

Changing Our Desires

Series: Jesus ...Changes Everything (Colossians)

Brad Bailey – May 21, 2023

Intro

Let me begin asking each of us to consider this:

Do you want to be a good person? And if so... why and how?

(How do you know what good is...and how can you actually change?)

(Does good exist?)

This isn't a matter of making any kind of judgement...but open us up to what God wants to say to us today...as we continue in our series "Jesus Changes Everything...drawing from the **Biblical Book of Colossians**.

It is written by the **Apostle Paul**... he knows the ways of the Roman Empires culture... religious culture... and he realizes that he has now faced the true source of goodness... that everything we have longed for and hoped for... has been made known.

Goodness is not reduced to our subjective whim and wishes... it is not that which is **defined by a government** Not that which even the best of **religious rules can achieve**.

It exists in God... and has now been embodied to in the one who has come to share that nature with us. [1]

This is what Paul began to describe in the previous text we engaged last week.

Colossians 2:6-7a, 8-10 (NLT)

⁶And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. ⁷Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him.

⁸Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ. ⁹For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. ¹⁰So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.

What does this say to us?

That the goodness we long for has come in all it's fullness....from outside ourselves... and sharing it's nature with us. So he warns us against the empty philosophies of the day.

We all do well to realize that **we live within the philosophy of our day**. Worldview.... We all think how we see things is the way they are... but in truth we see it through all the assumptions that we have been shaped by. That is our worldview. It's like colored glasses we never knew we were wearing.

Paul gives this warning...**because no one tends to realize that they are bound by such philosophies**. Today... there is **common aversion to being converted**.... to anything... and it comes from believing that one is independent from any system. The truth is that we all are being led by some set of assumptions passed along by others. [2a]

William Willimon, the former chaplain at Duke University, basically says,

"The dominant culture in which we live is that of expressive individualism ... (people are told) that you have to determine right or wrong for yourself.' But they're not thinking for themselves. They're

doing exactly what the culture tells them. In reality they are espousing the very way of knowing that has been imposed on them by their culture, and a very white, Western, individualistic one it is.” - William Willimon

He captures our cultural contradiction.

We are living amidst the height of a cultural contradiction... and it is this... our culture is trying to claim that there is no objective source of goodness... that everything is defined by the individual...and at the same time... our culture is steaming with moral outrage...which assumes there is a source of good from which to judge... a source that transcends merely an individual's desires.

We are living between two narratives... that which declares that the only reality that matters is ultimately whatever each individual chooses. Our true meaning and happiness lies in whatever we believe and feel as individuals.

But another narrative still whispers... that there is a source of truth and goodness that lies outside ourselves... a place we were meant to belong... a nature we long to fulfill. [2b]

Paul declares that which is truly good....truly as we were intended to be...has come... and not only has embodied that good...but then made it possible to be united with him...is such a way that his nature can begin to work in us.

As the text today says...

Colossians 3:1-11

¹ Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹ Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Challenging words... from which I believe God is speaking... and calling us to change our desires. HOW we hear them is vital.

“You’re enjoying freedom to do whatever you feel like...and now being told you should give it up.”

... vs

“You have felt bound by some unhealthy desires... this speak of finding freedom.”

The first point God wants us to grasp is this...

Christ is the way of freedom... from desires separated from their good.

There are three examples of the types of desires at work

Verse 5 ... You have sexual obsession and impurity, then you have materialism and greed. If you move on down to verse 8, you have “... anger, rage, malice, slander ...”

You have lying, dishonesty, lack of integrity. If you go all the way down to verse 11, it looks like there were also other problems there. There are hints that there was class and race strife within the church. It says, "Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free ..." and so on. What is the cause of all these things? What is at the bottom of all of these problems?

Two important phrases/words

*A key to understanding how this speaks to freedom...comes from **two important phrases/words that are smack in the middle of the whole passage. The first is the phrase "evil desires", and the second is the word "idolatry".***

This phrase "evil desires" is an effort on the part of the translators to get across a single Greek word, epithumia, which literally means an epidesire or an overdesire, an inordinate, magnified, excessive desire.

When you and I see the phrase evil desires, what do you think that means? You think it means desiring something evil, right? ...we think...."Okay, there's a forbidden list here of things you're not supposed to do. An evil desire is to desire one of those evil things."

But it's more about desires separated from their source... a desire that is no longer serving the good end... and has become an end in itself.

The essence of what's wrong with us is not simply that we desire something evil. The "epithumia" ... so called "evil" desires... can be understood as an inordinate, excessive, addictive, life-controlling desire ... a desire that may be for a healthy need...but has become corrupted...in a way that is destructive. [3a]

Jesus... spoke so often into the nature of lust, greed, and contempt. Why? Because each reflects that what was created became corrupted.

