

99-02-05a Colossians

Let's prepare ourselves for the study of the Word of God this evening by taking a few moments to collect our thoughts and clear our minds and seek the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Father, we thank you for all of your many blessings, your provision and the grace that you have expressed to us in so many ways. We thank you for the privilege of assembling here this evening to fellowship in the study of your Word.

We pray that our insight and our understanding will be accurate and that these things will shape the way we think and the way we act in the days to come. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

We resume our study tonight of Paul's letter to the Colossians in chapter 3. We saw last time that Paul has moved into what you might call the application section of his letter. He is using more imperatives now than he did earlier in the letter. It's fascinating to look at the imperatives or the commands that are found in this section.

We had basically nothing by way of an exhortation or command in chapter 1. This was the description of Paul's prayer, what his hopes and his understanding of the calling and how that calling is fulfilled for believers. He gave a doxology of the Lord Jesus Christ. In chapter 2, he also made many statements of fact, communicated a lot of truths both directly and in passing.

As he was making some points, he would fill in with a lot of supplementary detail. But he began in chapter 2 using imperatives. We saw this first in chapter 2, verse 6, where Paul said, As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him.

Then in verse 8, he said, See to it that no one takes you captive. The word blepo there for see is used. Then in verse 16, he said, Let no one judge you.

Then in verse 18, he said, Let no one disqualify you. So we had four commands in chapter 2, four exhortations. Walk in him.

See to it that you're not taken captive. Let no one judge you. Let no one disqualify you.

Now in chapter 3, we have a number of imperatives beginning in verse 1. Seek those things which are above. In verse 2, set your mind on things above. In verse 5, put to death these that are on the earth.

In verse 8, put away these various attitude sins. In verse 12, put on tender mercies and so forth. Put on these things that are positive attitudes.

In verse 15, he says, Let the peace of God rule. Be thankful. Both of those are in verse 15.

Then in verse 16, he says, Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. So you can see now that the

frequency of exhortation has gone way up in this section of the letter. Why is that? Because the ability to fulfill these commands.

Wouldn't it be something if Paul said, Hi there, I'm the Apostle Paul. Greetings, grace and peace to you in Colossae. Seek those things which are above.

Set your mind on things above. Set your affections on the things of God. Eschew and turn away from all the evil things.

He doesn't ever really start a letter out that way, does he? He always communicates and teaches and reminds people of truth that he's taught before. Several times he'll say, You will remember that when I was with you, I told you these things. As I have told you before, many times even weeping, so now I tell you again.

He reminds, he reviews, he brings to mind the truth that sets the stage for the exhortations. The reason that's important is, what happens to us when we're going along through the day and we suddenly find ourselves in a situation where we need to make a decision. Either someone has done something, some circumstance brings us to a decision point.

And we stop and we think, you know, I'm a believer. We actually pause long enough to remember who we are and that this decision has implications beyond the moment. Well, sometimes we know what the right thing is to do.

We know we shouldn't flash into anger, we shouldn't get impatient, we shouldn't fly off the handle, we shouldn't lose our composure, lose our peace, lose our happiness. We know that. And it's like someone coming up and saying, Don't let your mind get occupied with things on earth.

Think about the things in heaven where Christ is. But at that moment, the knowledge that what I'm about to do or what I'm in the midst of doing is wrong doesn't give me the power to stop. If anything, it just frustrates me because on top of everything else, now I realize I'm in the midst of a big spiritual failure as well.

And that doesn't typically make things any better. The principle is that the power to implement, the power to obey, the power to fulfill these exhortations is in the truth that precedes them. The power to fulfill our calling lies in the truth that's communicated to us about the plan of God.

So that when the chips are down, we can't always just say, Well, I know what I should be doing. Sometimes even if you do the right thing, you have to do it for the wrong reasons because you can't think of any other way to do it. You think, Well, I know that giving this person the tongue lashing that they deserve is a sin, so I'm just going to bite my lip.

And so then you just sulk and give them the silent treatment. Well, I'm not committing any sins of the tongue. And you just go along and you're just boiling and committing tenfold the number of mental attitude sins because you didn't get it off your chest.

