

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Colossians 3:1-17		Gary L. W. Johnson
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MORTIFICATION AND VIVIFICATION

Simul Iustus Et Peccator – “At once righteous and yet a sinner,” was how Martin Luther rightly described a true Christian who has been justified by faith alone. Since *sola fide* and not faith plus works constitutes the ground of our justification, this is *not* the result of an infusion of righteousness that actually makes a person righteous in and of himself. The sinner is *both* righteous before God because of the imputed righteousness of Christ and yet at the same time a sinner as measured by the standard of his own merits. The difference between Roman Catholicism and the Reformation are spelled out this way, “For the Catholic, justification is a subjective process inherent in us and never so complete in this life that assurance of salvation can be certain; for the Protestant, the believer is righteous before God only on account of Christ’s righteousness being credited to him by the declarative act of God, in which act a person, although ungodly in himself, is in the instant of believing freed from condemnation perfectly and forever.” The words of the noted English divine Richard Hooker cannot be improved: “The righteousness, wherewith we shall be clothed in the world to come, is both perfect and inherent. That whereby here we are justified is perfect but not inherent. That whereby we are sanctified is inherent but not perfect.”¹ This Biblical truth is why W. G. T. Shedd could write: “The child of God should not be *discouraged* because he discovers indwelling sin, and imperfection, within himself. A believer in the Lord Jesus Christ ought never to be discouraged. He ought to be humble, watchful, nay, sometimes fearful, but never despondent, or despairing. David, Paul, and the Colossian church were imperfect. But they were new men in Christ Jesus, and they are now perfectly holy and happy in heaven.

“The duty of the Christian is to assure himself upon scriptural grounds of his regeneration, and then to *work out this salvation with fear and trembling, because it is God that worketh in him to will and to do*. The fact that he is a new creature, if established, is a proof that God is helping him in the struggle with indwelling sin; and when God helps, victory is sure in the end. Believers are commanded to *examine themselves*, not for the purpose of seeing whether they are perfectly sanctified, but *whether they be in the faith*. We may make our self-examination minister to our discouragement, and hindrance in the Christian race, if, instead of instituting it for the purpose of discovering whether we have a penitent spirit, and do cordially accept Christ as our righteousness, we enter upon it for the purpose of discovering if we are entirely free from corruption. Reminders of the old fallen nature may exist in connection with true faith in Christ, and a new heart. Paul bemoans himself, saying: *The good which I would I do not; but the evil which I would not that I do*. But Paul was certain that he trusted in the blood of Christ for the remission of sin; that he was a new man in Christ Jesus, and influenced by totally different motives from those that actuated him when he persecuted the Church of Christ; that he loved Christ more than the whole universe, and *counted all things but dung that he might win Christ*, and become a perfect creature in him. The first and chief thing, therefore, which the Christian should have in his eye, in all his self-examination, is to determine upon scriptural grounds whether he is a renewed man. The evidences of regeneration are plain, and plainly stated. We have already hinted at them. A sense of guilt and cordial acceptance of Christ’s atonement, a desire to be justified by his precious blood, a peaceful confidence in God’s righteousness and method of justifying a sinner – this is the first and infallible token of a new heart, and a right spirit.”²

There are many similarities between Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians and his epistle to the Colossians. That the two are kindred epistles is obvious. It is generally held that Colossians was written before Ephesians,

though the opposite position has been asserted. Both lay stress upon the terms “fullness” and “mystery.” Wisdom and knowledge play an important part in the unfolding of the thought. Principalities and powers, both good and evil, are introduced. Christ is the unifier and consummator of all things. Yet there are differences. (1) Colossians is special in the sense that it is directed against false teaching in a local situation, whereas Ephesians is applicable anywhere. This leads naturally to the observation that (2) Colossians is polemical, Ephesians is ironical in spirit. The one shows solicitude, the other moves in an atmosphere of calm, of praise and thanksgiving. (3) Whereas Colossians is chiefly concerned with Christ’s headship in the universe, Ephesians magnifies his headship over the church.³

