

Putting on Christ

Colossians 3:12-17

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the riches of your word. Be with us in this hour, that we may profit from this scripture. Enlighten our minds that we may understand, soften our hearts that we may respond, and direct our wills that we may obey Your word. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

The Burden of Obedience

Are you tired of trying to be a good Christian? If you aren't yet, likely you will be someday. Look at this list of things Christians must do: love each other, put up with the slackers among us, even forgive others who hurt you. Who can do that? Who *wants* to do that? But these are the demands of the Christian life, and it is up to you to get in line and measure up. You know, you can probably put on a good show for a while, but it is inevitable that your glossy facade will crack eventually. And the effort! It is exhausting always to act like a good Christian. Many people eventually give up and settle for lazy Christianity and some give up the faith entirely. If you are not tired yet, perhaps you are not a serious Christian, or perhaps you have more endurance than many people. But your day is coming.

We are busy people. There are a lot of important and interesting things we could do instead of this meeting, so let's not waste our time here. The honest truth, when you read this passage in Colossians, if you really understand it, is that this is a truckload of burdens. It is easy to talk about love and forgiveness, but can you forgive your best friend when he steals your girlfriend? Can you share class notes and study with the student who doesn't bother to go to class or read the text book? If you say you can do these things – first, I have trouble believing you – you deserve to be registered as a Saint. My heart powerfully resists wasting my time on slackers, and I sure do not want to forgive hateful traitors. Folks, these are hard commands. No human can do these in his own strength. If you think you can, you are deceiving yourself. But this is God's word, these are God's commands, and no matter how long you stare at them, they don't go away. Fortunately, we are not expected to do these things in human strength.

Earth and Heaven

Is human strength a problem? No! God made mankind, and He said man was very good. God made us in His image, which means that we are like God, just in a derivative sense. Human beings are amazing! As Christians we should rejoice in the powers of mankind and celebrate the accomplishments of men and women. You are at a university where you are surrounded by very intelligent people who do amazing things. These things are achieved on earth by human beings who were made from the dust of the ground. God made that dust into His image, which is astonishing, but it is still essentially dust. Glorious dust, but nothing more than dust. The man of the earth is powerful, intelligent, and creative, however, our father Adam rebelled against his creator and lost one very significant ability. Men and women of the earth can do amazing things, but what they cannot do is obey God. That choice was robbed from them when Adam cast the deciding vote in favor of siding with Satan. Men and women have free will. They can choose to do anything they want to do. But our original earthly nature, is so polluted that we never *want* to choose obedience to God. Men and women are born with a desire to rebel against God, and this never changes. So man of the earth is unable to obey this passage in Colossians, in fact deep down in his heart he does not even want to obey it. The real truth is that he *hates* the commands of God, and this never changes. Man of the earth is eternally trapped in hatred of God and His commands. But there is hope. What man cannot do for himself, God has done for us. God has made it possible for men and women to do His commands, and even to desire them, and even to love God's commands. Christ is what makes this possible.

In chapter one Paul taught that God forgave our sins through Christ. By His death Christ redeemed us from the power of Sin and reconciled us to God. That means that Christians no longer fear eternal punishment for our rebellion against God. It means that we are no longer enemies of God. Christ reconciled us; He made former enemies into friends. Christ took our guilt upon Himself and paid for our sin, so we are

no longer subject to condemnation. In chapter two Paul said, “let no one pass judgment on you.” Now in chapter three Paul moves to another aspect of our salvation. Christ not only died for us, He also rose for us. Christ rose from the dead on the third day with a new spiritual body and ascended to heaven. We confess in the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed that now Christ “is seated at the right hand of the Father.” Jesus is in heaven. That is a big deal. But also significant for us is that *we have been raised, too*.

You heard this last week when you read the first eleven verses of chapter three. Verse one says, “you have been raised with Christ.” You have been raised with Christ. Is this true? When were you raised? Aren’t you the same as you have always been? Don’t Christians look and act like all other normal human beings? What does this mean that we have been raised with Christ? Paul explains in Romans chapter 6 that baptism joins us to Christ, and when we were baptized we died to sin and were raised with Christ. Now of course it is true that we all look and function like all human beings. Paul is not talking about our earthly condition. He is talking about our spiritual condition.

Spiritual Creatures

Here is the problem for modern man. We deny a spiritual aspect to humanity. We are taught, and accept, that mankind is a species of animals that arose over millions of years by natural selection. We are like dogs and monkeys, just more intelligent. Christians give lip service to the creation account in Genesis, but Christians operate on these modern assumptions, too. So when Paul says we have been raised with Christ, we look around to see if our feet are still on earth. Paul is not talking about your body. Paul is talking about your spirit. Your spirit is a real thing. You are more than a species of animal. Biologically it is of course true that you are homo sapiens of the order primates. But after God formed man of the same materials as the rest of the universe, God breathed His spirit into him. Man is a spirit-flesh being, a creature with a complex nature of two components.

