

Those of you who were with us last week remember that based on Colossians 2 we considered how we try to fill the emptiness of our lives with what Paul labels *“hollow and deceptive philosophies.”* In addition, he says these philosophies depend *“on human tradition and the elemental forces of this world rather than on Christ”* (2:8). Paul’s acid test for any conviction, belief, or practice, is this: Does it have Jesus the Lord as its center and focus?

This week Paul moves on to warn against a particular practice of his people. That practice is circumcision. The Apostle says that it is not needed in addition to Christ. The emptiness that we all have is filled with the fullness of Christ. *“In Christ”* we find the true meaning of our lives. Even though the Colossians were mostly Gentiles, like the Galatians they were being pressured to follow Jewish law. Others tried to convince them to add extra rules and false teachings to their faith in Christ. So, Paul’s main message to them is: *“When you’ve got Jesus the Messiah, you’ve got it all.”*

Paul clearly explains this to his readers in verses 13 & 14: *“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.”* Friends in Christ, that is all we need!

Karl Marx had an opinion that religion is like a “narcotic,” as any number of cynics and critics of faith have also said in other ways. None of us Christians like to be accused of being “so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good.” Yet here in Colossians 3:1-2 Paul urges: *“Since then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”* That is, lift your minds above things that are earthly and focus on the resurrected and ascended Lord Jesus only. Is Paul’s teaching a formula for being heavenly minded at the expense of important matters here on earth?

Even if it is much of the New Testament fights against that kind of mentality. Remember how in the Ascension story of Acts 1:11 the angels of God told the disciples: “*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*” There was, after all, much work to be done right here on earth. The Holy Spirit was going to come down here, not whisk the disciples up to wherever it was Jesus had gone. So, which is it: stop staring into heaven or start staring into heaven? Acts 1 or Colossians 3? I think the answer is “Yes.” Both.

You see, Paul doesn’t stop with heavenly things. If we read the subsequent verses of Colossians 3, we would find Paul dishing out plenty of advice about how life is to be lived here on earth. There are lots of behaviors that must not be present among believers in order to make room for other actions and attitudes that exude the sweetness of love and mutuality and celebration of the goodness of God—in Christ. In fact, by the time we get to Colossians 3:17 you find Paul throwing in the word “whatever” as in “*whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus...*”

It seems that those of us who have been raised “in Christ” are already fixated on that divine reality and busy at work here on earth. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he told the disciples a paradoxical, counter-intuitive truth: It was for their good that he had to go away. Well, it sure didn’t feel very good to see their Master waft away into the clouds. They felt abandoned and—in a feeling Jesus anticipated they would experience—they even felt orphaned by their Lord. What good would it do for Jesus to take his resurrection life and squirrel it away in the heavenly places?

The answer would come ten days later during a Jewish festival known as Pentecost. The good Jesus’ absence would do was the sending of one very powerful Holy Spirit who would be the energizing force for the life of God’s people from then on. In the roughly 2,000 years since then, the works enabled by that Spirit are incalculable. Can you imagine what the list would look like if we could actually catalogue every single thing the Spirit has accomplished through believers over the last two millennia? Every exercise of a spiritual gift,

every budding of a spiritual fruit, every small act of hospitality and kindness, every saving word of a missionary or evangelist, every church program to minister to the homeless, every kind word to the dying from a Hospice nurse, every wiping of lesions of a leper by the Sisters of Mercy in Calcutta, every confession of “Jesus is Lord” by anyone, anywhere, and so on. It is completely mind-boggling. Surely only God knows.

But here’s the thing: all of that would be acts of delusion or—at best—acts of humanitarianism *unless* they all flow from the things above where Christ is seated as the resurrected and ascended Lord of lords and King of kings. Take away that reality and we may as well be the United Way or Greenpeace or UN Children’s Relief. Those are all fine organizations that find their own purpose for the good work they do but Christians believe their work has a higher source and a longer lasting value because it flows from eternity. Christians do and say what they do not because it feels good or seems like the right thing to do. We do and say it all because we believe it accords with the way things are meant to be in God’s good creation—the way they maybe were once upon a time in the beginning and the way they will be again when God in Christ declares “*Behold, I make all things new.*”

In the movie *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, viewers encounter a group of aliens who long ago set up shop in a part of the Aztec Mayan kingdom in South America. These aliens, however, are not from outer space but rather we learn they are interdimensional beings, creatures that inhabit the spaces in between time as we know it. One of the things this means is that they are able to see past, present, and future in a single glance, giving them essentially an almost omniscient grasp of what has happened, can happen, might happen, will happen. One of the villains in the film is a Russian agent who wants to tap into that knowledge for herself so as to help the Soviet Union gain world domination. The aliens grant her wish but, of course, such knowledge is too wonderful for her, and it ends up quite literally blowing her mind. A bit too graphic for Sunday morning viewing.

In a strange but true way, when we set our hearts and minds above where Christ is seated, we also get a glimpse of all the possibilities in a world made new by Christ's resurrection. We see what has happened, what can possibly happen, and what will happen if we live out lives of faithful discipleship. But far from unmaking us or blowing our minds, our minds are renewed, energized, set on fire (in a good way) to understand all the possibilities of what working and living for the resurrected Lord of life can and must mean, however long we live on this earth. It is a vision that has led God's people for 2,000 years and will continue until our Lord comes again.

Until then, we strive to live "in Christ" as Paul describes it. That powerful little preposition, "in," encapsulates the in-breaking of the future and the most powerful moment "in" past history: Christ's resurrection—an out-of-time event, a temporal distortion in the space-time continuum at least as cool as the coolest Star Trek adventure you can imagine. Because that happened to Christ, we know it will also happen to us. We will be raised; and creation will be made new. We know it will happen because "in Christ" it has already happened. That re-frames the entire way we look at things.

When we grow sick and tired of the murky, immoral world in which we live, we are often glad to embrace anything that offers clear, clean lines. But Paul warns us in verse 23 that these things may "*have an appearance of wisdom*" but they are not actually wise. Therefore, when we catch a glimpse of things above, we need not add another layer of practice or devotion other than our single-minded devotion to Jesus. As Paul famously said to the Athenians: "*In [Christ] we live and move and have our being*" (Acts 17:28).

On this Sunday morning, let us "*set our hearts [and our minds] on things above*" where Christ is seated and not be defeated by the troubling concerns of this earth. Then, as we turn back to the things that are right in front of our eyes, we will find even those things transformed. And for the rest of our lives, we will be busy living out the tiniest fraction of all the possibilities of God's newness and glory and goodness. Praise God! Amen.