Lesson 5 Commentary

A Life Hidden in Christ

Colossians 3:1-17

The false teachers in Colossae said much about spiritual enlightenment but were silent on most moral issues. Paul taught that spiritual beliefs should transform the way people think and act. But this teaching contrasted sharply to the popular beliefs of his time. Our new way of living is based on our new identity. We have been raised with Christ. Therefore, our minds and thoughts are to be fixed on "things that are above, not on things that are on earth." Paul wanted his readers to shift their focus from earthly things and look to God instead. His instructions apply to us too. Our motivation for this upward focus is based on the fact that when we are in Christ, we no longer belong to the world. We have died to it, and now we are hidden—secure—in Christ. Jesus is not merely an important part of the life of a believer. He is life. He is the one who matters more than anyone or anything else.

Relinquish the Old

The Colossian believers had died to the world, been raised with Christ, and could look forward to appearing with Him in glory. Because of these things, they had some practical everyday work to do. Paul told his readers to put to death what was earthly in their lives. Old attitudes and actions had to be totally destroyed, including sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desires, and covetousness. The first four are sexual sins. Some ancient religions not only excused sexual immorality, they sometimes made it part of their religious practices. God views those activities as sinful. The fifth sin, coveting, refers to a desire for something that is not yours. It could also be greed for material things, or it could be sexual desire. Either way, Paul identified covetousness as idolatry. The consequence of lingering in any of these sins is God's wrath.

Think about God's wrath against sin. When we consider God's wrath, we may think of the unrighteous human anger we've experienced from others. But God's wrath is not unpredictable, unjust, vindictive, or self-centered. It is like a surgeon's response to a life-threatening tumor. Cancer must be removed—sometimes painfully and radically—or it will destroy. Sin is like a spiritual cancer: it damages people God loves. Because He is holy, loving, and just, He must deal with the sin that threatens to destroy us—both the sins we commit and the sins others commit against us. By pouring out His wrath on His Son, God made the ultimate sacrifice to provide a cure for our souls (see Romans 3:23-26).

Next, Paul used imagery everyone can relate to: putting away, taking off, and putting on clothing. Paul wanted the believers in Colossae to understand that they could choose what qualities and behaviors they "put off" and "put on" the same way they chose the clothes they wore each day. First, Paul addressed what to remove. He focused on attitudes and behaviors that negatively affect other people: anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, and lying.

Think about Paul's instruction against lying. This "garment" may be among the most difficult to remove. Lies are easily justified and often permitted, even in close relationships. Yet the Bible presents a different perspective on intentional deception. God gave commands for living in a loving community: "You shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another" (Leviticus 19:11). God is the God of truth. Anyone who opposes the truth opposes Him.

Accept the New

The practices listed in Colossians 3:5 and 3:8-9 belong to "the old self." When the Colossians had experienced new life in Christ, Paul explained, they put off this old self. From the moment believers trust Jesus, their old self is removed. Jesus defeated sin on the cross.

Next, Paul wrote about the attitudes and behaviors of the "new self." When we give our lives to Christ, we are new creations. Instantly, the old self is gone, and God sees us in the new identities He gave us. Yet "being renewed" is an ongoing process. The Holy Spirit continually renews us—increasing our knowledge of God and transforming our character to look more and more like His.

One of the ways God transforms us is by removing our prejudices. In Christ, there are no distinctions that separate people into opposing groups. Followers of Jesus accept one another—regardless of nationality, race, education, or status. No believer is more important to God than any other. All are equally loved and equally accepted. Paul stated that "Christ is all, and in all." Part of putting on the "new self" is realizing that there should not be division among those who have placed Christ at the very center of their lives.

Clothed in Christ

God provides spiritual clothing for anyone who calls upon His Son's name. Believers just need to put that clothing on. The clothes Paul mentioned include compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and the willingness to bear with and forgive one another. "Bearing with one another," or *forbearing*, can mean "to patiently endure with" or "to hold someone up." Sometimes bearing with a fellow believer means holding up or supporting that person. It implies overlooking others' faults and weaknesses. It means surrendering our desire or right to have others meet our expectations. Paul also told the Colossians to forgive in the same way the Lord had forgiven them—ungrudgingly, repeatedly, completely.

The final garment Paul told the Colossians to put on is love. Love ties everything else together. Without it, Christians are incomplete. More than any other quality, love identifies believers as followers of Jesus. "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another," Jesus said (John 13:35). This kind of love is a deliberate decision to act in a loving way even when we do not feel like it. It is the virtue that unifies the church and makes us look most like Christ.

Once believers are clothed in the qualities God has designed for them to wear, they can do the things He intends for them to do. Paul gave these three specific instructions:

"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." Paul meant that peace should guide believers' actions. The peace Paul spoke of was more than a harmonious mental state or the ability to get along with others. Rather, "the peace of Christ" speaks to the overall welfare of a body of people. This kind of peace can transform individuals and communities. Groups that display this peace will function effectively because everyone is working selflessly together. Paul told the Colossian believers God had called them to this kind of peace.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." Christ's word should take up residence in us. God's Word should become such a part of our lives that it is completely at home in us. If we take the time to know it well, it will be easily available when we teach and counsel other people. It will fill our minds with wisdom, guiding our thoughts, words, and actions. It will be on our lips as we praise God through our songs.

"Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus." When we trust Christ, we die to ourselves and are raised into a new identity and purpose. We become Christ's representatives on earth. Being Jesus's ambassador is a great privilege, but it is an equally great responsibility. Our words and actions tell the world who and whose we are. When we become Christians, the things we say and do should tell the world that we are Christ's. Our gratitude should also reflect this identity. The best response to the abundant life and hope-filled future Paul wrote about in this chapter is heartfelt thankfulness to God.

Personalize the TRUTH!

Paul told the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." He did not want the Colossians to be merely familiar with Jesus's words. He wanted those words to live in them—to take up residence and settle in. When God's words are at home in us, they give us direction for hard decisions. They build us up when the world tears us down. They affirm our true identity and remind us that we are dearly loved. They anchor us in truth when culture pulls us off course. Ask the Lord to plant His words so deep within you that they take up permanent residence there.