

(9) COLOSSIANS 2:20-3:5 – DYING & RISING WITH CHRIST

Today we continue in our Colossians Sermon series. This is Colossians chapter 2 verse 20 to chapter 3 verse 4. This is the word of God.

BIBLE: COLOSSIANS 2:20-3:4

2²⁰ Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ ‘Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!’? ²² These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. ²³ Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

3¹ Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your^[a] life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

In the passage there's a couple of terms that are worth clarifying. That is the word 'world' and the word 'body' - κόσμος and ὤμα in the original ancient Greek.

In the passage it sounds like the world is being depicted as a bad and rebellious thing to be resisted and fought against. But how does that sit with the world being described as **good** and pleasing to God in the creation account in Genesis? And how does this view sit with Jesus' declaration in John chapter 3 verse 16 that the world is loved and worth saving. **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

Well, the word 'world' is being used in two different ways in the ancient Greek. The word 'world' can mean creation – the interesting, colourful, complex, formed and filled, physical word. It can also mean all that is anti-God and set against His goodness, rule, reign and ways.

We kind of do something similar in English with the words 'world' and 'worldly'. In English we differentiate between enjoying the world and 'worldly pleasures'.

There is a goodness to creation and a very goodness to us humans because we are made in the image of God with inherent dignity, value and worth. We're made with capacity for love and kindness and creativity to do good and be a blessing.

There is also (not just a brokenness to the world) but a worldliness to the world and to us humans. That is a deliberate and wilful selfishness, self-centredness, sinfulness – set against God and His ways. This kind of world or worldliness permeates every realm and sphere and is to be resisted and fought against on the personal and institutional level. It's this later definition Paul is talking about and warning about in the passage.

In v20 Paul is also saying that there is a spiritual dimension to this worldliness. Paul, the Bible and Jesus are clear that there is a spiritual dimension to life and there are spiritual forces for good and there are spiritual forces for evil. Christianity is clear that the forces of good and evil are not equal. While evil continues for now until Jesus' return, Jesus through his death and resurrection has triumphed over the forces of evil in a decisive, once and for all, comprehensive and lasting way. This is what we read last week from Colossians chapter 2 verse 15...¹⁵ **And having disarmed the powers and authorities, Jesus made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.**

Those of us who are W.E.I.R.D.E.R. and by W.E.I.R.D.E.R. I mean the acronym - W-Western, E-Educated, I-Industrialized, R - Rich, D-Democratic, E - Ex-Christian (which is different from ex-Christ) and R-Romantic in our outlook tend to dismiss the idea of the spiritual realm and spiritual forces. There is also a tendency to do down those who do believe in these things. I think it's good for those of us who are W.E.I.R.D.E.R. to note that only 10% of the world's population believe that there is no spiritual dimension to life and that everything can simply be explained by energy and matter. That 90% of the world's population believe in a spiritual dimension to the kosmos is of course not proof that there is one, but it should give pause for thought to anyone writing off people as gullible or superstitious fools.

Christianity is very nuanced in its handling of the spiritual realm. It does not allow us to simply say, "The devil made me do it." Whilst recognising that we are all responsible for our choices the Christian framework recognises we can be influenced and tempted for ill. Which is why Jesus says, **when you pray** part of your prayer should be...**and lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil.**

I would argue that out of all world views, Christianity best acknowledges the wonder and complexity of us humans and that we are an incredible mix of physical, relational, emotional, psychological, neurological and spiritual. The Christian and Biblical framework I think is really good at recognising that these things are different and also overlap. Christianity challenges reductionist thinking and attributing the struggles we face to just one cause or saying there is just a one dimensional remedy.

For example, calling a neurological condition bad behaviour or a spiritual condition is neither God honouring or human honouring. The film *I Swear* which is in the cinemas just now tells the remarkable story of John Davidson a pioneering Tourette syndrome activist. The film gives good insight. Anyone seen it? Well worth a watch – moving, thought provoking, honest and funny and as the title suggests very sweary – certificate 15.

In the ancient Greco-Roman world, there was a powerful and prevalent view that the material world including the human body (the *soma*) was inferior, lesser, less important, more corrupted and temporal compared to the internal conscious or divine spark which was purer, nobler, more glorious and eternal. The thought was that the body was like the husk of a seed that would ultimately be discarded for the fuller, truer, higher state of life to emerge. The body (and the physical world) was in a sense a prison to be escaped. This view worked its way out in all kinds of ways.

For example - a husband could stay 'faithful' to his wife if he had sex with someone else because the body and bodily functions didn't really count, weren't the 'real' or lasting him. Temporal passions and giving in to them didn't really matter. In a sense you could be unfaithful on the outside as long as you were faithful on the inside with your eternal heart.

