

Sermon 1815

Colossians 3.1-11

July 31, 2022

My kids like to hike. The mountains around Tucson are wonderful. While not as rugged, the Coastal Range is pretty amazing, too. A hike is usually one of the days on the agenda. Unfortunately for me, hiking is not what it used to be and they haven't caught on yet. It is a slog, a grind, a constant watching where I put my feet, leaning forward hoping that gravity will impel me upwards if I just keep my legs going. I miss the scenery. I can only appreciate the view when I reach the top and have a chance to catch my breath. Yes, the altitude at times is challenging, but it's mostly because I have been complaining all the way up. In matters of life and death, I don't believe in suffering in silence.

Is your life turning into something resembling my hikes? Are you missing the scenery? At the end of each day's leg on the journey, do you ask yourself, "Is this all there is?" The Apostle Paul has words for us in today's text.

Look Up!

1. Our life is with Christ in heaven (1-4)
2. Kill the complaining (5-9).
3. See what we already are (10-11).

Anytime a group of people are facing a problem, there are two ways to go about it. The world always picks the legalistic way. Praise people so they do what you want. Threaten them to toe the line. Offer incentives to appeal to their greed. Flatter them and compare them to others to appeal to their pride. Shame them. Scare them. All these things are simply different aspects of the same thing, legalism. An external force is applied to make someone act.

Over all the years I have been here, I hope you realize there is a second way. It is called Gospel motivation. Look at what God has done for us. Consider Christ's great love for you. Is this because I am wishy-washy and don't have the guts to stare you down? Or is that what the Bible tells us to do? Well, what motivation does Paul give to the Colossians?

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (1-4)."

"You have been raised with Christ." "You died." "Christ is your life." "You also will appear with him in glory." I wish Paul would have kept going. I like what he's saying. It makes me want to look up! Great things are coming our way. That's because it is Gospel. When he mentions being raised, we think of Jesus being raised from the dead on Easter Sunday. And that's why he also says we died. When Jesus hung on the cross, it's as though our sinful human nature was also put to death. We

were freed from sin and death. We have a new life to live, a Christian life. We are not criminals on the run from the law. We are children of God and love him. And even though it does not look like that now, the day is quickly coming, the Last Day, when Jesus will return and we will be transformed and reflect his heavenly glory. Quite simply, we will shine like the stars in the sky and have a joyful forever with Jesus in heaven. So look up! That's where our real life is!

That's the motivation. That's Gospel motivation. That's why we do the things we do and live the life we live. But I have glossed over something. I shouldn't have. Our life is now hidden with Christ. What does Paul mean? On the surface, you and I look like everybody else. We suffer the same diseases, we endure the same calamities. Wildfires don't distinguish between the homes of believer or unbeliever. And while some scientific studies indicate the Christian lifestyle may lead to longer life expectancies, the studies are pretty nuanced. More people are going to the gym and nutritionists than they are to church in order to cheat death. But the goal of our life, the finish line, that's what is hidden in Christ. We are headed for heaven. By faith we are on a different trajectory than this world. Faith is invisible. Only God knows who his believers are. He is the one who created that faith in our hearts. And that hope of heaven, well, what is hope? Hope, like faith, is being certain of what we do not yet have, being sure of what we do not yet see. They say bees can see in the ultraviolet spectrum. A yellow flower appears to be white and blue, violet and crimson to them. It just looks all yellow to us. They see something beyond our abilities and haul in the nectar. We see things unbelievers have no idea exist. In that way, our life is hidden with Christ. Since he is in heaven, look up!

Look up! Kill the complaining. Believe me, I let my kids know it when the "easy" hike they promised me, with but a 400 foot elevation, turns into multiple hills and valleys. I'm going to die. Is there time to change my will? Is this trail right by the side of the cliff safe? How long will it take for the Medivac helicopter to get me? OK, I exaggerate, but not much. I make it unpleasant for everyone.

Since our life is hidden with Christ in heaven, look up and kill the complaining. Make our lives easier and the lives of those around us more bearable.

"Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices (5-9)."

