

Growing to Maturity:

The Message of Colossians" #10

"Put On Christ"

Col. 3:5-17

--CEFC 9/20/20; 5/4/03

(--cf. 1/4/09)

Topic: Sanctification

Last week we congratulated Stephen and Marace Roberson

on the birth of their baby daughter—

but I didn't mention the baby's name—

and that's because, at the time, the baby didn't have a name.

But she now has a name—it is Eliana Solenne.

As I was thinking of them this week

and the thought came to me:

What if Stephen and Marace were to say,

now that they have brought this baby into the world, they're done.

Not just they are done having babies (I know nothing about that),

but that they are done in that their job as parents is over;

they can now get on with other things in life.

That's the way it is with sharks, by the way.

A baby shark is born, and it is on its own from day one.

But to think that about a human baby is ludicrous, of course,

but it strikes me as the way that some people think of becoming a Christian.

Becoming a Christian is like a new birth--one is born again into the kingdom of God.

And we celebrate that new birth, especially as it is displayed in baptism,

and we will often recall that new birth--

in evangelical circles, people will share their "testimony"

describing the circumstances of that new birth.

And many people act as if that is the end of the story.

They are done,

and they can get on with other things.

Why not? They have been "saved,"

and they can be assured of heaven when they die.

What else matters?

Well, what else matters to Stephen and Marace as they think about little Eliana?

A lot matters!

She has been born into the world,

but she still needs to grow up.

She needs to be nurtured and fed;

She needs to be taught and disciplined,

and she needs to engage her mind and body,

in order to become the mature and responsible adult

that her parents desire her to be.

Well, our Father in heaven has desires for us, too.

By his Spirit he causes us to be born again into his kingdom,

but he's not through with us--not at all!

He wants us to grow up into the mature and responsible adults

he designed us to be--

he desires that we grow up into his image--

which is the image of Christ.

To change the metaphor,
as one preacher¹ put it,
a crippled oil tanker is safe when it is towed to the dock
after floundering at sea.

That tanker may be safe, but it is not yet sound--
the repairs may take a long time.
So the Lord designs to make us both safe and sound.

We are safe when we are saved from the penalty of our sins
and receive the forgiveness that is offered us in the gospel.
But we are not yet sound until God finishes his work of repair and restoration,
overhauling our hearts, our minds, our wills, and our bodies,
which is also a part of his saving work in the gospel.

To use theological language--

When we put our faith in Christ and are born again into the Kingdom of God,
at that point we are experiencing the regeneration of the Holy Spirit.
"Regeneration" is just the Latin term for "re-birth"
(for some reason, theologians like Latin--just get used to it!)
The spiritual dimension of our lives, which was dead because of our sin,
is made alive by the Spirit,
and we are enabled by God's grace to see and embrace the truth of the gospel.

At the same time that we are regenerated,
we are also justified--that is, declared not guilty by God the Judge,

¹ J. C. Ryle??

for Christ's death for our sins takes away the penalty that we deserve.

In a marital union,

the bride and groom come together as one

and they share each other's assets and debts.

And so in our spiritual union with Christ

and in a wonderful arrangement,

Christ as our husband takes our debts,

and we as his bride receive his assets.

As those joined to Christ,

in a gracious exchange, our sin is laid upon Christ on the cross,

and his righteousness is **imputed** to us--

that is, it is credited to our account,

it counts for us before God,

and in this way God maintains his justice when he declares us not guilty.

We are justified, Christ's righteousness is imputed to us,

and we are also **adopted** into God's family and become his beloved children.

That's what it means to become a Christian.

But that is just the beginning--

God desires that we grow up and begin to take on the family likeness.

He wants to make us fit to take up our glorious inheritance

as rulers of his new creation.

So he wants not only to impute Christ's righteousness to us--

but also to impart it to us.

In other words, Christ's righteousness is not just to be credited to our account,

but also to be evident in our lives.

And that process of becoming more like Christ is called sanctification.

A word that simply means sharing the character of God—
becoming for holy as God is holy.

This process of sanctification doesn't earn us a place in heaven;

that comes to us by God's grace alone.

Our sanctification simply makes us fit to live there.

And it fulfills in us what God desires for us--

that we become true reflections of himself in the world,

and so bring him glory.

Paul has said in this letter to the Colossians

that by faith in Christ, which unites with him,

we have now died with him

and we have been raised with him—

we now share something of his new life.

We are new people—men and women, boys and girls, in Christ.

Now, he says, we are to live that way.

We are to become who we are.

We are to become like Christ.

Now, that sounds nice.

Why would anyone object to it?

But we must immediately ask,

Why isn't it happening?

