



SERMON NOTES

US N^o. 140

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Title: From Vice to Virtue

#6 in the Series on the Letter to the Colossians

1. Review

- a. Jesus Christ is the King over kings and the exaltation of Christ is interpreted as his triumph over God's archenemies – sin and ultimately death. (cf. Rev. 20:11-15) Not only does Paul reclaim the importance of Christ's exalted status as Lord over all creation (cf. Col. 1:15-20), but he reclaims the significance of the church's participation with him in his exaltation: we share in Christ's triumph over sin and death.
- b. Paul has established Christ's lordship over all things that make up God's creation, now he draws out the implications for Christian discipleship.

2. Pauline ethics are founded upon certain theological truths. In the closing verses of chapter 2 Paul reminds the Colossians that ascetic regulations are of no real value in restraining indulgence of the flesh. The only cure for sinful passions is found in the believers' experience of union with Christ.

- a. Paul's ethical teaching flows from a moral vision rather than moral rules. He is much less interested than the addressing the observance of rules, although he provides them, than he is in **being** Christian. Rom. 11:17-18, *"And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you."*
- b. *"If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God."* (v. 1)
 - i. *"Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth."* (v. 2) The idea of setting our mind means to be mentally disposed and interested in those things. We ought to be entirely engrossed with heavenly things now that we have been converted and are in Christ.
 - ii. By being in Christ, the faith community has the right goals and the transformed character sufficient to pursue God's goals.
 - iii. For Paul the problem of a moral life is practical; it has to do with the sorts of persons we are and whether we are actually able to do God's will. Therefore, Paul's moral teaching stems from his Christological monotheism – that in Christ we not only are forgiven and redeemed by God but are also transformed into new persons, capable of knowing and doing the will of God.
- c. *"For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."* (v. 3)
 - i. Since Jesus is enthroned in heaven, our thoughts and hearts are connected to heaven also.
 - ii. Believers are *"with Christ in God"* and therefore reside in a place where divine grace transforms them into a new creation, capable of doing God's will.

- d. *"When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory."*
 - i. The great eschatological hope of every disciple of Christ; life eternal with the King of kings.
 - e. The person we become in Christ and the actions we take as his disciples must always reflect what and in whom we believe; ethical choices cannot be divvied up into private and public morality. The work of grace is inside out, so that private matters of the heart are always fleshed out in the public actions of the body. For the Christian, the marketplace, the town square and their ruling elites are under the lordship of Christ too.
 - f. The parallel between the moral integration of our private and public lifestyles is the spiritual integration of the visible and invisible worlds. Paul taught that God's triumph over sin and death in Christ has already been realized invisibly in heaven and therefore must also be realized visibly on earth. Paul's exhortation of Christ's reign on earth envisions a profound confidence that Christian discipline and action engages the immoral values of this present evil age in a battle that has already been won by the exalted Lord Christ (cf. Rom 12:2; 13:11-14; Gal 1:4-5). Paul parallels the familiar Lord's Prayer, *"Our Father in heaven . . . your will be done on earth as it is in heaven..."* (cf. Mt 6:9-10)
3. Conversion from Vice. It is not enough to simply paint over the rust on an old car, the rust must be removed and rusted parts replaced before the car is painted. *"...put to death your members which are on the earth..."* This is literally *"to make dead."* *"It is far easier to drift into a sin which one does not know by name than consciously to choose one whose very title should be repugnant to a Christian."* (NT Wright)
- a. Overview.
 - i. Paul most likely drew from lists that rabbis used to guide the moral formation of young Jewish children.
 - ii. Paul advocates that for those in Christ, the old has given way to the new, vice has given way to virtue. The community's conversion into the new kingdom is indicated publicly by a change of lifestyle.
 - iii. Paul's critical point is that to live in vice rather than in Christ means to exist in a *"dominion of darkness"* where evil forces and powers shape a self-destructive life in rebellion against God's good intentions for the creation.
 - iv. Repentance is not so much about turning away from sin, but more about turning toward God. Submission to rules of self-denial can never be a substitute for devotion to Christ.
 - b. End Sexual Immorality. *"Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them."* (Col. 3:5-7) For those in Christ, the old has given way to the new, vice has given way to virtue.
 - i. The literal sense of *"members"* seems especially to involve sexual organs. This should not be viewed as a vow of celibacy, or worse, of castration to become a *"eunuch of the kingdom"* (cf. Mt. 19:12). Paul has already chided those who would inflict pain on the body to gain favor

