

The Victorious Life  
Lecture on Colossians 3 and 4 and Philemon  
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Last week we studied “The Incomparable Christ” and how His story, which we call the gospel, places believers in a position of grace before the God of all Creation. We saw how Jesus Christ revealed the mystery of God in Himself so that believers may have complete understanding to grasp “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” thereby eliminating the need for the deceptive philosophy offered by false teachers. (2:2,3) Recognizing that in Christ “dwells all the fullness of God bodily,” (2:9) we were then challenged to refuse to submit to the regulations and restrictions the false teachers required.

Now, Paul presented in the second half of Colossians precise instructions on how to go about living in this position of grace as victorious Christians. His first challenge to us was the challenge of change in our personal lives. Chapter 3 verses 1,2 said, “Since then, you have been raised with Christ, ... set your hearts on things above, not on earthly things.” Such a challenge inspires me. But have you ever noticed how quickly our focus shifts from things above, to things down here, around us, that clamor to distract our attention from the “heavenly realms”? I have tried to be “heavenly minded” in prayer, and to focus on God’s qualities in personal and group worship, but quickly lost focus with questions of everyday life – Did I turn off the stove? Did I remember to charge my phone? Where did that last envelope get to??? And then I felt guilty for my earth-bound focus.

Max Lucado in his book, No Wonder They Call Him the Savior, describes a time when he was ten and got a puppy he named Tina. He cared for this puppy, fed, and even slept with her. Then, one day when he went into the back yard to give her dinner, and spotted her in a corner, near the fence, preoccupied with a butterfly. As much as a butterfly could actually be cornered, this puppy was playfully yelping and jumping up, trying to catch it in her mouth. He enjoyed watching Tina’s efforts for awhile, but needed to feed her dinner and get on with his chores.

“Tina! Come here, girl! It’s time to eat!” Max called. Tina looked at him, but instead of immediately scampering to him, she sat down on her haunches and tilted her head back toward the butterfly, looked back at her master, and then, back to the butterfly and back to Max again. She exhibited a “classic struggle of the will.” In an uncharacteristic moment of her puppy-hood, her “want to” overcame her “should do” and she ignored her master to continue chasing the butterfly until “the silly thing” flew over the fence.

“That was when the guilt hit. The excitement of the chase was overshadowed by the guilt of disobedience .... She turned painfully and walked back to encounter her owner ... Her head was ducked as she regretfully trudged across the yard.” How many times have we felt that same sense of guilt? Our “want to” has, again, overruled our “should do” and we lost focus on our goals for our Christian life. We didn’t feel very victorious. We felt more like that little puppy walking bent with our heads down, thinking, “Man! I did it again.” Paul felt this way too. In Romans 7:21-23 he lamented how difficult it was to live victoriously in his Christian life. But in verse 24 he found the same answer for this dilemma that he shared with the Colossians: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Colossians 3:3-4 encouraged us by saying, “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” This victorious life is a process. It does not happen all at once, but will, though Christ's work in our lives, create a change that comes, sometimes fast, and sometimes slowly, but consistently progressing in our lives. Paul used the picture of baptism to explain how this holy living begins. Since you have died to your past evil life, those old earthly habits have been buried with Christ and should no longer describe how you live. Matthew Henry put it this way. “Heaven and earth are contrary to one another, and a supreme regard for both is inconsistent; and the prevalence of our affection to one will proportionately weaken and abate our affection to the other.”

So, in verse 3 and 8 Paul says, “therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed which is idolatry . . . anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language;” You used to habitually act like that, but now “you must rid yourself of all such things.” Do you see the process in these words? This new, heavenly minded life has no place for such behavior. They are idolatry. Living our old life for sensual pleasures and selfish satisfaction equaled bowing down before the Asherah or Baal idols. We had put our inordinate appetites or passions before God in importance our lives. This self centered living progressed to the anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language listed in verse 8, which are products of the idolatry of the prior list. Paul sealed such behavior with the reason we must put them out of our lives: “Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.” (v. 7) They have no place in our lives. They showed the qualities of Satan. He is the author of the ultimate deception of self centered living and is the father of lies.