Why don't we see everyone who claims to be a Christian,

who claims to have been born again,
why don't we see more of these people becoming more like Christ?
Why aren't all those spiritual babies growing up as they should?

There is one small problem, you see--

one central barrier to Christian growth and maturity.

When we experience spiritual rebirth, we don't start our lives all over from scratch.

No, the new spiritual life begins to grow within my old body, my old self.

I become a new person,

but my old person is still there--

I mean, I obviously still have the same old body,

with its various defects and deficiencies.

And that's true also of my same old mind and heart.

All my old experiences, my old ways of thinking,

my old fears and anxieties and desires and deceptions

don't immediately disappear.

The new person that I am in Christ has to grow up

in the same space as the old--

and the new has to gradually take over the old.

I liken it to an old computer that has all kinds of old data on it,

which causes it to crash in all sorts of ways.

Any of you have problems with your computer?

I am certainly no expert, and I may be corrected on this by those who are,

but one of the things you need to do from time to time

when your computer is corrupt
is install a new operating system.

You need to give it a whole new set of instructions in how it
is to do all the things it does.

You install this new operating system,
but you do it without erasing all the old stuff--it's still there.

The new system has to sort through all that old stuff
and work out what is useful and what is harmful
and slowly purge the computer of all those bugs and glitches
so that it operates as it was designed to operate.

That's what is happening inside the Christian.

Our new life in Christ is a new operating system,
giving us a new way of approaching life,
but the old data still needs to be transformed.

And we are to be consciously involved in that process.

There is a battle between the old life and the new life within us.

We can describe this process of sanctification as a process of metamorphosis

in which we take off the **old self**, or "old man"

(the Greek word is *anqrwpo*", "man" in the generic sense)—

that is, our old life in Adam;

and we put on the new man, our new life in union with Christ

for he is the very image of God—

that image that reflects back to God something of his glory.

This process doesn't happen automatically.

We've got a hard-wired inclination towards selfish self-centeredness
that has to be re-programmed.

All sorts of experiences in our lives have reinforced certain ways of thinking
about ourselves, and about the world, and about God.

They don't all change in an instant.

We have to work at it, by the Spirit's power.

Sometimes we just want to hold on to some of the old ways,

because we just don't think we can possibly get along without them--

how could I live without getting angry at people

who annoy me or who offend me

or who frustrate my agenda?

How could I have any pleasure in life

if I didn't indulge those lustful passions?

How could I feel good about myself if I didn't cut other people down?

How could I possibly feel secure

if I didn't have just a little more money in the bank than I have now?

We hold on to these ways of thinking

just as a two-year old holds on to his favorite blanket.

We don't want to let go.

Yes, there is a battle within.

And everyone who has tried to deal with a two-year old

knows something of what that battle is like.

But we must be determined to fight that battle--

that battle within ourselves--

and by God's gracious power, we must be determined to win that battle--

for we are born again so that we can grow up
into the new person God calls us to be--
that's what "being saved" is all about.

Now, Paul in our passage this morning lays out something of the battle lines.

He pictures the two ways of living that are set before us.

On the one hand, there is the life of our old self--the old man—life in Adam--
the life that is characteristic of our old earthly nature.

This is what must be put to death--

v. 5--"**Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature:
sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed,**"

This is what distorted humanity looks like.

It sets its disordered desires

on what is unworthy of its worship.

That's why Paul described greed as "idolatry"--it is a false worship.

That description continues in v. 8--

"But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these:

anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips"

In v. 9, he adds lying to the list.

This is a description of what happens when those disordered desires are frustrated--

we get angry, and we lash out at other people--

we hurt them and malign them,

we twist the truth,

and we splatter the mud of filthy words all over them.

"anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips"—

don't you see all this in social media all the time!

It's all evidence of the ugly corruption and depravity

of fallen human hearts.

The word for "slander" here is the same word for "blasphemy,"

for in a sense, slander—unjustly defaming another person,

is a form of blasphemy,

for in defaming a fellow human being

you are defaming the God who created them in his image.

Think about that before you tap that "share" button

and pass along a juicy bit of gossip,

or some unfounded conspiracy theory,

on your social media link.

"sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, . . .

anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips"--

This is an ugly picture—

And it is offensive to God—

v. 6—" **Because of these, the wrath of God is coming,**" Paul says.

The wrath of God is that "necessary reaction of [God's] holiness, justice and goodness

to wickedness, exploitation and evil of every kind."²

The wrath of God is what these things deserve.

That is a picture of what is in the hearts of each one of us--

² So Wright.

it is a description of the “old man”

that lurks within us.

