

Colossians 3. 1-11. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 4 November 2012.

As many of you know, we have now reached half-way through our studies in Paul's epistle to the Colossians. And the set reading for this morning comes from Colossians 3, verses 1 to 11. But for the sake of connection, I want to pick up a few short extracts from chapter 2. First, from verse 12 ...

You were buried with Him ... you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him out of the dead.

and then just the opening words of verse 20 ...

Since you died with Christ ...

And now to our reading proper, from verse 1 of chapter 3 ...

Since then you were raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand. Set your minds on the things above, not on the things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is manifested, then you also will be manifested with Him in glory.

Therefore put to death your members on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming ... and in which things you once walked when you lived in them.

But now put away all these things: wrath, anger, malice, slander, and filthy and abusive language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, having put off the old man with his practices, and having put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him; where there is no Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian,¹ bond, free, but Christ is all and in all.

We have seen in previous weeks that the church at Colossae was being troubled by some who taught that the only way to live a life acceptable to God was to observe special days and ceremonies, to keep various man-made rules and ordinances, and to abstain from certain foods.² 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle' were some of the slogans of the false teachers.³

And up to the close of chapter 2, the apostle has, in part, been dealing directly with these false teachings.

But now, at the opening of chapter 3, in contrast to the commandments of men,⁴ he points the believers to the true secret of victory in the Christian life – pointing out among other things that the false teachers were fighting against the wrong foe ... the real enemy was not the physical body with its natural appetites ... the real enemy consisted of the sinful desires which expressed themselves through the various members of the human body.

But, first, he wants the Colossian Christians to know, if I can put it this way, that it was only by living in heaven that they could ever hope to live as they ought on earth⁵ ... and that what they needed to do was to live consistent with their standing in Christ⁶ ... that, as those who, according to what he had written in chapter 2, were seen by God (as a result of their faith in Christ) as having died with Him (the Lord Jesus), as having been buried with Him, and as having been raised with Him, as such they were now to wave goodbye to the vices of their sinful, pre-Christian life,⁷ and (which is not our subject this morning) to clothe themselves with Christian virtues,⁸ and to discharge their responsibilities as Christian wives and husbands, children and fathers, servants and masters.⁹

At the outset, Paul urges them both to 'seek' and to 'set their minds on' the things above.

Since then you were raised with Christ, he says. For not only has *Christ* died and risen *for us*, but, if we are truly His, we are dead and risen *with Him*. And, whether we realise it or not, this (by grace) is our standing before God.

Since then you were raised with Christ follows directly on then from the apostle's words in verse 20 of the previous chapter, 'Since you died with Christ'.

Since, Paul is saying, by faith in Christ, you share spiritually in His resurrection, He (Christ, and '**things above**', where He 'is') should be the object of your earnest endeavours. You should '**seek**' – should strive earnestly for – should concentrate your energies on – both heaven and Christ – the One who now occupies the very highest place of all, '**sitting at God's right hand**'.

As many here know, in the ancient world, for someone to sit at another's right hand was to occupy the position of the very highest honour and eminence.¹⁰ I note that, when 'Bathsheba went into King Solomon to speak to him for Adonijah ... the king rose up to meet her, bowed himself to her, sat down on his throne, and caused a throne to be set for the king's mother; and she sat *at his right hand*'.¹¹

Again, the Roman historian Suetonius informs us that when Tiridates, king of Armenia, visited Emperor Nero¹² at around the time when Paul probably wrote this letter, the Emperor gave Tiridates a seat *at his right hand* in the theatre as a token of respect and honour.¹³

But we rejoice with the saints at Colosse to know that our Lord Jesus is *not* seated at the right hand, either of any *monarch* in Israel or *monster* in Rome – for monster Nero certainly was. No, indeed – for, as the writer to the Hebrews would express it, He is seated 'at the right hand of the throne of the *Majesty* in the heavens'.¹⁴

No longer concentrate your thoughts on mundane and earthly ordinances (as the false teachers would direct you), but continually '**set your minds**' on '**the things above**' rather than on '**the things on earth**', which are, at best, physical and temporal.