When man rebelled against God, the rebellion was thorough. Man’s spirit opposed God, and his body attacked God. Our salvation will be complete when we have new bodies, like Jesus, and new spirits. But our salvation is only partial now. We are stuck in these God-hating bodies, but God has given us new God-loving spirits. That is why you are here tonight, and that is why you want to follow Jesus. When Paul says, “you have been raised with Christ,” he is talking about our spirits. This is a real thing. This is not positive thinking, or wishful optimism, or an empty metaphor for a vague blessing. This is real. You are *really* different. You are not the same as you were when you were born. You are categorically different than non-Christians around you. Non-Christians can be very good and moral people, but they are still spirits who hate God and will not inherit eternal life unless they repent of their rebellion and turn to God. But not you. When you were baptized, your original God-hating spirit died and a new God-loving spirit was raised in you. And this changes everything about how we live.

The earthly man struggles to obey because obedience is opposed to his nature. He is a rebellious spirit, and it takes enormous effort to make his body do what his spirit opposes. A non-Christian, an earthly man, can exhibit many of virtues of the Christian life, but it is against his nature, it takes a lot of effort, and it is exhausting. The heavenly man, the man or woman raised with Christ in baptism, has an obedient spirit. He or she loves God and wants to obey Him. There is no conflict with God’s commands in the spirit of the one raised with Christ. There *is* a struggle. The struggle is with a body that has rebellious habits and a spirit which desires obedience.

Reality Check

Let’s pause here. All this is true. What we have covered so far is exactly what God is teaching us. But if you stop to think deeply about these things, you are going to be confused. Paul has explained that we are spiritually raised with Christ, and desire to please God. When we were baptized God killed our old rebellious spirit and raised up in us a God-loving spirit which loves to obey God. But do you? Always? Here

is our struggle. We *don't* always want to please God, do we? Don't we get some pleasure from hating a traitor? Don't we enjoy indulging in sin sometimes? Is this scripture really true?

Paul is saying love of sin is not the real you. Not anymore. But old habits die hard. You used to hate your enemies and lust for pleasure. Your whole being was oriented that way. That is how you thought and that is how you acted. But now you have a spirit which is oriented toward God. Now your spirit has compassion on your enemies and enjoys God's blessings without lusting for pleasure. This is the real, deep, eternal you. This is the new man or woman God has made of you. You are not the same as when you were born. Using a related image, Jesus told Nicodemus that the Holy Spirit gives us a new birth. And that has powerful, profound implications for how we live.

Spiritual Clothes

Everyone here is decently clothed tonight. How did that happen? Did you plant cotton seeds, harvest the fibers, spin the thread, weave the cloth, and sew the fabric? Or did you pump the oil, refine the crude, manufacture the polyester, and make your shirt? Or did you just go to the closet and put on a piece of clothing that someone else made? How much work, and how long would it take for you to make clothing from seed to shirt? The difference between making clothing and putting it on is enormous. So is the difference between earthly obedience and heavenly obedience.

Obedience to God's commands is as simple as putting on clothes. Does that sound incredible? I'll say it again. Obedience to God's commands is as simple as going to the closet, pulling out a shirt, and putting it on. When we get to this application part of Paul's letter to the Colossians, Paul does not thunder that we must obey. Paul does not threaten us with judgment if we sin. Paul does not offer a twelve-step program for self-improvement. Sometimes parents and pastors can slip into making us feel guilty. Sometimes authorities use public shaming to force compliance. But Paul never does this. There is no guilt or shame for the Christian, and making each other feel guilty or ashamed is wrong. The key to the Christian life is not special spiritual gifts, or more self-discipline, or Christian community, although that plays a role. Podcasts, conferences, books, and videos can be helpful, but they are not the key to the Christian life. The Christian life is going to the closet and putting on obedience. It's as simple as that. Now simple is not the same as easy. These old minds and bodies are hard-conditioned to think and act sinfully. But sin can be overcome by putting off old habits and putting on new ones. Is that all? Yes that is all. Nothing more. Anything more will lead you astray and make life harder.

Now here is the application question. Do you believe this? Is putting off sin and putting on obedience all there is to the Christian life? Haven't you tried to stop sinning and do good – and failed? Don't we need something more to keep us in line? How can this be true, if it doesn't work? The fundamental question is this: Is this scripture true? In other words, is God's word trustworthy? Or is God lying to us?

