

“Marks of the New Man”

Colossians 3:1-4

If you have your Bible, I invite you to turn with me to the third chapter of Colossians. For the last several years, I've lived somewhere it seems near an airport. During the time Anita and I were in High Point, we actually lived between Greensboro and High Point in a place where we were not far from the flight path of the airport. The FedEx jets would take off and come right over our house most mornings. We are now in Monroe and not far from an airport. No large jets, but we do get to see several of the smaller planes fly over. Speaking of flying, I once heard a pilot explain how flying through a storm can be quite disorienting because you can't trust your natural senses. In a situation without visibility, you might feel like you're flying level when in reality, you're spiraling toward the ground. The condition is called 'spatial disorientation.' It happens whenever a pilot loses their sense of direction, balance, or position relative to the earth—usually when flying through clouds, fog, or in darkness. Because the inner ear can give false signals in such conditions, a pilot may feel like the plane is level while it's actually banking or descending. And vice versa. There have been crashes that happened because a pilot fell into the trap of trusting his senses rather than his instruments. Back in 1999, John F. Kennedy Jr. was flying his small Piper Saratoga airplane at night over the Atlantic Ocean just off the coast of Martha's Vineyard. The weather was cloudy, visibility was poor, and he was not yet fully trained to fly by instruments alone. Somewhere along the way, he became 'spatially disoriented' so that his senses told him the plane was level when, in reality, it was banking downward in a spiral. Moments later, his plane crashed into the ocean, ending in tragedy. Investigators concluded the cause was spatial disorientation—losing the ability to tell which way is up when flying by

sight instead of by truth. The only way to stay safe in that situation is to focus your attention on the instrument panel and fly by its truth and not on the basis of what you feel.

Paul will say something similar to the church in Colossians 3 as he tells the believers to 'set their minds' on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. He says that we need to live with the right horizon in view. When we lose sight of God's truth, we can get spiritually disoriented. We may feel right when we're actually drifting away from Him. But when our minds are fixed on the Word of God, set on things above, we stay on course even through life's darkest clouds. And the Colossians were facing some dark clouds as a congregation, ideas coming from false teachers which threatened to upend their faith. (Read)

As we've seen already, the situation in Colossae was such that the church's understanding of the gospel was being confused by false teachers who claimed that Jesus wasn't enough for an informed faith. Paul sums up their dangerous ideas in 2:8 as being nothing more than empty philosophy and deceit which was according to human tradition. Evidently, the believers in Colossae were facing a mixture of ideas that involved elements of pagan mysticism, with some Jewish legalism, and a strict asceticism which threatened to lead them away from simple faith in Jesus. Seeds of doubt were being sown in their minds as to whether or not what was offered in the gospel was enough. What they needed was gospel confidence.

Kent Hughes — *"We can fall into legalism and its attendant self-righteousness, joylessness, and judgmentalism. We can succumb to mysticism and develop a proud, elitist spirit that contributes nothing to true worship. We can get into asceticism, thinking it will make us more holy, when it actually will feed our flesh."*

The answer to these potential pitfalls is union with Christ in a Spirit-empowered life. Jesus replaces legalism with the liberating power of His grace. He exposes mysticism with the fact of His death and resurrection. He counters asceticism with a renewed inward nature that enables us to enjoy the things of life without indulging the sinful flesh. But the key is abiding in Christ, holding fast to Him in faith. Which means we solely rely on His finished work for our relationship to God. We rest on His shed blood for the forgiveness of our sins. We pray to the Father through the mediation of His Son. We face the prospect of death with hope in His resurrection. So that we live now in Him, with Him, and for Him. Which is why Paul will now say in verse 3, “When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.”

Paul has finished with the doctrinal section of Colossians at the end of chapter 2. And now having explained doctrinal, he makes some practical application. Doctrine always has practical implications for the way we live. Paul always has the right balance. In the first two chapters, he’s described our blessings in Christ. Now in chapter 3, he will describe our behavior in Christ. If the first half of the letter tells us how God has changed us, the last half will explain how He is still changing us. And the key to all of it is Jesus. You will notice that He’s mentioned four times in the first four verses of our text. To be in Christ is to be made new, and there are some corresponding marks of the new man which I now want us to consider.

1—The Christian’s new POSITION (3:1-4a)

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ

in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.”

