

The Nature of God's Love

by Rev. John C. Cheek



Prayer

Loving God, help us to understand
the precious relationship we have with Christ
and, more and more, help us to become
a reflection of Christ to all those we meet.
Amen.

Scripture: Colossians 3:1-11 (NIV)

Living as Those Made Alive in Christ

¹ 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. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

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. ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. 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. ¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

Introduction

This is Paul's letter to the church which was in Colossae, located in modern-day southwestern Turkey.

- Colossae had been an important city, but, by the time of Paul's letter, it was being replaced in importance by Laodicea.
- This church had not been planted by Paul, but rather by Epaphrus.
- The church was almost exclusively made up of Gentile Christians.
- Some commentators believe that there was a particular, unhealthy teaching that was taking root in the church at Colossae, and that this letter is a corrective from Paul.

In the preceding section of the letter, Paul reminds the Christians at Colossae that —

- They must not be taken captive by philosophies and false deceit. This is the basis for the belief that there was a false teaching impacting the church.
- They have died with Christ, dying to the old way of being.
- They have been raised with Christ in his resurrection.



SERMON – The Nature of God’s Love

- A. (v. 1–4) Since, then, you have been raised with Christ,
1. (v. 1b) Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.
 2. (v. 2) Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. *[The things which distance us from God.]*
 3. (v. 3) For you died *[with Christ in the crucifixion]*, and your life *[a new life]* is now hidden with Christ in God. *[The idea of a life hidden with Christ means that the life is safe in God’s care.]*
 4. (v. 4) When Christ, who is your life, appears *[this refers to Jesus’ glorious future return to this world]*, then you will also appear with him in glory.
- B. (v. 5–11) Put to death, therefore *[They are to be put to death because Christians have already died to them. For the most part, this list deals with things we do with our bodies, making idols out of the things we desire to have and to do.]*,
1. whatever belongs to your earthly nature:
 - a. (v. 5b) Sexual immorality,
 - b. (v. 5c) Impurity,
 - c. (v. 5d) Lust,
 - d. (v. 5e) Evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.
 2. (v. 6) Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. *[Even when we focus, as I tend to, on God’s loving nature, we must not lose sight of God’s purity.]*
 3. (v. 7 & 8) You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived *[before being transformed by the love of Jesus]*. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these *[this list is more related to conditions of the heart.]*:
 - a. (v. 8b) Anger,
 - b. (v. 8c) Rage,
 - c. (v. 8d) Slander,
 - d. (v. 8e) Filthy language from your lips.
 4. (v. 9 & 10) Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices *[the language here refers to the way we take off clothes, except the idea is that these old clothes are so bad that we throw them away.]* and have put on the new self,

which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. *[We experience an on-going process of transformation, being made more and more to reflect the image of our God.]*

5. (v. 11) Here there is no
 - a. (v. 11b) Gentile or Jew, *[This was the most basic division of people in the context of the time.]*
 - b. (v. 11c) Circumcised or uncircumcised,
 - c. (v. 11d) Barbarian, *[For Greeks, this was the description of all non-Greeks.]*
 - d. (v. 11e) Scythian, *[This was regarded as the lowest of the low.]*
 - e. (v. 11f) Slave or free,
 - f. (v. 11g) But Christ is all, and is in all.

What can we take away from this passage this morning?

The first thing I want to point out is so beautiful and glorious that we could talk about it all day if we wanted to. That is, we, you and I are made new in Jesus. Think about that. Whoever we are, whoever we've been, whatever we look back at and cringe, Jesus, in his love and his sacrifice, has made us new! That could be enough, but there's more!

In our new being, we are freed from bondage. That doesn't mean that we don't struggle with temptation, but it does mean that we can follow Jesus, making better decisions and learning from the bad ones. We are on a trajectory that leads us to the promise of peace and glory.

My friend Chris Staring is a wise and kind man. He and I were talking about sin and the church one time, and he made this observation. He said that for Christians, we tend to think that the worst possible sins are those we don't struggle with ourselves. It rings true, doesn't it? We look at a list like the ones in this passage, and we're tempted to say to ourselves, "Oh, yeah. I know the people who commit those sins. Yeah, they're quite a mess. They sure need to be delivered from those sins, but...." Does that sound familiar? And, as we're thinking that, don't we want to avoid looking in a mirror, because we're not sure we'll like what we see? Wouldn't it be good to be set free from that as well?

In this freedom from bondage, we are free to focus our attention and our energy on the things of God, what Paul calls "the things above." We don't have to be stuck in our grievances, in our hurts, in our resentments. Does that sound like a relief to you? Are you tired of carrying these resentments around with you, even if you do take them out from time to time and polish them up and remember how hurt you were and how unfairly you were treated? Wouldn't it be a relief to lay those things down? You have been set free, in Jesus' love for you to do just that. We can focus on God's love, God's compassion, the exquisite beauty of God's creation, and on the

incredible fact that God has chosen to abide within us. Aren't those things worthy of focusing on?

And you knew this was coming at some point in this sermon, and here it is:

Because of God's extravagant love for you, you are set free to love others. You're set free to love the ones who have been kind to you, and you're even set free to love the ones who have hurt you. You don't have to put yourself back in a position where they can hurt you again, but you can put down the hatred, the anger, whatever it is that weighs you down. You don't have to see the world in terms of good guys and bad guys, white hats and black hats, us and them. In Jesus the Christ, you are set free to look at them, the others, the outsiders, and know within your heart that they are created in the image of God.

My friends, isn't this the kind of rest that we crave? Isn't this the kind of rest that we hunger for? Sisters and brothers, this is your rest. This is your time. So, here's what I'm asking you to do, on this last Sunday of serving you. Slow down and realize the nature of God's love for you. Slow down and realize that you have been set free from your bondage to your old self. Slow down and realize what a beautiful creation you are in Jesus. Slow down, and be still, and note that God is God. Do you want that? Are you hungering for that? Are you thirsting for that? Are you ready? May it be so.

Amen

Map source: Halley's Bible Handbook, 25th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 853.

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