This is one of the things, and I will digress here just briefly, because this is one of the problems in our Christian culture and Christian society today. We have found ways to get people's behavior to conform, just like the Pharisees did. We have found ways to motivate people.

We can do something with them. We can train them. We can give them psychology.

We can give them counseling. We can give them chemicals. We can alter their brain chemistry.

We can do things to get people's behavior to conform to the outward norm. But that's not the battle. The fact that you can calm someone down so that they don't have outbursts of anger and outbursts of rebellion, you can put your child on Ritalin and get them to song-ambulate their way through the day, and you say, well, now this is much better.

No, it's not. That's not a victory for the Word of God. That's not a reflection of the glory of God.

That doesn't conform to the... It avoids. It jumps out of the whole realm of opportunity for parents and children to learn the things of God and to learn where do you have a parallel in the Word of God for take a pill. It's not there.

The Word of God doesn't claim to be a lot of things. It's not an auto-mechanic manual. It's not a scientific textbook.

It's not a history or a geography. What it is is food for the human soul of Christians. What it does claim to be is the answer for any mental challenge you face.

The Bible claims that for itself. It has the power to renew. It has the power to transform.

It has the power to cleanse. It can remove evil from your soul and from your mind, from your thought patterns, from your heart. It has divine power to restore, to renew, to cleanse, to build up, to generate growth, to generate fruit.

Nothing but the Word of God can do that. But people are quick and ready to run on substitutes. And they say, but look at the results.

Look at the benefit. Look at how this turned out. If you produce a result without the means, which is faith and the Word of God, it's still sin, even though it looks great.

You say, look, here we had a kleptomaniac. We put him through the 12-step program. Now he doesn't steal anymore.

Here was a woman that was a nymphomaniac. We put her through a 12-step program. Now she's not a nymphomaniac anymore.

Here's someone who was a homosexual. Now they're not into homosexuality. Look, they've got

short hair, used to be a drag queen, got all dressed up.

They've got a marriage going and attending church and everything. It isn't that wonderful. Well, perhaps.

But what was the means used to effect that change? If it wasn't the truth of the Word of God and that individual's faith in it, if it was a big support group pulling this person out of the life and into another place, that's glory for the support group, but it's not glory for God. And people don't like to hear that today because they think that the end justifies the means. If the end looks good, well, then the means must be good also.

If you can get someone to walk down an aisle and make a verbal profession of faith in Christ, well, then any means you use to do that, if you had to tell stories that aren't really true or if you had to use some kind of an emotional tool, you had to go fishing and find something in their psyche to motivate them to stand up and walk down the aisle, whatever it took, it's good. Well, it's not. People can find ways to curb their temper.

They can find ways to rein in rebellion. They can find ways to cut short sins of the tongue and so forth. But the only thing that does internal rehabilitation is the Word of God.

And if we want to fulfill these exhortations, we can spend a lot of time. I consider going to each one of these terms. We've got putting off anger, putting off wrath, putting off malice and blasphemy, what is filthy language out of your mouth and so forth.

I could spend a lesson on each one of those words and show you all the other places in the Bible where they're mentioned, the context and so forth. But we pretty much know what this is talking about, don't we? We know what a good, healthy mental attitude is and what the life is that needs to be led before God. Our problem isn't understanding what the good path is and what the bad path is.

Our problem is actually getting our feet to land on the good path consistently and not constantly failing and tripping and stumbling. So one of the things we can see in the pattern of Paul's letters, indeed in the pattern of the whole Word of God, is it's just like Jesus said, you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free. Paul packs the front end of his letters with truth.

And as we talked about last week, this is transforming truth. A lot of times it shifts the landscape in our soul. You can think of, at least I think of the soul as a landscape, like a painting, where there are mountains and plains and valleys and hills and rocks and paths and things.

There are certain places where things can move very smoothly and easily. There are other places where things are very difficult. There can be hard rocks and high mountains and cliffs and the terrain is almost impassable.

Each of us has a heart and a soul that has a unique geography to it. Some of us, patience comes

easy just by nature. For other people, patience is a virtue too high to be attained.

