

**Colossians: The Supremacy of Christ
Our Union with Christ
Colossians 3:1-4**

Have you ever found yourself in a social setting in which you were not exactly sure what to do? Surely you remember a time as a child when you were unsure of yourself, but even as an adult you may end up in a restaurant with four forks and three spoons. You have no idea what and when, so what do you do? You observe someone who seems to know what they are supposed to do, right? After you have had two to three times in such a place you will begin to feel more comfortable in the once unfamiliar setting.

The Christian life can feel somewhat like that. At first, you are not exactly sure what you are supposed to do, but when you don't know, you follow the example of those who are more experienced as followers of Jesus. Over time, you learn what to do – but somehow you seem to lack the ability to do what you know is right. The life of a disciple is more than simple imitation, although several times the Apostle Paul calls for his readers to imitate his life and the lives of other church leaders, and the author of Hebrews encourages his readers to follow the example of their church leaders.

We all know, however, that the Christian life is more than following a carefully structured model. Christianity is not so much a religion as it is a relationship. If we are not directly connected with Jesus, we are not Christians. Even so, there is a fair amount of imitation involved. The successful Christian life is a matter of both choice on our part and of Holy Spirit power.

But, when we look at the commands of God in Scripture for those who follow him, we are faced with a reality that is much larger than a “To imitate or not to imitate, that is the question,” kind of approach to how this life should be lived. Are we free in Christ –

free from legalistic adherence to “do’s and don’ts” kind of lists? Yes, we are. At the same time, does the believer face an even higher standard of morality than the OT people of God were expected to achieve under the law? Also, yes. I think we can agree that when Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, says “If you hate someone, you are guilty of murder,” and, “If you lust after a woman, you are guilty of adultery,” we face an even higher kingdom standard of living than those who lived under the law. But if we had no chance of keeping the Ten Commandments, much less the whole law, how in the world can we hope to live up to an even higher standard? Fortunately, God addresses this question, and our text this morning, Colossians 3:1-4, is one of the keys that opens the door of understanding to this rather complex NT issue, which may not be as complex as it seems.

Our text is Colossians 3:1-4. I know you have enjoyed the last three weeks of messages that Ricky, David, and Scott have preached from Colossians 2. Everything they said is foundational for what we will learn today in Colossians 3. You should know that if one has any hope of presenting the texts from Colossians 2 effectively, he will need to do a great deal of preparation and study and be blessed by the Holy Spirit’s presence as he preaches, and it is evident that our preachers were three for three over the last several Sundays. Alison and I were blessed to be in three very different worship services the last three weeks in Australia – different from one another, that is. All three churches had similarities to our worship here at Grace, though there were differences, as well. We had a wonderful time in the land of Alison’s birth, sharing life with family and friends and eating up to five meals a day. Even though we are jet-lagged silly, it is so very good to be home with family and friends.

In just a moment, we will stand for the reading of our text out of respect for God’s Word, but I want to say a word about this practice. Think about it for just a moment. Alison and I had a

number of opportunities to share the gospel on our trip, and in one encounter someone said to us, “If God wants us to believe, he should do a better job with his ministers. He has brought a lot of trouble on himself with the men of the cloth and with all the wars in the world. He is not doing a good job if he wants people to believe.” You may or may not know that there was another huge church scandal in Australia with Cardinal George Pell accused of sexual assault. We acknowledged the hypocrisy of church leaders and the difficulty of understanding pain in our world, but we also said, gently, “If there is a perfect and sovereign God, I don’t think we get to tell him what kind of job he is doing as God, and we cannot blame him for our sin. If he doesn’t reveal himself to us, which he has done through his Word and through Jesus, then we cannot know anything about him.”

Aren’t you grateful that God has revealed himself to us through his word – the written word of God in Scripture and the living word of God in Jesus? Today, while we wait for Jesus’ return, the preached word of God is one of the primary ways he uses to help us understand his plan for our lives. That is why we stand as God’s word is being read. This morning, we will think about our union with Christ, which is more than an abstract idea with little practical application. It is, rather, our very life and breath as the covenant people of God. In addition to reading our text, Colossians 3:1-4, we will read all the way through verse 17 of chapter 3 to get a peek at what implications will flow from our union with Christ. Would you please stand for the reading of God’s Word to us in Colossians 3?

