don't think I need to tell you that whatever you love supremely will occupy the greatest part of your thinking. Ask yourself honestly, what occupies the majority of your thinking? Is it the things above – or the things below? ***The purpose of our lives is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever.*** We exist to make much of God throughout life and eternity. Christ did not come ultimately to make bad men better men – He did not suffer the pain and humiliation of the cross simply to make our lives here on earth safe and prosperous and comfortable – but to remove the eternal barrier of sin that would keep us from loving God and enjoying God and making much of Him eternally. God intended that we should be first and foremost satisfied and happy in Him. The point of seeking the things above – ***the intent of the exhortation to let heaven fill our thoughts is that we make ourselves happy in God.*** This is the secret Paul knew – this is what George Mueller said was the most important thing: ***'...above all things see to it that your souls are happy in the Lord.'***

Because, Paul says, ***For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*** Colossians 3:3 The overarching truth of a believer's life in Christ is the experience of death and life. It is the experience of dying to the old life of sin and awakening to the new life in Christ. Consider your old life to be dead. Before Christ was your all in all, you were alive to the attractions of this world; you were alive to the kind of living that pervades this age; you embraced the thinking and philosophy that characterizes life without God. But that all changed when you surrendered to Christ. Now your thinking is eternal, not temporal. Your life relates to Christ now – not the world. Our living is for God – not for ourselves – we consider Him in everything – we live for Him in everything – all the parts of our lives relate to Him – and nothing in our lives is unconnected from Him. That is what Paul means when he says ***'...your life is hidden with Christ in God.'***

And because that is true of those who are genuinely saved, ***When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.*** Colossians 3:4 The world does not now see the risen Christ – but one day they will. The book of Revelation tells us that one day every eye will see Him coming on clouds of glory – and Paul says on that day, those whose lives have been hidden with Christ in God will also be revealed for all to see. It will be the grandest vindication of a life lived with Christ ever. Now people think Christ-followers are strange – now people reject the gospel – now people persecute and ridicule and humiliate followers of Christ. But one day the curtain is torn away and the glory of Christ and those who are His will outshine the sun – and every eye will see what was previously hidden.

And so Paul says, ***Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.*** Colossians 3:5-6 This is a great paradox – on the one hand Paul says that we have died – on the other hand he says put to death what is earthly in you. And what he is describing is the battle every Christian faces until the moment he goes to be with the Lord and that is the battle with what the Bible calls the flesh. There are no truces, no compromises – no peace talks – no cease-fire arrangements for the flesh. The only effective weapon is death. ***For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.*** Galatians 5:17 And when Paul talks about what is earthly in you – he is talking about your flesh – and it is on account of sinful flesh that the wrath of God is coming.

The flesh is that part of us that will not make it into heaven. It is the place in every man, woman and child where sin hangs out. Paul tells us in Romans 7 that nothing good dwells in our flesh. I want to tell you up front that there is no salvation for your flesh – God saves souls not flesh. It is not a question of progressive holiness – where you get better and better and one day you reach perfection and never sin anymore. It is a matter of putting to death what is earthly in you. Paul tells us in chapter 8 of Romans: ***'...if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.'*** Romans 8:12-13 John Owen, the great Puritan pastor and theologian, puts this in a shorthand form ***"Be killing sin or [sin] will be killing you."*** John Owen

Paul goes on to list five things that topped his chart on fleshly sins: ***sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*** I find it very interesting that the first four things Paul talks about to the Colossian church have to do with sex. Apparently it was as big a problem in his day as it is in ours. Sexual immorality covers a lot of territory – it is having any sexual relations outside of the God-given covenant of marriage. Things have progressed to such a point, not only in our world, but in the church, that sex before marriage has become commonplace. It is widely accepted and even endorsed by the world, and it is at least tolerated in the church.

I cannot tell you the number of couples that have come to me to be married that call themselves Christians and are living together and having sex before they get married. And the worst part is that they are not ashamed. There is no sense that they have broken God's law and dishonored His name by their actions. In times past, there was at least a sense of shame – at least a sense that this was something that needed to be repented of and made right. But now it is open and unashamed. There is no covering our faces in humiliation for sexual sin. But this is what happens when we grow used to sin.

Paul goes on to talk about impurity, passion and evil desire – and all of these are linked to sexual immorality. **Impurity** is the condition that results from illicit sex; **passion** conveys the idea of perverse erotic fervor; and **evil desire** describes the intense craving to fulfill these desires. And then he wraps up this list with **covetousness** – which is idolatry. Covetousness is best described as **an insatiable appetite to gratify the desires of the flesh** – and here in this case – illicit sexual desires. Most commentators separate covetousness here from the other four – but I think Paul meant this last one to include them.

