

## “Christ . . . Your Life”

Colossians 3:1-4

<sup>1</sup> If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. <sup>3</sup> For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (ESV)

Last Sunday we finished chapter 2 of Colossians. Basically Colossians breaks down into two parts: an indicative part and an imperative part. Those of you who didn't major in English or haven't thought about it for several years are asking what am I talking about? Indicative means “what you are” or “who you are” or “who Christ is.” It's passive, “what has been done for you.” On the other hand, imperative is “what you should do” or “what are the things you should be doing?” As we look at this Book of Colossians, remember that the Colossian church was not a big church, necessarily. It wasn't a famous church like Rome or someplace like that. And yet, Epaphras (we think) went and asked Paul, “I planted this church. We're out in the middle of nowhere. What do I need to know about church?” Paul told Epaphras the same thing that he tells every church planter and every Christian.

What you need to know is the answer to a couple of questions. The first question is, “Who is Jesus?” The second question is “Who am I?” And the third question is, “Is Jesus all that I need?” Once you understand those questions (the indicative, who Jesus is, who you are, and is Jesus all you need?), then you can begin to talk about imperatives, “What should I be doing?” The question is, “What should you be doing as a Christian?”

The times that are the most moving to me often are when members of the congregation come and they say they want to meet with me and they'll say, “Pastor, you've been preaching the Gospel and Jesus is working on my heart, but I have this issue in my life and I genuinely want to change. I want to be a better husband or I want to be a better wife or I want to stop being angry at my child.” The question is, “How do you do it?” Paul is going to tell us today.

How are you transformed? What does it mean to be changed? What does it mean to become more and more like Jesus? Before we look at those three things this morning, I want to remind you of what Paul said that it is not. Paul has been saying for the first two chapters, “Here's what it means to be a Christian. You're alienated from God, but Jesus has brought you near. All things are created to Him and through Him and for Him. Everything is about Jesus.” Now, when you think about what it means to be more and more like Jesus, what does it mean to truly change from the inside out? Let me tell you first what it's not. What it's not is following a bunch of rules. You want to know what it means to be a Christian? Paul says, “Let me start with what it's not. What it's not is following a bunch of rules. In the last verse I read last week, Paul said to them,

<sup>23</sup> *These (laws and made-up teachings) have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. (ESV)*

Paul is not saying that laws are bad. He's not saying that laws are evil. He's just saying that they are worthless. Let me qualify that. He's saying they are worthless for the purpose of changing your heart. They can only do certain things for you, namely restrain you. He said that they have a certain value in constraining the flesh but they can't change you.

For example, let's say you're driving south on I-5. You're driving to Portland through Olympia, and the speed limit is 65. You're going about 72. You're going 72, and you're listening to the radio. You're not paying attention to much of anything. Everyone else is going 72 as well, and out of the corner of your eye you see a state patrolman sitting under the overpass in front of you. In a twinkling of an eye you get an attack of virtue, goodness, and your heart is changed from the inside out. You realize that speeding is a sin because we're suppose to submit to the governmental authorities. In that moment your heart is changed and you either slam on the brakes or if you're smart you downshift so the patrol officer doesn't see your brake lights come on. Everything is good. Is that why you slam on the brakes or downshift? Why do you do that? It's because you're afraid of getting caught, is it not? Paul says, “That's the role that law plays for the most part.” It's good and restrains us. A lot of

bad things might happen if we didn't have these laws because we're afraid to get caught, and so we don't do bad things. But the question is, "How do you change from the inside out?" That's what Paul is going to talk about today. We're going to look at three things today. Imagine if you went to the apostle Paul and said, "Paul, I want to be better. I want to really be a godly person. What do I do?" Paul says, "You need to remember three things. Number one, you have already been changed (past tense). Number two, you are being changed. And number three, you will be changed."

The first question is, "How have we been changed?" That's the first thing we'll talk about. Notice the first verse here. Paul says,

*<sup>1</sup> If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. (ESV)*

So Paul is setting up an if-then statement again, if X is the case then Y. He says, "If you have been raised with Christ . . ." The first thing Paul is reminding them (past tense) is that they have already experienced a significant change. "First thing, you died and death entails a separation. So because of Adam's sin, we're separated from God. But because of Christ's obedience, we're separated from our sin because we're in union with Jesus. We're bound up with Him." He says, "So you died with Him, and now just as you died with Him you have been raised with Christ. And because you have died with Christ and raised with Christ, in fact you are where He is right now." You are so bound up to Jesus that wherever He is and whatever He experiences, you and I experience as well whether you know it or not. We died to our sin with Jesus and now we have risen with Jesus and are seated at the right hand of God. We have been changed (at least that's what our paperwork says about us) because of our union with Jesus. We used to be citizens of this world, but now we're citizens of heaven. We're so bound to Jesus, Paul says, we live there with Him. The question is, "How do we get life here to look like life there?" How do we get our life here to become aligned with what Paul says is true about us, that we have been raised, we have been seated with Christ in the heavenly realms and we're with Him now? The first thing is that you have to realize is that you're a citizen of a different place. You've been changed. With your union with Christ you've been changed in your very fundamental identity in that you're no longer a citizen of this world, but a sojourner. In fact you're a citizen of heaven. How do you get there? You get there by marriage, basically.