Some of us just wake up in the morning bubbly and joyful. Others of us wake up in the morning and it just doesn't seem like it's going to be a very good day. So we're all built differently.

But what the Word of God does, it can go in there. When you get up in an airplane, you see men with little bulldozers and they're road graders. It seems like a big deal when you're standing there at the construction site.

You say, wow, look how deep this hole is they dug. Look at this big mound of earth they turned up. But you get up in an airplane and it's just such tiny ant work down there on the surface of the planet.

We can't move mountain edges. We can't fill in big canyons. We can't move lakes.

The biggest thing we can do maybe is build a big concrete dam. Those are some of the most impressive human structures. But the Word of God can actually change the physical landscape of our soul.

It reminds us of what it says over in Isaiah where the rough places are made smooth. Every valley shall be exalted and the crooked shall be made straight. The Word of God can do that because in the Word of God is the power of God.

He is the creator. If he made it, he can fix it. You have a computer or an appliance or a car or something and it's broken, the experts who know how to put it together are the people who built it.

Go to the dealer. Go to the manufacturer. Say, I need a part for this.

I need it fixed. God knows how to fix our soul and he's put that power in his Word. So for us, the challenge is, I used to think that the challenge was, well, when the chips are down and the pressure is on, I've got to remember the principle of the doctrine or I've got to run through my 13 points on the doctrine of baptisms or the seven different kinds of death in Scripture or I've got to try to memorize all the points and all the things that I can pull up into my conscious mind and apply.

What didn't dawn on me until later is that meditation on these things and study of these things changes the landscape in your soul so that it becomes a natural response when a situation occurs. I wanted to clarify one of the things that we were talking about last week. This doesn't mean that we no longer have to stop and think or stop and make conscious application from time to time, but I think we've under-emphasized and we've failed to point out how much of God's transformation is our nature, the change of our nature.

Someone may, by nature, be very impatient and very short and curt and quick to criticize, quick to judge. Someone who's built that way can't just grab a principle or a doctrine off the top shelf of

their consciousness when somebody does something very irritating. They can't just say, oh, that will keep them in perfect peace, which might have said anything.

When you're all irritated, this is what people have talked about. Oh, well, I'm in sorrow. I don't want people coming up and quoting verses to me when I'm bereaved and I've lost a loved one.

I don't want someone quoting verses. Well, your conscious mind can do that to you sometimes. You're in the midst of a big failure or a sin and you know it and your mind comes up and says, well, here's a verse that says what you're doing is just utterly, totally wrong.

For me, it just ticks me off even more. Well, just add the failure to everything else I'm doing wrong and I'll just have to confess it all later. The thing we overlook is that if we're diligent, if we seek those things which are God, if we spend time, it doesn't even have to be a lot of time, but we need to spend time meditating on the things of God, sending our mind into the heavenly realms to think about the things that count and to refresh in our minds just the way the Apostle Paul does in this letter.

Refresh in our minds the truth of the Word of God. Then we gain, and we have as a possession, the ability to fulfill these commands from the heart, from our nature, because it will transform our nature. This is one of the exhortations we have in this chapter.

Paul says in verse 12, Therefore, as the chosen of God, as the elect of God, in Colossians 3.12, Holy and beloved, put on tender mercies. How do you just put on tender mercies? It's not like a coat hanging on the hook there and you just, oh, tender mercies, here we go. I'll just put that on.

Now I'm full of tender mercy and compassion and kindness and humility and meekness and longsuffering. How do you fulfill the command to put on an attitude? We've talked about this before in the command to love, the great commandment that Jesus gave the disciples. By this, all men will know you're my disciples, that you love one another.

Well, I can't just will myself to love something that I don't have a natural affection for. A lot of people try that and it's a very painful discovery to find out that you can't will yourself to love something even though you know you ought to. You can't just make yourself love.

So how do you put on love? How do you put on tender mercies? We have to let God inject that power into our souls and it doesn't come from directly pursuing that love. It comes from the truth. Let's take an example of just what we've seen in this past chapter or so.