1 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is 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 what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

I have been able to listen to all three messages that were preached while Alison and I were Down Under, and I am convinced that you now know everything that you need to know about – Mr. Potato Head. What a great analogy that Ricky used and what excellent follow-up by David and Scott! Very important teaching these last three weeks, and well done, at that.

Here at Grace, there are three things we are attempting to do every Sunday morning when we preach, no matter who is doing the preaching:

- 1) Explain the meaning of the text, which often involves addressing the social and religious context surrounding the writing of the book in addition to some detailed explanation of the grammatical and vocabulary notes of interest of the Hebrew and Greek texts.**
- 2) Apply the ancient text to today's world. As interesting as it was to learn about the Jewish and Greek impact on the Colossians in the first century through religion and philosophy, the more things change the more they stay the same. Many people today say that the Bible has had its day and is no longer relevant. They could not be more wrong, and part of the preacher's job is to show how it applies today.**
- 3) Provide principles for studying the Bible. Most often this happens without being stated. You heard a lot of principles for big-picture Bible study over these past three weeks.**

Another thing you heard over and over is the phrase "in Christ." The whole book of Colossians emphasizes this truth. The fact is, this truth is emphasized far more fully in Scripture and in church history than it is in our current teaching. There is a growing interest in the evangelical world about the believer's union with Christ and that is a good thing on multiple levels, not the least of which is that it is our reality – a reality of which we are little aware. Colossians 3:1-4 states the truth plainly and when you look at this text along with other NT passages that express the same truth in slightly different ways, an understanding begins to take shape in your heart and mind that has the potential to change your life. What we consider today will permeate the life that is prescribed for believers in the rest of our study in Colossians. Chapter 3, verse 1:

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is seated at the hand of God.” I know what you are thinking. You are thinking, “Hey, in the Greek, this is a first-class conditional sentence.” Am I right? The technical definition of a first-class conditional sentence is that it assumes the premise is true for the sake of the argument. In other words, instead of saying “*If* then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above” you could say, “*Since* you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above.”

To be raised with Christ is to assume that one has died with Christ. That is only logical, but we do not have to assume this truth – it is spelled out for us in Colossians 2:20, as we read last week.

Furthermore, there is no doubt that the truth of Colossians 2:13-14 is central to the entire argument, where we are told that Jesus nailed the crimes we had committed to the cross and thus cancelled the debt we owed for sin. It is as if the prison doors were opened to a condemned criminal who was told, “Go in peace – your debt has been satisfied.”

Would you close your eyes for just a moment and let this image wash over your heart and mind? You are in a jail cell, waiting to be taken for execution. Not only will you die, but you will suffer terribly for all eternity, apart from the goodness of God. Your eyes are closed because you haven’t slept all night and you hear the key turning the lock on the cell. Okay, this is a twentieth century meditation. You hear the key turn and your eyes open wide, but instead of armed guards, the prison warden is standing with a smile on his face and he says, “You are free to go – another has died in your place.” Open your eyes. What would you do next? Would you go back to the old ways, giving little thought to the person who died for you or to the law, which can never again condemn you – or, would you walk out of the prison as a new man or woman with a heart to live worthy of the freedom you have been given? That is

the choice we face. Wait a minute – a choice? Is it a choice we make to live righteously or are we utterly dependent on God for the power to live in this way? Yes. That one was easy. Colossians 3:1-2:

1 *Since* you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Our spiritual freedom is not due to some quirk in the system or from a miscarriage of justice. Freedom for all eternity is ours because Jesus died in our place. When we think about Jesus dying on the cross for us, we tend to think about him dying in our place. That is true, but it is also true that when he died, it was as if we also died with him. When he rose again, we rose with him. Yet, the reality of who we are as sons and daughters of Adam is with us every day and we may easily grow cynical thinking that the life we long to live in Jesus is impossible for us. Not for others, maybe, but for me, it is. The truth of today's text is that while the old man still lives in us, our identity is *in Christ*. Therefore, seek the things that are above. Seek the values of heaven rather than the values of this present age that demand your attention and require you to conform. Why seek the things that are above? Because that is where Jesus is – seated at the right hand of God.

