

MY HEART, CHRIST'S HOME

by Steve Zeisler

The Scriptures frequently declare an important truth: The most important things about us are invisible. No one can apprehend the critical issues that determine who you are and what you do by looking at you, touching you, or using any of their other senses. Your history is invisible; you might have a few snapshots taken at various times in your life, or you might even be recorded on videotape, but these are only minute portions of your life that have been captured in any way so as to be seen. Yet what you think and believe about yourself and the complex set of emotions that drive your feelings and influence your actions are made up a great deal of your history: how you have been treated, what you have been taught, places you have been, and ideas that you have embraced. Nobody can see your goals, what you long for, or where you're headed just by looking at you. Nobody knows what you feel at any deep level by looking at you. The things that make you interesting, difficult, and so forth are almost all invisible, and yet those are the most important things about you.

I was listening to an advertisement for a singles' cruise recently. It was commenting on how difficult and painful it is to try to meet people in singles' bars or to find somebody to know by any of the other means single people often use, because so much of that is based on appearance: the kind of clothes you wear, the kind of car you drive, the things that can be immediately discovered by looking. And those have so little to do with whether or not you want to know somebody even as a friend.

INVISIBLE TRUTHS

The things that are invisible and important about us may be either very good or very bad. You might be sitting next to someone right now who has loved people who are difficult to love and has hung on in hard situations under tremendous pressure. They might have done great acts of courage and accomplished remarkable things, and you don't know it. Or you might be sitting next to someone who has dark secrets of which they are ashamed and which would take your breath away if you knew. You might be sitting next to someone who ought to bear a superhero's S on their chest beneath their clothes, or they might have a "Mr. Hyde" complex that comes out of the dark at times.

In our study we're going to talk a bit about the most important invisible thing that is true of Christians: We are united with Jesus Christ. We have died and have been raised with Christ, our lives are hidden with him in God. These realities cannot be proved by how you look; nothing you can measure, touch, and show other people. Union with Christ is the greatest truth imaginable, but it is one that we have to choose to believe and act on because it can't be seen.

DIED AND RAISED WITH CHRIST

Last week we talked briefly of Colossians 2:20-23. Let's read it again:

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)---in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Paul is saying, "Why do you listen to some bogus religious authority telling you what to do, where to go, what meetings to show up at, how to dress, what to eat or not eat, and hundreds of other such things? Where did his authority in your life come from if you have died with Christ? And why do you care about the discipline of merely outward behaviors that doesn't address itself to whether change has taken place within?" These commandments concern things that are going to burn up someday; there is nothing eternal about them.

That kind of merely external discipline succeeds only in appearing to be valuable; but it ultimately does nothing at all for the hateful parts of us. It doesn't deal with the flesh, the heart that wants to do the things that are wrong.

Now we see the corollary to that point in chapter 3, verses 1-4:

If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

This is an extraordinary announcement. You have been raised with Christ if you are a Christian, and some very important things flow from knowing that is the case. The language that speaks of Jesus' being raised up and seated at the right hand of God superficially suggests distance as if it were in terms of space. That's really not the idea here. Jesus was raised from the horrible, destructive reality of the grave to the highest heights, to the right hand of God. It is a description of his authority and his greatness, the supreme place Christ occupies in both the old creation and the new creation (recall 1:15-23). So if we are raised up with him, it means that we have been taken from being judged as a criminal, executed, and buried, from all that was wicked in us; and we have been raised with him not through space but inwardly, invisibly. Our dying and being raised with Christ is hidden with him in God until the Lord is glorified. There is a period of time when we have to live with not being able to see this truth; and yet we can believe it, love it, and make choices based on it. We are looking forward to the day when Jesus will be completely glorified, and everything that is true of us will be made plain as well.