Covetousness, Paul says, is **idolatry**. And idolatry is setting up anything or anyone other than God as your preferred object of worship. Idolatry is loving something or someone else more than God. Time and time again, God's judgment against His people came because of their idolatrous behavior. And He nearly always likened their idolatry to sexual sin. In the book of Ezekiel the Lord tells that prophet to bring judgment against His people Samaria or Israel, and Jerusalem, or Judah: *The Lord said to me: Son of man, will you judge Oholah [Samaria] and Oholibah [Jerusalem]? Declare to them their abominations. For they have committed adultery, and blood is on their hands. With their idols they have committed adultery, and they have even offered up to them for food the children whom they had borne to Me.* Ezekiel 23:36-37

Sexual sin is a huge mistake because ultimately it constitutes idolatry. If you notice too, it always leads to the sacrifice of what once was sacred – human life. *they have even offered up to them for food the children whom they had borne to Me.* Sexual immorality always leads to a cheapening of the value of human life so it is not surprising that the so-called sexual revolution of the sixties led directly to the abortion rights movement of the seventies and now the push for right to die legislation that we just passed in our own state. Because we fail to love God supremely – we cannot even love ourselves, much less our neighbor.

So Paul is passionate in his exhortation to put to death what is earthly in you. If you are a Christian, don't let the evil desires of the flesh rule you, knowing that you have died to these things and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. It was true that, *In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.* Colossians 3:7 But God in His mercy rescued you from these things when you believed on His Son – He gave you a new heart and new passions and a new perspective – one that seeks the things above and not the earthbound things. **So how do we put to death what is earthly in us?** How do we practically kill sin? Because one of the characteristics of the true Christian is that he is always putting to death what is earthly. I want to leave you with three big sin-killers that will make you effective in your battle with the flesh.

First, **set your affections on heaven**. An article in a San Francisco newspaper reported that a young man who once found a \$5 bill on the street resolved that from that time on he would never lift his eyes while walking. The paper went on to say that over the years he accumulated, among other things, 29,516 buttons, 54,172 pins, 12 cents, a bent back, and a miserly disposition. Too many of us are like that man. While we may not walk around staring at the sidewalk, we are so engrossed with the things of this life that we give little attention to the next. Perhaps we've gotten a taste of some fleeting pleasures offered by the world and we've been spending all our time pursuing it. When we, who are **'seated with Christ in the heavenlies'** give our affection and attention to a world that is passing away, we lose the upward look. Our perspective becomes distorted, and we fail to bask in heaven's sunlight. Taken up with the passing pleasures of sin and the seductions of this world, we become defeated, delinquent Christians. Buttons, pins, and pennies a plenty, but no treasures laid up in heaven.

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. Let heaven fill your thoughts. Spend time in the word of God – ransack the Scriptures for hope-giving, sin-killing promises of God. All the promises of God are yes and amen in Christ. As you give yourself to exploring all the vast dimensions of God in His word, you will find your heart strangely warmed toward heaven. You will find your priorities rearranged, your inclinations transformed, your affections weaned away from the suicidal attractions of sin and the passing pleasures of this world, to the fullness of joy and everlasting pleasures in Christ.

Second, **consider yourself dead to sin.** *For you have died,* Romans 6 tells us: *So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.* Romans 6:11-13

How do we consider ourselves dead to sin? Paul says it is a conscious decision with a positive action: *Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God.* Don't allow yourself to go to those places where sin has dominated you in the past – but rather present yourself to God. The best advice is flee and pursue as Paul told Timothy: *Flee from youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.* 2 Timothy 2:22 I had a friend a long time ago who was a recovering drug and alcohol abuser and he had been doing well for some time. But he got it in his head that he ought to be evangelizing those poor souls down in the bars that he had consorted with for so long. He began going down to the bars to engage the people there in conversation and soon found himself joining them in a drink or two – and then it was two or three and finally he showed up at home one night, falling down drunk and saying how nobody really wanted to be saved down there. Don't keep presenting your members to sin – present yourselves to God.

Finally, **get away regularly with God.** Paul tells us to care for the hidden life in Christ. He encourages us to consider that *your life is hidden with Christ in God.* I believe this speaks to our prayer life. On the one hand this verse speaks to the believers assurance of salvation in that our lives are now invulnerable to the schemes of the enemy to ultimately cause us to lose our salvation. But also I think it speaks to the hidden life of prayer Jesus talked about in Matthew: *But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.* Matthew 6:6 We need time alone with God where the clamor of the world is shut out and our souls are quieted before Him so that we might hear Him speak. Prayer is that intimate connection that links our hearts to heaven and brings us into communion with Christ. Much prayer – much connection. Little prayer – little connection. No prayer – no connection. Let heaven fill your thoughts.

Our gracious God and loving Father,

Grant that we would see and savor and embrace the truth that we who are Christ's have died and our lives are hidden with You in God. Turn our eyes from the passing fancies of this world to the everlasting joys of heaven. Holy Spirit, fill us with the power to live as those who have died to sin and walk as those who are alive to God. We confess that there is a great war within us and we grieve over the evidence of our failings and ask that You would forgive us, cleanse us, restore us. Give us the will to fight the suicidal sin that our will desires. Help us to run from sin and run to Jesus. May we be those who live to make our souls happy in God and make the nations glad in You we pray in the precious and life-giving name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***