

GOD WITH US

Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

Message 25 – Colossians

Living like a Citizen of Heaven

Colossians 3,4

Introduction

Colossians 1&2 were focused on doctrinal issues, particularly related to *the supremacy of Christ*. Colossians 3&4 focus on “duty” issues, how we are able to live, and should live, in light of our connection to Christ. Here Paul covers many of the same ideas found in Ephesians 4–6, yet with some unique emphases. If I were to choose a “theme verse” for this section, it would be the opening verses that transition the letter from doctrine to duty: ***“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (3:1,2)***. While Ephesians emphasized the believer’s duty to *“walk worthy of your calling” (4:1)*, Colossians calls believers to *“live in light of your true position in Christ” (3:1,2)*. Ephesians calls us to respond to the many blessings that God has given to us. Colossians calls us to respond to the new position we have as a result of our union with the risen and glorified Lord.

Raised up with Christ: 3:1-4

In ch.2, Paul had written that believers are united with Christ in His death (v.20), and have been buried with Him in baptism (v.12), and are united with Christ in His resurrection (v.13). In the book of Ephesians, Paul adds that believers have not only been made alive in Christ (2:5), but have been raised and seated with Christ in the heavenly realms ‘in Christ’ (2:6). The unique emphasis in Colossians is that our *heavenly position with Christ* should change how we think and live in this world. We should not allow ourselves to be “pulled back down” to earthly ways of thinking and living.

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

Imagine a young man who has just become engaged to the girl of his dreams. He is on a business trip in another town, but his friends keep noticing that he is “walking on cloud nine.” They comment to him: “It seems your body is here with us, but your head is somewhere else!” He replies: “Yes, my head IS somewhere else. My body is here with you, but my mind and my heart are with my bride-to-be back home.” As Christians, our hearts have been united with Christ. We are “engaged” to Him; He is our “beloved.” Thus, as we live in this world, our hearts and minds should be constantly thinking of Him and pursuing Him. By spending time reading or listening to and studying His Word, times in quietness and listening to His Spirit within, time in communicating with Him in prayer, and time with His people who are also pursuing Christ, we can “set our minds on things above.” The way we think will determine the way we walk. Thus, let us live with our hearts and minds set on Jesus Christ.

Put off the old; Put on the new: 3:5-15

Paul ties “*Since you died with Christ*” (2:20) with “*Since, then, you have been raised with Christ*” (3:1). These verses refer to our position in Christ. He then moves to our practice: “*Put off*” or “*put to death, therefore...*” (3:5). Christianity is a combination of what has already been accomplished “*in Christ*” and “*through Christ*” (positional truth) with the daily reality of a person’s life-long journey of appropriating our new position, through a daily walk with Christ’s Spirit and His Word (practical truth).

This section contains phrases that parallel closely Ephesians 4:17-5:6. Paul uses the “put off – put on” language to describe the old and new ways of life. There is one small detail here that, when compared to the Ephesians passage, helps us understand the growth process for believers (sanctification). Compare these two phrases from Colossians and Ephesians:

“... put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires” (Ephesians 4:22).

“... put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:10).

Note how both of the underlined phrases are in the present tense - “*is being*”. This indicates *ongoing action*. In short, the old self

within each of us is *continually getting worse*. Christianity is NOT the rehabilitation of our old nature! Review the list of reactions that are common to our old nature: “*sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed (v.5), anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lying*” (v.8,9). Our ‘*new nature*’ was reborn in us at our salvation, and “*is being renewed*” back to “*the image*” that God the “*Creator,*” created in humans (*Genesis 1:27*) before SIN entered us (through disobedience against God). “*In knowledge*” as we learn and grow in Christ, we are “*being renewed*”.

If we don’t choose to attend to our new reborn personhood that is ‘*alive in Christ*’ and ‘*to His Spirit*’ (*Who lives within*), then sadly our old nature which “*is being corrupted*” by the world’s system and values, will still be capable of our old thoughts, habits and ways, and even at a worse level, in future years. Being renewed is a life-long choice.

