

Studies in Colossians

- I. Introduction, 1:1-14
- II. The Role of the Apostle 1:24-2:5
- III. The Warnings of the Apostle, 2:6-23
- IV. The Exhortations of the Apostle, 3:1-4:6

The “therefore” of v. 1 indicates a change in the subject matter of the letter. The term indicates a deduction is being made. From doctrinal instruction, he comes to moral implications (doctrine leads to moral teaching in the apostle’s writings).

A. The essential exhortation (“look Up!”), vv. 1-4

1. Stated, vv. 1-2

These verses contain two commands addressed to the Colossians as a community of believers (they are present, second person plural imperatives), the present tense suggesting ongoing action, not something that can be done in a single decision. The plural indicates that Paul is speaking to the church as a collectivity.

The “if” should be translated as “since;” it is a statement of fact. “Seek” and “set” are parallel expressions. A mind set on things of the Lord is one at peace! The reference to Christ as “seated” is a figure of speech of His triumph and enthronement. We are commanded to live our lives reflective of the implication of having a triumphant monarch!

2. Reasoned, vv. 3-4

a. Our new status, v.3

In v. 1 Paul tells us that we have been raised with Christ that we share in His triumph; here he tells us that we also share in His death. In His death we died and, in His resurrection, we have come to new life; His death became our death; His life is now our life. The believer and Christ share a mystical identity! As a result of this new identity, we have been “hidden (a perfect passive, it is something done for us not by us) suggestive of protection though its fullest manifestation awaits a future day.

b. Our new destiny, v. 4

Having died with Christ and raised to new life in Christ, we shall reign with Him beginning with His return.

B. The matter of personal conduct, vv. 5-17

It is clear in our passage that to “put to death (v. 5) is a synonym for “put off (vv. 8, 9),” an action warranted as a continual practice (present tense

verbs suggest this). While they have discontinued some behavior in one sense, they are instructed to continue to do so in another. It defines the contrast between the “old man (v. 9)” and the “new man (v. 10).”

1. Things to put off, vv. 5-11

a. The basic assumption, v. 5

“Therefore” indicates an inference to follow. Because of our new identity in Christ (with His death and resurrection), we are to consider or reckon (the verb denotes urgency) our death to the values and priorities of life in our unregenerate state.

Paul lists five actions to be put away. These relate to sexual impropriety, and they are collectively denominated as idol worship.

Immorality: it is from the Greek word “porneia” and from it we have our English word pornography. It is a general term for a variety of sexual sins.

Impurity: it means uncleanness relating to sexual activity (perhaps the former term suggests an action while here it focuses on the consequence).

Passion and evil desire: Paul uses these as synonyms in I Thess. 4:5 (these are linked as here). Both suggest a driving desire that in this context is evil and sexual in nature.

Greed: in this context the term likely means sexual exploitation for pleasure at any cost.

Anything that dominates and controls our lives, apart from thoughts of conformity to God, is idolatry. An idol is anything that we value and pursue as more important than conformity to the wisdom of God.

Sex and First Century Greek Culture: The adoration of the female body was more than simply sexual gratification; it was closely connected to political conformity, economic prosperity, divine worship, and social privilege; allegiance to the state because failure to participate in pagan worship, that included visiting vestal prostitutes, might incur the wrath of the gods bringing disasters of various types (natural calamities [drought, floods], enemy uprisings and invasions). Entrance into the trade guilds was connected to pagan rites affecting economic mobility, educational privileges, and social status. All of these seemed to make sense because pleasure seems for all of us to be the will of God. Remember Greek culture promulgated three usages for women (wives for an heir, paramours

for pleasure and intellectual stimulation, slaves for labor and pleasure). It was not a world unlike ours!

b. The rationale, vv. 6-11

1) The judgment to come, v. 6

“Will come” expresses certainty. Such may occur in this life as well as in the eschaton.

2) The past behind, v. 7

“Once walked” indicates the decisive change that redemption brings. However, Paul does not have in mind that the believer will no longer struggle with the past because we are exhorted not to live that way (hence the possibility exists).

