

New clothes for new people

A study of Colossians 3

By Mike Morrison

Paul has explained that we were buried with Christ and raised to new life in him (Col. 2:12). We are new creations, new people, and our identity is now in Christ. In chapter 3, Paul draws some conclusions about the kind of behavior that should characterize our new identity.

Throughout Colossians, Paul stresses that Christ has done everything that is needed for our salvation. But this does not mean that we sit back and do nothing—Paul gives instructions for how we should respond to what Christ has done.

A life hidden with Christ

Paul begins with general principles: **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** (Col. 3:1-2). Earlier, Paul had drawn conclusions from the fact that we died with Christ (2:20). Here, he draws conclusions from the fact that we have a new life with him.



“God is re-creating us, but he does not force this change on us—he tells us to do it: to clothe ourselves in something new.”

Since we are united with Christ, and Christ is with God, that is where we should set our affections. That is what we should desire, and that is what we should think about. This does not mean that we ignore earthly things (Paul has much to say about how we live in this world), but that we bring heavenly qualities to our earthly lives. Paul is moving from a rebuttal of the false teachings, and moving toward a positive statement of how faith works in our lives.

Don't worry about what you used to be. **For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God** (3:3). The old “you” is gone, killed with Christ on the cross and buried with him. Our new identity is in Christ, in God. Although it may not look like it, our real self is to be found with him.

Christ has brought us into the heavenly places (Eph. 1:20), and that should transform the way we think—including the way we think about ourselves. Our new life is to be patterned on the reality that

Christ has brought us into the divine life, into the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We belong to God, and we should think and act like it.

Our true identity is hidden. “By no means everything about Christian living is apparent, not only to outsiders, for whom much of it appears foolish, but also to Christians themselves, for whom there remains mystery and much questioning until the final revelation.... Its hiddenness necessitates that Christians live by faith and not by sight and, therefore, without all the answers to the meaning of many events in their lives” (A. T. Lincoln, *New Interpreter's Bible* IX, 641).

However, it will be evident to everyone in the future: **When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory** (3:4). Yes, we will be with him in glory in the future—but even now, Christ is our life. We should live in a way that is appropriate for those who live and move and have their being in him.

Out with the old

Paul tells us how to respond to the fact that Christ defines our new life: **Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry** (3:5). We are to eliminate five vices—not just desires for illicit sex, but also for desiring too much stuff.

In chapter 2, Paul criticized the people who said, “Don't do this, don't do that.” But here in chapter 3, Paul has also given a list of things to avoid. There is an important difference. The false philosophy was restricting *things*; Paul is telling us to avoid actions that hurt other people—actions that weaken a sense of community among the people of God.

Because of these, the wrath of God is coming (3:6). God does not like it when some of his children hurt the other children, and punishment is appropriate. But there is no condemnation, and no punishment, for those who died with Christ and now live in him (see Rom. 8:1 and 1 Cor. 6:9-11).

Our old life included wrong actions and desires: **You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once**



worthy of the Lord” (1:10).

We are to be like Christ, and we should treat others the way he has treated us: **Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you** (3:13).

The chief virtue, the umbrella term that includes all good behavior, is love—which is also the one-word description of God’s nature. **And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity** (3:14).

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members

lived (Col. 3:7). But we should stop living that way. **You must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips** (3:8). As people of Christ, our attitudes and words should conform to a new standard. We should eliminate any habits that hurt other people.

Do not lie to each other. Why? Because **you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator** (3:9-10). We are to change our approach to life because we have a new life.

God is re-creating us, but he does not force this change upon us—he tells us to do it: to put on, or to clothe ourselves, in something new. We are to make choices in the light of who we are. We are to become more and more like Christ is, because that is who we are. “No system of ‘dos and don’ts’ can create the image of God in humans.... The new life of obedience does not depend on [our] own feeble moral resolve but comes from being united with Christ” (David Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, 203, 207).

In with the new

Our identity is not in our ethnic group, our education, or our social status. **Here [in Christ] there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all** (3:11). Christ is the epitome, the standard, the model, of everything that humanity was ever intended to be, and everyone finds their true identity in him. Rich and poor, sophisticated and simple, young and old, we are one in Christ.

How then should we live? **Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience** (4:12). Since God has already chosen us, we should respond with these five virtues. These behaviors cannot make us worthy of salvation, but they are part of “a life

of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful (3:15). It is hard to be angry and thankful at the same time. When we remember that we are a barbarian saved by grace, it is hard to be angry at the Scythian who is also saved by grace.

Paul concludes with more general exhortations: **Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God** (3:16). As we speak to each other and worship together, the message of Christ should dominate our thoughts. He has changed our identity, and that should change everything else.

Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (3:17). All of life, both words and deeds, are done in Christ, because he is our life. Verses 15, 16, and 17 all end on a note of thanks. Praise God for what he has done for us in Christ! •

Questions for discussion

- Does my behavior reflect the fact that my life is hidden in God? (v. 3)
- Would Christianity have a different reputation if churches preached more against greed? (v. 5)
- If God has wrath (v. 6), why should Christians eliminate anger? (v. 8, same Greek word)
- How do social divisions affect Christian unity today? (v. 11)
- What happens if I don’t put on the clothing that Paul describes? (v. 12)
- In my congregation, do we teach and admonish one another? (v. 16)

We do not have space to discuss all of chapter 3, just as we did not for chapters 1 and 2. Our website includes commentary on all the verses in Colossians.