They don't exist simply as something in themselves... but as that which can serve others becoming that which uses others. [4]

The second of these two words/phrases that is helpful in understanding what God is saying...is the word "idolatry."

When you read this passage in Colossians, the word idolatry is only attached to the word greed, which means an idolatry of money. If you go to the parallel passage in Ephesians 5, a very similar passage, it's very clear the word idolatry is attached to everything.

What this is trying to say is that all your bitterness, all your impurity, all your malice, all of your problems, everything that troubles you, is the result of idolatry. What is idolatry? It's taking a good thing and making it an ultimate thing.

In Exodus 20, in the first of the Ten Commandments, it is very clear: "I am the LORD your God ... You shall have no other gods before me."

The commandment presents only two prospects, two ways. Either you worship the uncreated God, the true God, or you worship some other finite thing as a god.

*You either are going to worship God, or you're **going to worship something as god.***

*It's **not possible** for your heart not to build its identity on something, not to build its significance on something, not to make something your life.*

We don't tend to see that anything is that out of order. [5]

We tell ourselves, "Yeah, I know that's important to me, but it's not an idol in my life."

It's hard to admit how important something is...how much control it may have...how hard it is to stop self-medicating our emptiness... how hard it is to overcome our contempt of someone.

And when we do recognize such desires at work in us... we want to believe we can change with our own willpower.

But left to ourself... we don't find much hope to change. But we are not left to ourselves.

Colossians 3:1-3, 9-10

¹ Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

⁹since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Notice that it's not just about removing...but replacing.

When we receive Christ... we are united with him... and our life is now hidden with Christ in God.

We don't simply take off... but we also put on something new.

The second point for us to see is this...

Christ provides the new (nature) that can save us from the old.

"The idols of the heart cannot simply be removed; they can only be replaced."

Changing our desires is not simply a matter of removing them...but replacing them.

Lets try something... ask each of us to close our eyes... now take a moment and NOT think of a pink elephant....(pause)...you can open your eyes. How many imagined a pink elephant?

> Not very effective. I think moralism can tend to work that way... we are simply told what not to do. Being told that a desire is bad doesn't do much to remove it.

Let me ask you to try something else... take a moment and think of a orange tiger.

I would venture to say that there were fewer pink elephants in mind.

What we need is replacement...or more accurately it's a matter of displacement.

There's a potent description by the **Scottsman, Thomas Chalmers. [6]** He says,

"There is not one of these transformations in which the heart is left without an object. Its desire for one particular object may be conquered; but as to its desire for having some one object or other, this is unconquerable.... the only way to dispossess it of an old affection, is by the expulsive power of a new one." - Thomas Chalmers

And it's to this that we are directed.

It's the directive Paul began with...in verses 1-4,

Colossians 3:1-11

¹ Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

The point is that you now have access to the one who bears the nature of God.

Christ died for you... so you can share in his death... and now in his new life.

When did you die? You died.

When were you raised? You have already been raised.

That may sound a bit strange because we still are living in this finite and fallen condition... but we are united with Christ in God...in eternity.

It's not saying just you're supposed to set your mind on the fact that Jesus has died and is risen, but that you have died and have been raised.

It means...You have died in Christ. You have been raised with Christ. **You are in him. You are hidden in him. You are with him. This is what it means.**

When it says you have died, what it means is **God considers your sins as forgiven** as if you had died on the cross to pay for them yourself. He considers your sins absolutely, totally forgiven.

And **just Christ was welcomed with delight...**so will we be.... and **just as he was given a place of intimacy... so will we.**

And for this we are called to **set our minds...and our hearts.**

Did you catch that? He says set your hearts... and then set your minds.

It involves our minds... our thoughts... and these shape the heart... our affections.

This is not simply about coming to believe something... mental agreement.

This is about it affecting our hearts... where it meets us in the longings of our soul.

We might think that this sounds hard. It certainly involves effort.

Re-orienting our desires... breaking out of the old and becoming bound in the new involves intent.

The word "set" means to seek something out with a desire to possess it. The word is in the present tense, which implies that we're to **continue to seek the things above**. It's not just a one-time decision, but is to be a daily activity. This literally translates, "Keep on thinking, as a matter of habit, on things above, not on things on the earth."

So the final point is this...

Spiritual growth and transformation arise from forming new desires.

There is a combustion cycle, you might say, a dynamic, a motor that needs to be going on in the heart of a Christian. When that cycle is going there is growth, there is progress, and if there is no progress in your life, it's because that cycle is not going.