- I. **PAUL’S GREAT FUNDAMENTAL FACT.** The Apostle begins the third chapter by assuming his readers’ knowledge of this great theological truth: Christ died and rose again. Everything that follows is based on this. Note how the Apostle deals with the great truth. It is a historical fact that Jesus Christ died on a Roman cross and that He was buried. Even non-Christian historical sources acknowledge this much.⁴ The New Testament declares that He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Furthermore, the New Testament declares that Christ died for sinners and rose again for their justification. Notice how Paul handles this – if Christ died for our sins, He died to take them away. All those, for whose sins Christ died, died then with Him and they in turn died with Him to sin. These also rose with Him that they might live again to God. “And here now is the great fact in its fullness which Paul assumes and lays at the base of our present passage; the great fact of the participation of Christians in Christ’s death and rising again.”⁵ Do you see Paul’s point? Because Christians have died with Christ and have been raised to the newness of life, we have, in a very real sense, already passed from this earth to heaven. We are called, therefore, to *manifest our resurrection* by actions that are suitable to our estate.

- II. **PAUL’S GREAT EXHORTATION.** Christians are called to live according to their new estate. They have passed out of the realm of sin and death, out of a merely earthly orientation, have been made a citizen of the heavenly Kingdom and, therefore, live a life comformable to this great change. How do we do this?
 - A. **Set Your Heart on Things Above.** The ESV better captures Paul’s language, “Seek the things above.” *Zeteo*, to seek, *has particular reference to the orientation of the will*. Paul puts it in the present tense and in the imperative mood (a direct command) to show that this is continuous effort. Paul employs *zetate* as a direct command only here (it turns up as an indirect one at 1 Corinthians 10:24; cf. 1 Corinthians 14:12; 10:33; 13:5; Philippians 2:21; 1 Thessalonians 2:6), so its force may be to provide a positive counterpart to the false teachers’ energetic activity in “seeking” visionary experiences (cf. Lincoln, *Dimension*, 202; Grasser, *ZTK* 64 [1967] 141, asserts that both imperatives “seek” and “consider” correspond antithetically to the activities of the false teachers who with their asceticism, visions, and so on, sought to be free from the spiritual powers – activities which Paul calls *zetein ta epi tas ges*, “to seek what is on earth”).⁶ Richard Sibbes describes the import of this word, “Seeking implieth, first, *want*; for a man will never seek for that which he hath; secondly, it implieth a *valuation and esteem of the excellency of the thing* that is sought for; thirdly, it implieth *hope to get it*, else none would seek it, but leave it as a thing desperate; fourthly, it doth imply *means and use of means* to attain to what we want, esteem of, and hope to attain; lastly, he that wants a thing which he doth highly esteem and hopes to attain in the use of the means, will by all means *avoid all contraries that may hinder him from attaining thereunto*.⁷ The basic reason for seeking the things above is now stated – *that is where Christ is*, seated at God’s right hand.⁸
 - B. **Set Your Minds on Things Above.** The verb used here is different (the NIV gives the impression that they are the same). *Phroneite* means to think, to give one’s mind to, and is always a word that is of governing one’s life. Thus, the word expresses not simply an activity of the intellect, but also a movement of the will and thus carries the connotation “to be of a disposition or mindset.” In other words, this word indicates whole bent of thought and is set forth elsewhere by Paul in

Romans 8:5, 6. What are Christians to think about? The things above, i.e., the things that have to do with Christ and His Kingdom. It is a call to engage the mind with those theological truths that address our salvation. “If the heart be filled with the cross of Christ,” observed John Owen, “it casts death and undesirableness upon [the things of this world]; it leaves no seeming beauty, no appeasing pleasure or comeliness in them.”⁹

III. **PAUL’S GREAT MOTIVATION.** You will note how this seeking and mindset works itself out in vv. 5-17. The Apostle addresses motives for this heavenly walk (that is produced by a heavenly mindedness). These are drawn from the past, the present and the future.

- A. **Motive Drawn from the Past.** “Since you were raised by Christ.” It is a call to gratitude. It is a call to understand what has happened, to remember what the Lord Jesus has done for us.
- B. **Motive Drawn from the Present.** “For Your life is hid with Christ in God.” This is the *exalted* Christ Paul is speaking of, and believers share in His exaltation – therefore, walk worthy of such a privilege.
- C. **Motive Drawn from the Future.** “When Christ, who is our life, *shall* be manifested, *then shall* we also with Him be manifested in glory.” Therefore, do not grow weary or be disheartened. The day is coming when we will behold Him and we shall be like Him (cf. 1 John 3:2).