You remember those imperatives that we pointed out at the beginning tonight? Live in Him. See to it that no one takes you captive. See to it that no one judges you, that no one disqualifies you.

Seek the things above. Set your mind on things above. Put to death these earthly things.

Put away the malice and anger and so forth. What is the context in which these exhortations,

these imperatives are set? Well, look back at... You remember, of course, the statements that Paul made in chapter 1 and we went over those in great detail. This is where that pays off.

You remember all the time we spent on the doxologies in chapter 1 and the point about looking at Jesus Christ from the standpoint of His divinity standing in heaven looking toward earth and the standpoint of His humanity standing on earth looking toward heaven and how He bridges that gap? We think, well, that's a wonderful theological truth, but here I am trying to keep myself from committing mental sins and trying to curb my tongue and not hurt people with my mouth and not cut people down or not deceive and try to defend myself and put the best face on things and try to gloss over my failures with my tongue and these kinds of things. How does that... Where do those two things meet? Well, this is what Paul has done. If you look at this, just the first two chapters, two and a half chapters that we've looked at, look at how many declarative statements of truth Paul puts in there because he knows this is the ammunition.

This is the power that's going to enable us to fulfill these demands. So he talks in that section of chapter 1, verses 19 through 23. Look at all of the things that he says about the Lord Jesus Christ.

It pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell. By Christ, all things are reconciled to God. Things on earth are reconciled to God through Christ.

Things in heaven are reconciled to God through Christ. How? He makes peace through the blood of His cross. So things in heaven are reconciled to God by the blood of the cross.

Even though Christ didn't die for the angels, in some way, shape, or form, things in heaven are reconciled to God by the blood of the cross because it's an example. In the same way that God dealt with the Israelites, He didn't deliver me from bondage in Egypt and take me through the Red Sea, but it serves as an illustration. It teaches me about my salvation, doesn't it? Well, in the same way, what Christ did on the cross, dying for us and redeeming the human race, teaches something and reconciles something in the heavenly realms.

That's the truth. Look at all of the things that are said just in that one verse. Then he goes on in verse 21 of chapter 1. You used to be alienated and an enemy in your mind by wicked works, but God has reconciled you in the body of His flesh through death.

How did He reconcile me? How did He get rid of that problem I had of being alienated and an enemy in my mind? Well, He, in the body of His flesh through death, reconciled me. It was the physical death of Christ, the death that He died in His human body on the cross. That's a profound truth.

You can meditate on it. I thought it was a spiritual death. There are a lot of things going on in Christ's death on the cross, but His physical death played an important component.

The next time we take communion and look at the bread, and this is my body which is broken for you, what does that body do when it's broken? The death that Christ dies on the cross. It frees me from alienation. It frees me from enemyship.

It is that crushing of His body on the cross that gained me freedom from the power of sin. It is His goal to present me and you holy and blameless and above reproach in His sight. You think, well, if God can see half of what I can see about myself, how could I possibly be holy and blameless and without reproach? The power of Christ's death on the cross is greater than any failure I can commit.

And if God applies the work of Christ, it wipes out my puny mistakes and my puny failures. If we continue in the faith grounded and steadfast and not moved away from the hope of the gospel, there's going to be forces. Apparently the conflict that's being resolved in heaven by Christ's work on the cross, that work can be undone in our experience.

Not losing salvation, but we can fail to experience the deliverance from this present evil age if we don't continue steadfast in the faith. If we let something move us off the foundation of Jesus Christ, if we let something rob us of our hope, if we let something focus our eyes on this earth instead of on the judgment and evaluation of God. So, we can go all the way forward here.

Look at all of the statements that he makes. When he gets into chapter 2 and he says, Beware lest anyone cheat you in verse 8 through philosophy and empty deceit. Don't let anyone feed you these false ideas that take away your hope.

And then he gives more truth in verse 9. He says, Think about Christ. In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, and you are complete in Him. Don't let anybody tell you you're not complete or that it's not sufficient or that you need something else.

Christ is not enough. You are complete. He is the head of all principality and power.

