



LIVING THE NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

Colossians 3:5-17 (Becky Douglass)

I recently came across the following quote:

A Christian is ...

- A mind through which Christ thinks
- A heart through which Christ loves
- A voice through which Christ speaks
- A hand through which Christ helps

It sounds pretty good, doesn't it? I'm sure we would all like to be people through whom Christ could operate in this way. What a difference it would make in our family – our church – in our community! But how do we become like this?

This is what Paul has been talking about in the letter to the Colossians. He tells them he is labouring on their behalf because he wants them to become perfect in their relationship with Christ and become like Him in all areas of their lives. He also doesn't want them to get side-tracked by false teaching which promotes ways that have no power to change them and will actually pull them away from Christ.

The story so far ...

Over the past few weeks, we have seen that all of us from Adam and Eve onwards are born into this world with a sinful nature or heart. We are at enmity with God and thoroughly selfish. We want what we want when we want it! Our thought patterns are quickly dominated by this sinful bent and influenced by the world around us. From these thought patterns, we develop sinful habits of life. Paul describes these ways of thinking and living as earthly – in contrast to heavenly thinking which is based on God and his way of seeing things. So, our sinful heart infects our minds with sinful ways of thinking and our natural way of living becomes infected with this sinful thinking. This is the "old self" which Paul talks about in verse 9. This results in sinful actions which are against God and against one another and against the world in which we live. We are completely sold into sin and cannot live any other way.

But, because of his great love for us, God set out to rescue us from sin, renew us within and cleanse us from our sinful behaviour. Paul says that when we turn to God, we are united with Christ in His death and resurrection. *"For you were buried with Christ ... and with Him you were raised to new life ..."* (2:12) Through this union with Christ we have died to our old sinful nature, which led us to commit sinful actions and we have been born again with a new nature, enlivened by the very life of God himself. Last time we looked at Colossians Paul

described the next step in the transformational process when he told them to, “*Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth*”. (3:2) This is a call to change our mindset, our perspective on life. Before, our minds followed the thinking of the world around us and this influenced our lives. We need to realise this and choose to focus instead on God’s perspective and God’s way of thinking about life. This enables us to make godly choices which lead to less sin and more godliness in our lives.

But does this mean that all sinful desires have gone, and we never sin again? Is that your experience? I know it isn’t mine! It is true that I no longer have to sin, and increasingly I am aware of my sinful thinking and emotions and resulting actions, but unfortunately, I do still choose to sin. Why is this?

The change needed

Paul knows that even though we have a new nature, a new heart within us, and even when we seek to have God’s perspective on things, we still have habits and patterns of life that are sinful and lead us to sinful actions. The New Living Translation calls the problem “*the sinful things lurking within us*” (3:5 NLT). Sin is looking for any way it can to hang around in our lives. Because we have been so shaped by the world around us, we often don’t even see the sin that is within us! We think it is just normal living. But God wants to bring every sin in our lives out of the darkness and into the light so that He can free us from its power in our lives.

If you jump down to the end of the first paragraph, you will see the basis for Paul’s discussion here. He says that we are to start acting differently, “*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.*” (3:9,10) The picture Paul uses is of taking off one set of clothes and putting on another set of clothes. Before we turned to Christ, we had an old way of living, and “old self”. Our actions belonged to who we were before. But now we are not that person anymore, we have a “new self” and we have taken off one lifestyle and put on another.

I once heard this idea illustrated with the story of the raising of Lazarus. Jesus stands outside Lazarus’s tomb and calls out, “Lazarus, come out!”. Much to everyone’s surprise, Lazarus immediately comes walking out of the tomb. He is alive! But there is a problem. Even though he is physically alive again, he is struggling to walk and move and even see where he is going. Why? Because he is all wrapped up in the grave cloths. He is alive, but he is still wearing the clothes of his previous dead nature. Jesus has to tell the people there to unbind him and set him free. The grave clothes were very appropriate for his dead nature, but now that he is alive, the grave clothes don’t allow him to live fully in his new state. He needs to take off the grave the clothes and put on the clothes of life.

God has changed us completely on the inside, but we now need to begin the process of putting off the “old self” of our life of sin and putting on the ‘new self” of our life in Christ. In one sense this happened in the past when we first followed Christ, but it is also constantly “*being renewed*”. As Christ reveals more to us about sin in general and our sin in particular, we need to allow Him to change us and cooperate with His work in our lives. As a result, our behaviour begins to change and we are less and less ruled by sin and more and more ruled by God. This is a process of a lifetime. On this earth we will never be completely free of sin, but we can become more and more like Christ. And when we do sin, we know that we can go to God for cleansing and forgiveness – the sin doesn’t hang around!

This is the process that Paul wants us to understand. The change in our lives doesn’t come by restrictive rules and rituals but through the work of God in our lives. Paul say that our new

self “*is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.*” If we jump down to the second last paragraph, this is explained more. It says, “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God*”. (3:16) We come to know God better through His Word and we need to be learning from it all the time. It will give us a different perspective on life and point out the truth. It will help us to “*seek the things above*” and to know how to love others. I say it often, but I don’t care when or what or how much you read, but you need to be spending regular time with the Bible if you want to grow as a Christian. Beyond our personal Bible reading, our Sunday morning services and Grace Groups are an important help with this. Paul says we need teaching and admonishing. We need to be hearing from each other about what we are learning.

