

Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Revelation

Pray to the Lord your God with expectancy, for revelation is something within God's control, not ours.

For myself

Pray for evil to be eliminated from your words and from the way you speak. Each one of us develops ways of speaking which are as much a part of our language as what we say itself; make sure the devil does not use this.

For others

Lord Jesus Christ, we never know how much crime is close to us; evil deeds within private homes, wrong practices or fraud at work, industrial espionage - and people laugh at it! Deal with us according to Your justice, Lord Jesus, so that we will not tolerate evil, injustice or fraud wherever it may be found; give us a heart and a mind to root it out even in our own lives. So, with justice, may we call for righteousness in society and not be found wanting! AMEN

Meditation

You call me ever onwards Lord Jesus Christ, my Saviour!

If I must change, may I do so, and remain firm in faith:

If I have sinned, may I repent and return to Your love:

If I need to act, may I have wisdom beyond my years:

If I must speak, may I live the prophetic Word:

If I have been silent, may I open my heart to speak:

If I need to listen, may I truly hear both the spirit and soul:

If I must challenge, may I offer Your words within mine:

If I have to show courage, may I be humble through grace

If I need to wait, may I be patient with everything around me:

You call me ever onwards, Lord Jesus Christ.

Bible Passage

Colossians 3:1-11

¹ If you have then been raised with Christ, strive for higher things, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Think about higher things, not on earthly things, ³ for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ appears (who is your life), then you will also appear with Him in glory.

⁵ So put to death the parts of you that are earthly: sexual immorality, impurity, passions, evil desires and covetousness (which is idolatry). ⁶ Because of these things, the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. ⁷ Once, you used to walk in these ways, when you were living that life; ⁸ but now you must get rid of all these things, wrath, anger, wickedness, slander and obscene language from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, since you have removed your old self with its behaviour, ¹⁰ and replaced it with the new self which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Maker; ¹¹ in this there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all in all!

Review

This passage begins a description of the moral behaviour and ethical standards of the Christian life, which takes up the rest of chapter 3 of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Having previously exposed the heresies which were threatening the Colossian church (2:16-23), Paul begins this moral teaching by stating very clearly that everything a Christian does comes from taking part in the life of the risen Christ (3:1-4), and then goes on to describe the moral behaviour that is incompatible with the life of Christ (3:5-10) before turning to examples of godly morality (3:12f.). In whatever letter of Paul we read it, his moral teaching is exclusively based on Christ; he taught that those who were saved by the grace of God were changed by their salvation, and this always had moral and ethical consequences.

In our passage today, Paul speaks of 'striving' for 'higher things' (3:1). On the surface, this appears to suggest that we can obtain high standards of morality through personal effort or knowledge. You may think that there would be nothing wrong with this, but reliance on these things was at the heart of the heresies Paul had just attacked in this letter because they were not rooted in Christ. The 'higher things' Paul teaches us to strive for are the standards of God found only in Christ (3:3), and that by living 'in Christ' we are liberated, for we are not dependent upon any special knowledge or ability. The true Christian, living 'in Christ', has the power of God available to them to begin living a moral life by getting rid of evil. They are able to put all wickedness and evil 'to death' (3:5), 'get rid' of it (3:8) and have it 'thrown away' (3:9), for none of it is compatible with Christ. Using the language of removing clothes (3:9) and then replacing these with clean clothes (3:10), Paul reminded his readers that their behaviour and morality was something that was 'being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Maker' (3:10); a renewal which unifies all who follow Christ.

This teaching of Paul is similar to other ethical and moral teaching given elsewhere in his letters. For example, in Galatians, where Paul wrote to berate those who taught that the church should accept circumcision and the Law in order to keep faith with its Jewish roots, and he identified the evil moral consequences of not accepting the 'freedom of the Spirit' in a list of wrongdoing that is similar to that is our passage today (Gal 5:16-21, and Col 3:5f.). What is significant and different about our passage is that Paul took the teaching of the heretics he opposed and proceeded to turn it against them. They had taught about finding the 'higher secrets' of the principalities and powers of the universe, but Paul capped this by

declaring that all 'higher things' were freely available in Christ! (3:1-4) They had taught that to be morally good, you had to live according to strict moral standards and deny bodily pleasures; but Paul capped this by saying that in Christ, you can 'put off' all sin and evil as easily as tacking off your clothes! (3:9-11).