When put our faith in Christ,

and we are born again by the Spirit,

the new man, the new life of Christ,

comes to live right there in the midst of all this ugly stuff.

And we are to make that operating system exchange—

we are to put all these things that belong to that old nature to death,

we are wipe them off the hard drive.

And the best way to do that is by cutting off their line of supply—

what is it that feeds them, and causes them to grow within us?

Surely, it is the old nature, with its self-centered insecurities and fears.

It is our prideful insistence on our own way, our own agenda.

It is our desire to lift ourselves up by cutting other people down.

It is our independent, self-sufficient desire

to find our satisfaction, our security, and our significance

in the various ways the world sets before us

apart from God.

“sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, . . .

anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips”--

these are the ugly weeds of our lives

that can only be dealt with by attacking their roots.

And that’s where Paul goes in v. 12.

Look at the contrast in Paul's description of the life of the new self--the new man--

v.12--it is a life of "compassion, kindness, humility,
a life of "gentleness and patience"
it is a life in which, instead of lashing out at other people,
we **bear with** them,
and we **forgive** whatever grievance we may have against someone.

It is a life in which, over all these virtues, we put on **love**,
which binds them all together in perfect unity.

This a picture of the beauty of Christ-likeness.

Just try to picture in your mind
what a person who displayed these qualities would look like.

Which of these two ways of life do you want for yourself?

Which of these would you want for your marriage and for your family?

Which of these would you want for this church?

Which is it?

Would you rather have

"sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed,

anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips"

or would you rather have **"compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience"**

characterized by grace and forgiveness,

all held together with love.

It's like offering you a choice between a bowl of chocolate ice cream

and a bowl of mud!

"compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience"

characterized by grace and forgiveness,
all held together with love.

I'm sure you want this from the people around you--

O, if only my husband or my wife or my kids or my boss was like that!!

If only those left-wing progressives

or those right-wing conservatives on Facebook would be like this—

Wouldn't the world be a better place?

But don't you really want it for yourself, too?

This, Paul says, is a vision of what **can be**--

this is the beauty of Christ-likeness

which is what God wants for each one of his children.

This is what can be true of each one of us.

And I would say that as a church this is a way of life that ***must*** be true of us--

if we are to be a light to the world.

If we are going to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God,

who came to redeem a people for himself,

reconciling us to God and to one another,

and who died on the cross and rose again

to give us forgiveness and new life,

why should the world believe us if our lives haven't been changed by that message?

If the gospel has no power to bring some beauty to our lives

why should anyone care about what we say?

I think of a lawyer telling the court the case he intends to demonstrate--

that the new life of the Spirit of God has come into the world
through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And then that lawyer calls professing Christians to the witness stand
to testify about their lives

which contradicts every point he had hoped to prove.

What hope is there of convincing a skeptical world of the truth of the gospel
if our lives are no different from those around us?

The way we relate on social media is no different,
the way we spend our money is no different,
the way we think about politics is no different?

Why should anyone take our proclamation of the gospel seriously
if our lives are full of

**"sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed,
anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips"**

As I heard someone say,
"If we are to proclaim good news,
then our lives can't be bad news."

God calls us to embrace this vision of becoming like Christ, of putting on Christ--
for our own good and for his glory in the world.

So how does this happen--this spiritual transformation, this metamorphosis?
How does this new life overcome the old life still living within us?

It can't be simply a matter of will power--just trying to be good.

The Jews of the Old Testament were given the law--
they knew all the right things to do,
and they had every inducement to try very hard to do them,
but that wasn't enough.

Jesus Christ did not come into this world,
he did not give his life on a cross,
just to impart to us a self-help manual,
to be used for our own self-improvement.

That is a perversion of the Christian message.

If it just depended on our own will power,
then any success we achieved would just fuel our pride
and add to our arrogance.

Just knowing what to do is not enough--
we human beings are too weak for that;
we also need the power to do
what we know we ought to do.

And the gospel declares that the power for this spiritual transformation
comes not from ourselves but from God.

It comes not in our own will power,
but in wills empowered by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said that we act the way we do because of the kind of people we are.

A good tree bears good fruit;
a bad tree bears bad fruit.

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit,
and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.

This moral metamorphosis means changing who we are at the deepest level--

in other words, we must first be made into new people
with a new source of life.

It must all begin with what God has done for us.

I want you to see how central this idea of God's goodness and grace in the gospel is
to Paul's moral exhortation in this passage.

First, there is the context of this passage within this letter.

This is chapter three, which means it comes after chapters one and two
in which Paul has presented Christ to us--

Christ in all his glory as the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn over all creation,
the one in whom all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.

