

The Christ-Centred Life - Off and On

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0 : 0 0] Our Father and God, we thank you for your word and we pray tonight that you'd help us to know what it is to live before you, to live with Christ at the centre of our existence and to live in a way that responds rightly to him and to you.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well friends, tonight I want to begin by getting you to think about two or three areas in which Christians struggle most in our contemporary society. That is, I want you to think about those places where we find it hard to be different from the rest of the world. The areas where Christians know that they should be distinct but are not. The areas where they constantly find themselves falling down. The areas in which they struggle to maintain a Christian identity. I want you to stop now. So two areas, just choose two. Two broad topics if you like. And you can just note them down in your head or you could write them down on the outlines there that I've given you. So think about it. Okay, now having done that, forget about it.

[1 : 1 0] Just for a moment because we're going to come back there later on. Let's start though by remembering where we've been over these last three weeks. You might remember week one, we looked at, and have your Bibles open while we do this.

So have your Bibles open at Colossians chapter 2. And we started at Colossians 2, 6 to 7. And I hope you've actually memorized this verse now, but look at the verses and what they say. Paul says, so then. Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him. Rooted and built up in him. Strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness.

And you might remember that we worked out that the thrust of these verses was that Christians should go on in the Christian life the way they started. That is, they should go back to what they know of Jesus and they should never leave it.

And do you remember our analogy? I said we should walk into the future backwards looking at what God has done in Christ. Remember I said there's what God has done in Christ. And we walk into the future keeping our eye on that.

[2 : 1 2] Knowing that a hope is laid up for us. So it's not to say we're going to back into things, but we have our eyes and our focus in the right place. So that was our analogy.

We said that the Christian life is Christ-centered from beginning to end. It begins with Jesus and you go on with Jesus. And it keeps going on in that way into eternity.

So that's week one. And that was the heart of the book of Colossians, I said. In week two, we looked at some principal threats to the Christian life. Given Colossians 2, 6 to 7, the first one was incredibly obvious.

It was you get your thinking wrong. That is, you don't have the right focus on the right place. And you get your thinking wrong when you take on teaching that heads you away from Jesus to somewhere else.

And the Colossians were being exposed to such thinking. And rather than being full of Jesus and centered on him and on teaching that leads you toward Jesus, they were following what Paul calls hollow and deceptive teaching, which did not have Jesus at its center.

[3 : 1 8] That's not how he puts it, but he does call it hollow and deceptive. And such thinking inevitably leads to bad practice in the Christian life. It leads away from continuing the way that you began.

It leads away from continuing in and with Jesus. So that was the rest of Colossians 2. And then we got to Colossians 3, 1 to 4 last week. Now, we noticed three references within verses 1 to 4 about being with Christ.

And one was in the past. Paul said, you have been raised with Christ. That happened in the past. Then he went on and he said, he said a present tense one.

He said, our life is now hidden with Christ in God. And then he had a future reference. He said, when Christ, who is our life, appears, then we'll appear with him in glory.

So we are with Christ in the past, in the present, and in the future. And the result is that we should fix our mind on those eternal realities.

[4 : 21] And if we do, that will inevitably change our actions in the world. And that's where we come to Colossians, the rest of Colossians 3. And with that in mind, tonight I'm going to do something relatively easy and not my usual pattern.

I'm going to just give you a bird's eye view of these chapters. That'll probably take us about 10 minutes. And then I'm going to try and flesh out some examples of what it might look like in practice. So open your Bibles, chapter 5, verses 1 to 11.

Look at how verse 5 begins. It says, therefore. That is, Paul tells us because of what he said up until this point, we should therefore put to death whatever belongs to our earthly nature.

And then he lists five things. By the way, five is very important in this chapter. I'll show you as we go. Five things. And the fifth one has a little word of explanation added.

Did you notice? Fifth one has a little word of explanation. So he talks about greed and he adds, which is idolatry. So in my view, these five things are heavily weighted toward sexual sins.

[5 : 27] Not completely, but I think largely weighted toward sexual sins. And then in verse 7, Paul says that the way we used to walk, he talks about the way we used to walk before we were Christians.