As one great Bible expositor put it long ago, 'You must not only *seek* heaven; you must also *think* heaven'.¹⁵ Although, as we shall see from what the apostle teaches later, the Christian most certainly has to keep his feet well and truly on the earth, his head (so to speak) should be in heaven – with his mind focussed and centred on the place where His Lord now is.

Alas, so often my mind gets clogged with 'things on the earth'. Just like the woman of whom Stuart spoke last week, who, for eighteen long years, 'was bent over', and who was unable to straighten herself so as to look up, and was able therefore only to look earthwards,¹⁶ I so often find my mind absorbed almost entirely with the trivial things of earth ... and fail to view everything in the light of eternity and against the background of heaven's standards and values ... living as if this present world was all that matters ... so earthly minded as to be of no heavenly use! ... fixing my eyes on what is seen, rather than looking (as Paul urges us elsewhere) 'not at the things which are seen, but at the things that are *not* seen', which things are, he added, 'eternal'. Well did Eddie Donald remind us last Lord's Day evening of the example of Moses, of whom the New Testament says that 'he endured as seeing Him *who cannot be seen*'.¹⁷

Although I guess it is possible that the words 'the things on the earth' may, in context – and I have my eyes on verse 5 which uses the same expression 'on the earth' when listing five carnal vices – the words 'the things on the earth' may refer especially to sinful desires and deeds.

But before we consider verse 5, we need to look briefly at verses 3 and 4.

As you know, from the shops if not from the calendar, Christmas is fast approaching. I wonder whether many of you are familiar with Charles Dicken's novel 'A Christmas Carol', and in particular with the section towards the end of the story where the then reformed character Ebenezer Scrooge scrambled out of bed, repeating the words, 'I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future'. And, as we see from verses 3 and 4 of our passage, Scrooge's words – 'I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future' – carry a very serious message for every believer.

For in verses 3 and 4 Paul directs us to the past, the present and the future. As far as the past is concerned, 'you died', he says – taking us back to his statement in verse 20 of chapter 2. But, if, spiritually, I died with Christ in the past (and, according to the New Testament, I can be said to have died to sin,¹⁸ to the law,¹⁹ to self,²⁰ and to the world²¹) ... if I died with Christ in the past, I live with Christ in the present. And that '**life**', Paul says, is '**hidden with Christ in God**'.

And certainly our Lord is now well and truly hidden, withdrawn from the sight of men. And yet, what a thrill it is to know, that, although from the hour of His ascension, He has been hidden from the sight of all His people,²² not one of them has ever been hidden from His sight – not for a single moment.²³

But, Paul insists, in the present, our 'life' is hidden with Him – where it cannot be seen any more than He can. The world therefore knows no more of our new life in Christ than it does of our identity as God's children.²⁴ And this, our new life in Christ (a life very different to that which we lived in our pre-conversion days²⁵) this new – this eternal – life is hidden with Him, the apostle adds, 'in God'. What greater security could you ever ask? Our life is safer by far than any deposit locked away in a bank vault – safe in God's keeping, beyond the reach of all and any foes.

I have read in several places concerning the so-called 'church father' John Chrysostom, the Bishop of Constantinople back in the fourth century, that on one occasion he was brought before the Roman empress Eudoxia, who threatened him with banishment. 'You cannot banish me', Chrysostom is reputed to have said, 'for this world is my Father's house'. 'Then I will kill you', the empress is said to have responded. 'No, you cannot', Chrysostom replied – so the story runs, ...**PP**...'for my life is hid with Christ in God'.

Nice story, but I have to say that I have been unable to trace it to any reliable historical source. Nevertheless, on the authority of our text, we can have absolute confidence in the words attributed to Chrysostom – and I do enjoy the final words attributed to the bishop, 'I defy you, for there is nothing you can do to harm me' – words which I associate with a verse from a hymn which John Newton wrote in 1779:²⁶

Rejoice, believer, in the Lord ...

