

COLOSSIANS BIBLE STUDY

Colossians 3:1-11 (a)

Lesson #12

Introduction

This week we move into chapter 3 in our study of the book of Colossians. We'll be looking at the first 11 verses as a group which we've titled "The life of the new man." In this lesson we'll be looking primarily at verse 1, but for clarity let's read that whole group of verses:

The Life of the New Man

1 So if you have been raised with the Messiah, seek what is above, where the Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on what is above, not on what is on the earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with the Messiah in God. 4 When the Messiah, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

5 Therefore, put to death whatever in you is worldly: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, God's wrath comes on the disobedient, 7 and you once walked in these things when you were living in them. 8 But now you must also put away all the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his practices 10 and have put on the new man, who is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of his Creator. 11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.

Col 3:1-11 (HCSB)

Verse 1:

1 So if you have been raised with the Messiah, seek what is above, where the Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God.

Paul says "If you have been raised with Christ then seek what is above, where Christ is." This is a sample conditional statement. If one thing is true, then the other will be the result. Many years ago I used to write computer code, yes they did have computers back then, and the conditional statement if, then, was one of the main tools that was used in writing computer code. If a certain thing was true then something else would take place. In computer code there was no maybe, either it was true, and then the proper response was taken, or it was not, and the response was not taken. There were no gray areas, or semi-halfhearted responses. It doesn't seem to be quite so clear with human beings does it?

Why is it that in man, even when something is true the corresponding result doesn't always seem to occur as we think it should? The simple reason is that man has a dimension that the computer does not. We have emotions, we have desires, we have opinions, we have likes and dislikes, and we allow these to affect our reactions to various stimulus. And as troubling as these emotions and desires are to us, they are the very thing that distinguish us from a simple computer.

As Christians, I think there are plenty of times when we kind of wish we were more like the computer; then our responses would be more predictable, more according to the Scriptures, more according to what we believe should be our response. This would relieve us of much guilt for our often halfhearted responses, and lack of appropriate appreciation to our God who has done so much for us. If you're anything like me, you've asked yourself the question, why am I not more grateful than I am? Why am I so self concerned, and seemingly so little concerned about the feelings of the God who loves me and gave his Son to redeem me?

And the more that we learn about our Lord, the more troubled we are about our disproportionate response. A very wise man named Solomon said that "with much knowledge comes much pain." What he meant by this was that gaining a knowledge of God in increasing degrees only serves to show man how short he falls of the glory of God. Our appreciation just doesn't seem to grow proportionately with our knowledge. And this is a source of much grief to those who love the Lord. But, the Lord didn't make computers, he made human beings, in His own image and likeness, so that He would have a creature that could appreciate Him and love Him and understand Him, and worship Him forever.

Now you may be asking yourself what does this have to do with the verses that were discussing? Actually it has everything to do with the verses that were discussing. You see for man to function according to the way he was designed he must have a reason, and understandable motive to actuate his responses. No man can seek something that he does not know about or understand no man can set his mind on something that he doesn't even know exists, or understand the value of. So how do we seek what is above, how do we set our minds on the things that are above and not on the things that are on the earth? To do this it is imperative that we gain a sufficient knowledge of Christ for us to ever be able to respond to Him as He desires. One doesn't gain this kind of knowledge from simply reading it in a book, or being told by words. The kind of knowledge we're talking about here is a hands on knowledge, it's a roll up your sleeves and get involved kind of knowledge, because theoretical knowledge can only produce a kind of academic result. It lacks the ability to touch us right where we live and to elicit in us a passionate heartfelt response.

For example, we've probably all seen pictures on television of hungry starving children, and been asked to send a financial donation. Maybe we did and maybe we didn't, but if those children lived next door to us, and they came to our front door and asked us for food, who among us wouldn't respond and give them anything that we have? I think you might recognize now where I'm going with this conversation. We're still talking about how it is that we as humans can come to seek that which is above, and invisible to us, as truly and passionately as that which we see immediately around us.

Let me use another example from the scriptures. We're all familiar with the story that Jesus told about the prodigal son. We've heard many sermons about this passage. But, for the sake of our discussion, I'd like to use just one aspect of this parable of Jesus. It talks about a son who lived with his father who apparently had considerable property and assets. We aren't told anything about the lifestyle of the family, but whatever it was, it wasn't what the youngest son desired in his heart. Although he apparently was well off, he wanted something that he didn't have. He wanted to experience a carefree lifestyle of pleasure and indulgence, and that was where his heart was. He wasn't ever going to be happy and contented, let alone appreciative where he was, unless he had tried that carefree life of pleasure for himself. Apparently his father understood that because he did something unheard of for that culture, when he gave his son his portion of his inheritance even before he had died, and allowed him to take it and leave with little or no resistance.