One such lie is something we may still find present in our lives today, perhaps as the last vestige of that old self we are learning to put off. That is the prideful act of rationalization. Did you find yourself going through this list, mentally checking off several saying, “I never did that. I only occasionally used to do that.” Comparing ourselves to others or even to this list to make ourselves seem better is rationalization of sin. Sure, you may have checked off sexual immorality or impurity or lust. But have we put off those old habits in our choice of romance novels or movies that suck us into role-playing such practices? Do we fantasize about what we might do in retaliation for the evil dumped on us at the office or even at family get-togethers? Do we revisit that argument with anger, rage or malice in our minds, even months after the incident? Do we re-tell the incident using slander and “little white lies” to make ourselves the innocent victim of the tale to our sympathetic friends? Consider the definitions of these words:

anger: a strong feeling of displeasure and belligerence aroused by a wrong

rage: angry fury; violent anger, a speech full of rage; a fit of violent anger

malice: desire to inflict injury, harm or suffering on another either because of a hostile impulse

or

out of deep-seated meanness; evil intent

slander: defamation; a malicious, false, and defamatory statement or report

filthy language: very offensive or disgusting – usually about sex; very evil: morally wrong

lie: a false statement made with deliberate intent to deceive; an intentional untruth; a falsehood

A few weeks ago, I was unloading the groceries I had purchased into my trunk, when a nicely dressed woman walked up to me and asked me for some change so that she could go in and buy a slice

of pizza to eat. I remembered that I had given my last couple \$1.00 bill in offering, although I did have some change and twenties. But I had already put my purse in the front seat and didn't want to go get it out. So I found myself lying. I said, "I already gave my change at church, sorry." I immediately felt guilty. I had even drug the church into my excuse! I was feeling a lot like Max Lucado's puppy at this point. I finished unloading and dug out some coins and drove around the parking lot to try to be more honest, and generous. But I couldn't find her! I felt awful. How long does it take to "put off that old self?"

A missionary visited my church a long time ago and told of a born again native who explained this same dilemma in his life. He said, "Inside of me are two dogs, a white dog and a black dog. They are always fighting over which will be in charge." The missionary asked him, "Which one wins?" With a shrug of his shoulders, the man answered, "Which ever one I feed the most." How can we be sure that we feed our "white dog" more than the old "black dog?"

The remedy Paul instructed was found in verse 9. Not only do we practice "putting off your old self" but we also must "put on the new self." Long ago in Psychology 101, I learned that to break an old habit, it must be replaced by a new one, or the old habit will return. How amazing it is to have "modern science" catch up with God's teachings from over 2000 years ago! Read again Col. 3:12 "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." When I feel anger that is building up to wrath, choose to practice compassion: a feeling of deep sympathy and sorrow for another who is stricken by misfortune, accompanied by a strong desire to alleviate the suffering; and kindness: the state or quality of being kind; - to avoid malice!

When I feel wronged and am tempted to retell a story making myself the victim for sympathy, choose to practice: humility: having a modest opinion or estimate of one's own importance or rank. When I am tempted to defend myself or tell-off someone who rubs me the wrong way, choose to practice gentleness: being kindly or amiable; agreeable; willing to accept the wishes, decisions or suggestions of others; or patience: bearing provocations, annoyance, misfortunes or pain without complaint, loss of temper or irritation. Thereby, we will be feeding our "white dog" and reinforcing new, good habits to replace the old ones.

To sum up our closet of "spiritual clothing" qualities we can put on, Paul reminded us to "bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (v.13) What a motivation this last statement is! As a contemporary singer puts it, "If you can count the times of day you are forgiven, it's just a drop in the ocean." When we experience someone struggling with the same issues we see in ourselves, we must practice to forgive others "seventy times seven" as Jesus told Peter. (Matt. 18:21-22) If God put our sins as far away from his thoughts as the East is from the West, we must also forgive.

This is acting in love, "which covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8) We are all in this transition together, changing from our old habits to our new ones, and it takes time to change. So, bathing each action in Christ's love, which he so generously showers on us, we will show others that we are all united in this process. And what results is perfect unity among believers and the peace of Christ being in charge of our lives. This establishes a groundwork for our worship together.

Practicing these Christ-like qualities enables us to live together and be the body of Christ, known as the church. Gathered together, believers study the Word of God and help each other to grow more like Him. We hear the admonitions of Scripture and we practice His word and teach and admonish each other with them. We enjoy singing together, but also use hymns and spiritual songs, to express God's words and how we desire to live them out in our lives. Spiritual songs and singing scriptural wisdom together can express the progress God has made in our lives as well as the hope we have that He will complete that change one day. Worship together fills our hearts with gratitude and centers our hearts and lives to continue to “do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father in Him.”

Now I don't know about you, but I am ready to shout “Amen!” and close my notebook and leave early. However, Paul did not conclude his remarks to the Colossians yet, so neither can we.

Paul next moved on to describe how the same spiritual clothing that united the church gathered together, also described the church scattered in the world. We only need to think back to last Sunday morning's wrangle to dress ourselves and the kids, the gobbled breakfast or no-time-for-that-fast, the dash of catching every red light and finding a parking space “way out in the north forty,” - to remember that life at home also needs those marvelous “new self” character qualities too.

