

Taking Off the Grave Clothes and Putting on the New Life Part 2

Col. 3:1-4,12-17

Robin Williams is one of the best known comedians of our time with a career spanning 35 years and over 50 movies. His suicide in 2014 at the age of 63 shocked and saddened millions. In 2002, twelve years before his suicide, Robin Williams was being interviewed by James Lipton and the last question he was asked, "If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you walk through the Pearly Gates?" Williams answered, "If heaven exists, it'd be nice to know there's laughter. Just to hear God go, 'two Jews walk into a bar...'"

"If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you walk through the Pearly Gates" is a fascinating question, not because it reveals anything about what heaven will be like, but it does reveal what is important to us. For Robin Williams, not surprisingly, laughter was important. For a concert violinist, music might be what they hope for on the other side. It reveals deep questions that at some point most of us wrestle with: *is there a heaven? And if there is, what's it like?*

Speculation about what heaven is like is a big seller right now. A couple years ago a book and a movie were released called *Heaven is For Real*. Another book, published in 2010 called *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven* told the true story of a 6 year old boy named Alex Malarkey who was in a coma for 2 months and came back to tell of incredible sights he saw in heaven. The book has sold millions. The only problem is the true story wasn't true. The boy, now a teenager, has recanted his own book and admitted that they were lies made up to get attention.

Paul instructs us in Col. 3 to set our minds on things above (heavenly things) not on things on earth, but he then goes on to share things that are conspicuously absent of descriptions of heaven. Instead he gets real practical about what living in this world with a heavenly mindset looks like and it can be summed up in one word: *relationships*.

The Bible is clear that heaven does exist and it's going to blow our mind when we see Jesus' eternal kingdom. Anything you can imagine heaven will be like, it will be better. But I suspect one of the things that will blow our minds the most when we enter heaven will be what relationships are like in heaven. How healthy they are. How loving and sincere they are. In fact, I think that's what makes heaven heaven. It's not the streets made with gold. It's not the sight of angelic beings or other celestial sights that are unlike anything we've seen on earth. These things will be amazing, no question. But the thing that will hit us the deepest, that will wash over us in wave after wave will be the sense of deep, perfect, loving relationships. Perfect, pure, deep, soul-satisfying relationship with God. Pure, loving relationship with every person and every created being there. It will hit us deepest because, at our core, we were created for relationship above all else.

There are no head games in heaven. No power plays or selfishness or cheating or lying or hurting others to get ahead. We will see for the first time how messed up relationships -even good ones - were here in this fallen world and what God intended for relationships to be under His perfect rule. All of our relationships flow from one relationship: our relationship with God. All our relational problems with others stem in one way or another from our relational problem with God. When Adam and Eve sinned, the result was they hid from God and blamed each other. Up until then they lived in perfect harmony - they couldn't

even imagine the other hurting them. All of a sudden, Eve hears Adam say, "look God, it was the woman that you gave me." A sense of betrayal went through her. She now had to protect herself from Adam, walls went up on both sides and it would never be the same. Their relationship with God was damaged, and because of that, their relationship with each other was damaged too. That's what sin does, and that's why, at the core of the gospel, what Jesus came to restore wasn't religion, but relationship. He came to restore our relationship to God and by doing that our relationship one to another.

So when Paul says in vv. 5-11 that we are to put off that which is earthly in us - the things he mentions are all things that damage and mess up our relationships with each another: sexual immorality, evil desires, coveting, anger and rage, lying, and slander. These things all affect our relationship with other people and with God. At its core sin is a relationship problem - it's relational cancer. If you follow the news you know that the hot button issue right now is North Korea and it's seemingly crazy leader, Kim Jong Un. It's a complicated problem with no easy solution in sight, but at its deepest level it's a relational cancer that has metastasized. The other day I saw pictures of North Korea that a French photographer snuck out of the country at considerable risk. They paint a picture of an incredibly oppressed and miserable people living under the thumb of a cruel and narcissistic dictator. Like so many other dictators, he lives a ridiculously lavish lifestyle while millions of his people suffer. To him people - even his own family - are pawns to be used and disposed of for his own power and pleasure. Power is more important to him than people. That's relational cancer. And to varying degrees it's all around us: terrorism, greed, adultery, child neglect and abuse, arguments, marital conflict and on and on, everywhere you look are hurting and unhealthy relationships.