Who Tells the Truth?

The fundamental application question is, Do you believe this? Faith is the key to the Christian life. The first thing Paul said in his letter to the Romans was to quote the prophet Habakkuk, "The righteous shall live by faith." You cannot live as a Christian without faith. Now here is where we go wrong. Pay attention. Most of us understand that we must believe in Christ to be saved, but for us that only means forgiveness of sins and a reservation in heaven. We understand that we are justified by faith, but most Christians do not *live* by faith. They *convert* by faith, then *live* by law. They trust Jesus to have paid for their sins by His death, and then they spend the rest of their lives in a hopeless effort to act like Jesus. It doesn't work. Human strength is not enough to obey God. Human strength hates God. Earthly man has no intention of obeying God. Only a heavenly man, the man or woman who has been raised with Christ and sets his mind on heaven and trusts God to work in him can succeed in obeying God. The reason why Christians struggle so much is that they try to live like Jesus without faith in Him.

Faith is a badly mangled concept these days. Faith is not intellectual assent, although agreement is an aspect of faith. Faith is not a feeling. Faith is trust. Do you trust Jesus? Does He tell the truth? He said He died to pay for your sins. Do you believe that? Is Jesus telling the truth? Jesus says you have been raised with Him. Do you believe that? Is it true that you are a fundamentally different person than when you were born? Is Jesus telling the truth? Jesus says that love, forgiveness, and patience are acts that you put on. No special gifts or teaching required. Is Jesus telling the truth? If Jesus is telling the truth, if obedience is as simple as putting on clothes, how does that work?

Putting On Obedience

Jesus says you can forgive a friend who has betrayed you. He has raised you to a new life and given you a new spirit. If this is true, what will you do? Will you still talk with that friend? Greet him when you meet? You won't avoid him, will you? Can you forgive him? Jesus says you can, but you feel like you can't. Let's not be dismissive of your feelings. Honestly, sometimes our feelings are pretty ugly. It is unhealthy to deny our feelings, but it is unfaithful to *act* on them. Jesus says you can forgive your enemy. You feel like you hate him. Who is telling the truth? Jesus or your feelings? Feelings are not bad. God created us as creature with emotions. But feelings can lie to us. My feelings lie to me all the time. When I walk into Zus Coffee, I feel as though I *have* to get a Spanish Latte. Now there is nothing sinful about a Spanish Latte, but the truth is that I don't *have* to have one. Jesus says I should *put on* godly food choices. A Spanish Latte might be good sometimes, and not good other times. I can choose. Jesus has given me a spirit that is not dominated by earthly desires. I *feel* like I will be miserable if I don't get the Spanish Latte, but it is not true. And when I act in faith, trusting Jesus and not my feelings, and get a Cappuccino instead, I discover that I am quite satisfied. Jesus was right! I did not in fact need a Spanish Latte. My feelings had lied to me once again.

I said putting on obedience was simple, but not easy. What makes it hard is the conflict between the word of God and the word of my earthly nature. You can choose good food. You can forgive your enemy. You can be patient with lazy Christians. These things are truly possible. And if these things are possible, you can choose to do them. But your earthly nature is constantly lying to you. We are heavenly spirits, but stuck with an earthly nature until we get our new bodies. Our heavenly spirits are dominant, but our earthly nature lies to us. It deceives us and confuses us. When Paul reached the place to instruct the Colossian church in obedience, he simply said, "put on." If you add anything to that, you are misleading people. Do what seems impossible, and you discover that Jesus makes it possible. But without faith, if you do not trust Jesus, if you refuse to obey the commands of God because you do not think Jesus is telling you the truth, then you will remain stuck in sinful habits. Simple, but not always easy. So God has provide help for us.

Help Putting On

Sometimes my wife asks me to help her put on a dress. (Women's clothing is more complicated than men's!) She did not make the dress. She just went to the closet and took it out. But it is easier to put on if she has my help. I cannot wear my wife's dress for her. She has to wear it, but I can help her put it on. I cannot obey God's commands for you. You have to put on obedience for yourself, and that means you trust Jesus to come through for you when you act in obedience. But others can help you put on obedience. They cannot obey for you. You have to choose to believe Jesus. You have to act in faith by doing the thing which you hate or which seems impossible. But others can help you to put on obedience. If the friend who betrayed you is at church and you dread going, a friend could go with you and help you to forgive him. If you have a sinful lust for bad food choices, a friend can help you to trust Jesus. But a friend can only help. It would never do for me to wear my wife's dress for her. She has to wear it. You have to do the hard obedience. But a friend can help.

