

“How To Change, Part 1”
Colossians 3:1-17

March 2, 2014

SI: Paul has finished his attack on all the ideas and teachings going around the Colossian church that each claimed to have the key to fullness in the Christian life.

He has shown them that all of those things are gimmicks.

None of them really make you a better Christian because they marginalize Jesus. They become the focus instead of him, but all fullness is found only in him.

So in this passage, Paul explains how you do change and experience fullness through your union with Christ.

We’re going to spend three weeks on this passage, studying a few verses at a time.

INTRO: What kind of Christian do other Christians most admire?

Well, we certainly admire spiritual giants.

We usually meet a few of them in our lifetime—

Those unique men and women who just breathe a closeness with the Lord,
and who are so saturated with Scripture that everything is balanced.

When you meet a believer like that, you are struck by how he focuses on you,
not on himself.

Another kind of Christian we admire are the rock solid, steady ones who
year after year, decade after decade, do the faithful things.

When someone asked William Carey what qualifications he had to be a pioneer
missionary in India, he said: I'm a plodder. I can plod.

He plodded 40 years. He did the very same things every day,
and became known as the father of modern missions.

There may be other kinds of Christians you admire—

perhaps those who have greatly suffered, or those who have given away fortunes.

But I want to suggest that the sort of Christian we can't help admiring most
is the one in whom we see the most changes.

This person might have a very checkered past.

He might have some glaring weaknesses.

But compared to where he came from and what he once was,

the changes in his life and character are a striking witness to the power of Christ.

I've told you many times about my friend Charlie B., pastor on Staten Island.

Our early lives could not have been more different.

I grew up in the church. I had a godly, loving father.

He grew up in a godless home with an abusive father, and left when he turned 16.

We once drove with Charlie through the tough Brooklyn neighborhood where he
grew up. He showed us the park where he and the other hoodlums hung out.

It was in that park that a stranger gave him Gospel tract.

Charlie read it and believed it.

He left his apartment and his collection of Grateful Dead albums and went to
Columbia Bible College SC and then on to Covenant Seminary
and the ministry.

Charlie's not a spiritual giant, but he's a man I highly admire
and whose life inspires me mostly because of how he's changed.

One of the great things about the Christian life is that you can change.

Not just superficial changes, not just changes of image or behavior—
but true changes from the inside out—changes of affections, changes of character.
And this change has nothing to do with special diets or holy days or secret
knowledge or communication with spirits or with any other method or system
or conference or book or religious ritual or Christian fad.

It has everything to do with being united to Jesus Christ.

His life in you and your life in him and the power and patterns for living
that flow from that mystical union.

In this passage, Paul explains how Christians change.

According to him, it's a threefold process. Not three steps.

Not three separate actions, but a unified, threefold process.

We can separate this process into three components in order to study it—
and that's what we're going to do.

But don't forget that in practice, this is all or nothing process.

What are the three components?

First, there is a negative component, a putting off, a taking off.

Theologians call it the mortification of sin. To mortify something is to kill it.

Vs. 5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature.

Vs. 8 Rid yourselves of all such things. Vs. 9 You have taken off your old self.

Second, there is a positive component, a putting on of virtue and goodness.

Theologians call vivification, which is a fancy word for bringing to life.

Vs. 9 Put on the new self which is being renewed.

Vs. 12 Clothe yourself with compassion. Vs. 14 Put on love.

Third, there is a motivating component, an animating or empowering component.

Paul calls it, in vs. 1 and 2, setting your heart on things above,
and setting your minds on things above where Christ is.

That's where we are going to start this week, with this third component,
the motivating component which is in verses 1-4.

Then, next week the negative putting off 5-9, after that positive putting on 10-17.

But each week we're going to read the whole passage, because I want us to
get the point that this all goes together. Not three steps. Threefold process.

Let's start with a look at this motivating component under three headings:

The content of it, the necessity of it, the practice of it.

MP#1 The content of this motivation.

Let me say again: According to Paul, true change is a threefold process.

You can't change by just saying no to sin.

You can't change by just trying to do the right thing.

You have to do both at the same time and both of those actions must be animated and motivated by a heart and mind intentionally set on certain things.

What things? Let's read verses 1-4 again:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Change in the Christian life requires that the great acts of Christ's salvation, and your participation in them, occupies your heart and mind.

He died, he rose, he ascended, he is coming again.

Because you are united to Christ by faith, you have died, you have risen, you have ascended, you will participate in his second coming.

So all of the benefits of Christ's great acts are yours.

Paul says: Set your hearts on these things. Set your minds on them.

Christ died and in him, you died. What does that mean for you?

It means that guilt is no longer an issue in your life.

The demands of divine justice have been met.

You can't accuse and convict and punish a man who has suffered death penalty.

If the State of Alabama executes a criminal, it can't accuse him again, prosecute him again, sentence and punish him again.

When Christ died, you died. So accusation and guilt are gone from your life.