Now no matter what you might conclude is the main moral of this story, nevertheless the effect on the life and attitude of the son is dramatic. After all his money had been spent on the lifestyle that he sought, he came to see the consequences of such a life. He ended up working out in a field for someone he didn't even know tending after swine. He had so little money that he couldn't support himself and ended up longing for some of the pig slop to eat. It was at this point that this young man learned first hand what he probably knew intellectually already, and that is that actions have real consequences. But only first hand experience was able to impress him as to just exactly what this meant.

Suddenly that which had seemed to be of little value to him, his home and family and security, built on a life of sensible actions and righteousness rather than indulgence, began to appear valuable and desirable in a way that it never had before. His heart had desired to be free and unfettered, and he had felt restricted in his father's house, but now he began to see that as valuable and even desirable to his heart. He had left his father's house with one set of values and affections, but was now eager to return with a whole new mindset. That which had appeared worthless and even offensive to him had now become the true desire of his heart. He had tried the life of sin firsthand and found for himself that the wages of such a life are death.

Now he desperately longed to go back home and find even just a tiny vestige of that life that he had squandered. Even though he was afraid and ashamed of himself, he returned seeking only a simple job for his father, since he had already squandered his inheritance. He was amazed at his father's response when he returned. Expecting either outright rejection or at least severe rebuke, instead he found a waiting, loving father who received him back with great joy.

Why did his father act this way? Shouldn't he have severely rebuked and chastised him? The answer is yes, that's certainly what he deserved for his actions, but his father had a perspective that no one else had. He loved his son dearly, and his desire was for the long term result, not the immediate appearance. He realized that his son had left the home with an eye and heart set on a life of sin, but had returned with a whole new attitude. He had gotten that desire out of his system through experiencing its consequences.

The home and family that the son had considered worthless when he left, was now his heart's desire upon his return. This was the whole reason that his father had allowed him to leave in the first place. Because even before he left, the son was dead in his heart to a life of righteousness, and his affections were elsewhere. But upon his return he was alive to righteousness and had died to the desire for sin. Now he was a son to be proud of. A son who could be trusted and relied on by a father who had prepared a place for him and longed to have him back.

Now we might find several interesting aspects to this story, but it's impossible to deny that what happened was a son who already had everything he needed wasn't contented with it, and longed for a life of indulgence in his heart. He was never going to be content, or grateful, for what he had as long as his desire was for something else. There was a popular song back in the 1960's that had a line that said "you don't know what you've got until you lose it."

It would be very easy to argue that Adam and Eve, in the garden of Eden, didn't know what they had until they lost it. They were innocent of sin and the lust that it invokes. But they had no possible way to appreciate just how incredibly valuable that was, since they had never experienced anything else. So their Father put a tree in their close proximity that He knew, even intended, would lead them through many a trial and tribulation, but His purpose for putting it there was that they would ultimately come to see both the value of His righteousness, and the consequences of sin. Only by first hand experience could they learn this lesson, and without learning it they would never be able to really appreciate their Father for who and what He is, and perceive the magnitude of His glory.

In the book of Numbers, chapter 11, there's an account of the Israelites coming to Moses and complaining that they were tired of the manna that God was providing for them in the midst of the desert, and they longed for the meat and other good food they used to have back in Egypt. Moses went to God and said that the people whom God had put under his care were more than he could bear and asked God to take his life. Their constant complaining and lack of appreciation to God had made Moses weary of life. God responded by telling Moses that He would indeed send them some meat to eat in the way of quail, and He would give it to them until it "came out their noses."

It's an undeniable fact that mankind doesn't really learn much from history. Even when we know something intellectually we still tend to ignore it and go right on with what we want rather than what we know. As irrational as it may be, nevertheless it is by trial and error that most of life's important lessons are learned, or shall we say confirmed.

Is there a parent in the world who hasn't allowed their children to try some things as they were growing up that they knew were impossible, or even slightly harmful, so they would learn from trying them, valuable lessons in life? We don't expect our children to grow up into responsible and honorable adults by reading books alone, even the Bible must be put into practice in the tangible world by physical actions. That's the purpose for the scriptures. They're written for our instruction as to life and practice, not just for abstract mental entertainment. And as such, first hand experiences are required to learn what makes those abstract principles subjectively valuable.

Have you ever considered that the entire time period between the disobedience of Adam and Eve, up to the time of the return of Jesus Christ might just be considered the growing up period for humanity, established by God for the very purpose of teaching His chosen children, by hands on experience, the subjective value of His perfect righteousness? So that they will be "made ready", through all those experiences, both good ones and bad ones, to take their place with Him in that eternal kingdom of sinless perfection. Made ready in what sense?

In the sense that they've finally learned to be perfect themselves and achieved victory over sin? Well that might be the logical conclusion, but that's not what happens in the real subjective world of mankind. The true thing we learn from all these experiences is that we will never reach such lofty heights by our own capabilities, and no human ever born even can. We were designed, born, and predestined to fail at achieving perfect righteousness by our own efforts alone, apart from God's intervention. And this itself is the lesson. It teaches two absolutely mandatory truths for anyone to be ready to inherit the kingdom of God.