This has always been a good method of arguing, particularly in matters of faith, for if our God is greater than any other religion, then anything they claim, if it is remotely good, can at least be found in Christ, but in Christ, this goodness is exceeded, for the God who made all things is always greater than our imagination, from where all other religions come! Today's passage focuses on the importance of being 'in Christ' (3:1-4) and the moral consequences of getting rid of what is evil in our lives by the power of God. In tomorrow's passage, Paul goes on to speak of the positive moral consequences of being 'in Christ'.

Going Deeper

There is much to learn from this passage. Paul's teaching about the 'higher things' of Christ is based on baptism, and tells us about the focus of the Christian life and our access to God the Father. In the second part of the text there are some sharp and important words about evil and wrong-doing which is incompatible with Christian living.

Striving for the higher things of Christ

We must remember that at the beginning of this passage of Scripture, Paul uses baptismal language. Earlier he had talked of dying 'with Christ' (2:20) to the things of this world, in particular the heresies Paul was concerned to confront within his letter (2:20-23). This follows straight on to the beginning of our passage where Paul says 'if you have been raised with Christ ...' (3:1). This 'dying and rising' with Christ was designed to remind the Colossians of their own baptism, as it should remind us of ours; Paul did not believe that dying and rising with Christ magically conferred upon Christians any powers. What he believed was that by publicly identifying ourselves with Christ in baptism, the combination of our own decision and the grace of Jesus then draws us into 'higher things' of God. In this way, our lives are necessarily set on a path of moral living in which goodness overcomes all evil, for that is the character and nature of God which is found in Christ.

It is a frequent theme of Paul's writing that the path of Christian life is towards a goal, and that goal is Christ (Rom 8:5, Eph. 1:12, 1 Tim 4:10), but whilst we live this life on earth with all its problems and trials, in Christ, we have two essential things which make the journey of faith meaningful and real. Firstly, through our baptism, Christ is the focus of our lives; we live for Him and we find our purpose in Him to the exclusion of everything else. Secondly, we have access through Christ to Almighty God, which means that in the midst of all we experience, we can, through Christ, call upon the Lord our God to help us and sustain us. This combination of focus and access is what gives us the assurance of our faith in Christ.

When Paul speaks of thinking about 'higher things' (3:2), he is talking about the first of these two, the focus of our lives. Christ is our focus, and our minds, hearts and souls are directed exclusively to Him, trusting that He will direct us in the doing of what is right for us and for those we love. This focus is essential because of the distractions we all experience whilst living in the world; for evil always seeks to call us away from the Lord God who has saved us through Jesus. In the same part of our passage, Paul also teaches about the second of these ingredients; access. When he speaks of 'Christ, seated at the right hand of God' (3:1) or uses the enigmatic words 'your life is hidden with Christ in God' (3:3), this refers to the access we have to God through Christ; the true and exclusive access to God won through

Jesus' life, death and resurrection which, through baptism, is ours. In Christ we therefore have access to the very throne room of God.

Before leaving this part of our text, it is worth dwelling on the passage 'your life is hidden with Christ in God'. Many theories have been put forward to explain this unique phrase in Scripture, but the idea is essentially very simple. If we live 'in Christ', who is our focus and our access to the power of God, then whatever happens to us in this life, our final destiny is assured, because it is in His hands. These are things the world does not understand, but we do, and when Christ comes in glory (3:3), everything will be clear to everyone, and because we are with Him, we will 'appear with Him in glory!'

Getting rid of base living and immorality

There is no question that the Bible is frequently explicit about some of the key elements of immorality; things that are flagrantly in opposition to the life of Christ. This is because of the number of times that these things appear in Scripture, not just in Paul's writings, but also in the Old Testament, the teaching of Jesus and the other New Testament writers, such as John. I refer to things such as 'sexual immorality' (e.g. see Hosea 2:2, Acts 21:25, 1 Cor 6:18), 'impurity' (e.g. see Ezek 9:9, 2 Cor 2:21, Matt 23:27), 'anger' (e.g. see Luke 4:28, Acts 19:28, Eph 4:31) and similarly for every one of the wrongful things mentioned in this passage.

Sometimes, in our concern to be positive in the life of the church, we concentrate on the 'nice' parts of Scripture without the far more painful but essential task of spending time with the more difficult. The lists of earthly things in this text which we are told to put to one side are far less well known than the positive list of good qualities which we will see in tomorrow's reading (Col 3:12f.); and in the same way, the famous 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5:22) is far more well known than the preceding list of wrongdoing which is the 'works of the flesh'; 'fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing' (Gal. 5:19).