Verses 1-4 really form a ‘bridge’ between Paul’s insistence on Christian freedom and now his equally strong demand for righteousness in the Christian’s life. These verses are the bridge between his doctrinal instruction and the lifestyle imperatives which are the result. He makes the point that it is a believer’s position in Christ which demands a heavenly instead of an earthly life. The believer’s union with Christ results in a corresponding manner of living. Pay attention to what he says first about our new position. You’ll notice the prepositional phrase ‘with Christ’ that he uses at least three times. You ought to underline these. He says:

- You were raised with Christ (past tense)
- You life is hidden with Christ in God (present tense)
- You will appear with Him in glory (future tense)

This is Paul’s way of explaining how the ‘old me’ is dead and in the grave, while the ‘new me’ is raised to walk in the newness of life. I’m saved and secure because I’ve been brought into union with Christ. So let’s look at these:

The past tense reality

Verse 1 begins by saying, “If then you have have been raised with Christ.” Don’t let the word ‘if’ confuse you there for it is the ‘if’ of reality in Greek and can be translated ‘since’ because it’s already an accomplished fact. Paul is saying to believers, “Since you’ve been raised with Christ.” Which is to say that it is already an accomplished reality. And then down in verse 3 which may come as a shocking statement, “For you have died.” When a person receives Christ as their

Savior, there is a sense in which we die to the old way of living. The old me, who I was in Adam, has died. The old me was crucified and buried with Jesus. And this is in keeping with what Paul says in other places:

Colossians 2:20—“You died with Christ to the spiritual powers of this world.”

Romans 6:8—“Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.”

Galatians 2:20—“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

He means that our old self—the person we were in Adam, dominated by sin and separated from God—has been put to death. In God’s reckoning, when Christ died, all who belong to Him died with Him. His death became our death to sin’s penalty and power. This doesn’t mean physical death, but a decisive break with sin’s rule over our lives. It is describing a spiritual reality that takes place at the very moment of salvation, where a believer is brought into union with Christ in His death on the cross. (Paul deals with this at length in the sixth chapter of Romans.)

Many people think that if Jesus paid it all, we now have this prepaid divine Visa card with an unlimited balance. And we can just flash it whenever we want to cover whatever sin we choose. And Paul anticipated some people would even justify their actions by saying, “Hey, if God gets more glory by showing grace, doesn’t my sinning give him more space to be glorified?” Paul answers those claims in Romans 6:2 with the strongest negation possible: “By no means!” (God forbid!) Why is Paul opposed to this type of thinking? He says, “How can we who died to sin still live in it?”

So what does he mean when he says we've died to sin?

What Paul doesn't mean is that we have lost all interest in sin. Certain streams of Christian thought have taught that Christians can achieve earthly perfection, but Romans 7 is clear that believers are still tempted and seduced by sin, as every one of us in this room can testify. Paul doesn't leave us in the dark:

Romans 6:3-4—“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

When we accept Christ, we “die to sin” in two ways:

- Being dead to sin means we've renounced it once and for all, having made a break with it

This is called 'repentance,' or changing your mind toward sin. It means you were once the lord of your own life, but from this point forward, you are going to do an about-face and follow Jesus as the Lord of your life. Repentance is the essence of conversion. Apart from repentance, there is no salvation. Some may say, “Well, I believe in God.” And that's all well and good. But the book of James says even the demons believe in God, but they're not saved. There's a world of difference between believing in God and trusting Him as your Lord. Others lean on church involvement, or their own good works. But genuine conversion begins in repentance, and it can be pictured in baptism. When a new believer is put under the water, it is showing how they have died to their old way of living and are being raised to a new way of life. That's why I love baptism so much. It is a time of celebration, a picture of death and resurrection.

- Being dead to sin means that, through His death and resurrection, Jesus has destroyed its reign in our lives

When we accept Jesus Christ as Savior, Jesus pours the power of the resurrection in our hearts. This too is pictured in baptism. We go under the water, showing how we've died to sin, and then come out of the water, showing that the life of Christ has become our own. And because of that we now have access to His resurrection power over sin!

Romans 6:5—“For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His.”

‘United’ is a horticultural term, where you take branches off one tree and graft them into another tree. So that when a person comes to faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit takes the old dead branch of our life and grafts it into Christ’s living root, and His life starts to flow into us. We’ve received His life!

The present tense reality

Verse 3, “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” That’s the present reality. My life is hidden with Christ in God. To say that something is hidden is to say that it is secure. If you come to my house, I have a small safe in which Anita and I keep all of our valuable documents and things, and that safe is in a hidden place that is tucked away. That’s the idea here when Paul says our life is hidden with Christ in God. Things are secure and hidden for safe keeping. This is a present tense reality and affects everything about me—the way I view the world that is around me, the way I view my circumstances, the way I view my priorities and the things which matter the most.