It is this Christ who reconciled us to God,

**"having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness,
which stood against us and condemned us;
he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross"** (2:14).

By faith, when you were dead in your sins,
God made you alive with Christ.

And in the immediately preceding verses, 3:1-4, Paul had again affirmed that--
we died and have been raised to new life in Christ
and when he returns we will also appear with him in glory.

This is the gospel of what Christ has done--

that is the context in which Paul now says in v. 5,

**"Therefore, in the light of all this—
put to death, whatever belongs to your earthly nature. . . ."**

He lists those things that belong to our earthly nature--

things for which the wrath of God is coming--

and he says, "**You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived**" (v. 7).

You used to have a source of life

which quite naturally resulted in your walking in these ways.

But that's true of you no longer--

now, Paul says in v. 4, Christ is your life.

You have a new source of life—

a new power at work within you--

it is the life of Christ who now dwells in you by his Spirit.

It is that great mystery now revealed

which Paul spoke of earlier in the letter—

Christ in you, the hope of glory.

This description Paul gives us here--

"compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience"

this is not a new list of rules for us to obey--

it is a new way of life that will be exhibited by those who have become new people—

people who now have the life of Christ active within them

by the Spirit.

That's what the gospel is all about--

it's about a new source of life within us. /

Then, notice the emphasis on **the grace of God in the gospel** in v.12—

which forms the basis for his exhortation.

Just look at Paul's description of these Colossian believers—

which is also Paul's description of every Christian--

They are "*God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved,*"--

These are descriptions that you find in the Old Testament of Israel;

and they are descriptions you find in the Gospels of Jesus—

who embodies all that Israel was intended to be;

and now they are descriptions of us—who are now united to Christ,

who is now our representative before God,

such that we now share in who he is.

Through the grace of the gospel

you are already **God's chosen people**--he has determined to set his love on you;

you are already **holy** in his sight--set apart for his purposes in the world;

you are already **dearly loved**--as his own children.

That's who you are--not because of your goodness, but because of God's grace—

not because of your loveliness, but because of his love.

That's how this works.

We are to respond to what God has already done for us.

God's grace toward us is the driving engine—the power—

of Christian sanctification.

Look at v. 13--"**Bear with each other**

and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.

Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

You have received God's grace--

he has been compassionate toward you,

he has borne with you when he had every right to wipe you out.

He forgave you when you spat in his face and went your own way,

committing cosmic treason against him.

But he doesn't hold that against you--

instead he embraces you in his arms of love.

He adopts you into his family!

Now let that experience of God's grace

and that new identity as God's chosen people, holy, and dearly loved,

let it work itself out in your life.

Let it re-program the way you think about yourself

and your relationships with other people,

and how you view all your experiences in life.

When you put on this new self,

you are being renewed as a reflection of the very image

of the God who created you.

"Here," Paul says in v. 11, "**there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised,**"

which for Paul had always been a central dividing line between people.

Here there is no **barbarian**—

which is what the Greeks called all the uncivilized peoples of the world.

Here there is no **Scythian**—

the fierce warriors who lived in the South Russian steppes,

the Scythians had the reputation of the being the crudest

and most savage of all the barbarians--

they were the barbarians to the barbarians!

and here there is no distinction between **slave and free**—

more half the population of Rome were slaves—

people of the lowest social class,
but that social status no longer mattered.

**“Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised,
barbarian, Scythian, slave or free,”**

All the superficial distinctions that we ordinarily make between people--

the things that shape our perception of them and our treatment of them--
the racial, ethnic, cultural, educational, religious,

economic, and class differences--

these were present in the ancient world,

just as much as in our modern world.

They provided an elaborate network of prejudice, suspicion and arrogance,

so ingrained as to be thought natural and normal.³

These prejudices easily translate into the vices listed in v. 8.

But in this new realm of Christ and his kingdom, Paul says,

all these fade away into insignificance.

Sure, these distinctions continued to exist,

but they become irrelevant to the question of the love, honor, and respect

that are to be shown to people.

They become irrelevant because when we are renewed in the image of God

we all become more like Christ--

he is the one who is all, and is in all.

He is the one in whom are human beings

are meant to find their true identity.

³ So Wright.

It's not to be found in my gender or my race or my political party—
my true identity is found in Jesus Christ.

This is why I think the gospel holds the only real hope
for overcoming the deep racial divisions in our country,
and Christians should be leading the way in showing this to be true.

This gospel message makes all the difference, you see.

That's why Paul says in v. 15--

"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts"--

That is, the peace that Christ has brought to you in your relationship with God;
that peace those comes in knowing where you stand with God..
Let that peace of Christ rule in your hearts.