First, that its not possible to earn it on our own merits because God intentionally put it outside the reach of our own capabilities. This just upsets some people to no end, who argue that it's just not fair, and their God would never be unfair. They just don't get it, it's not about fair or unfair. These people can't, or just won't, see past the immediate and temporal

things of this day and age, to the unseen things that are eternal. (2Co 4:18) The Almighty God of creation has both the right and the power to raise up and train His own children for their ultimate and eternal purpose by whatever means are most appropriate in His sight. This understanding of our situation of utter hopelessness, and then our complete submission to God's sovereign right to put us in that condition, is a mandatory lesson in the preparation of the children of God to take their eternal place.

Second, it's only after learning, and fully accepting, the first lesson that those children can come to realize, and really treasure in their hearts, the value of the gift of God's righteousness by His grace. It's the full knowledge, gained from both scripture and from life experience, that salvation is totally of the Lord, and attainable by no means but His sovereign grace. And attributable in no part whatsoever to our own efforts. Even the will to believe, the very faith itself, was His gift, and not sought, instigated, empowered, or even possible, by our own doing. (Eph 2:8, Phil 2:13)

It is these two essential understandings, and all the events of a lifetime lived in fallen bodies of flesh, that make God's elect children ready. Ready refers to that state of mind that can truly and fully appreciate who God is and what He's offered to His children. A mind that has been subjected to enough of the failures of the flesh to really hunger and thirst for righteousness, and has no desire whatsoever for sin, but rather has learned to hate and detest it. This is what makes God's children "ready" to take their places in His eternal kingdom. Like the prodigal son, we must be made to see our eternal home as valuable and desirable, far and away above anything that sin might seem to offer. Those who are there (the kingdom) must want to be there above anywhere else in existence, and love the One who put them there with all their hearts, all their souls, all their minds, and all their strength. In the eyes of God, this is what "ready" means to Him.

While this is an abstract state of mind, it certainly isn't grasped or achieved apart from a subjective battle throughout our lifetimes. We'll never get there just by studying our bibles and talking about it alone. These things are a must, but they're only one part. One-half of the equation. The other half is that day to day subjective struggle with sin that builds this abstract principle and gives it more than just an academic meaning. It is within this lifetime of flesh and blood life that the righteousness of God is intended to be written into our minds and fused into our hearts.

Do we fully understand now the scope of what these verses we're studying are telling us? What's meant by the words "**seek what is above, where Christ is, and Set your minds on what is above, not on what is on the earth.**" In fact, it could be easily argued that if we aren't doing this then we're probably not growing in readiness. Now make no mistake, He's coming in His own time whether we're personally ready or not. First Corinthians 3 and second Corinthians 5 speak of genuine children of God, and evaluates their works during their lifetimes. There are many who will find that what they have done in their lives will be considered wood, hay, and straw, which are metaphors for works that are not able to withstand the test of fire, and are burned up. It says the children will still be saved, but they will have lost much rewards. It doesn't specifically identify these rewards, but any potential reward bestowed by the Lord isn't something we should want to risk losing.

I had a good friend in a former church that used to often joke that he made it into the kingdom of heaven, but the smell of smoke was on his coattails. He thought this was funny, but honestly, I always found it rather distressing. Is there really anyone who's satisfied to just barely make it into the kingdom of God? To have indulged in sin so casually, and sought the Lord so dispassionately, that entrance was in question? I hope this was just a joke, and I'm sure that it was, but I myself surely don't want to promote, or condone, any such ideas, even if it's in the form of a joke. Because this kind of joking only serves to reinforce the 21st century, Laodicean, lukewarm attitude of the churches; which really see themselves as being rich, and having need of nothing, and not realizing that in the eyes of God they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. (Rev 3) These are churches filled with people who are focused not on the things above but on the things of this world, and on that bases consider themselves well to do. Model Christians.

But in the eyes of God a model Christian is one who recognizes his sin and agonizes over it. Striving every day to put it to death. Yes, there's a time to laugh and a time to weep, but when considering our sin, and its impact on our Savior, its no time for laughter but for weeping. Also, one who hasn't left the passion of his first love and looked back to his place here on earth. One who daily labors in the word and earnestly puts everything in his life to the test of scriptures.

And one who is even prepared to forfeit his life for the name of Jesus Christ, if called by Him to do so. How many of these kind do you know? And better yet, are you and I one of them? It is my heart's desire that you dearly want to be that kind of Christian. And that your life, and your actions, and your affections, are distinctly leading in that direction.

Therefore let us take to heart the admonitions of Christ, to seek those things that are above and not here on this earth. Let's learn what it truly means to seek the things above, to really set our hearts and minds on those things, and we'll begin to grow in our faith and be made ready to take our place in that eternal kingdom. To Him be the glory forever. Amen