Here's another example – people who worked with their hands, with materials, creating or fixing something, in contact with the dirt were seen as inferior to those whose work was based on their mind – such as law, politics, philosophy. White toga'd types were thought to be more valuable and superior to blue collar, manual worker types.

Thankfully in our enlightened W.E.I.R.D.E.R. world, these views and outworkings are in the ancient past and no longer prevail. Is that true? No. This kind of Greco-Roman thinking and influence is still very present and often just assumed and not critiqued.

So, what's the answer to this kind of Greco-Roman thinking and living?
What's the alternative to doing what the pagans did in Colossae and the kind of sensual indulging that was common and Paul's taking about in v23?
The answer some said was *religion and rules!*

The thinking goes something like this...*Religions and rules and more rules are the antidote. If we follow these rules and these commands, if we deny ourselves this and that, then we'll break free from the kind of pagan hedonistic, desire and passion led living. Then we'll be one of the enlightened wise ones, superior ones, worthy ones and right with god.*

If you were coming out of licentious paganism like some of the people Paul is writing to in Colossae, you can see the appeal. There's an attraction to this is there not.

But here's the point that Paul is making – *religion and rule-based living is just as worldly and deadly as pagan passion and desire led hedonistic living. The problem of sin is that it goes much deeper than we care to think. The good news is that in Christ we have a Saviour who is much greater than we dare to hope.*

One reaction or over-reaction to hedonistic paganism was to become an ascetic. And the kind of ascetic that went way beyond the pursuit of 'the simple life'. The thinking goes something like this...*If I can just remove myself from temptations then I will be holy enough, worthy enough. Better to do without and be miserable and suffer in silence and avoid all enjoyment than find enjoyment in the wrong things! Better to live life as a continual fast from good things than to enjoy a feast and feast my eyes, mind, appetites in the wrong kind of way. Better that life is all fasting with no feasting lest I sin. If I deny myself, deny my desires, deny the flesh then I will make the grade.*

In the New Testament the word flesh σάρξ (sarx) is also used for the body. It is used in a similar way to the word Cosmos. It can mean flesh in the physical flesh and blood sense – a good and natural thing liable to wear and tear. It can also be used in the 'fleshly' sense – to describe our corrupt mis-aligned, selfish, self-centred self-indulgent desires.

The trouble with extreme Asceticism is that externalises temptation and locates sin and evil out there in the world rather than in here in the heart. It promotes the idea that withdrawal from the world is the answer, going against Jesus' call for his friends to be *in* the world but not *of* the world.

The thinking goes something like this...*What God cares about is my behaviour and the things I do or don't do. So, what I really need to do is activate all my will power, work really, really hard, white knuckle it when it comes to resisting doing what's wrong. And if I do something wrong then it's not just about repentance and being penitent....I need to do penance and do some form of self-flagellation.* Some in the ascetic sect did that physically. Many of us do that in our mind. This kind of thing...*I'm so stupid, I'm such a failure, how could God ever love or forgive me. He must be so angry, I deserve punishment. I need to be punished in some kind of way. Not till I'm sufficiently punished or I've paid the sin off will God accept me.*

This is awful, worldly and deadly. It is a rejection of Jesus' once and for saving work on the cross. This kind of thinking says *the punishment Jesus took on the cross is not enough and His atoning and saving work is insufficient.* This can leave us feeling that we need to make up the difference, that we need to save ourselves through....*More rules, me performing better, more white knuckling, me working on my behaviour.*

It sounds like Paul has this in mind as he is writing the letter. What we desperately need and what Jesus offers is a change of heart and new life in Him. Paul is saying that behavioural management can leave the heart untouched and unchanged.

²¹ 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?' ²² These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. ²³ Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Just as it is easy to remove God-given boundaries and make less of divine rules and regulations, it is easy to add to them! We're actually all inclined to do this. This human fallen nature is present in all of us. The truth is we all love to add rules to justify ourselves. Here's how this human tendency goes...*It's not good enough being progressive – to be really, truly progressive you need to do x, y and z. It's not good enough being inclusive, to be really, truly inclusive you need adhere to x, y, z otherwise you're not in! It's not good enough being a traditionalist, to be real and true traditionalist, you need to observe x, y, z - any talk of change and you're out! It's not good enough being orthodox in your particular world view, to be really and truly orthodox you need to show it in this x, y, z, way or you're a heretic and should be ex-communicated.*

Paul is saying this kind of stuff is the opposite of life-giving – it's deadly.