Have you ever had your own personal experience (or observed it in someone else), where you were going along, growing and bearing fruit as a believer and follower of Christ, and then you stopped the pursuit? Then surprisingly, you (or someone else), began to think, talk and behave in ways that might be even worse than you experienced BEFORE you accepted Christ? You ask, “How could this happen?” Now perhaps you understand. Your “old self” has been silently continuing to “be corrupted” and when allowed to re-manifest, you are shocked at the striking contrast between who you WERE when you were “being renewed in the knowledge in the image of the Creator”, and who you reverted back to, when you stopped the intentional routine of ‘being renewed. It is essential to understand how this can happen. How does this reality impact you? There is hope! We can all get back to renewal.

It is essential therefore, that we live out of our new nature. And as we do, that new self within each of us is *continually being renewed into the image of Christ*, to look more and more like Jesus. It is clear from these passages that sanctification (spiritual growth) is a process that moves from stage to stage, just like a physical maturity process. And that process is a work of the Holy Spirit within us; but it also requires our active, daily cooperation. Most importantly, both Colossians and Ephesians emphasize the importance of the way we use our *mind, focusing it on the truths of God’s Word*. This emphasis on the mind is very strong in what follows next.

Let the Word richly dwell within you: 3:16,17

At this point we come to another important unique passage in Colossians that, when compared to the Ephesian parallel, gives us a very important lesson. Looking back at Ephesians 5:18-20 we note that Paul emphasized *being filled with the Spirit*. Here, in the Colossian parallel, he emphasizes *being filled with the Word*. The results in both passages are nearly identical; but the process of getting to those results is slightly different in both passages.

“Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father” (3:16,17).

What can we learn from these two parallel passages? Simply and most importantly this: *The Word-filled life and the Spirit-filled life are two sides of the same coin. They must be kept together.* Ephesians 5 tells us to daily yield our hearts to the controlling influence of the Holy Spirit. This is yielding to a Person – the 3rd Person of the Trinity. At the same time, Colossians 3 tells us to fill our minds with the Word of God. This is yielding our minds to the controlling influence of God’s Word. When we put these two ideas together, we gain a clearer picture of how sanctification works. We can put it in a phrase: *The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to grow the child of God.*

*I recall as a seminary student sitting in the library one day. Across from me was a fellow student. On the side of his Bible he had taken a marker and written in large letters PRAY. This was his reminder that every time he opened God’s Word, he needed to PRAY that the Spirit of God would use the Word of God to enlighten and transform him. It was his reminder that the Bible is not just “another old book.” We need to approach our times in God’s Word with this same sacred attitude. We are not just opening up “a book.” We are opening up the life-transforming, Spirit-inspired, powerful Word of God. The book of Hebrews put it this way: **“For the Word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, even penetrating as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).***

Thus, the doctrines of sanctification and inspiration tie in together. The Spirit of God produced the Word of God (through Divine inspiration through human prophets and apostles). It makes complete sense, then, that the same Spirit of God Who lives inside of us would desire to use the Word of God (that He inspired) to shape our minds, guide our hearts and change our lives.

Relationships in the Family of God: 3:18-4:1

This section is a shortened version of Ephesians 5:22-6:9. In Ephesians, Paul gave much more detail on these three sets of relationships: husband-wife; parent-child; master-servant. There is, however, an important uniqueness in Colossians that deserves careful study. In dealing with the master-servant relationship, Paul says some things that can apply more widely to any time of relationship or role that God might assign to us in this life.

Paul ends the previous section on the Word, and begins the new section concerning relationships, by a similar command, ***“And whatever you do... whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks... (3:17)”***.

Near the conclusion of the ‘household relationships’ section, Paul repeats the phrase, ***“Whatever you do...” (v.23)***.

“Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord and not for people, knowing that it is from the Lord that you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. Anyone who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which they have done, and that without partiality (favoritism)” (3:23-25).

Yes, Paul was still addressing specifically the servants (slaves) in the context. Yet, by writing these specific words *to the lowest class in Roman society*, we can draw an important principle for our lives in *WHATEVER we do*.

Note: By giving instructions governing slave-master relationships, the Bible is not “endorsing” slavery. There are many instances in the Bible where God steps in to “govern” areas of life that He did not “intend” or “ordain” for our good (eg. regulations concerning divorce, laws concerning treatment of war prisoners, etc.). In 1Cor.7 Paul tells slaves that if they are able to gain freedom, that is the best option (7:21); but if this is not an option, he gives instructions to protect mistreatment by unruly masters.

