



The Greatness of Christ: A Study of Colossians Week 5 - Chapter 3

The New Self 3:1-17

- This chapter focuses on answering the question, “What does (a mature) life in Christ look like?”
 - This life in Christ is in fact *new* life: it is based on the reality that you “have been raised with Christ” (3:1). You were dead, now you are alive. God has given you something freely, which by its nature causes you to want to “seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”
 - Descriptive versus Prescriptive – is what this passage talking about a prescription for what the believer must do, and if so what happens when they fail, or is it a description of what is produced, however imperfectly in real life, in this new life in Christ?
 - We often want to treat the second half of Paul’s letters as prescriptive: this is what you must do (or else). We must then ask, what happens when my mind is not set upon things that are above? Have I lost God’s gift and am not raised with Christ? What happens with this line of thinking is that we make the fruit of the sanctified life the condition for being justified, which can lead us to either Pharisaic or despair.
 - Recall last week’s discussion of the Law. The law serves two functions:
 1. Reveals God’s holy requirements, bringing order / restraining evil
 2. It crushes our sense of self righteousness and leads us to Christ
 - The fruit of the Gospel, that is the new life Paul is describing, is not a new law. That is to say, it is not doing all these things that brings new life, rather trusting in Jesus Christ is new life, which then produces/looks like what Paul is talking about. That’s not to say all this happens without struggle, nor are they things we aspire to, but we must get the order correct.
- The death that brings life → the life that brings death → and the life that brings life
 - The death that brings life: The death of Christ, into which we were baptized, buries our ‘old’ sinful self, and through Jesus’ resurrection (into which we also share) we are given new life. However, because we are not fully glorified (recall “the already and not-yet”) our sinful nature remains and the result is essentially a war between the new life in Christ, led by the Spirit (cf. Romans 8:5ff) and the old sinful nature (see Romans 7:12-25 for a full treatment of this ‘war’). In other words the death and resurrection of Christ creates a two-pronged result in us: on the one hand a putting to death of our sinful nature, and on the other the cultivation of new life
 - The life that brings death: The thing which our new life in Christ, led by the Spirit, does is put to death our sinful proclivities. Thus Paul states in 3:5, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you.
 - This is not to be confused with a detached, escapist view of morality, or an overly zealous asceticism (which Paul has already decried, see 2:23). The way we ‘put to death’ the sin in us is not by living in ever increasing levels of strictness, or ever increasing levels of apathy (a Buddhist / Hindu indifference), but to confront our sins as they are, confess them and repent with faith. The medieval church had this problem. If one struggled with sexual immorality or impure thoughts, the answer was to whip yourself (flagellate). In the short term this has “an appearance of wisdom and promoting self made religion and asceticism and severity to the body”, but in the long run does nothing to actually change your sin. If I get into lots of car accidents because I’m a bad driver, the answer is not to have me start digging ditches. The answer is to take away my keys and then put me in driving school.
- Paul is very direct and clear on the sins that he lists, to be guarded against and put to death
 - See Wright’s explanation on p. 133 as a helpful discussion starter.

- Put on Christ
 - The life that brings life: Paul describes the second prong of the new life as a putting on of compassion, kindness, humility, etc (5:12). This list compares well with Galatians 5:22-23, the well known “Fruits of the Spirit” passage.
 - Paul especially brings up the need to forgive one another (cf. Eph 4:32) on account of our forgiveness in Christ. See also, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” in the Lord’s Prayer.
 - Note also Paul’s exhortation to “let the word of Christ dwell richly within you”
- The Anglican understanding: What the heart desires, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.
 - When our hearts are evil, selfish, and corrupt, we will naturally choose things which suit those desires, and then declare such things in our minds as “good”.
 - What we need is new and renewed hearts. The person who rightly sees (or rather, is shown) the ill contents of their heart, can turn to Christ in repentance and faith, trusting the promise of the Gospel that there is no condemnation for their state, and this will produce through the power of the Spirit compassion, gratitude, and humility. Note, this does not mean that the consequences of actions are simply annulled – if you steal a car and get caught, one can genuinely repent and trust Christ for their forgiveness and be renewed and not steal again, but that doesn’t mean you won’t go to jail for it!
 - “Almighty God, to whom all **hearts** are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts of our **hearts** by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy holy Name...”
 - Twelve specific references to the heart in the Rite 1 liturgy, excluding Scripture readings or Proper Prefaces (Eucharist).
- Thus we find Paul in this section giving instruction on what does it mean to live Christianly. While we may not find answers to every possible situation or problem or decision, the governing rule is, “as unto the Lord”. In the next section Paul applies this specifically to the home