It is a constant desire to be turning towards God... it understands that repentance doesn't refer to a single simply moment....but to a desire to turn back to God ...and then doing so...and finding the goodness of His presence.

It's not a process of fear and despair... but that of love and growing.

Consider what Jesus said...that the kingdom is like one who found a treasure worth selling everything else to gain.

Repentance is identifying and removing the idols of the heart.

If you want to set your mind and heart on things which are above, first find where it's set on something that's earthly.

"What is it in my life that I've made too important? What good thing have I turned into an ultimate thing? What is consuming my attention? What seems to control my life? Then look for the deeper good ... and what the love of God holds.

Take time to be present with God. And when you do... realize His goodness already exists.

I believe we may separate earth and heaven in a false way... as present and future. It's a little more dynamic than that. They are two realms... the eternal spiritual realm and the created order... and originally the created operated under the heavenly... and one day they will be fully reintegrated and reunited as one.

Our truest design and dignity is held in the heavenly nature. It is the realm of **all that we long for... justice, peace, love, and beauty.** The tragedy is that many of us have come to think that the reality of the eternal God centered realm will kind of mess up how we experience this realm. I might suggest we haven't begun to realize how out of sync we are. From the perspective of the eternal order and intent... we probably look more like the strangeness of chickens with their heads cut off... or a world of those who woke from amnesia... wandering around trying to find out who we are.

It's important stay clear that this is **not simply about focusing literally up rather than down... it is about focusing on reality.**

Setting our minds (prayer) on Christ is not retreating from reality but engaging reality in all it's fullness. God's eternal perpetual presence... sustaining every moment and molecule...tuning into what reality actually is.

We are laboring (making effort) to live in reality...and find rest in reality. [7]

CLOSING:

If you have begun to explore who Christ is... I want to encourage you... he is the life you have been looking for.

God desires life for all of his children, but sin by its very nature brings death in its wake.

"God is not against us for our sin. God is for us against our sin."

Our problem...is that we think God wants us to stop having fun and fulfillment. It's because we have never known true good.

There was a movie review in the *New York Times* that focused on a genre of movies he called **"metaphysical second-chance comedies,"** movies in which **the laws of time and space are bent to give characters access to self-knowledge unavailable in ordinary circumstances so they can transform themselves.** From *It's a Wonderful Life*, with Jimmy Stewart, or like *Groundhog Day*, with Bill Murray. He was listing a whole bunch of them.

"A metaphysical second-chance comedy in which the laws of time and space are bent so characters who otherwise would be locked in their old selves get self-knowledge unavailable in ordinary circumstances so

they can change themselves.” Guess what the gospel is telling you? **Your life can become a metaphysical second-chance story, because God has sent Jesus Christ into the world to literally change, bend, break the laws of time and space, to bring you a knowledge and power that otherwise would be utterly unavailable to you.**

And that more ultimate dimension is always available. It is the larger reality that transforms us.

PRAY

Resources: I drew from Tim Keller’s engaging of this text in three different messages. (Removing Idols of the Heart: Growth in Christ, Part 1—October 22, 1989; Practical Grace; How the Gospel Transforms Character—February 3, 2002; Christ, Our Life: The Vision of Redeemer—September 18, 2005 – source: Keller, T. J. (2013). [The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive](#). Redeemer Presbyterian Church) I am indebted to his engagement and honor his life as he passed from this earth the same weekend I originally developed and gave this message.)

Notes;

1. As one stated well:

“What the Bible teaches is that morality is rooted in actuality: Some things are actually good, and other things are actually bad – whether God says they are or not, and whether you believe in God or not. In other words: Sin is not bad because it is forbidden, rather: Sin is forbidden because it is bad.”

2a. The pagan religions of Paul’s day taught little or nothing about personal morality: “A worshipper could bow before an idol, put his offering on the altar, and then return to the worst of self-indulgence and cruelty to others. The world digressed into lust and greed and vengeance. What a person believed had no direct relationship with how he behaved.

2b. It’s important for us to face this contradiction. As Tim Keller has expressed: “There is no empirical, rational reason, there is no reasonable basis to say a human being is inherently more valuable than a rock. Secondly, there’s no right and wrong, just power. Nobody is to say what is right and wrong. Right and wrong mean there’s a design, there’s a reason for things, and you have to conform to it.

If everything is an accident... there’s nothing but power, and whoever gets their way gets their way.

There’s no ultimate basis for appealing to something as wrong.

The average person today... may say...”As far as I know, this world is an accident, but I know people are valuable. I just know it, and I know injustice is wrong. I know there’s right and wrong. Injustice is wrong, violence is wrong, and people are valuable. I just know it.”