Here's a classic example of how we can do it as church. It's by taking a Biblical principle like honouring and revering God and making the method or application of it the more important thing. For example, some people can say *honouring and revering God is vital. When it comes to clothing dressing in your Sunday best is the way to do that. If you dress up for human royalty, you should do no less for God. If you don't dress up for God, you are dishonouring and disrespecting Him.*

I wonder if you recognise or have come across this?

But there's two grave errors with this.

The first is that the human method or application has been exalted above the divine command or Biblical principle. The second is that we don't just approach God as the ultimate Judge and supreme King, in Christ we are the beloved children of God and that's how God wants to relate with us and to us. **Our Father (abba, dad) in heaven hallowed by your name.**

Here's a story that helps with this. I think I've shared this before.

STORY: A lady called Cathy from Inverness, that I came to know quite well, shared that when she was a wee girl, her family was so poor she didn't have shoes. When she was a wee girl there was a time, she wanted to go to church because she liked the sound of Jesus.

When she tried to go, it was made clear to her on the door that her type, the type without shoes, someone who wasn't wearing their Sunday best was not welcome because it was disrespectful and dishonouring to God. So, Cathy didn't go back church for years...decades.

By the grace of God when she plucked up the courage to try again, she was met with a very different response and it was a very, very different experience where she was embraced and enjoyed the love and kindness of Jesus and the love and kindness of Christians.

Cathy came to know Jesus as her Saviour, Lord, God, King and friend.
Cathy wanted to profess faith in Jesus, to be baptised and join the church.

When she was baptised as an older lady (in the sprinkling way we sometimes do in the Church of Scotland). Cathy and the minister who was baptising her both took off their shoes and did it barefooted!

Cathy and the minister knew that she could come as she was to Jesus. That was communicated to the church loud and clear.

Cathy knew that as well as being sinned against (which she was) she was a sinner in need of forgiveness. Her forgiveness was to be found in Jesus and in Him dying on the cross for her.

She has a sense that because of Jesus, she could come to God as a beloved and blood bought child of God. Jesus' love affected her heart.

Please note, what I'm *not* saying is that behaviour isn't important. Of course it is. How we behave matters. But what matters more is what's going on in our heart. God cares not just about *what* we do but *why* we do it. Our motives, what drives us and who or what we put our ultimate trust in is more important than what we present on the surface in public. Behaviour and behavioural management is surface level. God is after our heart. This is what Paul digs into, in the next section of the letter to the Colossians. And this is what we'll dig into when we return to this series after advent. What we find is that Jesus' love and Spirit enlivens, changes and re-orders our heart and frees us. That's what happened with Cathy.

Cathy had a sense that the man-made regulations and burdens needed to be challenged for her sake, for the sake of others and for Christ's sake. She was not going to be cowed any longer.

The late Cathy had a sense that she had died with Christ and had risen into a new life with Jesus and that because Jesus rose from the dead so she would too. This is what Paul is getting at in the passage in chapter 3 verse 3.

³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Here's an illustration to finish with that helps with this...

ILLUSTRATION: Here's a piece of paper. Here's a Bible. I'm putting the paper in the Bible. You could say it is hidden in the Bible. Three points to make about this...

1. The Bible now covers the page. The page isn't magicked away. It doesn't vanish or disappear or cease to be. But it is covered. In the same way, all those who are in Christ are covered by Him. All those in Christ are covered by his righteousness, His goodness, His saving work on the cross, His blood.
2. When we look at the paper now, what we now see is the Bible. When God the Father looks at all those who are in Christ – He sees Jesus, his beloved child. In the same way, God the Father sees and loves God the son, God sees and loves you and me. Those in Christ are beloved. The Father's words to the Son at Jesus' baptism **This is my child in whom I am well pleased** become His words to us. Our status as beloved child is ensured by Jesus not by us because we are in Him.
3. Because the page is in the Bible everything that now happens to the Bible happens to the page. If the Bible rises, what happens to the paper? It rises with the Bible. In the same way all those in Christ rise with Christ.

There is an already once and forever aspect to this because Jesus has already died and has risen.

There is a daily ongoing aspect to this. Paul is aware of this and aware how much he needs and we need God the Holy Spirit's help to live in and with and for Jesus in the real world.

And there is a future (still to be fully realised) aspect to this. ⁴ **When Christ, who is your^[a] life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.** The Christian and Biblical **Hope of glory** is not that we are taken out of the world to heaven but Jesus on his return brings heaven with Him to renew and restore the world – the kosmos.

The good news is we can come as we are to Jesus.

The good news is that Jesus loves us too much to leave us as we are.

All of us are work in progress. In Christ we are saved and being saved, dead to sin and dying to sin, alive and being made alive.

Jesus is saying...*come in. Come home. Come closer. Come to the table.*

PRAY

HOLY COMMUNION