

Title: *Being With Christ*

Text: Colossians 3:1-11

We have just come through our celebration of the Holiday season. The wonder, and the warmth and the joy of Christmas is that God has come down in the person of Jesus Christ. That is the central fact, the defining moment, the hinge point of all history.

As we turn our attention back to the letter to the Colossians, we could say that that was one of the main points Paul was trying to impress upon the Christians there in Colossae.

This Jesus Christ was not some distant emanation of a far-off God who cannot bother to dirty himself with our affairs. Paul tells us in 1:15, “[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Paul talks a lot about our dying and being raised with Christ. In 2:13, he says, “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive **with Christ**.

In 2:20,21, he says, “Since you died **with Christ** to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules?”

The last time we were in Colossians, now a month and a half ago, we looked at Paul’s attitude toward rules – rules that people adopt if they are trying to escape the stain of this evil world.

So in the contrast between the passage we looked at last time we were in Colossians, between 2:20-23 and 3:1-11. It’s the difference between living a life bound to this world and living a life of freedom in Christ.

If the question of Advent and Christmas is, ‘What does it mean for God to be with us?’ the question of Colossians today is ‘What does it mean for us to be with God?’. That phrase “with Christ” appears several times in three basic ways. In verse 1, he says, “Since then you have been raised **with Christ**.” In verse 3, he says, “your life is hidden with Christ in God” In verse 4, he says, “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Marla Runyan is the kind of Olympic athlete who gets profiled on those up close and personal profiles they show on television of Olympic athletes. She has been legally blind for 22 years. Even so, she competed in the 2000 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. In fact she qualified for the finals in the 1500 meter race. (Marla finished eighth, three seconds behind the medal winners.)

How does she do it? Marla can't see in color, and what she does see is just a fuzzy blob.

In a race she just follows the blob of figures in front of her. She told TV commentator Tom Hammonds that the real difficulty was in rounding the final turn and "racing toward a finish line that I can't see. I just know where it is."

Think how much mental preparation must go into a race for here. Over Christmas I bought the Andrea Bocelli Christmas CD. He has a wonderful voice but what is more striking to me is how many instruments this blind man is able to play – I know he plays the flute and the piano, at least. How does he learn the music? It must take an incredible amount of focus on things that he knows are there even if he doesn't see them.

In the same way, we don't see the things that are above. We focus our mind there in anticipation of what it must be but we aren't really able to see it. It's possible to use the Christian lingo so much that we just assume everyone knows what we're talking about when we use it. I remember in preaching class years ago, we'd get chided for talking about the "things of God" and throwing around the phrase "things of God" in a way like everybody already knew what we were talking about.

Paul says, "Since you have been raised out of your state of spiritual death and given new life with Christ, focus all of your attention on the new life that will one day be fully yours in Jesus Christ. I've been reading Randy Alcorn's book on Heaven. It's a few years old now. I've heard people say, "I don't want to become so heavenly minded I'm of no earthly good!" That sounds good until you read the words of C.S. Lewis who said:

"If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven"

We talked about this in the very first sermon in the series entitled *What Hope Does*. Hope gives us to fuel to see the better world that is possible because of what Christ has done and because of what he promises us. Henri Nouwen said, "Hope prevents us from clinging to what we have and frees us to move away from the safe place and enter unknown and fearful territory."

Hope is fueled as we focus above. Notice Paul doesn't just say focus your mind on things above. That may be the place to start, but as your mind becomes more aware, doesn't the heart seem to want to desire it more. If you know how great something is, the more your heart will want it.

I guess the contrast to setting your heart and your mind on things above would be to think about things below. Live your life just for this life. Seek only the pleasure of this life. That's a futile pursuit. Live your life just for the pleasures of this life that we think are so significant. The wealth the pleasures that we think can bring happiness and live only for the pleasures of this world. Again, it was C. S. Lewis who said, "Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither." Paul tells the Colossians, "You've died to the basic principles of this world. The things that the world gets excited about and thinks will bring pleasure, don't

bring the pleasure that we thought they would.

