

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT WHEN WE FOLLOW CHRIST? Colossians 3:1-17 – February 28, 2010

Do you ever get one of those offers which promises a free weekend at their resort and, in return, all you have to do is sit through a presentation? The offer seems great. The weekend at the resort is tempting, but you wonder what will happen in the sale's presentation? What kind of barrage will I have to endure while I'm away in my weekend? So, though the weekend away is appealing, not knowing what to expect in the sale's pitch keeps you from accepting the offer. In the same way, a relationship with Christ makes promises of life change and fullness of life. Those promises may be well and good, but what can we expect from Christ in the midst of a relationship with Him? Can we expect Him to make us poor to serve His purposes? Maybe, but not necessarily. Can we expect Him to call us to be single all our lives to serve Him? Maybe, but probably not. Can we expect Him to give us a life of favor and blessing in which everything goes our way? We'll experience His favor, but not everything will go our way. The last question I asked before receiving Christ was, "Ron, if God calls me to be a missionary in Africa, it is okay isn't it?" Maybe you can relate, but the fear of not knowing what to expect holds us back from following Christ whole-heartedly. Therefore, that fear also can keep us from experiencing all God has for us. So it is worth our time to consider the question "What can we expect when we follow Christ?" When we find the answer to this question, I think we'll be able to lay our fears aside. If you have a Bible, please open it to Colossians 3:1-17. We'll look at these verses and consider the question, "What can we expect when we follow Christ?"

Our passage opens with Paul telling his readers where to set their affections and desires. Let's read verses 1-2:

¹Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.

Verse 1 begins with statement of reality in a Christian's life. In following Christ, we have been raised up with Him. This is a partial restatement of what Paul taught in chapter 2. When we put our faith in Christ, we identify with Him in His death on the cross. What dies? Our sin nature dies. The nature that demands that we live for our self is put to death, in the sense that it loses its power over us. We no longer have to submit to the desires of our self-centered living. And when we put our faith in Christ we identify with Him in His resurrection. What is brought back to life? Our heart or capacity to live under God's direction. Our inner being is renewed or born again when we put our faith in Christ. Since we have a new nature, Paul tells us to set our desires, longings and passions on the things above. And just so we don't get confused about things above, Paul gives us specifics on where to direct our affections: Where Christ is seated. This means we value Christ above all. And as we value Christ more, we value the things of this world less. This means that, before, we might have cheated to get ahead financially. We now say "no" to the extra money because we value Christ and His approval more than the extra money. Or, this might mean, that before we might have cut someone down to elevate ourselves among others. Now we refrain from the put down because we value Christ more than our elevated status. What can we expect when we follow Christ? We can expect Christ to change our focus and values.

Before our first child was born, I was fanatical about the University of Michigan's football team. I subscribed to a magazine. One month I spent \$100 calling 900 numbers following their recruiting. While we were in Latin America I racked up huge internet charges following the team. But once our son was born those expenses went away. He captured my heart. All of a sudden Michigan football wasn't worth the money. I had someone else more valuable. So it is with Christ, when He comes into our lives, other things lose their value. Paul directs us to keep setting our desires on the things of Christ. Yet, we live in a culture that markets the world to make it look more appealing. God gives us His Spirit to empower us to live out the value of Christ. Ask the Spirit to enable you to set your mind on the things above. In verse 3, Paul lets us know our Christ-centered life may not be obvious to everyone:

³For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Our life is hidden with Christ. Occasionally, we read about a person who passes away and only after his death do neighbors find out the man was wealthy. This person dressed and lived modestly. His wealth was hidden. In the same way, our life is hidden with Christ. Though our life with Christ may be hidden, verse 4 tells us that it will be made manifest when Christ returns:

⁴When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

Christ's glory, His greatness will be on full display when He returns. Right now, many in our world ignore and are unaware of Christ's greatness. But someday, all will see Christ's glory. And when Christ's greatness is revealed our life in Christ will also be revealed.

But the changes Christ brings to our lives are not just theoretical, they are practical. Look at verses 5-7:

⁵Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. ⁶For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, ⁷and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them.

Verse 5 starts with the word therefore. This means in light of our heavenly mindset, in light of our valuing Christ above all, we must get rid of behavior that doesn't reflect this mindset. Paul uses 3 terms to tell us to get rid of sexual sin, both actions and thoughts. Our world is consumed with sex. From God's point of view, what is the root issue with sexual sin? We think fulfillment is found in sexual experience. We're consumed with sex because we think that experience is more fulfilling than God, who created sex. And we are so consumed with sex, that we break promises and destroy lives just to get a few minutes of gratification. Paul then tells us to put evil desires to death. Evil desires mean any tendency toward living for self. Before coming to Christ, we were our own god. In Christ, we are someone greater than us, more worthy of our loyalty – God and His purposes. This is a radical separation from our culture that tells us to watch out for ourselves. Finally, Paul tells us to put greed to death. Greed is an inappropriate

desire for more. The greedy person believes everything exists for his purposes. Paul identifies the root issue of greed – idolatry. That car, that money, that vacation spot has become the object of our desire. We must have it for ourselves. So we obsess over it and it controls us. Sexual sins, evil desires and greed are not consistent with a person whose inner nature has been changed by God. So verse 6 tells us God will judge such a lifestyle. And in verse 7, Paul reminds his readers that this is how they lived before they came to Christ. But now that they have a heavenly mindset, Paul expects them to value Christ more than these earthly experiences and things.

What if, like me, you follow Christ but still battle with the earthly desires Paul outlines in verse 5? We need to realize our change of values is a process. As I find myself consumed with earthly desires, my plea is “Christ, change my value system. Grow in my life, so I don’t value these things anymore. Jesus, replace all these other desires and be my one true desire.” In verse 8-9, Paul turns to our relationships with others. Nothing reveals wrong values like relationships:

⁸But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another.