From the Lord's perspective, it is our assignment from Him that matters; not our "rank" in this world's system. Brother Lawrence was a Carmelite monk and head cook in his monastery's kitchens. He learned to do his work as cook as if he were doing it for the Lord. His writings, "The Practice of the Presence of the Lord", have become devotional classics. Paul teaches us (and Brother Lawrence models) that we can occupy the seemingly lowest position and yet work at it "as for the Lord and not for people." This, in turn, means that our work is never insignificant or unimportant. What matters is how we perform our work and who we are working for. The bottom line: "WHATEVER YOU DO, work at it with ALL YOUR HEART, as though YOU ARE WORKING FOR THE LORD, NOT MEN (people). It is the Lord Christ whom you serve." What are YOUR DAILY TASKS? What are your attitudes as you do them? Take this attitude of serving Christ "in whatever you have to do" with you as you go about your daily assignments.

Concerning Prayer: 4:2-4

This short section emphasizing *prayer* is unique to Colossians (when compared to the closing chapter of Ephesians).

"Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it (be watchful and thankful) with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way that I ought to proclaim it" (4:2-4).

The word "devote" here means to "busy oneself with," "to adhere to," "to persist in," "to busily engage in." Prayer should be our first response, not our last resort. And we should "keep alert" in our praying with an attitude of thanksgiving, because God *always answers our sincere prayers* (according to His own wisdom and will). "*Being thankful*" is a posture of gratitude and faith. We might not have our requests answered as we had prayed for and hoped for, but the more we grow in the knowledge of God, the more we can leave our heart-felt prayers in His loving will.

Paul specifically asked that they pray for "open doors" even as he was locked behind closed doors. He wanted *God's wisdom* to direct him to know precisely what he should say in each situation.

So much of our activity is driven by the wisdom, power and strategic thinking of . . . US. Too little of our attention is given to the practice of prayer. The great devotional writer E.M. Bounds said it this way a century ago (and his words are more apt today than ever): “What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Spirit can use - men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men - men of prayer.” How about you? How much of your activity and effort is being bathed in prayer?

Concerning Proclamation: 4:5,6

Paul was not only concerned that believers be witnesses for Christ; he was equally concerned with HOW they made their testimony known to their friends and neighbors.

“Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Your speech (conversation) must always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person” (4:5,6).

- “*Outsiders*” are people who are ‘outside’ the community of people who have become believers in Jesus Christ. We should exercise wisdom in our daily encounters with people who do not yet know Jesus. The way we speak and conduct our lives can either open or shut doors in people’s hearts as they sense and experience our demeanor.

- We should make the most of every opportunity. Someone once said: *There are no accidental encounters, only divine appointments.* When we spend time with anyone, we should see this as a Divine opportunity to reflect the love and grace of JESUS to that person.

- We must understand that each person we encounter will likely call for a different response from us. “One size fits all” does not work when it comes to sharing our faith with others. We need to ask the Spirit for wisdom to respond appropriately with each different person we have a spiritual conversation with.

When given the opportunity to speak about our faith, our speech should be grace-filled (kind, gentle, appropriate for the situation, non-argumentative, respectful of the other person's views, questions and objections etc.). And, "seasoned with salt". Salt has many uses, including making foods have a more pleasant taste! A conversation that includes an opportunity to tell another person about the love and grace of Jesus Christ and His impact on your own life, should leave them with a more pleasant view of Christ. How does Paul's admonition change the way that you should talk to people who don't know Jesus yet?