Set your heart on that. Set your mind on that

so that the freedom and gratitude it provides motivates you.

Christ rose, and in him, you rose. You have been raised with Christ.

There are so many implications of being raised in Christ.

But fundamentally it means that in spite of how you look or feel physically and emotionally, in spite of living in a fallen world where everything eventually falls apart—the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in you.

There is another life you will enjoy when this one is over.

The brief years of trouble and pain here are just preparation for that great life which is to come in a restored and redeemed creation.

If you knew that next year you would inherit your rich uncle's millions, would it bother you that this week your car repair bill broke your budget? The knowledge of that great inheritance would lift your spirits.

Christ ascended, he is seated at the right hand of God, ruling over all things.

Paul says: Your life is hidden with Christ in God.

It's his way of saying that you participate in Christ's current status.

As an incarnate man, Jesus perfectly fulfilled his Father's plan.

All the favor and honor and love that he receives from the Father for his perfect obedience and victory is yours.

That means in spite of what other people might say about you or think of you, you have status in Christ. Your heavenly Father looks on you and is well-pleased.

And he has entrusted you to rule—in workplace, home, other spheres.

The things you do may not seem important, but they are.

Finally, he is coming again.

When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

There are so many benefits that will come to us when Christ's return, but what Paul focuses on is this idea of his appearing.

Right now, Jesus is invisible.

Some hostile towards him. Intent on proving New Testament witness wrong.

Most people are indifferent to him. He's just a name from history.

They don't believe he's the risen Savior, the King of kings and Lord of lords, seated at the Father's right hand, ruling the nations with an iron scepter.

But, the day will come when he appears. Every eye will see him.

What Paul is saying is that in that day, we will also appear as we really are.

The tremendous difference between God's people and the world will be seen.

It will be glory and honor and immortality vs shame, guilt, and corruption.

I love the way CS Lewis put it, that if you could see the person sitting next to you in church as he or she will be in that day, you would be tempted to fall down and worship. That is the glory to be revealed.

What's your honest reaction to all this?

Instead of giving us concrete, practical advice on how to change—

Paul gives us this mystical, complicated theological idea of our union with Christ and he tells us to work it out, mediate on it.

Why does he start here? Why doesn't he just start with rules and practical stuff?

That brings us to the second point.

MP#2 The necessity of this motivation.

The reason Paul starts here is because just hearing the rules doesn't change you.

Even reading the rules in the Bible doesn't change you.

Because you do the things you want to do.

And you don't do the things you don't want to do.

You like your pet sins. They are appealing and comforting to you.

And there are certain good things disagreeable and unpleasant to you.

So the only way you can really change is when you start to want different things.

Rules might change your behavior for a time,

but don't make you want or like different things.

The only way that what you like and want can change,

is when your imagination is renewed.

That's why Paul starts this way. He's trying to stir up our imaginations.

The more we envision these great invisible spiritual realities: Who we are in

Christ, our status, our freedom from guilt, the great inheritance we have—

to that degree, we are going to be moved to change.

In Ephesians 4, a parallel passage, Paul says:

Put off the old self, put on the new self, be made new in the attitude of your mind.

What is the attitude or spirit of your mind?

It's that part of your mind that tells you what is valuable and what isn't.

Let me give you one secular example and two biblical examples,

one negative and one positive.

I came home one evening after working hard for the Lord and found my family

watching a television show called Biggest Loser. I tried to shame them with

some holier-than-thou comments, but they ignored me.

You know the premise of this show.

Obese people have to lose weight over a certain period of time.

There are teams and weigh-ins and it's all very dramatic.

But here's my point. There are some people who lose weight just because

it's the rules of the contest, but there are others who you can tell are captured by

a vivid imagination of what their lives would be like if they could change.

In the long run, which one is more likely to take weight off and keep it off?

Not the one motivated by rules. When the contest is over, habits will resume.

It's the one who imagines what it will be like to wear a bathing suit,

or to get into size 34 pants or whatever, who is most likely to truly change.

Now the biblical examples. First a negative one.

Joshua 7 tells the sad story of Achen. When Israel destroyed Jericho, they were told not to keep any of the plunder, but Achen did. Brought trouble and defeat. When confronted by Joshua he admitted had taken some. He described it:
When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them.

Follow the progression. He saw in the plunder a robe. Nothing wrong with that. But he didn't just see a robe. He saw a beautiful robe.

And not just a beautiful robe, a beautiful robe from Babylonia—stylish.

What was Achen doing? He was imagining. How good he would look in robe.

The spirit of his mind said: This is valuable, this is good, this will make happy.

So what was the next step? I coveted them and took them.

There were bigger and better things he should have imagined—

life in the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey.

But he didn't deliberately set his heart and mind on those things, so his sinful imagination got the upper hand in his affections.

Second biblical example is Asaph in Psalm 73. You know the Psalm.

It's about a believing man who almost loses his faith because he sees the wicked prospering while he himself was suffering loss.

And, oh my goodness, his imagination starts to run away from him.