Though many foes beset your road,
And feeble is your arm,
Your life is hid with Christ in God
Beyond the reach of harm.

Amen.

But I said that Paul directs us, not only to the past and the present – which he does in verse 3 – but to the future – which he does in verse 4. For not only has the believer died with Christ, been buried with Christ, and been raised with Christ ... not only is the believer's life hid with Christ, but the day will come when the believer will be manifested – will be revealed and openly displayed – with Christ ... and that 'in glory' ... then enjoying a body conformed to our Lord's own 'body of glory'²⁷ ... 'glorified with Him'.²⁸

But Christ, I note, is not only, as Paul had said towards the close of chapter 1, our 'hope of glory'²⁹ ... He 'is our life' Some here may remember the fridge magnets we gave out at the local summer festivals several years ago, magnets which declared, 'He who has the Son has life',³⁰ words which are true, not only because He is the source of eternal life, but because He Himself is the believer's life.

And we mustn't miss the way in which the apostle switches from 'your life' in verse 3 to 'our life' in verse 4, including himself alongside his readers. It seems to me that, when speaking of the life of the Christian as being identified with Christ Himself, there was no way Paul could leave himself out.

But Paul quickly makes it clear that being heavenly minded certainly doesn't mean living with one's head in the clouds!

For those who set their minds on things above will also, on earth, both 'put to death' what we may call *sensual* sins,³¹ and 'put away' what we may call *social* sins.³²

In verse 5, he lists five vices, all of which express themselves in some way or other through the 'members' of the body, which members thereby become the instruments of unrighteousness, uncleanness and iniquity.³³ The first four vices have to do with sexual issues, ranging from 'fornication' (a word which carries various shades of meaning in the New Testament, but here no doubt covering any sexual relationships outside of marriage), through all acts of

uncleanness (any action which is filthy and foul), through the uncontrollable urge which leads to sexual excess and impurity, to an excessive craving for sexual satisfaction.³⁴

I have read that 'there are 82 warnings in the New Testament against immorality of one kind or another'.³⁵ Although I have not checked the statistic, I can well believe it.

To this ugly catalogue of vices, Paul adds, perhaps surprisingly to some, 'covetousness'. I guess that many of us would view 'covetousness' (literally, 'the desire to have more') as a far less serious sin than we would the previous four. Yet not only does covetousness here keep very bad company, but the apostle is careful to emphasise its seriousness by labelling it as 'idolatry'. For you might almost say that covetousness is the worship of gold instead of God. And we have it on the very highest authority that 'you cannot serve God and mammon'.³⁶

And all five vices must, Paul says, be dealt with ruthlessly, unsparingly.³⁷ As we have seen, the believer's standing is such that, in Christ, he has died. But it is for the believer to match his standing by his practice, and to strike dead – to execute the death sentence on – all his carnal sins – remembering, as he does so, that the wrath of God (God's invariable reaction against sin) is already on its way to punish the very same sins 'in which' he (the believer) once walked and lived.³⁸

Paul next turns to sins of the temper and of the tongue³⁹ – ranging from a settled attitude of hatred and hostility, through violent and uncontrollable outbursts of temper, through the vicious nature which delights to do harm to others,⁴⁰ through the maligning and deriding of others, to obscene and foul-mouthed abuse of others.⁴¹

All such sins – each of which is calculated to destroy the peace and unity of the church – must be 'put away', as one would put off and lay aside filthy and worn out clothes. These dirty 'garments' – together with all forms of deceit – Paul says, went out of fashion as far as we were concerned when we first became Christians – for at that point we put off 'the old man' and his ways – put off what we had been prior to our conversion – and we put on 'the new man' – the new 'me' who is being continually and progressively renewed – not in the bogus knowledge of the false teachers – but in the knowledge of God, His will and His ways, with the stated purpose that I should become like Christ, who Himself is the perfect image of God.⁴²

