

Colossians 2:20-3:11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Colossians 2.20-3.11 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

In these you too once walked, when you were living in them, but now you must put them all away, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all. In Colossians chapter 2, Paul has been highlighting the futility of turning back to the elementary principles and powers of the old age of the flesh, now that Christ has come, with all the fullness of deity and the substance of what was once foreshadowed.

[1 : 51] Now he drives home the point to the Colossians, underlining the practical import of this reality. Death releases us from the powers and the principles that once governed us in the realm where we formerly lived.

However, even having been freed from these principles and powers, the Colossians were in danger of returning to live in terms of them, as if they were still governed by them. Paul isn't necessarily accusing the Colossians of having done this, but he wants them to be exceedingly alert to the reality of the danger.

The danger is that they will subject themselves to ascetic regulations, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, as if these were what true religion is about. Such regulations were prominent features of the Judaism to which Judaizing missionaries might be tempting the Colossians.

However, all of these regulations are narrowly focused on material objects, and they arise from human traditions. While they may sound wise like a true form of religion, they are really characteristic of a religion of human invention, that imposes harsh treatment upon the body, but is ultimately futile in dealing with the true problem of the flesh and preventing its indulgence.

It doesn't deal with the problem of the heart at the root of the fleshly condition. We should recall Jesus' teaching from Mark chapter 7 verses 18 to 23, with which Paul's teaching clearly has a very great deal in common.

[3 : 12] And he said to them, Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart, but his stomach, and is expelled?

Thus he declared all foods clean. And he said, The form of the most likely Jewish ascetic religion that Paul is challenging in his teaching to the Colossians actually has much in common with pagan religion, with its shared preoccupation with the flesh, yet inability to tackle its underlying heart issue. True and faithful religion has a rather different character to it, and Paul goes on to discuss what this alternative pattern of practice must look like. The truth at the heart of a true pattern of Christian religion is the resurrection of Christ, and our participation in it by the Spirit.

We belong to a different realm of existence, having undergone a translation into a new sphere of transformed life. We must live in terms of the freedom that this affords us.

The new pattern of religion is founded upon the achieved fact of our participation in the resurrection of Christ, not some attempt to achieve resurrection for ourselves. Our death and resurrection is a fact for Christians, a fact that must be the fundamental truth of our existence.

[4 : 46] Our lives are now situated with Christ and God, and the full reality of our lives awaits us in the day of the revelation of Christ. Our current existence must be lived in anticipation of this, a living out of the reality-filled promise of what we will one day be.

Behind all of this is the question of the real me. Who am I really? Paul wants the Colossians, and us, to answer this by pointing to Christ and declaring that our lives are hidden in him. And there is a real hiddenness here. We do not generally appear righteous, whether to ourselves or to others. We are all too aware of our own sinfulness and failings. Yet we have died, and will be raised with Christ.

This is something that's sealed to us in our baptisms. We must live by faith in this promise, constantly declaring to ourselves the deep truth of our existence, against all of the appearances. We must constantly return to God's word about our true existence, and live in terms of it. Our true life is part of the mystery of Christ, a mystery largely hidden from the world, but gloriously revealed to God's people.

[5 : 56] God is like the sculptor standing in front of us as his blocks of marble, declaring that we are glorious images of his Son. To most eyes, of course, we simply look like great blocks of marble, bearing no clearly discernible form.

However, the sculptor's word is an assurance that the reality of our existence is not defined by what we currently appear to be, but by what we are being fashioned into. Paul wants us to think of ourselves in this way.

We are not primarily the unhewn block, but that glorious image waiting to be revealed by the work of the master sculptor upon us. Thinking of ourselves in such a manner, we will identify and act very differently.

We will see a great deal in ourselves that doesn't belong to what we are to become. Rather, it is destined to become chippings and rubble, those parts that are to be removed from the marble block, to release the glorious sculpture now trapped by them within it.

We may define ourselves, by certain of our sins, obstinately resistant to the chisel of the sculptor that would seek to strip us of them. These things, however, are earthly. They are marked out for divine wrath.

[7 : 04] No matter how attached we may currently be to these things, they imprison us. And if we will not be freed from them, they mark us out for destruction too. Paul especially foregrounds sexual immorality and the sinful desires, passions and lusts that underlie it.

Such sexual sins and lusts are often particularly emphasised by Paul, perhaps because they most readily become defining of people's existence and identity. Behind all such sins, however, lurks covetousness, the greed that so commonly drives us, and behind that, the monster of idolatry itself, by which we devote our lives to the service of something other than the true God, and fashion false masters in our own perverted image.

Our lives were once defined by such sins and practices. Indeed, these were the air we breathed, the water we swam in, and the realm we inhabited. They were our manner of life, the things that we set our minds upon, our preoccupation, and our governing concerns.

However, now we must shed them all like an old skin. If Paul's list of vices in verse 5 foregrounded sexual sins, in verse 8, he foregrounds sins of the mouth, which are often so prominently condemned in the scripture.

Again, we should recall our Lord's teaching concerning true impurity in Matthew chapter 15 verses 17 to 18. Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled, but what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person?

[8 : 36] Christians must trace the problem back to the root, through the mouth and down into the heart. As N.T. Wright observes, the old form of religion went after symptoms, but the new form goes for the root.

The new humanity in Christ that Paul is speaking about is not an individualistic reality. It's a new body of people, who are renewed, not merely as detached persons, but in a restored and transformed society.

The old self of the flesh is the old forms of society that we were once embedded in. Forms of society governed by vicious speech, by lies, and by the biting and devouring of each other that is characteristic of speech in such society in the flesh.

We have left behind these old solidarities, again something symbolically manifest in our baptisms.

The new humanity into which we are placed is being renovated and renewed in the image of its creator, made into what God always intended for humanity to be.

In the body of Christ, humanity is rising to its true and proper stature, no longer stunted and distorted by sin. We are being renewed into knowledge, brought to a true recognition of our creator, of what we are as his images, and of what everything else is in the light of his being, truth, and glory.

[9 : 54] In this new humanity, the differences, oppositions, and antagonisms and tensions that characterize life in the flesh, the differences between the various families and social classes of humanity, are abolished, as all divisions are traversed by the unifying spirit of Christ that fills all, placing every human being, whatever their fleshly identity or background, upon the same firm footing of the broad sunlit uplands of God's glorious grace.

A question to consider. Here, as in related passages such as Ephesians chapter 4, Paul gives a special attention to the importance of a renewed way of speaking.

What are some of the ways in which Christians should and can stand out from others by their manner of speaking and their forms of conversation as a society? What are some specific ways that we can put off the old self and put on the new self in this regard, in the situations within which we find ourselves?