with God (2:23). Rather in the light of 3:1-4, this exhortation refers to the radical transformation of the believer's mind, which brings a new way of understanding the body. So that we read in 1 Cor. 6:12-20 Paul's perspective on human sexuality which comes from a new perspective on the body, not only as an instrument to be used for God's glory rather than for sexual perversion (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19-20) but as the place of God's final justification where the body will be raised incorruptible (1 Cor. 6:17; 15:35-49).

- ii. The list given in verse 5, *"fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry..."* can be read backwards to see the progression of sexual impurity. Greed is often combined with idolatry because whatever is the object of greed (in this case, more and better sex) has replaced God at the center of one's life. If Christ is Lord over all things, then the disciple's passions are brought under control and centered by *"minding the things above."*
- iii. God desires a sexual revolution that will bring humanity back from sexual chaos into harmony with the Creator. (cf. Rom. 1:18-32)
- iv. *"Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience."* (v. 7) We must recognize that there are consequences for sin.
 - 1. REPENTANCE
- c. End Impure Speech. *"But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds..."* (Col. 3:8-9) For those in Christ, the old has given way to the new, vice has given way to virtue. On this point, the sins are social and not sexual, and deal largely with speech that reveals hatred toward others which usually results in broken fellowship.
 - i. James tells us that the real issue at stake when people talk with each other is not so much the verbal transmission of ideas, but how those ideas affect human relationships for good or ill (cf. James 3:1-18)
 - 1. If our speech is seasoned with heavenly wisdom and purity, then relationships can be at peace and we can expect a *"harvest of righteousness."* (cf. James 3:17)
 - 2. If our speech is seasoned by worldly wisdom, then relationships are destroyed by *"bitter envy and selfish ambition"* and the community will be in *"disorder and evil practice."* (cf. James 3:14, 16)
 - ii. Christianity is not a cult of the individual; instead, God's grace transforms people to live in right relationship with one another.
- d. The End of Vice. *"Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him"* (Col. 3:9-10) Paul makes his point by using verbs for taking off and putting on clothes.
 - i. A new humanity must put on new clothes of holiness bought by the blood of Jesus.

- ii. **For** Paul, then, the critical decision for any individual is how to become a member of God's people in Christ. The primary fruit of an individual's faith is how the believer relates to others who belong to the congregation of God's people.
- iii. The ethical renewal of the new self is nothing less than the complete restoration of God's very good purposes for human existence, which were left unrealized because of the Fall.
- e. The New Way in Christ. *"where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all."* (Col. 3:11)
 - i. This is a Pauline "Magna Carta" similar to what we find in Galatians 3:28. The faith community found in Christ is egalitarian.
 - ii. The concluding formula, Christ is all, and is in all, echoes the confession of 1:15-20 and once again lays claim to Christ's lordship over the new order.
- 4. Conversion to Virtue. Paul's tone changes from negative to positive as he shifts his attention from pagan vice to Christian virtue which reflects the natural movement of conversion out of darkness into light. Believers are transformed by the work of divine grace in people who are obedient to do God's will. This new character results in and is clearly demonstrated by transformed relationships within the church. *"It is most significant to note that every one of the graces listed has to do with personal relationships between man and man. There is no mention of virtues like efficiency or cleverness, not even of diligence or industry – not that these things are unimportant. But the great basic Christian virtues are those which govern human relationships."* (Barclay)
 - a. Be Holy. *"Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do."* (Col. 3:12-13)
 - i. This statement by Paul is religiously and politically controversial because he identifies this largely Gentile congregation with God's Israel and Messiah. Gentiles have now been included in the elect and they then have been imputed with the moral righteousness of holiness.
 - ii. Paul gives a catalog of virtues that result from the character of holiness that grace has accomplished in us: mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience in bearing with one another. One write that *"each of the five graces with which God's elect are to be clothed shows how Christians should behave in their dealing with others, particularly with fellow-believers."*
 - iii. Reconciled relationships within the faith community bear witness to God's triumph over society's corrupting influence. The mark of true Christianity for Paul is how well believers care for others, even those outside the *"household of faith."* (cf. Gal 6:10)
 - iv. These virtues include words that carry a profound emotional content referring to how one feels when responding to another in need.
 - v. *"Forgiving one another..."* then treats the problem of abusive people who need our forgiveness when our emotional tendency is to *"repay evil for evil."* (cf. Rom. 12:17-21). The holy response, prompted by grace, is to forgive because we as beneficiaries of the Lord's