Household Order 3:18-4:1

- The household, in the Roman world *paterfamilias*, was typically broader in scope and content than our modern ‘nuclear’ family, but certainly based on one or more nuclear families.
 - Household ‘codes’ were common in the ancient world, likely the most well known from antiquity is Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus*, or “On the duties of domestic life.”
 - It has been noted for some time that the general content of Paul’s household code is similar to many of those written by both Stoic and Jewish writers. However, while the behavior approved of in these lists may be similar to Paul’s, we must note that the reason why one should behave this way is different. For the Stoic a son should respect his father and mother because it is “fitting according to nature”, that is natural law. For Paul a son respects and obeys their parents because it is fitting as to the Lord Jesus, which changes the whole dynamic in substance, not just because the words “as to the Lord” have been ‘tacked on’ to the end of existing pagan *oekonomici*.
 - Paul’s instructions give a real-world substance to what it means to live in Christ, to live into the new life Jesus brings not just in the church or the world at large, but in your own home. If the goal of life in Christ is to be truly alive, fully human and mature, then the place where this ought to most be relevant is in your home – where you are most often the ‘real’ you anyway.
 - We must also pause and state that many readers (and theologians) gloss over or dismiss these passages out of hand simply because they are referring to a social familial setting and time vastly different from ours. This is unfair to these passages (as well as being guilty of what Lewis called “chronological snobbery”). Often examination of these passages is simply an opportunity to expound all the ways the church has mistreated the family (especially women and children; which, ironically goes against the codes), rather than an opportunity to actually explore and interpret the text.
- The household rules are divided into three correlating pairs: husbands & wives, parents & children, masters & slaves/servants.

Husbands & Wives

- The relationship of man and wife is ultimately intended to be an earthly reflection of the relationship between God/Christ and his people.
 - The Christian teaching of inter-human relationship within the church and especially within the family is that of mutual submission. We should not make the mistake here in assuming that submission/submissive = inferior. Far from it.
 - Paul clearly asserts in other letters that men and women are equal creature of God, and have equal righteousness in Christ. We must not lose that background.
 - Paul also has in view, within his very egalitarian (and very much ahead of his time view), a need for order and structure for the well-being of the created order. Adam was made before Eve; husbands are the head of their wives, (young) children do not have authority over their parents, citizens respect their rulers etc.
 - We must also note that Paul is approaching this with the assumption that men and women, though equal in Christ, are in fact different!
- Paul is presenting a very balanced order based on mutual love and submission – neither party is to be domineering over the other in any of the categories he gives.
 - The Christian understanding of life is counter-intuitive – to be fully mature and fully yourself comes as a result of actually emptying yourself, humbling yourself, and submitting to God and those he has put over you. I must decrease that Christ may increase
 - The world teaches us that to fully be yourself you must be assertive, goal oriented, and accomplished. Two very opposite views of maturity.
 - The heart of the Gospel understanding of love is that true love is not conditional upon the performance of the beloved; such love brings out life in the beloved. The challenge then, the question, is not, “Is my spouse/child worthy of my love/respect/submission?” but rather “I will learn to love/respect/submit to them for Christ’s sake, even if at times they drive me nuts.” The focus is on the state of the lover not the worthiness of the loved
- Wives submit to your husbands as is pleasing to the Lord. The submission is out of love and respect, not servile inferiority (as if often, wrongly, the interpretation). In today’s world, via messages from the culture, television, celebrity, schools, commercials, etc., are girls taught to respect men? I think they are conditioned by our culture to fear and/or ridicule them. Note, the passage speaks of this submission only with respect to a marriage relationship. Paul does not say, nor does he imply, that all women should submit to all men. And surely there are buffoonish husbands in this world, emotionally constipated and brash, but should they be respected if Christ-like for a woman to respect her husband, even if he is not as intelligent as she? Paul is saying that the Christian wife is to forgo the temptation to rule her husband’s life.
- Husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them. In the ancient world the head of the household was usually a man, and he usually had absolute authority. However, the head could be a woman, such as Lydia in Philippi. Paul is instructing husbands to put their wives interests and well being before their own, just as Christ gave his life for the Church. For a fuller treatment of this see Ephesians 5:22ff. In our culture, are young men conditioned to care for women, putting their needs over their own? No, they are conditioned to mistrust and use women. Attaining success and wealth (signs of a ‘real’ man in our age and in the ancients’) at the cost of a wife’s well being is not Christ like. How many men forgo the temptation of accomplishment at work for the sake of being present and caring in their wife’s life?
- The intended result of these instructions is actually greater freedom and maturity for both husband and wife within the marriage, not less.

