

“HOLY AND FAITHFUL”

Living It Out

Colossians 3:1-17

As we've mentioned several times while we've been looking at this little letter, Paul's letters always follow a similar pattern and one of the striking things about them is that, after Paul has set out his stall in terms of his theology, after he has explained what faith in Jesus is all about and has responded to the particular issues that are concerning his readers, he then goes on to explain what it should mean in practice. Being a follower of Jesus is not a matter of thinking and talking, of lectures and discussion groups, of sermons and breakout rooms – it is a matter of attitudes and behaviour, of a distinctive lifestyle.

So here, in writing to these new Christians in Colossae, who have come to faith after hearing Epaphras's preaching, Paul has warned them about the dangers of false teachers and of trying to find God by following strict rules or seeking esoteric knowledge that can be known by only a few. And now he turns to the difference that a commitment to Jesus and his teaching should make in their day to day lives. He can imagine them saying, having heard all he has written about what they believe, “How then shall we live?”

He tells them in the opening sentences of this chapter that they should now be focussing their hearts and minds on “*things above*”. Their experience – hearts – and thinking – minds – should be turned to God's ways, and they need to recognise that Christ is now “*their life*”. You know how people say of someone with a particular passion that it's “*their life*” – “sport is his life”, “music is her life” – it means that it's the main thing, the overriding interest for them. For those who claim to be Christians, then Christ should be the main thing, the passion of their life. Jesus should be at the very heart of all they do – of all we do, as his disciples.

Paul talks about being “*raised with Christ*”, that imagery of both baptism and resurrection, which speaks of being given a new life, a new start. And if that new life with Christ is to be effective, then the old life, the life that was previously governed by our emphasis on self, needs to be “*put to death*” (v5). The word Paul chooses to use there is a very strong one. It doesn't just mean “suppressed” or “dealt with”: it means “exterminated”, “annihilated”. It all has to go, because it's not what God wants, not what he intended for us.

Now this isn't the theological equivalent of rocket science. This is clear and straightforward, something very simple that needs to be put into practice. Paul not setting out some discussion points for the Colossians' housegroups so that they can sit and discuss it all until the cows come home. He is telling them what has to be done if they are truly to respond to God's grace and live as he calls them to. What we believe needs to be demonstrated in the way we live, by our distinctive lifestyle – both individually in our day to day situations where we are called to live and work; and in our collective behaviour as a church, as a group

of Jesus' disciples – in our response to those around us and in our response to each other. What Paul says here is clear as day, really, but he still needs to spell it out. Tom Wright wrote a commentary on this letter back in 1986, long before his *Paul For Everyone* series, and in it he says this: “*By bluntly naming sins which are all too often excused or glossed over with euphemisms, Paul sets a clear standard for the church both ancient and modern.*” Yes, we need to have these things spelled out for us every now and then because it is so easy to find ourselves swept along by what's going on in the culture around us, excusing behaviour that is opposed to God's ways as self-expression, lifestyle choice or some kind of behavioural determinism.

You see that with the first set of sins in v5 - “*sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires*”. In Paul's day, sexual sin was pretty well characteristic of Greco-Roman culture. No-one batted an eyelid at the widespread immorality and infidelity that was endemic in the culture: it was just what you did. The poetry of Juvenal or Martial or Ovid makes that very clear. I'd say that the situation is pretty well the same today. Sex is everywhere, from advertising hoardings to novels for adults and teenagers to television programmes and movies. We let it wash over us and we get to the point where we don't really notice it and we start behaving like it ourselves. It has been said that one of the novel things that Christianity introduced to the life and culture of the Roman Empire was chastity. And even if we manage to keep ourselves clear of the actual practice of sexual immorality and impurity in their increasing and varied expressions, we still need to guard against lust and evil desires, which affect our emotions and imagination – and, don't forget, Jesus pointed out were just as bad in his eyes as doing it.

And to the end of this first little list, Paul adds “*greed, which is idolatry*”. This is really covetousness – it's a Greek word that means “*have more*”. Again, this was a feature of the culture in Paul's day, but, I would suggest, is even more so today. Our whole economy is built on greed and covetousness. Fuelled by advertising – from the images and words which yell at us from every magazine and hoarding and bus to the subliminal infection of our social media platforms, we are told that we need more and more stuff. And if our minds are constantly thinking about how we can get it (mainly, it seems, in order to keep up with everyone else), then God is nudged out and so it does indeed become idolatry, something that takes the place of God for us.

God's going to deal with these things, says Paul – “*the wrath of God is coming*”. God will do something about it all because it spoils his original intention for his world. His world of faithful relationships, his world where everything needed is supplied by him – that world is subverted and distorted by the infidelity of sexual immorality and the idolatry of greed. So he will sort it out. And if you have allowed yourself to become tainted by it and have not sought the help and forgiveness of Jesus, then you will feel the consequences.

But there's more. Paul reels off another list of the things that have no place in the life of the follower of Jesus. Again, we are surrounded on all sides by these things – *“anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language”*. We have become anaesthetised to them because they are everywhere we look. And it's so easy for us to start mimicking that behaviour, almost unthinkingly. It's kind of taken for granted that that's how society works – and we mirror it in our relationships as fellow disciples. As we do with the sin he mentions in v9 – lying. I've just finished reading a little book entitled *The Assault on Truth* about the *“new moral barbarism”* that has been fed by, among others, Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, both serial liars whom we have somehow elected to office. (Johnson was sacked from two jobs for lying before he entered politics properly.) Lying has become endemic in its many and varied forms and we need to steer a very long way clear of it. If we are truly to live as God wants us to, as Jesus has taught us to, then we need to take these things seriously, folks.