Where do we usually vent our wrath? Where do we turn malicious, subtly hurting another? Where do we talk someone down? Where do we mislead and misrepresent the truth? All these things happen in relationship, with people. Why do we get mad at people? They don’t do what we want. Why do we chip away at another’s reputation with our actions or words? We’re jealous. They have position or popularity that we desire. Why do we lie? We want to mislead people so they will think better of us or they will do something for us. All of these actions have their root in setting our desires and affections in the world. If our desires and affections are ultimately with Christ, we can be disappointed with people without exploding at them. We don’t have to slander people because our worth isn’t in the position or popularity they have. And we don’t have to lie to people because their approval doesn’t ultimately define us.

Reading the list of mandates given in verse 5 and verse 8 can lead us to impose self-discipline. Reading those lists can make us set up a bunch of rules and then find accountability partners to help us enforce our rules. If our response to the mandates of verses 5 and 8 is self-discipline, rules and accountability, we will fail to keep the mandates. Verses 5 and 8 are given to make us desperate for the renewal of our inner person, a renewal that only God can bring. Look at verses 9-11:

“since you laid aside the old self with its *evil* practices, ¹⁰and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him—¹¹a renewal in which there is no *distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.*

The end of verse 9 and the beginning of verse 10 tell us to put off the old self and put on the new self. Strip off your old rags and put on your new suit!! How does that change happen? Verse 10 teaches that as we understand Christ, we know our nature needs to change. The renewal of our nature is God’s gift to us through Christ. We don’t work for it, we don’t make it happen. Verse

10 tells us that our new self is being renewed. Therefore our renewal is an ongoing process. That's why we must stay connected to Christ on a moment by moment basis. He is constantly at work renewing our nature. Verse 11 tells us that God's renewal erases sinful human distinctions based on religion or culture or status. We are the renewed of God, nothing else matters. Right before the start of my freshman year in college, I went to a voluntary introduction to Texas A&M lore called Fish Camp. As we were heading out to our destination, our camp counselors had the freshmen introduce themselves. Most students gave their name and major and then shouted out their high school with pride. By the end of our 3 days, nobody was identifying themselves by their high schools. That distinction didn't matter. We were Aggies. In the same way, Paul's point is that you are the renewed of God. Nothing else matters. Put those distinctions that divide you away.

In verses 12-14, Paul picks up on our unity in Christ. He gives us a list of what to put on. Look at verses 12-14:

¹²So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; ¹³bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. ¹⁴Beyond all these things *put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

In light of our new identity in Christ and in light of the fact that we are chosen, set apart and loved by God, we need to live a certain way. You'll notice the 5 characteristics Paul mentions are lived out in relationship. Compassion is feeling what another person feels. Kindness is sensitivity to the needs of others. Humility checks our need for recognition, so we can make others important. Gentleness makes allowance for others. And patience means we refrain from reprisal or revenge for others. Why would we do this? We are beloved of the Lord. He has exhibited all these characteristics toward us and empowers us to do the same toward others. In verse 13 Paul tells us to bear with one another and forgive one another. Again Christ is our model and source of strength in forgiveness. Finally in verse 14, he tell us to put on love, which is the supreme virtue and binds us together.

In verses 15-17, Paul gives some final instructions:

¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of [†]Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

In verse 15, we see Paul's ongoing concern for unity, when he tells us to let the peace of Christ dwell in our heart. And then in verse 16, he instructs us to let the word of Christ richly dwell in us. The peace of Christ rules where the word of Christ dwells. The word of Christ refers to the message of Christ, to authentic teaching about Him. We are to teach and challenge one another

with Christ's message using psalms and hymns and songs. And our life is to be characterized by gratitude toward God.

We started by asking the question, "What can we expect when we follow Christ?" In verses 1-4, we saw that we can expect Christ to change our focus and values. But as we have seen in verses 5-17 those changes in values will lead to a change in behavior. We'll leave some practices behind and we'll adopt some new practices, all so we can represent Christ to our world. What can we expect when we follow Christ? We can expect Christ to change our values and our behavior. We can expect Christ to change our values and our behavior. The emphasis is not on us following a list of rules. The emphasis is on us submitting to Christ, so He can renew our nature to live for Him instead for ourselves and this world.

Ted de Haas shared this example. *Clean House* is the name for a new show on the Style Channel where experts in cleaning, organizing, remodeling, and painting sweep into a cluttered home with the purpose of leaving it more comfortable, attractive, and livable. The experts face the challenges of clothes strewn across the floor, bulging cabinets, closets filled from top to bottom, filled counter tops, and overflowing kitchens, bedrooms, bathrooms, and living rooms—not a clean room in the house! The experts' first step is to take an inventory of all the "stuff." Then, decisions are made about what to sell at a yard sale and what to keep. The home's inhabitants hesitate and hold on to favorite clothes from years gone by, childhood keepsakes, space-taking trivia, but then they yield. The sale is held, and money comes in to help with the makeover. Then the family leaves, and the work begins. Rooms are cleaned out, redone for more efficiency and attractiveness, and repainted. Curtains are hung, cabinets set in, and walls decorated. A transformation takes place, and when the family returns, what a difference it makes! Any nervous anticipation quickly gives way to excitement and laughter when the family sees what's taken place. "Thank you, thank you," the family says often amid smiles and tears. This is a picture of what Christ does in our life when we yield to Him. He cleans out our heart so that we can live the life He designed us to live. The thought of Him changing us makes us nervous, but when we see the results our tears are turned to smiles. What can we expect when we follow Christ? We can expect Christ to change our focus, values and behavior. We can expect Christ to change our focus, values and behavior.