Parents & Children

- As in the instructions to husbands and wives, the instructions to parents and children are balanced, based on the concept of mutual love and submission.
- Children are to obey their parents. Paul, by addressing children directly, gives them voice and validity in the church community. See Exodus 20:12, the fifth commandment is the first with a specific result of blessing.

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- Children naturally do not like to obey – they do not need to be taught disobedience. However, in our culture are children generally encouraged/taught to obey and respect their parents, or to rebel against them? Are parents encouraged to be a figure of authority, structure, and provision in their child's lives? Or do 'children know best'? Children who have no sound and healthy respect for the authority of their parents will likely have a difficult time relating to the authority of God in their lives. To respect your parents, even if a child thinks they know better (and often times, despite what movies and TV tells them, they don't) it is Christ-like to submit and respectfully obey.
- Fathers, in particular, but parents in general are not to be harsh with their children. Parents are not the 'best friends' of their young children, they are their parents. It is interesting to note that the mutual submission in view here is that of 'self-limiting', that is, the parent is to be aware of the limitations of their children's developmental stages, and not over-nagging or belittling children. A parent is bigger and stronger than their child, and it is not Christ-like to use that in an unfair or abusive way. Instead, parents are to show their children that the love they bear for them does not depend on their performance or obedience. The basis of the relationship is Christ-like love.
- We note also that in our world we often find the opposite extremes in play. Often the fear of provoking or limiting the child results in an over-permissiveness which creates an obnoxious and even harmful child. On the other hand, overbearing authoritative parents create

Slaves and Masters

- Slavery in the ancient world was ubiquitous. Upwards of half the Roman Empire may have been slave at times. In the NT we find such an institution treated as the societal fixture and reality that it was. This has often been wrongfully taken as the NT's tacit approval of slavery, but this is a very fallacious interpretation of the text.
- Paul's instructions are intending to bring a Gospel reality into the existing Master-Slave relationship, the fruit of which would ultimately render that system defunct, which in fact it did. Not overnight, to be sure, but eventually. Paul is not openly seditious to the slave system, but the instructions he gives clearly intend to consistently bring the Christian understanding of Christ-like mutual love and submission into the household structure.
- Slaves are to work honestly and dutifully, knowing that their true "master" (*kurios*, in the Greek the word can mean both 'master' and 'lord'; Jesus is *kurios iesus Christos*).
- Masters are to treat their slaves justly and fairly, knowing that they themselves also have a master, Christ, to whom they are accountable. In today's parlance we might more readily apply this template to that of employer-employee. Often times slaves functioned in the household much like employees, and many were often paid and some even became wealthier than their owners!
- For a fuller treatment of Paul's view of the Gospel's capacity to rupture the chains of the slave system, see his letter to Philemon.