CONCLUSION: We must keep in mind that Paul’s statements are true of all believers. The Bible knows nothing of two classes of Christians (the haves and the have-nots). All Christians are imperfect and all must contend with indwelling sin, but a believer in Christ should never be discouraged – the Christian ought to be humble, watchful and, even at times, fearful, but never despondent. Have we been brought to see our guilt before a Holy God and to readily accept Christ as our atoning sacrifice? Are we trusting only in Christ as our righteousness? Then we ought to *cultivate* our faith – which is another way of saying we should manifest our resurrection. This is the meaning of Paul’s language when he exhorts believers to “put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge” (3:10). “To *put them on* therefore, is to put them forth; to elicit them; to draw them out from within and exhibit them in daily life. They are all contained germinally in the regenerate mind, and the particular duty which is devolved upon the believer is that of training them.”¹⁰ What is the major focus of the Apostle’s emphasis on setting our minds on Christ? Note he is **not** urging his readers to seek a religious experience (which is exactly what the Colossians were being urged to do by the false teachers, see Colossians 2:16-23). Machen captures the essence of the Apostle’s concerns when he writes: “Let us not deceive ourselves, my friends – Christian experience is necessary to evangelism, but evangelism does not consist merely in the rehearsal or what has happened in the evangelist’s own soul. We shall, indeed, be but poor witnesses for Christ if we can tell only what Christ has done for the world or the church and cannot tell what he has done personally for us . . . But we shall also be poor witnesses if we recount only the experiences of our own lives. Christian evangelism does not consist merely in a man’s going about the world saying, *Look at me, what a wonderful experience I have, how happy I am, what wonderful Christian virtues I exhibit; you can all be as good and happy as I am if you will just make a complete surrender of your wills in obedience to what I say.* That is what many religious workers seem to think evangelism is. We can preach the gospel, they tell us, by our lives, and do not need to preach it by our words . . . But they are wrong. Men are not saved by the exhibition of our glorious Christian virtues; they are not saved by the contagion of our experiences. We cannot be the instruments of God in saving them if we preach to them thus only ourselves. No, we must preach to them the Lord Jesus Christ, for it is only through the gospel which sets him forth that they can be saved . . . If you want health for your souls, and if you want to be the instruments of bringing health to others, do not turn your gaze forever within, as though you could find Christ there. No, turn your gaze away from your own miserable experiences, away from your own sin, to the Lord Jesus Christ as he is offered to us in the gospel. *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so much the Son of Man be lifted up.* Only when we turn away from ourselves to that uplifted Savior shall we have healing for our deadly hurt . . . Oh, that men would turn for salvation from their own experiences to the cross of Christ; oh, that they would turn from the phenomena of religion to the living God ! . . . Let us above all things know the Word. Let us study it with all our minds and cherish it with all our hearts. Then let us

try, very humbly, to bring it to the unsaved. Let us pray that God may honor not the messengers but the message, that despite our unworthiness he may make his Word upon our unworthy lips to be a message of life.”¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ Iain H. Murray, *Evangelism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950-2000* (The Banner of Truth, 2000), p. 228.

² W. G. T. Shedd, *Sermons To The Spiritual Man* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 309.

³ E. F. Harrison, *Introduction To The New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1997), p. 326.

⁴ Graeco-Roman sources include the ancient historians like Thallus and Tacitus. From Jewish sources we have the record of fifth-century Babylonian Talmud (b. Sanh. 43a) that states that Jesus was hung on the eve of Passover because he led Israel astray. The Jewish historian Josephus likewise recorded that Jesus was put to death under Pilate. Cf. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (InterVarsity Press, 1987), pp. 196-202 and Gary Habermar and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. T. L. Meithe (Harper & Row, 1987).

⁵ B. B. Warfield, *Faith and Life* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), p. 351.

⁶ Cf. P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians: Word Biblical Commentary* (WORD, 1982), p. 160.

⁷ *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes* V (rpt. Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1863), pp. 199-200.

⁸ “The apostles were aware that they were using figurative language when they spoke of Christ’s exaltation to the right hand of God. They no more thought of a literal throne at the literal right hand of God than we do. Ancient Jews and Gentiles alike commonly regarded the right side and a position at the right hand as symbolic of honor or good fortune.” P. T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1982), pp. 162-163.

⁹ *The Works of John Owen* VI (rpt. Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 250.

¹⁰ W. G. T. Shedd, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

¹¹ *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings* edited by D. G. Hart (P&R, 2004), taken from the section, “Christianity and Evangelism,” pp. 135-142.