And in verse 6, he says that it's because of such things that God's wrath is coming. Now look at verse 8. Paul adds another list of five things. Instead of saying that we should put them off, he says, well, we should rid ourselves of them.

They are anger, rage, malice, slander. And then Paul adds another fifth element and a word of addition again. Remember, just a little added bit on the end. He speaks of filthy language that comes from our lips.

Now, as I said, the first five major on sexual sin. But these five major on something else. They major on human anger and its outworkings.

So there's a sort of summary of verses 5 to 8. Now, it tells us that about one side of the Christian life. One side of the Christian life is about putting to death what belongs to our earthly nature.

[6 : 31] It's about ridding ourselves of the things that used to dominate us. And so does this make the Christian life one about simply putting in effort? You know, putting off and putting on? Is that what the Christian life's about?

Engaging in this great effort? Well, it's partly about this. But our willpower will never make us victorious over sin. The history of Israel has shown that.

They weren't able to do it. And nor will we be able to do it. Our own sinful nature would show us that. We can't actually always keep God's law. That's just the way we are. We can't do it. No, the Christian life has another side to it.

It must. And look at the language of verses 9 to 12. Look at the language Paul uses. He starts off by picking up a particular sin. It is the sin of lying.

And look at what Paul says in verses 9 and 10. See if you can see what makes the Christian life function. Paul says, Don't lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in the knowledge of the image of its creator.

[7 : 38] Now, I want you to notice just a few things about this. First, notice the way Paul speaks. He speaks of something that we have already done. It is an accomplished deed. That is, we have already taken off the old self, and we have put on the new self.

Presumably, that means this happened when we became Christians. We took off an old self, and we put on a new self. And that would make sense, wouldn't it? Because he's already talked about us having been raised together with Christ. So we put to death something.

We came to a new life. But there's a second point. He also speaks of the source of power for the new life in Christ. And can you see what he says? He talks about God's ongoing renewal.

I wonder if you can see Paul's logic. Yes, do take things off. Yes, do rid yourselves of certain things that used to belong to your past life. Yes, don't lie to each other.

But recognize the source of this ability. It is the renewal of God that happens in the people who put their faith and their trust in Jesus. They're new people. We're people who are of a new identity. [8 : 45] We are new men, women, new people. We are Christ's people. And we are being renewed by God day by day. And with that, Paul goes on to speak about our identity as God's new people, as Christ's new people.

And again, remember I said about this five? Five. There's another five coming up. Have a look at it. Verse 11. He notes that there are no cultural boundaries anymore. And second, he tells us about the new clothes that we should put on as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved. We should clothe ourselves with the characteristics of Christ. And again, guess how many there are? Five. Can you see them there? Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Then he speaks about how that might work itself out in one area, the area of forgiveness. And above all, we should put on the ultimate Christian virtue, which is love. Okay, finally, Paul focuses back on Christ-centeredness again. And I wonder if you can see it. He speaks of the peace of Christ in verse 15. Then the message of Christ and how it should affect what we do when we meet together in verse 16.

[9 : 54] And then all things done in the name of Jesus in verse 17. So, friends, can you see and hear what is being said in this passage as a whole? Here is an outline of Christian living.

Now, let me tell you, Christian living is not about morality. Being Christian is not fundamentally about being a moral person. Did you get that hint from Paul? It's not fundamentally about that. Being Christian is really about being centered on Christ. This will and must show itself in changed morals. But it's more than changed morals, being Christian. It's a complete change of orientation. It's about no longer being dominated by the sinful nature, but by God. By who Christ is and who you are with Christ.

Now, friends, what I want to do now is to focus on what you thought about at the beginning. Do you remember? So I ask you to think about two or three areas in which Christians struggle the most in our contemporary society.

[10 : 57] Now, I wonder how many of you thought of the issues, that the issue of sexuality was one. I'd love to do a straw poll, but I won't. But I reckon it is an overwhelming one for us.

And I wonder how many of you thought that the issue of anger was another. Did you see that second list of five? They're largely issues of anger, aren't they? So it's very interesting that when Paul looks at his society, what does he think some of the big issues are?