And in His church there are no second-class members ... no distinctions made on account of race or nation, of religious privilege, of culture, or of social status or rank – neither bond nor free, that is – and, in using these last words, Paul may well have had in mind Onesimus and Philemon – now united in the church at Colossae as brethren in the Lord.⁴³

And when I read verse 11, **I** cannot help but '*have in mind*' the speech given by Martin Luther King Junior in Washington in 1963 ... 'I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood' ... which speech he ended by referring to the day 'when all ... black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, ... will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'⁴⁴ Thank God, in the church of God that is no dream, that day has already come. For ultimately, as Paul says, 'Christ is' not only 'all', but 'in all'⁴⁵ – which I understand to mean that Christ is everything – absolutely everything – He is 'all that matters' – and He is also 'in all' – He indwells all believers, that is ... irrespective of their race, class, colour or background.

Footnotes

¹ In the seventh century BC, the Scythians had invaded the countries of the Fertile Crescent, and, had left a memory of dread and horror. The account of Herodotus with reference to them reads as follows : "They invaded Asia, after they had driven the Cimmerians out of Europe ... and made themselves masters of all Asia. From there they marched against Egypt; and when they were in that part of Syria which is called Palestine, Psammetichus, king of Egypt, met them and with gifts and prayer persuaded them to come no farther.... They ruled Asia for twenty-eight years; and all the land was wasted by reason of their violence and their arrogance.... The greater number of them were entertained and made drunk and were then slain by Cyaxares and the Medes" (I.103–106). "They drank the blood of the first enemy killed in battle, and made napkins of the scalps, and drinking bowls of the skulls of the slain. They had the most filthy habits and never washed" (IV.64, 65, 75). The Jewish historian Josephus added, "The Scythians delight in murdering people and are little better than wild beasts" (Against Apion 2.269). The early church Father Tertullian could think of no greater insult to the heretic Marcion than to describe him as "more filthy than any Scythian" (Against Marcion 1.1).

² Col. 2. 16.

³ Col. 2. 20-22.

⁴ Col. 2. 22.

⁵ Col. 3. 1-3.

⁶ Col. 3. 9-10.

⁷ Col. 3. 5-11.

⁸ Col. 3. 12-17.

⁹ Col. 3. 18-4. 1.

¹⁰ The ancient world made a careful distinction of the relative value of being at a person's right or left hand. See, for instance, Joseph's reaction when his father Jacob crossed his hands and placed his left hand on the head of Joseph's firstborn, Gen. 48. 13-19. Similarly, we note that, in our Lord's account of the coming judgement of the nations, where the goats (the 'cursed') are set at the left hand of the Son of man and the sheep (the 'blessed') are set at His right hand, Matt. 25. 31-46. Note further the words of Psalm 45. 9, addressed to the King, 'upon thy right hand did stand the queen in gold of Ophir', and of Psalm 80. 17, 'Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself'.

¹¹ 1 Kings 2. 19.

¹² A.D. 62.

¹³ 'Tiridates ... was king of Armenia, whom Nero induced by great promises to come to Rome ... The king was taken to the theatre and ... Nero gave him a seat at his right hand', Suetonius: '*De Vita Caesarum*', Nero Claudius Caesar, section XIII. See Edward Champlin, '*Nero*', page 75. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/6400/6400-h/6400-h.htm>; http://www.romansonline.com/Src_Frame.asp?DocID=Stn_Nero_13. This was Tiridates of Armenia – not of Parthia.

¹⁴ Heb. 8. 1. The New Testament speaks often in terms of Jesus now sitting at God's right hand - in the place of supreme dignity and honour. In one passage, Jesus is contrasted with the Jewish priests of the Old Testament, who always stood to offer their countless animal sacrifices, which could never finally take away sins. "But this man", the passage continues, "when He had offered one sacrifice for sins, for all time, sat down at the right hand of God". That is to say, the fact that Jesus is said to be sitting now is clear evidence that, on the cross, He offered Himself as a single sacrifice for sins once and for all! Nothing needs to be added to that work. Nothing can be added to that work. It is in every sense a finished work.