The word "rule" here comes from the Greek word for "umpire"--

let that experience of Christ's peace be the umpire, the arbitrator,
when it comes to the way you deal with other people.

Let it be the deciding factor

when you are trying to decide how you ought to respond
when someone has made some remark that you didn't appreciate;
or when someone has failed to follow through
on something they promised you;
or when someone hurt you through neglect or indifference.

Let the peace of Christ cause you to seek peace with others,
just as Christ made peace for you with God.

And v. 16--**"Let the message of Christ dwell in you richly"--**

that gospel message,
the message from Christ and about Christ--
the message that we are now loved by God
with a love that we can never fully understand.
Let the church be a treasure house full of that wonderful message of the gospel--
may that message be something we teach and encourage each other with,
may it be something that we sing about in all sorts of songs and styles,
may it issue in gratitude in our hearts.

Did you notice how much **gratitude** comes up in this passage?

- v. 15--"be thankful"
- v. 16--"with gratitude in your hearts"
- v. 17--"giving thanks to God the Father"

Gratitude--that is the proper response to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Gratitude is the proper motivation for all Christian living.
And gratitude is the source of power that can help to change our lives.

For when we live in gratitude to God, we are living in a right relationship with God--
for gratitude is an expression of the fundamental reality
that God is God and I am not--
that everything I have comes from him,
and that he is good--he is good all the time.

And when we live in the light of those realities
we are beginning to live like Christ--
and we will put on "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

13 we will "bear with each other
 we will "forgive one another
 if any of you has a grievance against someone."
 And we will "put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

It is the gospel which changes our hearts,
 which then empowers our wills,
 so that our lives might be transformed.

If we are to change,
 we must embrace the gospel--
 It's a radical and paradoxical thing, really--
 many people never understand it.

God doesn't say,
 Get your act together--start acting right--
 start living in "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."
 and then I'll accept you into my family.

No, he says, I love you just the way you are--right now, with all your faults and failures.
 In fact, I sent my Son to die for you,
 even when you wanted nothing to do with me.
 He came so that you could be given new life
 and be received into my family as my beloved child.

Receive my love, trust in me,
 and I'll help change your heart so that you will want to do
 what you ought to do--
 and then I'll empower you to accomplish your deepest desire,

which will become my desire for you—

to be the human beings we were created to be

to bring honor to our Creator.

In that act of faith in the love of God,

we are born again into a family of grace--

and that's where we can begin to grow into maturity

as a beloved child of God.

That's true in a human family, you know.

Children prosper when they know they are loved,

when they know they are safe and secure.

So it should be in the church--

We need to create an environment of grace—grace and truth.

Don't put on airs and pretend to be something you're not.

We must accept each other as God accepts us.

Grace means we can relax, and know that we are loved.

Grace will be the source of motivation and encouragement to grow and mature.

If we are to change,

we must embrace the gospel.

So that whatever we do, whether in word or deed,

we may do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus,

giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Prayer—

A call to respond in faith--

Closing Song: *Let It Be Said of Us*

Benediction:

1Ths. 5:23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.

May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless

at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

Growing to Maturity:

The Message of Colossians" #10

Sept. 20, 2020

"Put on Christ"

Col. 3:5-17

Our new birth as Christians implies a need for new growth and development into maturity, reflecting the fullness of the image of God. Paul speaks of it in our passage as "putting off the old man" and "putting on the new." We are to "put on Christ"—becoming like him in all things.

I. Putting on Christ—

Becoming Who We Are

II. The Battle Within—

An Ugly Picture of the Problem

III. The Beauty of Christlikeness—

A Vision of What Can Be

**IV. The Power of the Gospel—
How Transformation Is Possible**

Sermon Response:

"Put on Christ"

Col. 3:5-17

- In v. 5 Paul begins with a negative command: "Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature." One way to do this is to cut off the lines of supply that feed our sinful desires. What would that mean in your life? What feeds your greed or lust or impurity? How can you best starve those desires so that they will die?
 - Why does Paul call greed "idolatry" in v. 5? How does it flow from a misplaced worship?
 - Reflect on who you are as described in v. 12. Why is this an essential part of the spiritual transformation that Paul is urging us to experience?
 - Reflect on the empowering motivation of the call to forgiveness found in v. 13. Consider Jesus' words on this theme in Matt. 18:21-35. Ask God to enable you to realize and appreciate just how much you have been forgiven and let that encourage you to forgive others.
 - Read v. 17. What does it mean to act "in the name of the Lord Jesus"? How would such a motivation change your behavior? What areas of your life are not being lived in that name? Ask God to help you do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.
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