Sexuality and anger. It's fascinating, isn't it? Because we think, oh, this is a very contemporary problem, isn't it? But actually, it's a very ancient problem. And if you look back into the Old Testament, you'll find at least the sexuality one is there and dominant as well.

Now, I wonder, you know, you see, as a pastor, I really think both are significant. And the beauty is that they were issues of significance in the first century as well.

So what I want to do now and in our remaining time is to just sort of give three case studies. The first is one on sexuality. The second is one on anger. And the third is one on greed, which was a problem in Paul's day as well, a very significant problem, and I think is a massive problem in our day.

[12 : 12] So three issues. Disciples, sexuality, anger, greed. Now, for each of these, what I'm going to try and do is put into practice what we've learnt in the last few weeks.

So you've got to try and remember the three weeks together. And I'm going to try and put into practice what we've been talking about. So we're going to talk about getting our thinking right. We're going to talk about doing the choosing that Paul has talked about.

And we're going to talk about putting things into concrete action, which is what Paul's talked about as well. So let's get started. Case study one has to do with sexual conduct. Now, first thing we need to do is to get our thinking straight by starting with the truth of the gospel.

Now, the gospel makes a number of things particularly clear. The gospel tells us that God made us and that he made us for right relationship with him and with each other.

Right relationship with God is marked by what? By loving God's rule and listening to God's advice. Right relationships with each other is marked by loving them, by loving each other and only doing the things that honour and respect to them.

[13 : 20] I think you could probably all sign off on that. That's what love of God and love of your neighbour at least means. This break in relationship with God. Sorry, but the gospel is also clear

that we have broken relationship with God and our lives have been characterised not by God centredness or Christ centredness, but self centredness.

That break in relationship which is evident in every part of our lives has shown itself everywhere, including our sexual beings. Although God created us as sexual beings and looked on it and said it was good.

Our lives. Well, and he's urged us to express that side of his sexual of our beings rightly. We've stepped outside of his guidelines. Sex has become for us.

Perhaps the expression of animal instincts rather than relationships. Sex has become tainted by manipulation and abuse of others. For many of us in our society, sex is the satisfaction of personal desires rather than the expression of love and concern for another person.

We have loosed it from lifelong, enduring, committed relationships in our world. And instead of it being a good thing, sex has become an expression of our own sinfulness.

[14 : 33] And we have paraded it across the world on web pages everywhere. It shows our desire to live for ourselves and not for others. And the worst expression of it in the contemporary world, which we see all the time, is the sexual abuse of children.

Because that is just atrocious, isn't it? That is about the worst thing. Because this should not happen. These sorts of things, our sexual orientation within our society, demonstrates our lust to live for ourselves and not for others.

We just want what is sexually gratifying for us. But the gospel doesn't stop here, you see. The gospel goes on to tell us that God knows about our situation. He's aware of our sinfulness and he desires our forgiveness.

Therefore, God sends Jesus into the world to reconcile us to him. He's acted to forgive us and to bring us back. And if we're Christians, then what have we done? We've said, yes, I accept that. I accept all that God has done for us in Christ. In accepting Christ, we die for ourselves. We die with Christ. We rise, as Paul said, to live for God.

[15 : 41] And from now on, we are his. He made us. He owns us. We're glad of this. And we know that he loves us. And we love him. And we want to live under his loving rule.

We want to obey him. And that leaves us with some choices to make, doesn't it? And the choices are very clear. We can continue to live as we did in the past, in that previous life.

We can continue to be people who are sexually immoral, impure and lustful. We can continue to love sex for sex's sake. We can continue to feed our addiction to pornography that diminishes us and abuses other people.

We can continue to sleep with people who are other people's present or future husbands and wives and so break relationships. We can continue to ignore God's advice about keeping sex for marriage. We can continue to use sex for self-gratification or as a means for abusing others.

Or we can choose to live God's way. That is to live under his loving rule. We can choose to put off the old self and to put on the new self that is being renewed.

[16 : 45] We can be grateful to God for the sexual nature that he has given us. We can be satisfied with the opportunities he gives us to express it rather than begrudging him the times when he says we shouldn't express it.