Paul says that we should be heavenly minded and reflect heaven's heart in this world. And what does that mean? It means we who have been restored through faith in Christ to a right relationship with God need to take off the grave clothes of sinful attitudes and actions that mess up our relationships and put on the grace clothes that reflect the heart of heaven. And notice that it's all about relationships. Specifically it's those qualities that produce, protect, and preserve healthy, loving relationships. Let's look at these qualities beginning in verse 12.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved...(vs. 12)

Right relationships don't start with how we relate to others or even how we relate to God, it starts with how God relates to us. We dress ourselves in the new life Christ gives us because we are chosen, holy, and beloved, not to become chosen, holy, and beloved.

In the story of Cinderella, after the great royal ball, the prince is left with nothing but the memory of the woman he loves and a glass slipper, and so he sends his men out looking for the girl who left it behind. So they try the slipper on every young maiden's foot, declaring that the foot on which it fits, is to be the prince's wife.

I don't know if you've ever thought about it, but that's taking a really big risk. I mean, there are a lot of women who have the same size foot! Unless Cinderella's feet were the size of snow peas, or the size of pontoons, anything in between is going to have a lot of young women who can fit into those shoes! There's no telling who the soldiers might have dragged back to the castle because her feet fit the glass slippers. But the idea was, if these shoes fit, you're the woman I want to marry.

That's not what God says. He doesn't say, you're my children if these grace clothes fit, He says, because you're my beloved children, put these grace clothes on, they will fit. We *are* His chosen ones, holy and beloved - before we do what Paul is going to tell us to do. And I want you to notice something really precious here. Each of these titles, *chosen, holy, beloved*, are spoken over Jesus in the NT. Jesus is God's Chosen One (1 Pet. 2:4), the holy One (Acts 4:27), and the Father's beloved Son (Matt 3:17). We are in Christ and God loves us like He loves His Son Jesus. That would be incredibly presumptuous of me to say except that Jesus himself said it.

²² *The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one,* ²³ *I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.* John 17:22-23

We don't put on the new life in order to be loved by God, but because we are loved by God. We don't do these things to have a relationship with God, we do these things because we have a relationship with God. And that makes all the difference. Setting our minds on things above has us put on:

- Compassionate and kind hearts - this means that our hearts feel empathy and sympathy for other people to the point that our hearts are moved to help them in their plight. Jesus felt compassion for the sick and the suffering. One of the qualities that people who abuse other people lack is compassion. They don't feel compassion for the other person's pain. The way for an abusive person to change is to cultivate compassion. God is a compassionate God. Jesus is a compassionate Savior. Eph. 2:7 says that we will be trophies of God's kindness for all of eternity and then Paul says in Eph. 4:32 that therefore we should also be kind to one another. Heaven is a place where compassion and kindness is prized. So we too should put on compassion and kindness.
- Humility - not promoting ourselves but lowering ourselves and letting go of our rights in order to promote the welfare of others. Jesus humbled himself all the way to the cross in order to save us.
- Meekness (gentleness), patience. These things counter the grave clothes of anger we need to take off. Gentleness has to do with strength under control and patience has us giving people grace. Room. We don't fly off the handle at the smallest infraction. We don't give up on people when they mess up. We don't speak harshly or rashly when someone isn't understanding us or agreeing with us. Patience has to do with allowing people time. A patient parent allows their child time to develop and learn and mess up. Not that they don't address or correct, but they give the child breathing room. God is patient with us, we are to be patient and gentle with one another.
- Bearing with one another. Have you ever noticed that people are quirky? Everyone has their quirks, right? Sometimes it feels like we're the only normal people in the world, and to be honest, I've got my questions about you. Seriously we're all quirky and quirky takes bearing with each other. Healthy relationships need us to bear with one another. Again, doesn't mean we don't address things. Doesn't mean we don't correct, or rebuke when someone does something wrong. But we give grace to people. Grace to be annoying or goofy or super serious or artistic or whatever their quirk may be. Grace to make mistakes, to drop a ball, or let us down. Grace by bearing with their quirks.
- When something goes wrong relationally, forgiving - *if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.* Things are going to go wrong at some point. Someone is going to hurt you. Someone is going to disappoint you. I

wish I could say that we're all Christians so we'll never hurt or disappoint each other but that's not true. We are all sinners and we will all sin against others at some point. That's where forgiveness is key to preserving healthy relationships. Without forgiveness, broken relationships are always just one sin or mistake away. Forgiveness doesn't mean we ignore someone's sin or that there aren't consequences for sin. But when someone repents of their sin, forgiveness means we absorb the hurt and pain they caused us by forgiving them.

Forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven you. God has, through Christ, forgiven us of all our sin. All of it. The Lord is a forgiving God. And if we live by His forgiveness, we must live with forgiveness. Now I want to point out something about forgiveness that is a little shocking at first. These verses are a continuation of Paul's thought to set our minds on things above where Christ is. Heavenly mindedness will fill our hearts with forgiveness, but why? Why is God so forgiving, why is forgiveness such a deep part of His character? It's not as if He has had a lot of practice in eternity past forgiving. There's nothing in heaven to forgive. No one offends, no one fails, no one hurts. Why is forgiveness such a deep quality of God's infinite soul when before the Fall there was never anything He needed to forgive?