3) The action to take, vv. 8-11

The “you also” makes it clear that our struggles are not entirely behind us.

a) Stated, vv. 8-9a

There are two commands in these verses and they are negative (“put aside” and “do not lie”). Both are in the present tense suggesting ongoing endeavor. The five avoidances deal with issues of negative emotions.

Simmering anger

Wrath: outbursts of rage

Malice: vicious thoughts/ desire to hurt

Slander

Lying (the particular emphasis is to stop a present action)

b) Reasoned, vv. 9b-11

Two reasons are given for such action.

[1] Redemption has occurred, v. 9b

The believer has experienced a death (vv. 3, 5). Here Paul continues the garment metaphor; the old filthy garments, our manner of living, have been taken off.

[2] Renewal has occurred, v. 10

[a] Stated, v. 10a

Life has sprung from what was dead because we share in Christ’s resurrection (v. 1). Paul is saying that we should act according to what we have become, not what we were (again a clothing metaphor, (“put on”).

[b] Explained, v. 10b-11

{1} Its nature, v. 10b

“Being renewed” indicates that the renewal is a process, not a one-happening. It also indicates that the renewing is a work of God (“being”), not us. The

goal of the renewal is Christlikeness.

[2} Its universality, v. 11

God's renewing work has no ethnic or cultural boundaries. Salvation has brought about a reversal of the fall and the Tower of Babel (the division of people groups, Gen 10-11).

"Scythians" were considered the worst examples of uncultured, uncivilized barbarians.

2. Things to put on, vv. 12-17

The "so" indicates another inference by the apostle. Since there is equality among all believers, there should be unity among them also.

There are no uniquely "better" people in God's family; we have come to know Him because of God's choice, election (a perfect passive verb [an event in the past done by other than ourselves, from before creation [Eph. 1:4]).

a. Stated, vv. 12-16

1) Habits of the heart, v. 12

As a result of God's sovereign choice to allow us to know Him, we have been separated (holy) and loved.

2) Conduct flowing from the heart, vv. 13-16

Continuing with the clothing metaphor, there are five things that should characterize our deportment because of the transforming mercies of God (chosen, separated, and loved). Of the five qualities listed three have to do with internal qualities and two with the treatment of others. The five have a commonality in that they are inward qualities.

"A heart of compassion:" literally "bowels of compassion." The ancients believed that the seat of emotions was in the lower abdomen.

"Kindness:" the nature of our response to others

"Humility:" this is a unique Christian virtue; Greeks saw it as weakness.

"Gentleness:" Originally the term was used of animals that had been trained into compliance ("breaking horses"). We have been "broken" by the expression of divine love.

"Patience:" this term, like, kindness, has respect to our deportment with others rather than internal qualities (compassion, humility, gentleness).

2) Manner of conduct, vv. 13-16

Paul turns from inward qualities to outward actions. The former are the bases of the latter.

a) A forgiving spirit, v. 13

(1) Stated, v. 13a

“Bearing with:” voluntary non-retaliation

“Forgiving:” the verbal root is the same as the word “grace.” It means to freely forgive, to do so without cause or merit.

“Whoever has a complaint:” this is a phrase that indicates future probability. These things happen among Christians.

(2) Reasoned, v. 13b

“Just as” tells us why we are to forgive; we have been forgiven far, far more.

b) A loving attitude, v. 14

Paul continues with the clothing metaphor.

Love is the distinctive characteristic of Christians because God is love, Christ purchased that love for us, and the Spirit is the gift of love that Jesus purchased and God grants because of Christ. The character of God is the evidence of the reality of the life of God.

c) A peaceful demeanor, v. 15a

Here is concept involves the unity of believers in community as our rule of conduct though significant diversity exists as it has always (v. 11).

d) Be thankful, v. 15b

The present imperative suggests ongoing action (“keep on always being thankful”); it is a characteristic of spiritual maturity.

e) Be focused delightfully on Christ toward one another, v. 16

The translation that expresses the content of this verse, most clearly, I think, is the NET Bible. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and exhorting one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, all with grace in your hearts to God.”

The command is plural and corporate telling us that it is about life in togetherness as a body of people. Life in the earliest churches was much more participatory than in our day. Each participant had a responsibility to serve others in worship by sharing. Here we have insight into

the form of worship in the earliest churches.