This is an unhealthy imbalance for Christians individually and, collectively, for the church. The teaching here is quite clear, before we can 'put on' the godly moral qualities available to us through our life 'in Christ', we must accept that we must use the power available to us in Christ to put aside the evils clearly mentioned by Scripture. We cannot read through the text of Colossians 3:5-9 without coming to the conclusion that the human behaviour described within it is clear, precise, and unacceptable in the presence of God. It should therefore be unacceptable to us in any form whatsoever. I have come across people who would call themselves Christians and who live in ungodly sexual relationships, are ruled by their own passions, use obscene language as a matter of course, for example, and who refuse to accept that these things are incompatible with Christian faith! This could perhaps be a failure of teaching, as is frequently claimed, but questions must be asked about what kind of Christian conversion has been experienced by those who are unable to see that being focussed on God through Christ is incompatible with some common features of their own lifestyle. The norms of society contain many evils which are incompatible with the life of Christ, and are demonstrably self-centred and not God-centred.

'Because of these things the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient' says Paul (3:6), and this is not an accusation against people in the world who do not know better, and who may not have any means of knowing the difference between good and evil. This text is therefore not best used in evangelism! This sentence is a text for preaching to the already converted, those who harbour evil and are still prepared to compartmentalise their lives and persist in sin, even when baptised. They do not apply to themselves the truth of God's morally good qualities, amply evident through the Word and the traditions of the church (which is the Body of Christ). Wrath is a strong word (3:6), which expresses the anger of someone who has been hurt. It is properly used here by Paul to refer to the anger of God who is justly hurt when His own people refuse to hear His Word and its moral consequences.

Finally, it is fascinating that Paul speaks of the unity amongst God's people which comes from recognising the common moral qualities of God in Christ (3:10,11). 'There is no Greek or Jew ...' is one of Paul's famous phrases, and here it speaks of the unity of God's people when they have 'put off ... the old self' (3:9,10) and can therefore be united in Him.

Discipleship

Application

Human and divine judgement and godly worship

I am tempted to conclude that the lack of unity amongst God's people so evident today is not because of the historic differences between us or the different ways in which we like to worship. No, I reckon that the differences between us come because we are not able to accept that some of our traditions have erred and are human, not divine, and we are reluctant to shed them, whether Catholic or Protestant, Evangelical or Pentecostal, low church or high. Secondly, too many of us fail to see that our tastes in worldly things such as music drive our attitudes to worship, and this is thoroughly ungodly; people even choose where to worship on the basis of the perceived quality of worship bands! The Lord weeps at the lack of godliness shown by such judgement. Our worship of the Lord should be driven solely by our desire to be obedient to the Lord, not any aesthetic appreciation of music, especially church music, whether it be organs or worship bands. And if you are wondering about where things like this are included in our passage of Scripture today, then look no further than verse 5, which talks of 'evil desires and covetousness (which is idolatry). Idolatrous forms of worship are one of the main evils within the church today, and though this is known by many good leaders, preachers and worship leaders, it is not accepted by all, and it remains a deep-seated problem.

Deal with it!

It would be worth our while spending time with each of the 'sins' and evils mentioned in this text, but perhaps the real test of whether we understand them does not come through any detailed explanation of them, but whether we have that witness of the Spirit within which says we understand that they are wrong. For this is the voice of Christ speaking within us. The effort to focus on Christ is all the effort we should need to know that these things are wrong, and in the 'putting off' of them, we are set free!

Ideas for what to do

- Read carefully the lists of evil and wrong-doing in verses 5 and 8. Are you aware that any of these either have afflicted you in the past, or still afflict you today? Read over the first part of the text (3:1-4) several times and consider how you either have dealt with them, or can deal with any of them.
- Pray for all who struggle with issues in their lives that they cannot seem to shift or deal with before God. Pray for the Lord's blessing on all who help and counsel people in such need.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. When Scripture says 'you have died, and your life is hid with Christ', what comes in to your mind? Share your thoughts with your group.
2. Is it possible to be focussed on Christ all the time? What comes in the way of this?
3. Which of the things in the lists of evil within this text are the most difficult to deal with because they are prevalent within the church? How do we deal with these things when we find them amongst God's people?

Final Prayer

Let me hear Your voice tonight, faithful God and Lord of all. Speak to me so that I may know Your will, whether it be hard or easy, comforting or challenging, exciting or mundane; and let me value each and every word, the instruction You give for Your servant's life. Thank You Lord; AMEN