forgiveness, we know from our own experience how and whom to forgive. We forgive because we are already forgiven.

- b. Be Loving. *"But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection."* (Col. 3:14) Paul specifically singles out love as the ultimate outer garment which must cover all else.
 - i. Love for others is the reverse of dishonesty toward others.
 - ii. Perfect unity is a property of God's grace, which perfectly unites the church with Christ in God. Love is the fruit of faith in Christ rather than compliance with codes constructed by human tradition.
- c. Be at Peace. *"And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful."* (Col. 3:15) If the peace of Christ rules the heart, then every decision made and every action taken will have the quality of peace. Love characterizes the community's public life, while peace characterizes its internal life. (cf. Phil. 4:7)
 - i. Hebrew concept of peace is summarized by *"Shalom."*
 - ii. Truth produces peace, while lies produce spiritual and moral frustration.
- d. Be at Worship. *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."* (Col. 3:16) The worshiping community expresses its devotion to God in two ways: instruction and celebration.
 - i. Instruction.
 - 1. Paul's ministry aims to produce congregations that will continue his ministry of the gospel elsewhere (cf. 2 Tim. 2:2). His teaching is founded and based in the Word of Christ.
 - 2. The church's teaching ministry must help its members understand all of life through a scriptural filter.
 - ii. Celebration
 - 1. Paul's set of words for congregational singing, psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, *"describe the full range of singing which the Spirit prompts."* (Lohse) His exhortation is more illustrative than technical; not giving precise instructions on *"how"* to celebrate.
 - 2. Songs are meant to complement teaching in worship. In the Christian liturgy, hymns often clarify the great themes of biblical exposition and prepare parishioners for proclamation and sacrament. In early Methodism, for instance, Charles Wesley's hymns provided the context for understanding the theological contribution of his brother, John Wesley.
 - 3. The effective purpose of worship is not experiential but rather the interpretation of and response to our heartfelt experience of divine love.
 - 4. In many congregations worship has become a spectator sport, geared to a generation fashioned by the slick tricks of the media. The "feel good" experience has replaced the hard discipline of knowing God in spirit and truth. Christians today must have minds as tough as nails, able to cut through the vapid secularism and materialism of our world with the word of truth.

- e. The Beginning of Virtue. *“And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” (Col. 3:17)*
 - i. Any rule of faith that disregards the centrality of the Lord Christ for Christianity's self-understanding cannot result in proper worship of and witness to God. Further, our active worship to God comes through him [Christ] alone—not through our congregational leaders or religious rituals and rules. This closing formula, which places the community in relationship to God through Christ, reminds us of what Paul said earlier in 3:3: the community's hope for salvation is viable only if its *“life is hidden with Christ in God.”*

5. Take-aways

- a. Eschatology matters
- b. Via grafting, the Root support us
- c. We are transformed into a new life
- d. God works from the inside out
- e. Put to death your earthly members
- f. Devotion to Christ delivers from sin
- g. End sexual immorality, Impure Speech and Vice
- h. How we relate to others is the test
- i. One people by His righteousness
- j. Be Holy, Loving, at Peace and at Worship
- k. Do all for Jesus