

Jesus At The Apex

By Mark Jarvinen

*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. ... ⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. **(Colossians 3:1-3, 9-10)***

Martin Luther once challenged one of his students by saying, **“I’ll get you a new horse and carriage if you can pray the Lord’s prayer and concentrate on every phrase without losing your train of thought.”** The young man thought to himself, **“No problem!”** However, he later confessed to Luther, **“All I could think about was the horse and carriage.”** It seemed that the harder he tried to concentrate on the Lord’s Prayer, the more his mind was drawn elsewhere. (Joel Pankow, Sermon Central, March 28, 2002). That’s our innate tendency. Human nature can’t reform itself.

We can certainly identify. In **v. 2** Paul writes, **“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”** This kind of imperative from Paul presupposes a gospel orientation on the part of the hearer, in the sense that even when one sets his mind to obey, he is aware that he falls short and stands in need of forgiveness. So often, in our humanity, we get stuck on the lesser things of life, not always the bad stuff, but the earthly stuff, such as that upcoming surgery, that impending job promotion, or even that big Twins game starting later in the day. These worries and preoccupations are indicative of the

idols that compete for supremacy in our hearts – things that we allow to take precedence over God. That’s the inbred tendency of the old nature. Religion tries hard to topple these idols, but to no avail. There was a heresy in Paul’s day, or false teaching, operating in the Church in Colossae that was spreading like wildfire. This heresy promoted human wisdom and self-made religion that emphasized rule keeping, self denial, and bodily disciplines as the way to tame sinful desires and make people better. Making progress, or becoming better, had become its own kind of idol.

That’s why Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians. Paul knew that attempting to tame human nature through self-effort was a dead end street - impossible. Transformation could only take place in one way – through life in Christ. Therefore, throughout his letter to the Colossians, Paul sought to refute this heresy by emphasizing the supremacy of Christ. For example, in **2:9-10**, Paul writes:

“For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.”

In other words, inasmuch as the Colossian heresy was entirely inadequate in its ability to restrain the old sinful nature, and topple its idols, Christ, and the new life found in Him, was at the apex, i.e. the summit or pinnacle. Thus, the theme of today’s message is **“Jesus At The Apex.”**

RAISED WITH CHRIST

Notice how **v. 1** begins: ***“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ,”*** What does this mean? Simply that spiritually, all Christians share in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. To

understand this more fully, let's consider **Romans 6:4**, where Paul writes:

“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Here, Paul tells the Christians in Rome (and all Christians) that their baptism intimately connects them to Christ, first, to his death. Through the gift of faith bestowed on us in baptism, we are both crucified and buried with Him, that is, when Christ was punished on the cross, it was for us, and we share in His death. In other words, when we think of what happened on Good Friday, it's not just ***“poor Jesus, think of all the pain He felt on the cross.”*** It's more like, ***“I'm sorry, Lord. My sin put you on that cross. Your suffering and death were for me!”*** But that's not all! The Christians in Rome (and we) were also raised from the dead and ascended into heaven through our faith connection with Christ. Therefore, from God's point of view, since spiritually we share in Christ's resurrected life, our place in heaven with Him is already secure. Therefore, back to our text in **Colossians 3**, since we have gone through all this together, crucified and buried with Christ, and raised and ascended with Him, Paul says to set our minds on heavenly things. **When we rehearse in our thinking just how connected we are to Christ, and what we share with Him, Paul's admonition to set our minds on things above isn't such an absurd request.** After all, v. 3 says, ***“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”*** It means that in Christ, we're completely surrounded by God. If this is our position in Christ, what higher thoughts are there to think about? **Timothy Keller**, in his book **Counterfeit Gods**, says,

“Setting the mind and heart on things above” where “your life is hidden with Christ in God” means appreciating, rejoicing, and resting in what Jesus has done for you. ... thus, you find Jesus becoming more beautiful to your imagination and more attractive to your heart, than your idol. That is what will replace your counterfeit gods. If you uproot the idol and fail to `plant’ the love of Christ in its place, the idol will grow back.” (p. 172)

Thus, living by a new equation, **Jesus+Nothing=Everything**, is the truth and the new reality by which we live as Christians.

WHY DO WE STILL STRUGGLE?

We still struggle because of the battle between the **flesh** (the old nature that is still capable of rearing its ugly head) and the **Spirit** (the new nature marked by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit) that is part of the maturing process in Christian living. All believers, with boots on the ground, experience this battle on a daily basis. **Having said this, I want you to pay very close attention to what I am about to say.** The struggle is made more difficult than it needs to be when we **AVOID THE GOSPEL.** What do you mean, Pastor Mark? The gospel is the old, old story of Jesus and His love. I don’t avoid the gospel, I LOVE the gospel. Yes, that’s true. We do love the gospel, especially the part about the forgiveness of sins. However, if you’re at all like me, you all too easily forget the breadth of the gospel’s implications. Let me get at the gospel’s deeper implication with a question.