You may remember several weeks ago I stated that the imagination is an important element of one's union with Christ. I recognize that our imaginations can quickly get out of control, but if the book of Revelation gives us a description of heaven, albeit, a limited one, we can imagine something of what it must be like. There are powerful angels that worship the Lord night and day, there is incredible order in which all is as it should be in the Lord's perfect timing. There is a throne where God sits in indescribable majesty and the Lamb that was slain steps out of the throne as the only one worthy to open the book of judgment on the earth and, by extension,

the book of life that contains all the names of those who are in Christ. Furthermore, the book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God and it is only through him that we have access to the Father at his throne of grace, not in fear, but in confidence and assurance. In Ephesians 1:18, Paul prays that the eyes of our hearts' understanding would be opened to the hope we have in Christ.

So, look up. Choose to cast your eyes on Jesus. Not simply on the benefits of his crucifixion and resurrection, but on him. This week, when you are tempted to sin, whether it be with an unkind word or in watching something that you know would not be pleasing to Jesus or in turning over in bed for another snooze – look up. Literally, pick your head up. Not as in gazing wistfully at the sky, but if it will help you to simply raise your head to remember to set your eyes on Christ, do so. Or, set reminders to think about your hope in Christ at regular intervals during the day, such as at mealtimes. Better still, get in the Word – every day! Since the earliest days of the church, believers have understood the value of Bible reading and meditation and prayer, and while it can become a legalistic enterprise, if your eyes are fixed on Jesus, he will grow larger in your heart and you will understand more of your identity with him. Furthermore, as you have heard repeatedly in the last several weeks, the important ability to discern between truth and error is greatly increased when church means more to you than a group of individuals who gather weekly to perform their “Christian duty.” If you understand and treat the church as the called-out covenant community of God with Jesus at the head, it will help to keep your eyes fixed on him on a consistent basis. Why should we live in such a way when it is such a sacrifice in this life? Colossians 3:3-4:

3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

In other words, our life is truly no longer here, nor are our lives our own. Oh, we are very much in the world, but the kingdom of God is breaking into this world through the church, through God's children, through the body of Christ. Ultimately, we belong to the kingdom of God. We are very much in this world, but our identity is no longer in the world. We do not seek the world's applause, nor do we draw our meaning from things that are passing away. We do not need the world's permission to believe what the Bible says about what is right and wrong, though we must always speak truth in love, not in self-righteousness. Our lives are hidden in Jesus, and that has implications, not only for eternal life but for this life, as well.

May I ask if you feel like you have died to sin and that you have been raised to live righteously? You may not feel it is so because you struggle so much with your attitudes and words and thoughts and with temptation. In fact, while you are grateful for the promise that you will be with the Lord for all eternity, you may prefer that he not appear quite yet because you would be ashamed of the way you are presently living. You may be thinking, "I just need a little more time to clean up my act before I see him." But, is that our hope – to clean up our act? That is what so many were saying to the Colossians – "You just need to be more committed to religious practices, and you need to plan for the kind of life you want to live." But, if you are in Christ, you know that the impulse to be better is, as we have heard, not unique to us. It can leave us deeply discouraged when our lives do not match our desire to do better. How can we break the power of sin? We cannot. But Jesus has and our union with him promises the same in our lives. But . . .

There is so very much more to say about the truth we have begun to absorb this morning, and we will be returning to this truth over the next few weeks as we receive instruction for how to live as individuals and corporately as a church and in our families and in

our work life. We will think about the balance between faith in Christ's finished work and the good works to which believers are called. We will think about the balance between God's extravagant grace and his call on believers' lives to radical discipleship. We will think about what it means to live in the already/not yet reality that exists for those who are in Christ. We will consider the ways that God's design for the church helps us achieve the balance between thinking and feeling and the proper use of philosophy and how the church can help us avoid the error that is so dangerously close to the truth. Is it possible that we can be more like Jesus? Well, yes! Our lives are already hidden in him. Meditate deeply and dwell in this truth this week. Believe that what he says about your life in Christ is true, regardless of how much you struggle with yourself. One last time, hear God's word to you as followers of Jesus Christ:

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