Paul says, "You died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." The only places that exact verb form 'you died' is used is in 2:20 and 3:3. Paul does discuss the same idea in Romans 6, though. He says, " ⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

The problem is Colossae was this notion that matter was evil and that it should be avoided. Paul writes, "It's not that the stuff of this world is evil." It's that what Christ offers us is so much better."

Philip Yancey tells the story of his pastor who tried to pull a trick on his children. He decided to pull a vacation surprise on his four children. "We're going to Junction City, Kansas," Peter told them. "It's where my dad used to pastor a church, and we can have lots of fun there." Meanwhile he made secret plans to spend one afternoon in Junction City, then drive on to enjoy the glories of Disney World.

Ever trusting, his children bragged to skeptical friends, "We're going to Kansas for vacation. It's great!" All during the long drive from Denver to Junction City, Peter kept up morale by describing the wonders awaiting them: playgrounds, a swimming pool, an ice cream stand, maybe even a bowling alley.

After touring Granddad's old church, the kids were ready to check into a motel and go swimming when their dad dropped the bombshell. "You know something—it's kind of boring here in Kansas. Why don't we just drive to *Disney World!*" Mom reached in a bag and pulled out four custom-made Mickey Mouse hats.

Peter expected his kids to jump up and down in delight. Instead, they complained: "Ah, who wants to get back in the van?" "What about the swimming pool? You promised!" "I thought we were going to go bowling!"

The great surprise had backfired. For the next few hours Peter sat behind the steering wheel and smoldered as his children expanded on all the advantages of Junction City over Disney World.

[The whole thing reminded him of that famous quote from] C. S. Lewis: "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea." ...

The pastor had learned a valuable lesson about human nature]: our desires are too small. We stamp our feet and insist on a merry-go-round in Junction City when Disney World's Space Mountain lies just down the road.

We have to believe that our life hidden with Christ in God is better than any of the things of this life that we have a tendency to hold on to.

In verses 5-11, Paul gives a description of what a life hidden with Christ in God will look like. Paul says, “⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.” If we died with Christ, our old man died, therefore all of those things that are a part of our sinful nature ought to be put to death as well. He begins by talking about sexual immorality. In I Corinthians 6:18, Paul writes, “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body.

Notice how Paul makes a progression from sexual immorality down to greed which is idolatry. You could say that sexual immorality is the ultimate expression of greed which is idolatry. It is taking something that God has designed and blessed and sanctioned and declared good and twisting and perverting it into something that is only used to gratify our own passions. It’s used only to get for ourselves what we want in the way that we think we want it. It becomes an idol because we allow that to get in the way of our relationship with God and with anyone else. Paul talks about greed, evil desires, lust, impurity.

In his book *Wired for Intimacy*, Christian psychologist William M. Struthers lists the following stages of how men get hooked on pornography:

Denial—“Sure,” they may say, “I’ve looked at it in the past, but I don’t anymore.” Most men will confess their struggle with pornography only under the conditions of anonymity and confidentiality.

Minimization—At this stage a man will argue that his pornography use is insignificant and has no real effect on his life. He might say, “Well, I do look at porn, but only occasionally. It’s not like I’m addicted to it or anything.”

Normalization—At the next stage men say, “Everybody does it.” Explaining the use of pornography as a common form of entertainment is referred to as normalization.

Rationalization and Justification—At this stage a man finds logical reasons to argue why porn is okay. You rationalize what you are *going to do* and you justify *what you just did*.

Celebration—Over time and with repeated exposure, many men so completely buy into the deception of pornography that they don’t feel a need to defend their habit. Instead, they even celebrate it. As a result, a man’s conscience is seared and his moral compass becomes seriously compromised.

Paul says, “You used to walk in these ways in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all of these.” In I Corinthians 6 he says, “ Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

My point in mentioning that this morning is simply to emphasize Paul’s phrase, “That is

what some of you **were.**” Paul says, “Your life is now hidden with Christ in God and you have the power through his Holy Spirit to have a life and a character that is changed and different and free of those destructive things like anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language. He also says, “Don’t lie because you’ve taken off your old selves. You are a new person who is being remade into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. What God intended for us at before the fall is being restored because of Jesus Christ. We’re becoming part of something where the only ethnic identity is Christ.

When Christ appears, we will appear with him in glory

Preached at Salem Avenue, January 8, 2012 a.m.