Did you ever see the movie, "Green Card" with Gérard Depardieu and Andie MacDowell? He's a Frenchman here without a job and the only way he can stay here is to get a green card, if he is in union with a citizen of this country. He doesn't love Andie MacDowell. She has a great apartment, but she has to be married to rent it, so out of convenience they get married. And what do you know? They fall in love. The point is that the only way he gets to stay in the country is by virtue of his union. And the reason that you and I are citizens of heaven is not because of what we have done, it's not because of any good thing we've produced, and it's not for any striving we have done. But because of our union with someone who dwells there. That is Jesus Himself.

One scholar I read this week said that the Colossians had this obsession with heaven, and he couldn't understand why Paul would then encourage them to seek heaven. The reason, I think, is because they had an obsession with heaven but it was bogus. You've often hear the terminology, it's a clique where someone says, "Tommy's so heavenly minded he's no earthly good." Have you ever heard that? Well, Paul is basically saying here, "The reason you're no earthly good is because you're not heavenly minded enough." The Colossians apparently started in the wrong place. They started from the ground and looked out at the prize. The prize was getting to heaven so they spent all their life doing good things on earth to make sure they got to heaven. Paul says, "You want to ensure good things on earth? Do you want to be a changed person, do you want to be a more generous person, do you want to be a more loving person? Don't start on the earth and try to work your way there. The place you start is there and work your way back." The thing that enables you to be a more loving, generous, gentle person is not the fact that you hope to get to heaven some day, but it's the fact that you dwell in heaven now with Jesus. If that is true, it changes everything. That's where Paul goes next. Or at least that's where I'm going to take him.

You have to remember that you have been changed from death to life. You've been raised with Christ; you're in union with Him. Several people have said, "Tommy, you don't tell us what to do enough. Give us the imperatives. Tell us what we should be doing." Paul is going to do it now. If you're looking for what you should

be doing in order to be more obedient, in some ways you might be disappointed in what Paul tells you here because you'd expect Paul to say, "Now you've got it. You've got the Gospel, you've got Jesus, you've got everything, now just be moral. Now be good." Paul says, "Here's how you're changed from the inside out." I'm going to read the same verse again.

<sup>1</sup> *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.* <sup>2</sup> *Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.* (ESV)

So you want to be changed? How does God change us now? Paul says, "Seek the things above. Set your minds not on things here but on things there." If you want to change you don't start with being good, you start where? At least with the apostle Paul, the starting place is always the same. It starts with a "J" and ends with an "S." It's Jesus.

But it's even bigger than that. It's almost hidden in this text. He said, "Seek the things above" and he could have added, "where Christ is." Period. But I don't know that that would have helped us that much. Because then you might say, "'Where Christ is' – am I supposed to just seek Jesus where He is as an example?" He actually is very specific. He says, "Seek the things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." That's the key, I think, to this text. Christ, when He died, rose again from the dead; He ascended to heaven and was seated at the right hand of God. Theologians call that the "session of Christ." What Christ being seated signifies is that His work on our behalf is completely and utterly finished; that there's nothing more that He needs to offer God in order for us to be acceptable to God. So the fact that Christ is seated at the right hand of God should be the greatest comfort in the world to you. All the work to take away your sin is done. It's not just been done, but it is so complete that Jesus can actually sit down. He doesn't need to engage anymore.

What does that do with your life now? Let's say you struggle with sin, the rare person in this room. Or you struggle with anxiety, or depression or you struggle with something. Everyone does. Paul says, "Don't set your thoughts down here. Set your thoughts on that which is above, namely Christ seated at the right hand of God." Look to Jesus and see that His work on your behalf is finished. So many of us struggle with our sin and we wonder, "Gosh, I wonder where Jesus is. Is He up there? He's probably frustrated right now. He's probably pacing back and forth. What is Jesus doing? If He knew what I was doing now . . ." Paul says, "Just skip all that. If you're struggling with your sin, go straight to heaven and see where Jesus is. Tommy, you're a guilty and miserable sinner. Jesus is still sitting." "But what about my struggles with this?" "Jesus is still sitting." There's nothing that you could throw at Jesus that could get Him to not be seated anymore. I know you're thinking of Stephen in Acts 7. That's a different thing altogether. The point is that Jesus' work on your behalf is finished. If you really know that and remind yourself of that, that is the starting place for true inward change. It's not starting outward and saying, "Man, if I could just be good." What you do is look to Jesus and say, "Okay. Jesus, you have paid with this sin that I struggle with. You identify with it. Now help me change it. Your work on my behalf means that even as I struggle, I'm not going to be kicked out of heaven because it's done, You're seated, You've done the work."