Greetings and Final Words: 4:7-18

As with most of his letters, Paul ends with a list of greetings *to and from* those close to his heart and life. Let these people inspire you:

- **Tychicus and Onesimus** were being sent with this letter to the Colossian church (4:7-9), along with the letter to the Ephesians and to Philemon. Tychicus is described as "*a dear brother, a faithful minister, and fellow bond servant in the Lord.*" Onesimus, who Paul refers to as "*a faithful and dear brother,*" a runaway slave (see Philemon v.10-16), whom Paul led to Christ, is being sent back to Philemon, his master. The short letter of Philemon gives us more insight into this beautiful story of transformation.
- **Aristarchus** (4:10) was imprisoned with Paul. Whenever we encounter this man, he is one of Paul's key "wingmen," taking the heat for Paul and trying to protect him in any and every kind of difficult circumstance (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2; Philemon 1:24).
- **Mark** (4:10) was Barnabas' younger cousin. This helps us understand why Barnabas took special interest in young John Mark after his failure on the first missionary journey (Acts 15:36-39). While Paul had little use for him back then, Mark had now become an increasingly valuable co-worker to Paul and many others. Of course, his major contribution to the early church was his composition of "the gospel of Mark" (which is thought to have been a collection of Peter's sermons given in Rome, where Peter was the leader, with Mark taking detailed notes).
- **Epaphras** (4:12,13) was from Colossae. Paul referred to him as another "*bond servant of Christ Jesus.*" Epaphras might have been one of those who helped to plant the church at Colossae, being one of the leaders. He had traveled to Paul to encourage him, and also

tell him what was going on within the church at Colossae. He labored earnestly in his prayers for the spiritual growth of the Colossian believers. According to Philemon 23, Epaphras was also a prisoner with Paul.

- **Luke** (4:14) was not only a missionary, a writer (documenting in detail “The Gospel of Luke” and “The Acts of the Apostles”), a theologian and a historian. We learn here that he was also a medical doctor. It is likely that along with all the other ways Luke assisted Paul in life and ministry, he served as his “personal physician.” (And Paul certainly need a lot of medical attention along the way!)

- **Demas** was a companion of Paul at this point. Yet, when it came to Paul’s final hours and his execution drew near, Demas seems to have feared for his own life. He deserted Paul in favor of security in this world (2Timothy 4:10).

- **Nympha** (4:15) is another example of a woman who used her position in life to advance the work of Christ. She hosted a church in her house. Assuming that Philemon hosted a church in his house (Philemon 1:2), we get the sense that “the church” in any one city consisted of numerous “house churches” that met throughout the city. A relatively large house, in that day, could hold between 30-50 people for an inside gathering.

- The letter to the Colossians was intended to circulate among the churches in the region (4:16). The “letter to the Laodiceans” was probably a lost letter. Some have suggested that it was the letter we now know as the book of Ephesians; but this is uncertain at best.

- **Archippus** is admonished to “take heed to the ministry he had received in the Lord, that he may fulfill it” (literally, “continually fulfill it” 4:17). He is also mentioned in Philemon 2 and he may have been “the pastor” assigned by Paul to serve the wider church in the city of Colossae.

- Paul ends by noting that he wrote the greeting at the end of the letter “*with his own hand*” (4:18). This was his way of authenticating the letter by including some of his own, distinctive handwriting. He used an amanuensis (literary aid) to actually write his letters as he dictated them (eg. Romans 16:22). There were forgeries circulating in Paul’s name that attempted to introduce false teaching in the churches (see for example 2Thessalonians 2:2).

THANKFULNESS: *One final practical note from Colossians. There is much emphasis in the letter on thankfulness as a Christian discipline. See the following passages: 1:3,12; 2:7; 3:15,16,17; 4:2. In calling thankfulness a “discipline” we mean that it is not always easy to give thanks to God. There are times when our feelings do not move us to be thankful. Yet, even in the difficult times, we are to give thanks to God as an expression of our trust in His love for us. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: “Give thanks in everything, for this is God’s will for you in Christ” (1Thessalonians 5:18). Try incorporating thanksgiving into your daily prayers. The A-C-T-S acronym for prayer puts thanksgiving before supplication (asking God to supply our needs): Adoration – Confession – Thanksgiving – Supplication. As the psalmist wrote: “It is good to give thanks to the Lord and to sing praises to Your name, Most High” (Psalm 92:1).*

Discussion Questions

1. Of all the unique lessons and passages in the 2nd half of Colossians, what stands out to you the most?
2. How does Colossians 3:23-25 shape your attitude about the work you have to do at this time?
3. Read Colossians 4:5,6 again. Do you have opportunities in your life right now where this comes into play?
4. Why do you think developing a heart of *thankfulness* is such an important virtue?
5. Do you identify with any of the people whom Paul mentions by name at the end of his letter?