Why? Well, that's what God asks of us is, I suppose, the bottom line. But God doesn't ask these things arbitrarily. Paul says that it is part our new life – we have taken off *“the old self”* and we are being renewed, being restored and re-established *“in the image of our Creator”*. God created humanity in his own image – we read that in the very first chapters of *Genesis* – but that image has become tarnished and distorted by the presence of evil in our world and the room we have given it in our own lives. These sins are part of that tarnish and we need to get rid of them so that God's image can shine through. And that's the case whoever we are – as Paul says here: Greek or Jew, slave or free, foreigner (a *“barbarian”* who sounds like he's just saying *“Bar bar bar”* all the time) or uncivilised outsider (the Scythians who lived beyond the bounds of the Empire).

But, if you claim to follow Jesus, if you take his teaching seriously, if you accept his offer of grace and redemption, you are part of God's chosen people and so should live a life that reflects that. As in so many of his other letters, Paul lists some of the characteristics of these chosen people – compassion, kindness, humility (again, a much reviled quality in the Roman world and a sign of weakness – as it's regarded again today), gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness. They should be the qualities we model, and some of them will stick out in stark contrast to the values of the culture around us. And Paul doesn't present this as a list of possible suggestions, some nice things to try if you'd like to have a go. These are commands. These are non-negotiable marks of the disciples of Jesus.

And they are all wrapped up in love – the supreme quality of our Creator, which should be obvious in all those who bear his image. Love one another, as Paul has said again and again: and, as Jesus tells his disciples, love is the ultimate distinctive of his people – *“By this shall everyone know that you are my disciples – if you have love one for another”*. It's a love that is shown in the way we are at peace with each other – wouldn't that be great? – and by the way we worship together and encourage one another, with the

underlying attitude of thankfulness to God for his amazing goodness to us. Paul is describing the ideal Christian community and it is very difficult to live up to that. But it doesn't mean we shouldn't try. If we're serious about living out our faith, then we have no alternative than to follow what Paul writes here.

Paul closes this little section, before he goes on to talk about some specific situations in which our Christian distinctiveness is to be shown, by saying that whatever we do, "*whether in word or deed* [they are both very much needed as part of our witness], *do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus*". Do we ever think of that – that we are acting and speaking in Jesus' name? Wouldn't that have a huge effect on our words and behaviour? F F Bruce puts it like this: "*What is the Christian thing to do here? Can I do this without compromising my Christian confession? Can I do it (that is to say) 'in the name of the Lord Jesus'?*" Or, as Tom Wright suggests, we ask "*Am I representing Jesus?*" Just pausing before you give someone a piece of your mind or allow an unhelpful image to sneak into your imagination or say something that you know isn't really the truth or utter an obscenity or click on the *Order Now* button for something you really do not need – it might remind you that "*you have been raised with Christ ... and your life is now hidden with Christ in God*". God has shown you his amazing grace – be grateful and live as if it makes a difference to you.

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Paul talks about being *"raised with Christ"*, that imagery of both baptism and resurrection, which speaks of being given a new life, a new start. And if that new life with Christ is to be effective, then the old life, the life that was previously governed by our emphasis on self, needs to be *"put to death"* (v5). He is telling them what has to be done if they are truly to respond to God's grace and live as he calls them to. What we believe needs to be demonstrated in the way we live, by our distinctive lifestyle – both individually in our day to day lives where we are called to live and work; and in our collective behaviour as a church, as a group of Jesus' disciples – in our response to those around us and in our response to each other.

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Why should we do this? God doesn't ask these things arbitrarily. Paul says that it is part our new life – we have taken off *"the old self"* and we are being renewed, being restored and re-established *"in the image of our Creator"*. God created humanity in his own image but that image has become tarnished and distorted by the presence of evil in our world and the room we have given it in our own lives. We need to get rid of these sins so that God's image can shine through.

But, if you claim to follow Jesus, if you take his teaching seriously, if you accept his offer of grace and redemption, you are part of God's chosen people and so should live a life that reflects that. As in so many of his other letters, Paul lists some of the characteristics of these chosen people in *vv12, 13*. They should be the qualities we model, and some of them will stick out in stark contrast to the values of the culture around us. They are all wrapped up in love – the supreme quality of our Creator, which should be obvious in all those who bear his image. It's a love that is shown in the way we are at peace with each and by the way we worship together and encourage one another, with the underlying attitude of thankfulness to God for his amazing goodness to us. Paul is describing the ideal Christian community and it is very difficult to live up to that. But it doesn't mean we shouldn't try. If we're serious about living out our faith, then we have no alternative than to follow what Paul writes here.

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For reflection and discussion

- 1) How do you understand being "*raised with Christ*"?
- 2) What are the "*things above*" which Paul mentions twice in the opening verses?
- 3) Why do you think the things Paul says we should "*put to death*" have no place in the Christian's life? How should we respond to their presence in the culture around us?
- 4) Why is it love that "*binds all these qualities together in perfect unity*"? In what ways can we demonstrate that in our life together?
- 5) Does knowing that you are made in the image of God make a difference to the way you see yourself?
- 6) How do you understand doing everything "*in the name of the Lord Jesus*"? What difference do you think it would make if you consciously considered that more often?