So Paul applied these same qualities to changes in our home life and work ethic. He explained that it is possible to live “in Christ” with your own family as much as it is possible to do so in your own private spiritual life. “Wives, submit to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.”

This first section is perhaps one of the most contested yet vital topics about Christian living in the Bible today. I did not say it was contested only in modern times either. Since shortly after the Lord instituted the first marriage, women and men have tried to re-define marriage “in their own image.” Women too often think they have an “if clause” in this Scripture. Wives must submit to their husbands “if” he has loved them adequately, or in the way they expected to be loved. Husbands too often think they would love their wives “if” they would just respect and submit to their authority. But, notice the blatant absence of the “if” in these verses.

The word submit in Greek is “hupotasso” and is also used of submitting to governing authorities in Romans 13:1. It is a military term, according to Vine's Expository Dictionary, and denotes: “to rank under.” It is also the root that is used in Phil.3:21 “who, by the power that enables him (Christ) to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body.” Such submission is speaking of ranking in order. The government has authority over you, therefore you submit to their jurisdiction. Christ is over all things on earth, therefore he can change our bodies to be like his.

The husband has been placed in ranking order over the wife by God, therefore, she should submit to him. This ranking happened at creation. God made Adam first, then He created Eve, to be “a helper suitable for him.” Gen. 2:18. But when tempted to believe Satan rather than God, “Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.” (I Timothy 2:14) Adam followed suit, choosing also to sin. Ephesians 5:24 states, “Now as the church submits to Christ,

so also wives should submit to their husbands.”

Submission is not a subservient groveling, but an order of authority. I was married to my husband for seven years when I came to a particular understanding of the concept in this verse. I understood that God commanded me to submit to my husband. I had seen my mother submit to my dad even though my father was not a believer. The beginnings of the “women's lib movement” was also challenging my experience and learning. Since my husband was a Christian, I had expectations of a marvelous unity between Steve and I that was escaping reality. Sometimes we did not agree on decisions we had to make. Sometimes he decided to do things differently than I wanted. Did submission mean losing the arguments all the time?

Finally I listened to a message on this subject. My take-away was this. God made this ranking because it was perfect in the husband/wife relationship. God also gave both husbands and wives talents and gifts. But “whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Col. 3:17 Just like an officer is held to account for the actions of the soldiers under his authority, my husband will be held to account to his superior, Christ himself, for the spiritual decisions made under His authority. If I refused to submit to my husband, I am bringing discipline on him because he is my head appointed by God. Furthermore, my submission to my husband's authority gives us a unity in raising our children. That unity prevents favoritism and the “divide and conquer” tactic children easily use against parents.

I began to look at my husband in a whole different way. Although God gave me talents and gifts to use for His glory, I would never purposely usurp my husband's position before the Lord. He also has many gifts and talents, different from mine. So, he and I discuss family matters, and then decide what we should do. It is my job to give suggestions, my reasons and then back off! He may decide my points are valid, or not. But it is OUR decision that is finally made. I respect “the office” and we work together, as God has planned.

Husbands are admonished to love their wives and not be harsh with them. I saw the principles of submission work even if the husband is not walking in obedience to his responsibilities before the Lord. My father was an unbeliever and harsh in his relationship with my mother and we their children. Yet when we would whine and complain that Dad was unfair, Mom repeatedly reminded us that we must respect and obey him because he was our “father.” I obeyed, often with gritted teeth, but I found out that the promise in verse 20 was true. God is pleased with our attempts to practice the spiritual qualities of our new life and He gives blessings to our family life that go far beyond our expectations.

Finally, Paul addressed how these qualities could help us in our work lives too. Verse 22 states: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.” Masters also received Paul's instructions in chapter 4 verse 1: “Masters provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.” Many theological leaders of the 1800's used these admonitions about slavery to preach either that slavery should not exist, or that slavery was supported in Scripture. We are blessed today that slavery has been ended in our country and widely across the earth. Today these Scriptures are applied to the employer/employee relationship that we experience every day. And to both, the admonition in verse 23 of chapter 3 was given: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.”

These admonitions were fresh in Paul's mind because very near to this same time, he was dealing with a run-away slave named Onesimus. This young man had left the home of a convert in the church of Colossae, named Philemon, and ended up in Rome with Paul. There he became a believer himself and the dilemma he faced was the one we are discussing today; what should he do to put off the old, deceitful self and put on the new self. Onesimus decided that it meant returning to his master, Philemon, and facing the consequences. However, in Roman law, the penalty for a run-away slave was death! To complicate the matter, Onesimus had apparently stolen items or money from Philemon to finance this escape. Paul wrote for clemency.