Do you as a Christian ever sin? I wish I could say “no.” However, I find myself needing to come back to the cross every day of my life, because of my sin. Sin is my flight from God in thought,

word, and deed. I **John 2:15-16**, addressed to Christians, succinctly describes where this flight from God can take us –

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does (the pride of life) – comes not from the Father but from the world.”

I so easily slip into a pattern in which life becomes all about my own little world, complete with my own standards and rules and goals and preferences, where my deepest concerns are about me and what I want. It's subtle. I'm not always aware that it's happening, but I'm capable of succumbing to this ***“pride of life.”*** I become preoccupied with my own strengths, achievements, and attainments (or lack thereof). An example of this takes place in me when a new acquaintance meets me and finds out I'm a pastor and asks me the simple question – ***“So how big is your congregation?”*** My old nature often hears this question as ***“How successful are you as a pastor?”*** I make the question all about me. I sometimes couch my answer in a way that won't be a blow to my pride. I avoid the gospel.

Why don't I just answer the question honestly by simply admitting that I'm the pastor of a small sized loving, caring congregation whose members desire to honor Christ and follow Him wholeheartedly? **SIN IS MY TENDENCY (AND YOURS) TO AVOID THE GOSPEL by being more concerned about propping up our own egos by looking good in the eyes of others, than by honestly and humbly following Christ.** Why do I want to avoid the deeper implications of the gospel? Listen to this! It's because the gospel makes **ME (my tendency to be my own God)** disappear –

and my old nature doesn't like that. We need to understand that there's a sense in which the gospel obliterates the old nature, which although is painful, is the key to our ultimate freedom. **The truth is that the gospel doesn't take us deeper into ourselves, it takes us away from ourselves.** It doesn't put a thin veneer of righteousness over the old nature, just enough to tweak it and make us look good in the eyes of others. It crucifies and buries the old nature, only then to raise us to new life in Christ. That's why Paul says in v. 3 of our text – ***“You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”*** Salvation is both a status we are granted by grace, and a process of daily renewal. The gospel is not something we believe once for salvation and the rest is left up to us. The gospel is the truth we live by each and every day.

OFF WITH THE OLD – ON WITH THE NEW

The essential understanding for us as we seek to live in the freedom of the gospel is found in vv. 9-10 of our text:

“Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”

It's true that as Christians, from a macro perspective, we have discarded our solidarity with our old nature and its behaviors like a set of shabby clothes, only to be joined by faith in Christ to a new solidarity, which renews the image of God in us and creates new behaviors, **[putting on a new set of clothes]**. Yet, in the real world of everyday life that doesn't simply mean giving up a few old vices and accepting a few new virtues. For example, it's not as simple as saying, ***“I'll stop sleeping in and start going to church.”*** A person who encounters Christ may be led to set their alarm on Saturday

night so they can attend church as they are prompted by the Spirit to do so. Furthermore, attending church regularly will likely become an **“I want to” instead of a “Do I have to?”** kind of issue as one walks with the Lord. However, what we’ve been talking about this morning is one’s whole nature being exchanged, not just a few behaviors being revamped. Living in the freedom of the gospel is not just about reforming our lives for the better, or making some minor modifications in our behavior. **Our greatest need is to simply, by grace, to look to our crucified and risen Lord and what He’s done for us, before we look to ourselves.** The gospel empowers us to escape the disruption caused by the old nature, which Luther calls our tendency to be **“curved in on ourselves,”** instead of on what Christ has done.

To put a bow on this thought, allow me to share the words of an admired proclaimer of the gospel, Paul Tripp, who writes:

The gospel tells us, ‘Relax, it is finished.’ The gospel grants us the strength to admit we’re weak and needy and restless – knowing that Christ’s finished work has proven to be all the strength and fulfillment and peace we could ever want, and more.”

With that being said, why would we ever want to avoid the Gospel? The answer, of course, is that sometimes we find ourselves doing the very things we don’t want to do **(see Romans 7)** Thankfully, by grace we are led to confess our sins and receive God’s forgiveness through faith in Christ’s atoning blood.

WHAT’S AT STAKE?

What’s at stake is not merely our own sense of well-being. It’s the furtherance of the Kingdom. Tragically, today many people hear the term **“Christian”** or **“Evangelical”** and they think of the

moralistic voting block that political candidates need to win over if they want to be elected. Christianity is so much more than observing certain codes of behavior and abstaining from others. The gospel of Christ is radically different! **Gerhard Forde** sums it up well in this quote from his book entitled **A More Radical Gospel**:

“Jesus came first not to make bad people good, but to make dead people alive. Jesus came to bring first of all spiritual resurrection, not moral reformation. Christianity is not the move from vice to virtue, but rather the move from virtue to grace.”

As we think about our witness to a world that is darkened by sin and despair, we need to demonstrate and articulate the difference between **religion**, which is all about my need to be better and do better, and the **gospel**, which is all about what Jesus has done. Lord, may a gospel-soaked attractiveness and an aroma of grace spill forth from our lives and into our world. **A-men.**