New Bible Commentary—*“This implies our inner lives are hidden and secure, unable to be touched by anyone. We are protected. The world may rage against us, and our own circumstances may crumble, but our innermost spirits are safe and secure, hidden with Christ in God. In ways the world cannot see, we have inner spiritual resources to sustain us.”*

I like how Dottie Rambo expressed this truth:

*So let the storms rage high
The dark clouds rise
They won't worry me
For I'm sheltered safe within the arms of God
He walks with me
And naught of earth shall harm me
For I'm sheltered in the arms of God!*

Think of how precious this truth must be to those Christians in Nigeria right now, where Christians are being hunted and killed. Its one of the most dangerous places on earth to be a follower of Jesus. I read yesterday where some 70% of Christians who've been killed for their faith were in Nigeria. And then I think about how precious this promise is to our brothers and sisters in Ukraine, who are meeting together for worship while drones and missiles are crashing down in their neighborhoods. I had lunch with a couple of Ukrainian pastors this week who shared with me their situation. But through the blasts of bombs and the threats of terrorists, or through the pain of whatever your current situation may be, you can find strength and encouragement from the truth that our life is hidden with Christ in God!

The future tense reality

Verse 4 says, “When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.” My past has been changed. My present is secure. And now, Paul says my future is bright! No matter what I may currently feel, this is what the ‘instrument panel’ (Bible) tells me! So that I don’t have to go through life with spiritual disorientation.

Richard Phillips—*“John Chrysostom, who in earlier days was bound to ascetic legalism, came to understand this life that is hidden with Christ in God. As archbishop of Constantinople, he rebuked the ungodliness of the Empress Eudoxia, who threatened him with banishment. Chrysostom replied, “You cannot banish me, for this is my Father’s world.” She answered that she would then kill him and he replied, “You cannot kill me, for my life is hid with Christ in God.” She countered that she would take away his treasures. He said, “You cannot take my treasure, for my treasure is in heaven and my heart is there.” She said, “Then I will drive you away from your friends and you will have no one left!” He replied, “No, you cannot do that, for I have a Friend in heaven from whom you cannot separate me.”*

When Jesus died, we died with Him. When He was buried, so were we. We also shared in His resurrection. And now having been raised with Christ, we are seated in heavenly places with Him. The Christian life is one of participation, not imitation. It is so very important that you understand that. Your salvation doesn’t depend upon your imitation of Christ, but upon your participation with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. A Christian is saved because they are united with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection—not because they try to live like Jesus. Through faith, believers are placed ‘in Christ.’ His death becomes our death to sin. His resurrection becomes our new life. This is participation, sharing in what Christ accomplished, not imitation of what He modeled.

Ephesians 2:4-6—“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

All that simply means the old me is dead and buried, and the new me is raised to walk in newness of life and live for Jesus. We’ve been cut off from our old life. And in view of that truth, we now live for the glory of God. Now, imitation follows participation. That’s what the imperatives of verses 1-2 now imply.

I’ll never forget what it was like for me when the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to this truth. It was like a weight was lifted off of my shoulders. My salvation was dependent upon my participation with Christ in death and resurrection, and not upon my imitation of His life. I mean how could you ever truly imitate someone who is sinless and perfect and think that you can live up to that standard? The only way you can is when His life comes to live in you. And my friend, that is the Christian’s new position!

2—The Christian’s new PERSPECTIVE (3:1-4b)

“...seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”

The imperative in verse 1, “Seek the things that are above,” is followed up by a second imperative in verse 2, “Set your mind on things that are above.” Both of these commands are plural, present-tense imperatives, active in voice. This means that seeking and setting our minds on things above is the present and ongoing responsibility of every believer. And again, it is the Christian’s union with Christ which now demands a corresponding way of living.

F.F. Bruce—*“Christ’s interests, in fact, have become theirs. They must therefore pursue those things which belong to the heavenly realm where He reigns; their mind, their attitude, their ambition, their whole outlook must be characterized by their living bond with the ascended Christ.”*

Paul’s call to personal holiness always follows the pattern in which the indicative is followed by the imperative. I’ve said this already, but you really see it now in these verses. When I refer to the indicative, I’m talking about what God has done for us in Christ and what we now are through faith. Indicative truth is what I am declared to be—raised with Christ, hidden with Christ, appear with Him in glory. That is followed by the imperative, or that which I am now commanded to do as the result. And so following this pattern, then, listen to Paul’s logic—“Our situation in Christ is such that we’ve died to our former way of living and are now raised with Christ. Therefore, we’re to seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”

By the way, that’s the difference between holiness and moralism. Holiness begins with our position in Christ, which then informs our practice. But moralism tries to jump to the imperatives while ignoring the indicatives. “Be good, try harder, do the things that you ought to do.” But friend, the problem is that we can’t apart from the life and power of the Holy Spirit who is living within us! Which is why Paul’s words in these verses are such welcome news.