The answer has to be what we see in verse 14: *And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.* Forgiveness isn't a product of hurt, it's a product of love. When mankind sinned and rebelled against Him, God's love simultaneously demanded that sin and rebellion be judged and at the same time moved God to make a way for our sins to be paid, the debt and offense to be absorbed by God Himself so that we could be forgiven. Forgiveness is a precious product of love.

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.*

Paul begins to rapid fire some things that reflect the heartbeat of heaven and preserve our relationships in the church. Our hearts shouldn't be ruled by anxiety or fear or anger, our hearts should be ruled by the peace of Christ. When things are going rough relationally, our hearts can get whipped up like the ocean in a bad storm and our lives and our relationships are tossed to and fro and are in danger of being swamped. Just as Jesus rebuked the winds and waves and said "peace, be still" and they obeyed him, ask the Lord to restore peace to your heart when the winds and waves are tossing your emotions, your life, and your relationships around. In that place of clear eyed peace, you will have a better perspective of what is best to do, what the Lord would have you do.

A big part of setting our minds on things above means in the church we are to encourage each other to be Spirit-filled and Bible-centered. In Col. He says let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, leading to teaching and admonishing each other to grow in the things of the Lord. In Ephesians 5 he says the same thing only he says "be filled with the Spirit". Being filled with the Spirit and being filled with the word of Christ are synonymous. Church isn't a once a week meeting, it's a people God knits together to do life together, a place where the Spirit of God moves and the word of Christ richly dwells. God has called us to connect with Christ by connecting with one another with the word of Christ.

One way we do that is through our community groups, and I'm excited about some changes that we're planning in our community groups for the fall - stay tuned! But community groups are a major way in GCC for us to regularly meet together in a smaller group to share God's word, to encourage each other in our walks, to pray for each other, and to provoke one another to love and good works. Paul envisions contexts where we invest God's word and wisdom in each other's lives: teaching, admonishing, speaking wisdom, singing praise to God. And all of this stirring thankfulness.

Sometimes we can think of thankfulness as a lightweight quality. Thanksgiving is a great holiday but we don't see it as the kind of serious spiritual event that Christmas and Easter are. It's about turkey and pumpkin pie and football. And, oh yeah, thankfulness too. Almost forgot. Thankfulness isn't one of those character qualities that we find all that impressive. When God is handing out character qualities, we're hoping He gives us stuff like boldness, integrity, compassion, discernment, intelligence, hard working - stuff that looks good on our resume. Thankfulness is nice but easy to overlook.

Not for God. Thankfulness - the opposite of complainingness - tunes our hearts to the goodness of God and reflects to the world the glory of God. When we can thank Him for His love and faithfulness to us even in the midst of a trial we bring Him glory. When we serve him with thankful hearts, it helps us not get all self-righteous or self-important. It tunes our hearts to His greatness and goodness, and that's healthy for our hearts, and it's healthy for our relationships.

Nothing eats away at relationships than focusing on what's wrong with the other person. There are times when we need to address issues - this isn't about avoiding truth or being honest. I'm talking about when we get so focused on what we don't like about someone or his/her faults or criticizing them, that those things get huge to us. Thankfulness helps us keep life and others in perspective, by keeping God big and good in our eyes.

If you are a Christian, Jesus has given you grace to be what he has called you to be. Not to be a child of God but because you are a child of God. The question is, are you putting on the grace clothes that He has made available to you? Setting our minds and hearts on things above will be the best thing we can possibly do for our relationships here on earth. That's the heartbeat of heaven.

And if you're not a Christian, the Bible has bad news and good news. The bad news is that because we are sinners, we can never be good enough to earn our way into heaven. Heaven does exist, but the first thing we will hear God say is "depart from Me" if we try to enter in our own righteousness.

Jesus died to save you. He gave his life on the cross to pay for your sins - all your sins. You can't work your way into heaven and God can't just forget your sins and forgive you. Forgiveness can't violate God's perfect justice. God doesn't wink at your sin, Jesus paid the horrible price for your sin. Your part is to believe in Christ. Trust in Christ. Put your faith in Christ. Not a casual, tip your hat to Jesus kind of belief, but submitting your life to Jesus as Lord and Savior. He is the Good Shepherd, will you follow him with your life? If that's the desire of your heart, will you pray with me?

Closing song: *The Father's Love*