So, our goal is to make these exhortations real, to implement them in our life. And to do that, we have to know where the power is, because the power is not in our will. The power is not in our volition.

When he says, Live in Him. Walk in Him. Set your mind.

Put away these things. Cut off and put to death these earthly things. Our decider doesn't have power.

It doesn't have the power to save us, and it doesn't have the power to deliver us from evil. It doesn't have the power to prevent us from sinning. What it does have the power to do is to fasten itself to where the power is, and that's the truth of God's Word.

We can decide to set our minds on things above, the truth of God, not the circumstances of earth.

It's easy to look at politics. It's easy to look at what's going on in the government or going on in society or going on.

Somebody chucked a couple of eggs at my house this past week. I could let my mind run on that and think about all the different Marine Corps ways I could identify and wreak vengeance on whoever's doing that kind of thing. Little boys climbing the fence and looking at my daughters when they're in the backyard and this kind of thing.

I could easily just let my mind run on that, but I have a choice. I can let my mind run on that or I can remind myself of some truths that I know from the Word of God. God sees all.

God knows all. God loves me and my daughters and my family. Everything that I have belongs to Him.

It's His house. Those little girls are His children, and He knows how to protect them. He knows who throws what and who climbs what and who's there in the middle of the night and whatever kind of vandalism may or may not take place.

He is fully aware. He knows right where they live. He has the ability to confront them and give them the opportunity to rescue themselves from whatever unhappiness is making them do those things.

I can pray for them that they will come to a relationship with God and receive the things that they have obviously not gotten from their parents by way of training and by way of instruction in the things of God. I can turn my mind to positive things. I don't have to dwell on injustice.

I don't have to dwell on what wrongs have been done to me or what wrongs I have done, but I have to make that choice. I can't choose to be loving, but I can choose to think about the God of love. I can't choose to be patient, but I can think about the God who is infinitely patient, who's put up with the human race, with all of its tawdry, raggedy failures and rebellions and insufficiencies for thousands of years, and it's never worn out his patience.

I can think about him, and when I think about the Lord Jesus Christ and what he put up with in his earthly life, when we follow the exhortation that Paul gives, Whatsoever things are good and noble and lovely and right and of good report, pure and honest, think on these things. Same thing here. And Paul doesn't just say think about good, lovely, honest things.

He tells us what they are. He interweaves them all through his letters, and you constantly find these declarative statements, and sometimes they almost seem out of context. Well, why are you talking about reconciling things in heaven when we're in the middle of trying to refute a false philosophy on earth? What's that got to do with the things in the heavenly realms? It's truth, and these truths shape the landscape in our soul.

They give us a different perspective. They stand us in a place where we're not nearly so

concerned with ourselves. We're much more concerned with what's going on in God's plan, and we see things that happen to ourselves in the context of how it fits into God's plan.

How many times have you gotten one of these envelopes in the mail, and it says, Congratulations! Ten million dollars! You're the lucky winner! And you open it up, and the more you read, the more you think, Well, gosh, I think maybe I really am the lucky winner here. I mean, it's got a check signed by the president of the company. It's got a picture of Ed McMahon or somebody on it, and my choice of three different cars.

Do I want to drive a Lexus or a Maserati or a Mercedes here? And you read and read, and somewhere in the back of your mind, you're thinking, Where's the catch here somewhere? Where's the fine print? And sure enough, you look, and if your name has gone out of the hat a year and a half from now, all of these things are true. But you could just look at the surface of this and get all excited. A lot of people do.

They had one of these America's Videos things where they filmed the guy, and he thought he had won the lottery. His family had faked it because he was always buying these lottery tickets, and they were sick of him crying the blues that he never won, so they faked the thing and told him he had won. And then they videotaped him for like 20 minutes.

He was dancing, carrying on, and let's all go out for steaks, and I'm quitting my job. And he just was in the grip of hilarity, dancing and just throwing stuff around the backyard. We can buy more.

And he was really going nuts. And then they broke the news to him. Well, you know, it's not really true.

And then he was all embarrassed because he had said and done all these things. The point is your perception of reality shapes your attitudes, shapes your decisions, shapes your priorities. If you think you've won the lottery, you may go up and tell your boss something you may later regret.