This brings us into the meat of our passage in Colossians. Christians are tempted to criticize each other, are impatient with those who struggle, gossip about others, hold grudges, etc. This is not who we are.

We are heavenly spirits who love God and each other. When we act like non-Christians, we are living a lie. The gospel is not the demand to live virtuously. The gospel is the good news that God has chosen us and is transforming us. He has already given us heavenly spirits, and some day He will give us heavenly bodies, like Jesus. Until then, the gospel is that we can ignore the lies of the earth and live like the heavenly beings we are. We have a spirit of love, and we can choose to live that way. And when we do, we find that the impulse to sin is powerless. We *feel* that we cannot love others, but it is a lying feeling. The truth is that we *really can* love each other, and a vital aspect to that love is to help each other put on obedience. When we see someone acting sinfully, we can choose not to gossip about him, but to help him. When you see a sister failing to meet with Jesus on the Lord's Day, you can offer her a ride back to her room before midnight, and pick her up for church in the morning. She may resent your offer. You can bear with her and lovingly seek ways to help her. When you see a brother getting drunk on Friday nights, instead of criticizing him you can offer to take him to a different activity. This is gospel living. This is living the truth. This is the beautiful community.

The Word of Christ

There is one person even more helpful than other believers, and that is Jesus. Jesus helps us put on the Christian life. Of course Jesus accomplished the main work of salvation when He died and rose for us 2100 years ago. And now, today and everyday Jesus helps us put on the Christian life. We have seen that the heart of the problem is conflicting messages. This scripture says we can obey – we have been raised from earth and have a heavenly nature which even *wants* to obey God. Our old nature says it is not true. You really cannot obey these things. They are too hard. You have tried, and you failed. In fact, everyone you know fails to obey all these commands. You are pulled by two opposing voices – the voice of scripture, and the voice of your old nature. Sometimes one wins and sometimes the other wins. Sometimes we believe in Jesus, and other times we believe the lies of our old nature. But Jesus is helpful not only in what He did 2100 years ago, but now. Jesus talks to us now. This letter that Paul wrote to the church in Colossae is the living word of Christ. Through scripture Jesus speaks to us now. Throughout the day, as we encounter various opportunities and temptations, Jesus can be that voice of faith which drowns out the lies of our old nature. Jesus is the voice of faith when His word dwells in us – as we read and meditate on scripture throughout the day. Do you need stronger faith to trust Jesus when your old nature tells you that you are a failure and cannot hope to obey these commands? The word of Christ drowns out the lies of your old nature, gives you hope, and encourages you to act in obedience.

Charles Spurgeon was the greatest preacher in the English language. It is said that every Sunday as he climbed into the pulpit he chanted to himself over and over, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, I believe in the Holy Spirit." Spurgeon's old nature was telling him, "You can't do it. You aren't educated enough. You aren't eloquent enough. You aren't good enough. You are a poor preacher who will make a mess of this sermon." They were all lies. Vicious lies, but frightening to a humble preacher about to address thousands of London society. Spurgeon countered those lies with the word of Christ. Jesus promised to give us the Holy Spirit to enable us to serve Him. That is a dry theological fact you can read in a textbook. But Spurgeon received it as the word of Jesus, giving him hope and encouraging him to preach.

Application

This hope can be true for all of you here tonight. But if you have not been baptized, this hope is not true for you yet. Jesus urges you to trust Him. Believe Him. Jesus urges you to believe His words, and His beginning word is to be baptized. When Jesus baptizes you, He kills your old desires and raises you into a new life. But those who do not believe Jesus will sink deeper and deeper into hopelessness and condemnation. Then there will come a day when they will meet Jesus, and then He will say, "Why did you not believe me? Did you think I was lying to you?" Don't let that happen to you.

For those of you who do believe Jesus, Jesus is your encourager. Listen to Him every day by reading the scripture. You and other Christians help each other. Remind each other of the words of Jesus, and

remind each other not to listen to the lies of our old nature. This is how you put on the Christian life. This is how you obey God. This is how you find that His commands are not burdensome. And this is how a beautiful community takes shape.

Prayer

Our Father, thank you for speaking to us tonight in this Your word. We believe You, we want to believe You, but we are slow of heart to believe all You have said to us. Increase our faith. Help us to put on the hard obedience of Your gospel. Enable us to put off sinful habits and help each other to put on righteousness. Help our unbelief! And for those of us who have never believed You, send Your Holy Spirit into us tonight so that we may begin to trust You. We ask for the sake of Your gospel and in the name of Your Son, Our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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