He imagines their prosperity, he imagines their easy lives—he says:

My feet almost slipped, I had nearly lost my foothold,

for I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Envy—that means he was imagining how great it would be if he had their money.

But the turning point for this man came one Lord's day when he was in church—

He says: I entered the sanctuary of God and then I understood their final destiny.

His imagination began to stir, he began to imagine the end of life, final judgment.

What will it be like in that day for them, and for him.

You place them on slippery ground, you cast them down to ruin.

He imagines a person slipping, falling off a cliff, a house torn down to rubble.

(But) you will take me into glory . . . God is my portion forever.

He imagines the inheritance he has in the Lord.

His imagination is renewed, and it changes him.

He's no longer consumed with self-pity and envy, he's calm, he's stable.

In order to change, you have to renew your imagination.

That brings us to the third point:

MP# The practice of this motivation.

This is our challenge. It's very hard.

All around us are the temptations of the world that we can see.

They don't take much imagination.

All the things that tempt us to envy and discontentment and anger and lust are before us in Technicolor—as the old movies use to say.

But we have to ignore those things we can see and stir up our imagination for the invisible things we can't see and that's hard.

We can't see the guilt-erasing effects of Christ's death or the life-giving power of his resurrection.

We can't see Christ's reign over the nations, except in the tiniest little fragments.

We can't see the world and home he is preparing for us.

We can't even see who we truly are through our union with him.

The Bible tells us these things, but we view them as if behind a veil—the failure of our imagination and the limitations of human language, and the effects of sin on our reason hamper us.

But even so, this is what we are called to do in order to change and mature—set your hearts, set your minds on things above.

The key is simply to make regular use of the ordinary means of grace.

The ordinary means of grace are those regular conduits that God has established through which he pours his grace into our lives. What are they in particular?

Look again at the way Paul ends this passage, verses 15 and 16.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

Life in the body of Christ, church life, fellowship with other Christians—talking to them, praying with them. It stirs your imagination.

The Word of Christ, taught and preached. Submitting to it week after week.

Hearing the truth about the invisible world.

Worship with all of its various elements that point us to Christ in different ways.

Paul particularly mentions singing—psalms, hymns, spiritual songs.

Great lyrics about the invisible world and Christ and our union with him pressed home through music. Think how often believers on their death beds have asked a hymn to be sung, because it brings to mind God and heaven.

This was where Asaph had his imagination renewed, in the sanctuary of God.

You must make use of the same.

Here's what will happen. In the hard times the greatness of that world will come to you, and sustain you, and you will be able to change—to put off the old self and put on the new.

The Harry Potter books start with this young boy Harry whose mother and father are dead.

He lives with an aunt and uncle who don't like him—

Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon Dursley.

And a horrible cousin who also despises him, Dudley Dursley.

They live at Number 4 Privet Drive and Harry feels trapped.

He's full of anger and sadness.

But you know the story. He's contacted by some mysterious people, and told that he has been accepted to the Hogwarts School of Wizardry.

He attends Hogwarts and is introduced to a bigger world, a mysterious world that he never knew existed. He meets wonderful, good, and powerful people, and he comes in contact for the first time with great evil.

Then the school year is over, and he goes back for the summer to 4 Privet Drive and the Durselys.

His aunt and uncle still dislike him.

His cousin Dudley is still just as hateful as ever.

Harry once again starts to have that trapped feeling again, it feels the same.

But he realizes, it's not the same. This is not all there is to life—this muggle life. There is a bigger world, a grander world—and I'm part of that world.

That's my identity, that's my life. I've been changed.

And when summer is over, and school starts again, I'm going back.

Every illustration breaks down at some point, so don't push this one too far.

But here's the point.

When Christ called us out of darkness, into his wonderful light, everything changed.

We were united with him in his death, resurrection, ascension, and return.

We're still living at 4 Privet drive, but a new and bigger world has opened to us.

We have front seats in the cosmic battle, and are part of that new kingdom.

Because we are part of that world, with that new identity, then we can change.

We must change. We must be who we are.

Make use of all the means of grace to push that reality home.

What do you want to change about yourself?

Uncontrolled emotions

worry, depression, fear

afraid of certain people, certain situations

anger, bitterness, hard heart, not tender toward people you love

Uncontrolled tongue

say too much or too little, can't keep secrets, can't keep promises

hypocrite—say one thing, live another

Personal weaknesses

too shy, too self-conscious, wish could be more open, more appealing

wish was able to be closer to people

start things and never finish, too uptight, nothing you do ever good enough

Misuse of people and things

money problems—too stingy, not careful enough

time problems—not enough, too much, misused, schedule controls

wrong priorities, work too much, ignore, take for granted people.

You can change.

Not just superficial changes, not just changes of image or behavior—

but true changes from the inside out—changes of affections, changes of character.

And this change has nothing to do with special diets or holy days or secret

knowledge or communication with spirits or with any other method or system

or conference or book or religious ritual or Christian fad.

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