¹⁵ J. B. Lightfoot, '*St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*', page 209.

¹⁶ Luke 13. 10-16.

¹⁷ Heb. 11. 27.

¹⁸ Rom. 6. 11.

¹⁹ Rom. 7. 6; Gal. 2. 19.

²⁰ 2 Cor. 5. 14; Gal. 2. 20.

²¹ Gal. 6. 14.

²² Acts 1. 9; 1 Pet. 1. 8.

²³ 1 Pet. 3. 12.

²⁴ 1 John 3. 1-2.

²⁵ Col. 3. 7.

²⁶ This Olney hymn is entitled 'Perseverance'. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/newton/olneyhymns.h3_84.html

²⁷ Phil. 3. 20-21.

²⁸ Rom. 8. 17.

²⁹ Col. 1. 27.

³⁰ 1 John 5. 12.

³¹ Col. 3. 5.

³² Col. 3. 8.

³³ Rom. 6. 13, 19.

³⁴ **Fornication** ... carries several shades of meaning in the NT. It is used to describe unlawful sexual intercourse or immorality, especially between single people; cf. Matt. 15. 19; Mark 7. 21. Sometimes it is broader, and probably signifies sexual immorality in general ... that is, all sexual relationships outside of marriage – before, and especially during the betrothal period – or during marriage with anyone than your spouse – i.e. adultery. It heads the list of the deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5.19).

"**Uncleanness**" is an action; it can be committed; that which is filthy, foul and dirty. Moral sewage.

Passion ... This is an uncontrollable desire, a compulsive desire. In the NT a shameful passion which leads to sexual excesses (1 Thess 4. 5); the vices of homosexuality (Rom 1. 26). The state of mind that urges and excites to impurity.

Evil desire is the excessive craving for sexual satisfaction.

³⁵ 'The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians - a study by Dr. Grant C. Richison'.

³⁶ Matt. 6. 24.

³⁷ With respect to sexual pleasure, the Christian must strive after purity; with respect to secular possessions, after contentment, Heb. 13. 5.

³⁸ Col. 3. 6-7.

³⁹ Col. 3. 8-9.

⁴⁰ 'The vicious nature which is bent on doing harm to others', St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.

⁴¹ Luke uses the verb 'lay aside' in connection with robes at the stoning of Stephen, "And they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul", Acts 7. 59. Did Paul remember?

Wrath ... settled feeling of hatred, settled indignation a settled attitude of hostility; long lasting, smouldering

Anger – fury, outburst. Violent and uncontrolled outburst of rage. It is used to speak of those in the synagogue of Nazareth who exploded in anger upon hearing Jesus' teachings (Luke 4. 28). It is used similarly of the Ephesian craftsmen's anger over Paul's preaching (Acts 19. 28).

It does not take much for some of us to lose our temper. It would be nice to lose it and not find it again.

Malice takes pleasure in seeing others suffer. It is the desire to hurt others.

Slander is the same word as often translated blasphemy. It can mean to speak evil of God or man. As we would not blaspheme God if we are a Christian, so we should not slander fellow Christians. Defamation of character.

Maligning of man, either by lies or gossip. Disparaging remarks. Those at the cross reviled/derided Jesus, Matt. 27. 39. Contemptuous speech. Sticks and stones ... No medicine can heal the wounds inflicted by the tongue.

Foul talk occurs only here in the NT but outside the Bible covers the ideas of obscene speech or abusive language. Hence 'foul-mouthed abuse'. Vulgar, obscene, crude, coarse language. Decent words don't prove a clean heart, but vile words certainly demonstrate an impure one.

The two last vices, being sins of speech, must be put away "out of your mouth." Some need a good mouthwash!

⁴² Col. 1. 15.

⁴³ Philemon 15-16.

⁴⁴ Martin Luther King, Jnr, 28 August 1963. <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihadream.htm>.

⁴⁵ Literally, 'all things and in all Christ'. 'Christ' is placed last for emphasis.