WHAT TO SEEK

We are told to do two things in verse 1: First we are to keep seeking the things above, or as the New International Version (NIV) says, to set our hearts on the things above. Secondly, we are to think about the things above, that is, to have our minds engaged in the process. (We will come back in a moment to the things that are above.) To "keep seeking" these things speaks of passion and involvement. It must be a choice that matters very much to us. We must not let the importance of our union with Christ fade. And it follows naturally that our minds ought to be given over to the things above: the way we judge what is true and what is false, what is valuable and what is not. Our convictions, ideas, and standards of judgment need to be in accordance with the things that are above.

There is a contrast as well: "Set your mind...not on the things that are on earth." The things on earth are also invisible. Paul isn't talking about material things, but about the fleshly ideas or earthly points of view that stand as alternatives to the things above. These are the things that drive us to love ourselves instead of the Lord, the ways we choose patterns of sin, the ways we ruin ourselves and others, and the power of sin to persuade us to live lives that we hate and that God hates. We must choose the things above and avoid the things on earth, ultimately putting them to death as Paul will say in the next paragraph.

Do you believe that your life is hidden with Christ in God? Do you see these words, written to Christians centuries ago, as true of you? I spent much of last week struggling with a loss of confidence, a feeling that my judgment was horrible and that everything I touched was going to come out wrong. At one point I had to deal with a mechanic who I found out later was a crook. I kind of sensed that and thought, "I'm no match for this guy. I'm going to be taken for everything, and I don't know what to say; I'll go in and make a fool of myself." I felt defeated before I had even had a conversation with him. It got to the point that if someone even arched their eyebrow at me I would wonder what it meant! Meanwhile I was studying this material on union with Christ, dying with Christ and being raised with him. And I finally found myself having to deal with these ordinary little anxieties by going back and appropriating these truths. I had to say, "My life is hidden with Christ in God, and the day of his glorification will be the day of my glorification. That's who I am, and I have every right to seek the things above and to turn aside from the things on earth. If I am holy, beloved, and chosen of God [see verse 12], then I can deal confidently with the mechanic. I can have ordinary conversations with people, carry out my role as a pastor, and expect my life to be useful to the Lord instead of feeling shot down before I even begin."

Anxieties, uncertainties, and self-doubt are things that are on earth. Something was telling me that I was valueless and no good at anything, so what was the use of trying. Something was selling me that version of me. But it was a lie; my flesh was getting access to my mind to make me believe these things about myself. So I needed to rejected one version of me in favor of the other version of me. You can probably identify some patterns of flesh that at times have power to persuade you to think of yourself as you are not. But if we are Christians, we are united with Jesus Christ, and everything that is true of him---his death which paid for our sins, the power of his life in being raised from the dead, and his being seated at the right hand of God---is true of us. That is who we are. It is critically important that we understand ourselves in that sense.

When we get to verse 12 and following we're going to look at a list of the things above, the heavenly things. But first we're going to talk about a list of things that are on earth and that we need to put to death, to thrust away from us. Verses 5-11:

Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come, and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him---a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

Because we have been raised in him, we have the right, the authority, and the requirement to put to death the fleshly program resident within us. It is not who we are. It is a lie. We are not required to do what our flesh tells us to do because it no longer has ownership of us. We need to reject its influence; deliberately and actively put to death its ideas, its pressures, and the temptations to misunderstand ourselves and then to act terribly as a result.

SEX AND ANGER

The phrase, "consider the members of your earthly body as dead," is translated better in the NIV: "Put to death...whatever belongs to your earthly nature." Then we have two lists as the paragraph unfolds, two main issues that Paul is going to speak of from our fleshly nature: sex and anger. Now, just knowing myself and my experience as a pastor in talking with Christians in various ways in the church, if there are two great areas where Christians very often struggle to believe that they are raised with Christ and to put to death the flesh, they are these very issues. Difficulty in admitting struggles with such sins lead to phoniness and hypocrisy. There are patterns of behavior in these areas that we keep secret from other people because we are ashamed of them, and so we never really put them to death. We are not as we appear to be, and therefore even our friends can't help us because nobody knows the truth. These two areas come up over and over again for everybody, but especially for Christians, because it's so difficult for us to ask for help in them.