The sense of a moral compass is good... but what is valuable to consider...is that it is choosing to not think about the beliefs it holds.

It is an approach to what is good that refuses to think out the implications of one’s own beliefs about reality.

What Paul is saying...is quite different. “Do you believe this world was created by a God who wanted our friendship and, even though we’ve turned away from him, he’s moving heaven and earth at infinite cost to himself, he has come down in the form of his Son to get us back?”

If you believe that, if you understand that, think. How valuable is every human life? How significant is your life?”

It is the current worldview which requires us to ignore a rational understanding. The Christian belief is that which is consistent.

3. As Tim Keller notes: “*Every single place that character change and supernatural heart change is mentioned, this word is there in the midst to explain in a catchall, summary way what is wrong with our*

hearts. John uses it in John 2. James uses it in James 1. Paul uses it in Ephesians 4 and here and in Galatians 5 where it talks about the fruit of the Spirit. Peter uses it. Everybody uses it. The problem with our hearts is not ordinary desire for bad things. It's overdesire for good things."

Keller also notes, *this distinction helps us understand why Jesus had to contend with the religious leaders of the day.*

The Pharisees never do anything on the usual moral forbidden list, but they're lost. Not only are they lost, but they are very much a part of what's wrong in the world. Not only that, they're the ones who killed Jesus, not the people doing the stuff on the forbidden list.

So now, we suddenly realize we can't say the essence of what's wrong with us is that we desire something evil. That's not what epithumia is. Epithumia is not so much talking about ordinary desire for something that's bad. It's an over, inordinate, excessive desire for something good. That's the essence of what's wrong with us.

4. This helps us to begin to see these lists of desires for what they are.

Verse 5... "earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry."

These reflect broadly that of Sexual immorality ... when the desires originally designed for that which creates a life-giving union... become that which uses another to gratify oneself... including the sense of union without truly giving ourselves.

Notice... how Paul naturally includes "greed" at the end.

We shouldn't confuse that word with healthy sexual desire. God has wired us with sexual desire; it's a positive thing. But lust is different. Lust treats the other as a mere object, as something rather than a someone. It separates our bodies from our beings... dishonoring the value of everyone.

Verses 8-9...anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. 9 Do not lie to each other... These reflect Contempt – when the desire to belong becomes a desire to do or speak harm against others.

Vs.11 Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

These reflect Divisions that Divide – when desires for value use differences to devalue others.

As Brian Bill expounds: "We must look around and see others as Christ does. Notice verse 11: "Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all." The word "here" indicates that in Christ there should be no barriers of nationality, race, education, social standing, wealth, gender, religion, or power. The gospel breaks down walls of ancient prejudice. Paul lists four groupings that need to dissolve in the church.

Racial distinctions. The spread of the Greek culture could make a Greek person feel proud and privileged and therefore look down on Jews. A Jewish person would regard Gentiles as heathen and immoral, and outside of God's grace."

Religious distinctions. The false teachers taught that circumcision was important to the spiritual life but Paul made it clear that this act of surgery gave one no advantages in Christ.

Cultural distinctions. The Greeks considered any non-Greek to be a barbarian and the Scythians were the lowest barbarians of all and were considered little better than beasts.

Economic distinctions. There was a huge cultural and economic chasm between slaves and those who were free.

All of these human barriers belong to the "old man" and not the new one. Friends, since Christ dwell in all believers, regardless of background or social status, we must make sure we are not allowing any division or prejudice to take root in our lives. From Brian Bill- Colossians 3:1-11 Breaking Free From The Past - [here](#)

5. Let me suggest a couple ways to identify what may be more ultimate in our life than we'd like to think. Where does your mind commonly go when it wants to escape? What do you think about often when your mind wanders? It usually goes to that which we have made a source of greatest worth and hope. And it is that which we likely have epi-desires for. Secondly, what is the thing that most easily steals your peace... if it becomes effected by circumstances?

6. Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), a Scottish preacher and inspiration of William Wilberforce, preached one of the greatest and most well-known sermons in history called "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection." This sermon is based on the words of 1 John 2:15, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him," and powerfully lays out why it doesn't work to merely tell people to stop their sin or love for the world. Sin has a magnetic power that attracts us; and unless a greater power grips our heart, we remain powerless to change. He states: "The best way to overcome the world is not with morality or self-discipline. Christians overcome the world by seeing the beauty and excellence of Christ."

7. Drawn from Tim Mackie: Unceasing Prayer with John Mark Comer, Christine Caine, Tim Mackie, Pete Greig | Tyler Staton <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMS5QNI4ABU>