Hearts that are seeking heavenly things

I like how the NIV renders verse 1, “Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” Or the NLT, “Since you have been raised to new life in Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God’s right hand.” To ‘seek’ or to have your

heart 'set' on something means you are determined, you long for, yearn for, and hunger for something. What our heart is truly set upon, we go after. When we set our heart on something, it motivates us, it changes us, and it energizes us. It puts pep in our step.

David Jeremiah — *“In times such as these we have to look somewhere for answers. The psychologist tells us we should look within. The opportunist tells us we should look around. The optimist says we should look ahead, and the pessimist says we should look out. But God says we should look up—even when we feel down.”*

It was Vance Havner who said Christians are not citizens of earth trying to get to heaven, but citizens of heaven making their way through this world. And in the midst of the chaos of our times, you and I are to live with the perspective that comes from God. Just as a compass points to true north, our perspective should be trained such that it is oriented to the things of heaven.

Minds that are set on heavenly things

The second imperative in verse 2 is similar to the first, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” A heart that is seeking, and then a mind that is set. The phrase ‘set your mind’ means to fix your thoughts on something. It is the idea of focusing your inner thought life in a particular direction. We do this all the time. When we have a vacation scheduled, the closer we get to it, the harder it is to think about anything else. When a couple is about to be married, its all they think about. Well, you and I can also be intention with directing our thoughts toward spiritual things. It ought to characterize a saved person.

Psalm 10:4—“The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts.”

When Paul says ‘set your minds on things that are above,’ he uses a verb tense that means ‘keep on doing this’ as opposed to a one-time action. It is not an attitude that we possess only when we come to church. No, he’s saying to us, “Keep on keeping your mind immersed with the truth of God and His Word, in every waking moment, and in every situation.” That’s the positive side. The negative side is to not set your mind on things that are on earth.

Now, in no way does that mean you forget about earthly responsibilities. This is not saying that we are to become so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good. He’s not saying that we ought to quit our jobs, walk out on our family obligations, and not enjoy anything life. So buy a car, buy a home, enjoy your hobbies. Just don’t set your mind on those things because they will pass away. It is the eternal things which must command our allegiance.

Matthew 6:33—“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.”

Can I ask you the question this morning, “Is your heart and mind occupied with spiritual things?” I’m not asking if you give it a passing thought every now and then. Rather, are you most passionate, most concerned about those eternal realities? That is the issue.

I don’t have the time to get into this, but notice a third thing:

3—The Christian’s new PRACTICE (3:5-11)

“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. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices.”

The first mark of the new man is that I have a new position in Christ. The second is that I now have a new perspective in Christ. My life has been changed. My priorities have been rearranged. Even though sin is still very much a thing to contend with, I've died to it in Christ. I'm no longer under its tyranny, but have been set free in Christ. The third mark is that I have a new practice. Which means that now, I am to put to death what is still earthly in me that remains. In other words, I'm to pursue holiness in living. Grace frees us to put off the old and put on the new, to pursue holiness. We didn't read these verses, but you will notice beginning in verse 5 that Paul lists various sins which we are to put to death in us. He then will follow that up with another list of virtues which are to cultivate. And we will look at these the next time...

But I ask you this question, "Have you been made new in Christ?" Is there a definite point in time in your life where you know that the old you was crucified with Christ, a time in which the old passed away and the new has come? And can you say with certainty that your life is now hidden with Christ in God? Do you live with a future confidence which says, "When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory? Friends, these are positional realities for the one who has repented and come to faith in Jesus Christ. And if so, is your mind occupied with eternal realities? Along these same lines, Jesus said:

Matthew 6:19-21 — “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for

yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Where is your treasure? Your heart will be there also. Our heart follows what we truly treasure and vice versa. May it be said that we treasure Jesus above all! By deliberately and daily committing ourselves to the values of heaven, we seek that which is above. This is to be our lifestyle and our thought pattern as the followers of Jesus. That is the true horizon which we need to have in view.

*Since you have been raised to new life with Christ,
Set your sights on the realities of heaven,
Where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand.
Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth.
For you died to this life,
And your real life is hidden with Christ in God.
And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world...
You will share in all His glory!*