The first list consists of things that have to do with sexual sin: immorality (which is the general word for sexual sin), impurity, evil passion, evil desire, and greed. Greed is really the word covetousness, and given its place in this list, it probably has to do with coveting someone sexually, or wanting someone you ought not want.

The question is, if you have died with Christ, have been raised with him, and are united with him, what right does impurity have to march around in your head, putting pressure on you to act in ways that are inappropriate? Or who gave that right to covetousness, wanting someone who is married to another, envying their relationship?

So instead of just disciplining the external behavior, what Paul is saying is to put to death the passions. You are raised with Christ, and your life is hidden with him in God. You will be glorified with him someday. Even though you may feel unloved in this world, you are loved very deeply. Even though you may feel lonely and

unappreciated, you are not lonely and never will be lonely again; you have a companion who will go everywhere in your life with you, he cares so much for you. Therefore, these passions do not belong in you. They no longer have the right to command you. And so when you begin the process---and it is a process; this does not happen overnight---of putting to death the ideas, passions, and longings that don't belong there, the sinful actions as a matter of course will stop as well.

The second list has to do with the power of malice, anger, or hatred or resentment of another to take over our lives. Over and over I find Christians ashamed of periods when they hurt people close to them by venting anger and using abusive language. Those sins are in this list: "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech. What right does hatred of another person have to fill your thoughts? What right does malice have taking over your life, hurting another person in the process? It doesn't belong there because you have been raised with Christ. (Paul will say later on that it is the forgiveness that we have received that becomes the source of forgiveness for another.)

Let me say before moving on that both sex and anger are right at times. Our sexuality is a gift of God; it is sexual sin that is being spoken of here. And there is nothing wrong with anger; anger is sometimes appropriate. God expresses his anger at unrighteousness. Jesus expressed his anger in the temple. Scripture says to be angry but not sin. But what happens is that our flesh takes ownership of our mind and makes us want to sin, especially in these areas.

NO DENIAL

Paul raises a very important issue beginning in verse 9. He says, "Do not lie to one another." I think what he is talking about here could very well be what we call denial in modern jargon. Much of what goes along with improper anger and sexual desires is denial that they exist. Again, we're so ashamed of these habits, patterns, and dark areas of our lives that we live lives of widespread denial even to ourselves and certainly to other people. But we're never going to get any help at all if we don't stop lying or denying what is true.

He continues, "...since you laid aside the old self." Now, the point is, if we are not the old self anymore, then we don't need to be embarrassed and hide what it was like or try to pretend that it was attractive. We have laid it aside anyway; it's not who we are anymore. He goes on to talk about the categories that don't exist anymore: Jew, Greek, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, and so on. It doesn't matter what we came out of---our culture, our economic standing, what language we spoke; perhaps we had a rough and ruined background filled with all kinds of awfulness, or perhaps a very refined and attractive background. It doesn't make any difference because "Christ is all and in all."

The wrath of God descends on wickedness. This nation and every other routinely rejects what God says is valuable, and eventually it falls apart. The wrath of God is not a lightning bolt thrown at a specific person for a specific act. It is his hatred of sin, the slow and certain antagonism to it that he has built into the creation. Cultures will decay, fall apart, and self-destruct. Individual lives will, too. It is an inevitable consequence of sin. This reminder also is reason for us to be willing to put to death what is no longer true, yet invisibly influences us.

PUT OFF, PUT ON

We must make two choices to live a healthy Christian life: (1) Actively say no to the awful things on earth; the invisible, ugly, horrible persuasions that need to be crucified. And (2) choose the things above. You can't just ignore the old self or expect it go away, and put on the clothing of righteousness over it. Put off the old and then put on the new. But then the question is, what are we to put on? What are the things above that we are to keep seeking and set our minds on? What are some truths that we can embrace because we are raised with Christ? Verse 12:

And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of

unity. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

It is as if Paul can't help himself--he has to keep coming back to this business of identity. He can't just start with a new list of positive activities; he has to remind us again of who we are: chosen, holy, and dearly loved. It is as those people that we are to do these things.