“Word of Christ” mostly likely means the message that they have embraced concerning the person and work of Christ. It is a message to be expressed in the worship gathering of the church in the form of instruction and exhortation.

Further, the saints should worship together, in singing (“Psalms” suggests that it should be with musical accompaniment. “Hymns” denotes songs of praise and thanksgiving, and “spiritual songs” likely suggests lyrics of the Christian life set to music).

b. Summarized, v. 17

The apostle concludes with a grand summary of the quality of our conduct in the churches. Individual interests are to be set aside and a focus on God as we relate to others is to be primary.

Applications:

1. There is a connectedness between right doctrine and proper morals. Paul seems to explain how we should think about God as a basis for how we should live for God. Of course, we have all met people who talked a better “song” than they lived. That should not allow us to dismiss the fact that ethics are rooted in a proper knowledge of the holiness of God. The assumption behind belief/action conformity is that of appreciation. If we truly understood the wonder of God’s grace and mercy, we would not find it hard to seek conformity to the object of our affection and grieved when we fail to do so.
2. Our text today provides a wonderful insight when it states that “Christ is seated at the right hand of God (v. 1).” That means that Christ is enthroned in His royal, kingly status; it means that Christ, who appeared to have been defeated by death at Calvary, has obtained the greatest of triumphs evidenced by His resurrection. The king is now gathering His subjects and when it is complete He will rule over us having conquered death and hell. We share in His death, our texts say, in that His death brought about our death to death; His resurrection brought our assurance of victory; and His enthronement in the heavens will someday come to the new earth (“the new garden”) and you and I will reign with Him forever.
3. We live in a pleasure-oriented culture that worships the female human body (this is evident by how women are dressed and used to sell any number of products by linking the product to gratification). Our world has retrogressed to the morals and lifestyle of Greco-Roman society.
4. The metaphor that Paul uses for proper Christian conduct is that of clothing,

our dress identifies us as does our moral habits. What is it that Paul tells us to “put off” some things and “put on” others? Does not our text say that we have died with Christ (v. 3)? In what sense have we died to sin when we are instructed to deal with it? We have died to the universal grip of sin over our lives, but the remnants of sin’s once universality is what the apostle has in mind. We have died to the eternal penalty of sin; we are being delivered from the power of sin; and we shall be delivered from the presence of sin. “Putting off” has to do with those habits in our lives that have remained though Christ has redeemed us. Paul isolates two kinds of sins that plague Christians: sins of the flesh such as pornography, and abusive conduct expressed in speech.

5. Not only are we to “put off,” we are to “put on;” that is, we should attempt to replace old habits with new ones, ones that are consistent with our redemption. The things to “put on” are the very character of Christ Himself (“your life is hidden with Christ, v. 3”). Can you imagine a world full of the characteristics in vv. 12-15. Take, for example, forgiveness that is noted in our passage three times. Are you harboring an unforgiving spirit toward someone? Think about what that is saying to the Christ who has forgiven you. Does gentleness and kindness describe you?
6. How are we to go about this “off-on” instruction? Our passage tells us that the key is what you think about (v. 2). Do you think about Christ’s victory over sin for you? What you fill your mind with is what you will think about and what you think about is what will shape your moral conduct. Do you have a mind set in heaven, an otherness, or are you preoccupied with yourself (pleasure, revenge, lying)? It also tells us a key to this matter is worship. Worship in the sense of community sharing and care. The way to grow positively is to help others in their walk with God, deeds of love and mercy. Bible study is not enough; it requires engagement with others as we grow together in Christ. The litmus test of the validity of action is v. 17. Can you say that what you are doing is for Christ’s glory or is it for your own?
7. I have a challenge for all of us this week. Pick a character quality in your life that you know you should “put off” and actively work on it by filling your mind with what should be in its place? What is a part of your life, though there are many to choose, which really should not be there? Do the same as regards your conduct in your family? Do the same as regards your conduct in your professional life? Pick a character quality from Paul’s list of positive things and ask the Lord to make it a greater part of your life as well. Put away what characterized you before redemption and remains in your life. Put on the character of Christ “who is your life” now and will yours completely when Christ “appears (v. 4).”