You may do things. You know, people that think they've won a lot of money will go out and buy stuff on credit thinking, oh, well, the check's going to be here next week, and they find out it's not. So our perception of what's real shapes how we think, what we consider important.

Most people who are really big on money, if they found out they'd won a million dollars, they'd be happy for several days. You probably couldn't puncture their happiness. You couldn't wear out their patience.

You couldn't frustrate them or get them annoyed because they just keep thinking about that big check and all the things they're going to do, and they're going to quit their job and move to Florida and so forth. Well, then a different reality gets submitted. You read the fine print and find out, oh, well, it's only if out of this pot of 115 million names they pick mine, then all of these things are

true.

Well, now it's all different. And just by having a new fact in your mind, now all of a sudden you're easily annoyed, and you're easily upset, and all of your dreads and disgust with your circumstances return and so forth. So just the way you perceive what you consider to be true or what you believe to be true shapes your nature, shapes how you act.

Well, this is the principle. It's the way God built us, and we are designed as believers to have a new nature. The truth from God's word will shape our nature and give us priorities and give us attitudes and give us abilities that we don't have in our fallen nature.

And so how do we put those on? We immerse ourselves in the truth, not just at Bible class, but we need to stop and think. We need to remind ourselves, this world is not my home. I'm just a passing through.

My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue. Angels beckon me from heaven's open door, and I can't feel at home in this world anymore. We have to stop and remind ourselves.

Sometime other than Bible class or maybe when we pray before a meal or something, we need to try to be more and more aware as the day goes on of who we are and why we're here, because refreshing those truths in our mind gives us the perception of reality. This is what's really true. It's really true that God's in his heaven.

It's really true that Christ died to deliver us out of this present evil age. All of the other statements that we've seen in the first two and a half chapters of Colossians are true and they make a difference. When you stop and think about them, we are complete in him.

He's the head of everything. He's above all of this stuff. None of my circumstances came about without the express permission of God.

God allowed it. God may have caused it, but he knows about it. He's content with it.

It's okay with him that this happened. So how bad can it be? He's my heavenly father. He loves me.

If he figures it's okay for this to happen to me, why should I complain? Am I second-guessing his judgment? Do I think I know more than he does? He's overestimated my abilities here. He doesn't know me as well as I know me and he thinks I can pass this test and I know I can't. No, we start to realize that it's important for us to see things as they really are and the Word of God gives us that objectivity.

So one of the things we learn, we don't even have to go word by word and lexical entries and exegesis and everything else. In the third chapter of Colossians, when we start seeing all these imperatives, this is almost like the Ten Commandments of the New Testament. Let no one judge

you.

Let no one disqualify you. Don't let anyone take you captive. These are all addressed toward others.

Don't let others mess with your mind. Don't let others set the agenda in your thinking. Then you've got personal things that are addressed to us.

Put to death these earthly things in your mind. Put away these mental attitude sins. Put on the new man that's created in the image of its maker.

And then there are things that are oriented toward God. You have let the peace of God rule in your hearts. Be thankful.

Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. These are things that remind us of God. So you've got these three areas that are dealt with with these commands, which is very similar to what you have in the Old Testament in the Ten Commandments.

You have commands that deal with your relationship with others. You have commands that deal with your personal holiness. You have commands that deal with your honoring of God.

When I was a very small boy in California, the first time I went to vacation Bible school, they taught me a little acronym. I probably couldn't spell very much at that time. But the order in which we view the priorities of life is Jesus, others, and yourself.

And if you look at that acronym, that's where joy comes from. Jesus, others, yourself. And to remember that God's commands are summed up in love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength.

And love your neighbor as yourself. You put Jesus first. You put others first.

And yourself comes last. That's how you can fulfill the command to rejoice. We're going to pause here and take a break.

When we come back, we're going to look at just a couple of the more prominent things that Paul mentions here as to what we are to put off and what we are to put on. And we'll see that he has already given us the means in what he has said in these first couple of chapters for fulfilling those exhortations. But let's pause here and take a break.