Once again we are confronted with a list of the deeds of the sinful human nature. The only thing we can do is put them to death. Kill them. No mercy. Put them to death. There is nothing constructive any of them can do for us. Yet isn't it amazing

that Paul is talking to us Christians about this danger? Just because we believe in Jesus, that doesn't mean the sinful human nature has fallen away from us. We will carry that rot all the way to the grave. That's one reason we will always need the forgiveness Jesus gives us. Deep down there is something inside us that leads us to irrational, destructive deeds and thoughts and words. The sinful human nature will always do this, will always fight against the Holy Spirit. Most of these vices, unfortunately, need no explanation. We have felt them all too often. They flood the news, whether we get it through the TV, newspaper or internet.

But one of these deeds of the sinful nature may leave us scratching our head—greed. Paul equates it with idolatry. Martin Luther once said what you put first in your life, that is your God. So what you cannot live without, that is your God. Those who are greedy have put money first in their lives. Therefore money has become their God. Just look at today's Gospel, the parable of the Rich Fool. The man thought he had it made for many years. He trusted his riches. Money was his God. But money could not save him. His riches could not cheat death. God demanded his life that very night. Be rich towards God, Jesus stresses. Don't be greedy, Paul seconds.

Of late I have tried to turn the complaining way down. It has helped. The hikes are just as strenuous (for me, anyway). But everyone else has a much better time and I have more wind. I can hear the birds since I am not always complaining.

Look up! See what we already are.

One of the complaints unbelievers always have about Christianity is that it focuses attention on a heaven that is so far away you don't enjoy the moment. Always looking off to the future, you waste the present. I think that's what Mao Tse Tung meant when he said religion was the "opiate of the masses." And remember how the opium trade almost ruined China in the early 20th century. That attitude is short-sighted. Christianity allows us to look up and enjoy the scenery right now. Look at what we already are.

"You have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all (10-11)."

Humanity seeks unity. Think what we can do if we come together! The sinful human nature takes that as an invitation to unite in purpose against God's will. Think of the Tower of Babel. God wanted mankind to spread out over the entire earth. They wanted to stay together. Think of Pilate and King Herod becoming friends over their mistreatment of Jesus. The European Union is not the final protector of European prosperity. NATO may not be able to deter Russian aggression. Even if there were a New World Order it would hardly be orderly, except in its attacks on the God of the Bible.

But what if that unity were centered on God's will and what he has done for us? Such a unity exists. It is called the one, holy, Christian Church. You and I are a part of it. Our earthly differences don't matter in this Christian Church. Greek or Jew, those who knew the Bible backwards and forwards and those who never even owned a Bible, could become Christians. So poor that you don't even own yourself or a free man, your own person, both could be brothers and sisters in the faith. Civilized and absolute barbarians who thought a pool of water was only for watering their horses, come right on in. Christ died for you. The Holy Spirit works powerfully in you.

Such a unity exists. No matter what the outward differences, there is an inner unity. The Holy Spirit has put on each member of this holy, Christian Church the new self. Just as we are to die to the sinful human nature with its evil deeds and desires, we are to put on the new self, to continue feeding and nourishing it.

Paul calls this new self the image of its Creator. Let's go back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God. An image is a reflection. It shows you something about yourself. A mirror reflects back what you look like on the outside. Since God is spirit, the mirror reflects nothing back. But Adam and Eve, having the image of God, reflected back to him something about himself, his holiness, his righteousness, his moral perfection. They were holy and sinless and saw things exactly the way God saw things. Their unity with God showed itself in their unity with one another.

That image of God is renewed in believers. We have the knowledge of God. By that we mean we know who God is, we agree with his good and gracious will. We want to live according to it. See what we already are, a holy nation walking together under God's guidance, fighting the good fight against sin and every evil knowing that our God will give us the victory. That gives us the stamina to soldier on, to work till the day is done.

And it does something else. It builds confidence that our Savior is not leading us over a cliff. He is not driving us to our death. He has it all planned out so we can pull up once in a while and enjoy the view.

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This is our world. This is our mountain. This is the day the Lord has made for us. Yes, we do have to sweat the details sometimes. Yes, when the footing on that mountain trail is particularly unsteady, we must watch where we are stepping. But the whole trail isn't like that. Every day isn't like that. Look up! This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.