One of my favorite scenes from any movie is from "As Good as it Gets" with Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt. (I don't know why I'm using all these "chick flicks" today.) Remember in that movie Jack Nicholson is sort of an obsessive, compulsive, middle-aged, complaining guy. He's sort of like me, I think my kids would say. He meets Helen Hunt who's this cute, nice waitress, on one hand. On the other hand she doesn't take anything from him. She's the only person that's willing to confront him. They have this sort of stormy, quasi-relationship. They go out to dinner. She's sick of this guy. She says, "Compliment me." Remember that scene? She says, "Unless you compliment me right now I'm getting up from this table and walking away." He leans across the table and he said, "You make me want to be a better man." That's it. She said, "That's the nicest thing anyone ever said to me." The question is, why did she make him want to be a better man? It wasn't her example. He says that in the movie. It was her person. It's just being with her and the fact that she was willing not to take things from him but in fact to engage him where he was. That's what made him want to be a better man. What the Gospel says is if you're really engaging with Jesus you can't help but want to be a better man or woman because, on one hand, you know He's seated and He loves you and He's not going anywhere. On the other hand, He's not willing to let you stay how you are.

The next thing that Paul says is, “Remember not only that, that you have been changed and that Jesus is changing you. “ Notice what the last verse says.

<sup>3</sup> *For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.* <sup>4</sup> *When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.* (ESV)

Theologians have a lot of discussions about what that means. What does that mean that our “life is hidden with Christ in God”? It carries with it sort of the idea of a fortress, that Jesus is a fortress and until the end of time we’re hidden in Him and nothing can touch us. That’s true. But I think there’s something more to it, especially for a question which all Christians struggle with, “Gosh, am I always going to be like this? Is it always going to be hard to be a Christian? Is it always going to be hard to be a father? Is it always going to be hard to be a mother? Is it always going to be hard to be a student? Is it always going to be like this?” Paul says, “Remember, right now your life is hidden with Christ in God, and one day you will be revealed in glory.” What you see right now is not exactly the way things really are.

Do you ever notice that every person longs for glory? Everyone does. If everyone doesn’t long for glory, just watch “You Tube” [<http://www.youtube.com>] sometime. Randomly click through “You Tube” and ask yourself, “Do people want to be seen and want to show themselves?”

The clearest idea of what Paul is talking about here came to me this week. I’ve skipped most of the reality television shows fortunately. I have to watch the dancing shows because I have all women in my house. But other than that, there’s not many of them that I watch except one that I happened upon last year and now I record it and watch it late at night. The show is, “America’s Got Talent.” It’s amazing when you see how many people show up for auditions by the tens of thousands. On one hand you think, “Man, these people want a shot at glory.” On the other hand I’m thinking, “Does anyone not love these people enough to tell them that they have absolutely no talent whatsoever?” Zero. I mean negative numbers. I’m always amazed when people come up and everyone sort of writes them off from the beginning. It happened a couple of weeks ago. A guy named Kevin Skinner came out onto the stage. Kevin Skinner had a baseball cap on backwards and he’s wearing high-topped tennis shoes and he had the worst accent in the world. “My name’s Kevin Skinner from Kentucky.” You have two British judges, remember, and one from the U. S. Ironically one of the British judges was criticizing him for his accent, you know, what do you think? But they looked at him and you could tell they were disgusted. One said, “So, tell us what you do?” “I’m a chicken catcher.” And the judges rolled their eyes. You can see them go, “Oh, God.” They go on, “How many chickens do you catch?” They’re mocking the guy now. “I don’t know, I’m not very good at math.” He sounds like Forrest Gump. They say, “Well, go ahead and play.” And he started playing, started playing a Garth Brooks song and within ten seconds you could have heard a pin drop. In the whole auditorium, people could tell he was obviously very talented. All the judges, tears in their eyes because here’s this guy that everyone had written off, and yet obviously if you ask me he’s probably going to win the whole thing. And yet no one would have known that unless he was revealed to be as such. Think of that feeling you get when you see someone like Kevin Skinner singing and you realize that this guy is not just good, he’s glorious. I couldn’t even touch that. I love at the end when he finishes no one knows what to do, then it takes one person, “Whooo.” And the crowd just explodes. Paul says, “You want to be motivated? Some day you, no matter what you feel like now, you remember Jesus has changed you, He is changing you, but some day the crowd is going to look at you and they are just going to marvel no matter how lowly and humble you are. In fact the more lowly and humble you are now, the greater it’s going to seem when you are finally revealed in glory. What made Kevin Skinner seem so glorious is because he was so humble to begin with.

So, it feels hard now struggling with our sins. It feels hard being in the places where we are and yet the more glory will be heaped upon us. Most religions seek to empower us. You don’t want a religion that empowers you, because if it empowers you what is it going to empower you to do? Look within yourself? Then you look within yourself and all you see is sin and then you’re going to be disempowered. You want a religion that says, “I take away your sin and I’m destining you for glory. Think about that.