It's very important to realize the emphasis on community in this passage, that together we must be recognizing who we are in the Lord, setting our minds on the things above, and putting to death that which is earthly in us. We must be encouraging one another and singing to one another. There is a power in music to encourage and teach as we sing songs of the words of Scripture. You learn the words of Scripture that way; they penetrate deeper.

The language Paul uses tells us another important thing in this passage: Becoming mature in Christ is a process that is going to take time. There are things to learn and battles to fight. There are evil patterns in your life that are very secure because they have been there a long time and the ruts are worn very deep in you. It will be a difficult business to put them to death; weaknesses that you have given in to over and over again will not quickly change. That is why we need to be patient with each other, forbearing, and forgiving of one another; that is why there has to be a deep commitment to let God grow the other person at the rate he will. As soon as we see growth in ourselves we can't give way to impatience with those who are still struggling. We have to be on their side and be an encouragement to them.

THINGS ABOVE

He says, "...put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity." Patience and forbearance describe putting up with something negative. Love, on the other hand, is a positive term. It means not just bearing the way people are, but caring for them, actively becoming a blessing to them.

Note the "of Christ" and "of the Lord" statements. Verse 15: "...let the peace of Christ rule." One of the issues Paul has raised is anger; the horrible business of bitterness, resentment, loss, fury, malice, abusive speech--all the things that are so ruinous and destructive of relationships. They tear families apart. The alternative is to "...let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." Seek above the one with whom we have been united, who loves us, who rules the universe. Let the peace of Christ rule where anger once ruled. That is the positive choice we make.

Verse 16: "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you...." One of the alternatives to lustful thoughts, impurities, and evil passions are these greater truths of the riches of the word of God. If we are choosing to love someone, (the word of Christ calls us to love one another), we can't be desiring to take advantage of them sexually or in any other way. So much of what makes people vulnerable to sexual sin is some sense that they have been passed over; they have lost out on something; so now they need some pleasure, connectedness, or banishment of loneliness. And yet if we partake of the enormous riches of the word of Christ every day, then we have a way of filling the void left by the passions we have to put to death.

Finally, verse 17: "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father." This is a wonderful summary. Word or deed, everything is centered in Jesus. Doing everything in his name is a great way to test ourselves. Can I say what I am about to say, think what I am about to think, or go where I am about to go in the name of the Lord Jesus? If not, then I have discovered something about myself that I have to address. What is it that is making me even consider something else? I need to go back and discover the passion that is driving it and put it to death. I need to remind myself that I am raised with Christ, such a person doesn't do what I'm thinking about doing right now. Again, we must not settle for merely external change, but aim for internal change, because we have died and have been raised with Christ.

I was reminded recently of James Thurber's classic story, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. Walter Mitty was a shy, huddled, little person who had an amazing fantasy life of doing great acts of heroism and bravery. He would be carrying out his normal, perfectly run-of-the-mill activities, and at the same time imagining himself to be the greatest, most extraordinary of heroes, accomplishing fantastic things. It's funny because of course it wasn't true; he was none of those things. It's the story of a fantasy life that had no touch with reality.

What is extraordinary about the Christian life is that it is true. We have died with Christ and have been raised with him. Christ is seated at the right hand of God, and he who is our life will be glorified and revealed some day. This announcement that Jesus lives in us, that the power of the Spirit is available to us, that our identity is in him, is not the secret life of Walter Mitty. We are given an opportunity to seek the things above, not things on earth. We can begin to make choices to live as we were intended to live. And we can bear with one another in the process, encourage one another, and help one another. We can stop our denial and tell the truth, getting help and making progress, because it is true.

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