And we need to sing! Singing is a powerful way to take the truths of God’s word and plant them in our hearts and minds. Songs bring us comfort and remind us of truth. Songs come to us at odd moments of the day, reminding us of biblical truth. Songs give us a way to express our thankfulness to God – something that Paul mentions several times in these verses. On Sunday mornings, we are quite intentional about the songs we choose. The first two songs are designed to remind us all of some of the general truths of the Gospel – the greatness of God, His salvation, His care for us. The songs on either side of the sermon are usually chosen to re-state things from the readings and the themes of the sermon. Songs are an important way that God speaks to us and we focus on Him. And as we focus on Him, we will become more like Him.

Songs are also a powerful way for us to express our thankfulness to God. When we thank God for all He has done and all He has given to us, we are acknowledging that this life is not all about ourselves. We have been made by God, we have been saved by God, we are loved and cared for by God. We owe all we are and have to God and when we acknowledge this in thanksgiving, we also express our trust in Him for our future. Thankfulness helps us to realign us with God and the truth about our relationship with Him.

The Old vs the New

In light of what we have learned about the change needed, we can now look at Paul’s descriptions of the behaviour of the “old self” and “new self”. Pages have been written about exactly what is covered in Paul’s lists and how they relate to each other. However, I am not going to look at them in detail now. But I would like to point out a basic contrast which can be seen – that of the absence or presence of God’s love and peace as evidence by these two different lifestyles.

At the beginning of our reading, we see two lists of negative behaviours that are really very ugly – sexual sin, greed, anger, slander, dishonesty. These are sins which come directly from our desire to please ourselves with no regard for anyone or anything else. At its root, all of this is idolatry. We are seeking something other than God to satisfy us. As such, it deserves the wrath of God. And when our relationship with God is broken, we have no peace in our hearts and no love for others. We spend our time grasping for more and stirring up turmoil in all around us. We need to realise that this is part of our old self and must be put to death as we cooperate with God’s work in our lives.

What a contrast we see in the second paragraph! Here, God’s love for us overflows in love for others and God’s peace brings peace between people. We see people with God’s eyes. Human distinctions between people are of no importance – whether they involve race or economic status or personal accomplishments. We are all the same in Christ. We will see the implications of this next week as we look at Paul’s comments on how we are to live

together in the home and workplace, but Paul is basically saying here that no one is better than anyone else. It is not that a Gentile becomes a Jew, as if that is somehow better. No, a Gentile stays a Gentile, but that is no longer an important distinction. All God sees is Christ in us. We are all the *“holy people he loves”* and so we learn to love each other, showing *“tender-hearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience”*. (3:12) As we allow Him to fill our hearts with His presence and allow Him to “strip off” those things that remain from our old life, then His love and peace will fill us and overflow to those around us.

The result

Finally, Paul tells us that *“whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus”*. (3:17) This is amazing, because this is about reclaiming the original role of humanity. God made us to be His representatives here on earth – to do His will here and point to Him as in praise and thanksgiving. And the more we become like Him, the more we are able to do this. The Micah 4 passage that we read this morning is a picture, a prophecy, of the future when God’s people will so reflect God himself that all the people of the earth will come to learn more about God. They will be drawn to God because of what they see in his people. And they will be changed. No longer will their lives be characterised by conflict but they will live in God’s peace and they will know God’s love. They will walk in God’s ways because they will see the example of God’s people and they will want what they see.

When I was thinking of being God’s representatives as we are clothed with His love and peace, I was reminded of when I was in Primary School up in Newcastle. Uniform standards were quite a bit stricter then! Those were the days of hats and gloves and blazers – not a track pant in sight! Not only did you have to wear the proper uniform to school – and you could be sent home if you were out of uniform in any way! – but as long as you were in uniform at all, you had to be wearing the complete uniform and it had to be tidy. If a teacher saw you at the shops or walking home and you had taken off your hat or had untucked your shirt or were not wearing regulation shoes or had stuffed your tie in your bag, you could get detention. It was felt that if you were in uniform, you were representing your school and if you didn’t look good, then you were bringing disrepute onto the school. What you were clothed in told others who you were and pointed back to where you belonged.

How are our “clothes” looking? Have we clothed ourselves with God’s love and peace? Do we point people to God and His holiness and love and peace by the way that we act? Are they drawn to him? It is not about the rules and rituals that we keep but about our willingness to allow God to change us to be like Him. It is about the love that we show to each other and to those outside the church, even if they are different to us or we don’t agree with their lifestyle or their ethics. And when we do fail, when we get our “clothes” dirty? We have the wonderful promise that we have God’s forgiveness and cleansing. He can take even our failures and turn them into good.

So – are you wearing the grave clothes of your “old self” or are you learning to put on the life-giving clothes of your “new self”? Which do you want to wear? God wants to work in you to make the changes which need to happen.