So, as Paul prepared to send the letter off to the Colossians, he sat down and also prepared a personal letter to Philemon that would be delivered by Onesimus himself, upon his return. Paul very skillfully composed this letter to his dear friend and his family. Philemon is addressed as a fellow worker by Paul. He had shared the gospel with others and lived his new life in Christ faithfully. Paul prayed for him regularly, rejoicing in Philemon's love for all the saints. He and his wife Apphia also opened their home to other believers, having a church meet in their home. So they were probably somewhat wealthy to have a home large enough for the church to meet there.

Even Philemon's son, Archippus, had begun to serve the Lord, and Paul called him his “fellow soldier,” a warm encouragement to this young recruit. At the end of Paul's greetings to the church at Colossae, he greeted Archippus, but admonished him to “See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.” Scholars believe that Archippus was serving the Lord in the church of Laodicea which was a little way from home, in the same valley of Phrygia. Perhaps his service there had been in conflict with his desire to also spend time at home. So Paul's admonition was not severe, but in line with his instructions to workers in Colossians 3:25, “It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”

Paul then encouraged Philemon further, as he exclaimed how much Paul appreciated his faith and love which gave Paul great joy and encouragement. Now, Paul admonished the father to also be active in sharing his faith and have a full understanding of “every good thing we have in Christ.” Paul appreciated how Philemon “refreshed the hearts of the saints.” Now he turned his attention to the issue with Onesimus, a new saint himself.

Speaking of himself as “an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus,” which could have been a reminder to Philemon to elicit sympathy, Paul appealed to him on the basis of love. Paul called Onesimus his son, because he was born again after Paul preached the gospel to him. But Philemon was also a convert perhaps through the work of Epaphrus, and was called a brother by Paul. Paul was seeking to establish a new relationship between these two men. Yes, technically, Onesimus was still a slave. But beyond their work relationship, Paul wanted them to have a family relationship as brothers in Christ.

The name Onesimus means useful or profitable. So as Paul reminded Philemon that he used to be “useless” as a run-away slave, now “he has become useful both to you and to me.” v. 11 In fact, Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus because he had been such a great help to Paul during his imprisonment. But, Paul knew Onesimus needed to end the fear that hung over him because of running away and because he had been a thief. So, Paul offered to actually pay back anything that Onesimus owed Philemon. Paul actually signed this letter in his own handwriting, as a binding agreement to do

so. Paul was confident that Philemon would do the right thing and even requested that if Paul would be released, Philemon might have a room ready for him at his house.

The principles of the employee/employer relationship are seen in this small letter as a full 3D scene. Onesimus had come to realize that he should have obeyed his earthly master, because his heavenly Master required it and offered an “inheritance from the Lord as a reward,” (Col. 3:24) even if his boss did not grant him forgiveness. God's principles were clear. We work for Him. Whether we get an earthly paycheck or not, we must “work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord, not for men.” Employers must realize they too answer to their Master, the Lord Jesus for how they treat their employees. Philemon learned that Onesimus was more than a repentant slave. He was a new man, a brother in Christ, who was ready to serve the Lord wherever God wanted him to serve.

Whether we are employees or employers, or work independently, we too have a heavenly Master, which is the meaning of the word Lord. Our Lord desires that whatever we do, His name should be held in high regard as a result of our actions. Whether we are a wife or a husband or a single adult, our relationships reflect on His name too. But what if you have already “blown it?” What if we didn't follow these principles, were dishonest, unloving, impatient, and fell back into those old sin habits of our old walk? Remember, there is forgiveness. Mark was on the first missionary trip with Paul, but had returned home in the middle of the journey and disappointed Paul so much that he left his partnership with Barnabas over it. Acts 15:38 Now, twelve years later, Paul relies on Mark and asks the Colossians to welcome him if his travels bring Mark to their area.

Like Mark and Onesimus, we may not always live up to Christ's name. But He offers forgiveness and restoration. We are not our past. We are living for our future in Christ. Believers are to forgive as Christ has forgiven us. Our victory is in His name and His presence in our life. What happened when Max Lucado's little puppy returned to him, head down and tail between his legs? Max wrote, “My heart melted, however, and I called her name again. Sensing forgiveness, Tina darted into my hands. (I was always a softy.) . . . What my little puppy needed was exactly what you and I needed – a master who would extend his hands and say, 'Come on, that's okay.' . . . You need a Savior.” (No Wonder They Call Him the Savior, by Max Lucado p.317-341)

Be relieved that this victorious Christian life is a process. Be challenged that this victorious Christian life is a process! Colossians 3:4,5,10,17 remind us that “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.” “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature; put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” “Do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Will you choose to feed your black dog or your white dog today?