And we can choose to use sex as a way of serving others and giving to others in God's ordained context, which is marriage. Now, having done that, we can turn our choices into actions, can't we? Now, what does that mean? Well, we know we're not perfect yet. We're continually going through this process of putting on and putting off. And so we need to make some steps to be right, don't we? And what will that mean for us?

Well, it will mean a number of things. It will mean avoiding situations where our sinful nature might overwhelm us. It will mean avoiding situations, for example, avoiding the magazine rack or the video section or those websites that we should not go near.

It may mean never going online again. Or substituting to a service that will send our online activity to someone to whom we might be accountable and responsible.

[17 : 56] It means not being alone in a private place with the person you're going out with but not married to. It means keeping bedroom doors open until you're married and holding yourself accountable to someone else.

It means setting yourself rules in your relationship and making sure you both stick to them. This is prior to marriage and even after marriage. It may mean getting married young rather than waiting

for your career to progress or your degree to finish.

It means making sure that your sex life with the person you're married to is full and satisfying. And it means going to see someone for help before you get into trouble or when things begin to get wrong.

Can you see the decision-making process that you go about? Because you're Christian. And you're about deciding things. You're about putting off and putting on and about making decisions. Understand what I'm saying?

See, Christianity is not simply about being Christian. It's about choosing to be Christian. It's about acting like a Christian.

[18:55] That's what Paul's been saying. You've got to put off. You've got to put on. You've got to do things. You know, it's not just sort of that being. So you say to people, I am Christian. It's something to do with you.

It is something to do with your being. But that being must flow out into life. It's about actively putting off and putting on. It's about doing certain things. But remember where the power for all of this lies. It doesn't come from your willpower. That's not going to make it possible. It comes from God who's renewing us and how he's given us his spirit of power, love and self-control.

Now, let's go to our second case study because I really want to press this home to try and get us to grips with this. The first thing, this time we're going to look at anger. Now, the first thing we need to do is to get our thinking straight by starting with the truth of the gospel.

Gospel makes a number of things particularly clear. The gospel tells us that God made us and he made us for right relationship with him and with each other. However, the gospel is also very clear.

[19:59] We have all broken our relationship with God and our lives have been characterized by self-interest. And that breaking relationship with God shows itself in every corner of our existence, including the way we respond in relationships.

And because we're self-interested, well, we easily get angry when our interests are not met, don't we? You can ask Heather about me, if you like.

Because our sinful nature wants what we want. Because we're self-interested, we get angry. We use our anger to, then we can use our anger to continue to break relationships and fracture our friendships.

So you see, if Heather and I didn't do the Christian thing and reconcile with each other, it could tear our marriage apart, couldn't it? But the gospel tells us more about this issue. It tells us that God is angry.

Unlike our anger, though, God's anger is righteous. He's angry, but angry at sin. He's angry because he made us for a relationship and we've broken that relationship. And the gospel tells us what God did with his anger.

[21:05] You see, he allowed his love and his mercy to triumph over his anger. So instead of wiping us out, he sent his son, Jesus, into the world. In Jesus, he took his anger, as it were, upon himself.

He acted in love to keep relationship with us rather than expressing his anger. Well, he did express his anger, but expressed it amongst his Godhead, as it were.

You see, we deserved anger, but he gave us love. And because of this, our lives have been changed. We've accepted this. We know this. And our lives have changed. And we know that he loves us. And we want to love him back.

We want to live under his loving rule because we know what it's like. And we want to obey him because we've seen what it does. And that leaves us with choices to make. And the choices are very clear.

What can we do? Well, we can continue to live as we did in the past. Paul says, that's not on. You've got to put those things off. No longer being angry like that and so on. We can continue to be angry with people who don't meet our expectations.

[22:07] No, we can't do that. We can continue to express our anger when people wrong us, to be indignant, bitter, resentful toward those who have shown themselves to be our enemies. We can continue to express our anger in rage and vindictiveness and allow our emotions to dominate our lives.

Or we can make a choice. And that choice is to live God's way. We can choose in the strength of his spirit to live under his loving rule. That is, choose to be like God.

To turn our anger upon ourselves. To forgive as we've been forgiven and to love those who hate us. And we can choose to overcome evil with good. Having done this, we can then turn our choices into actions, can't we?

Because it doesn't just stop at having made the choice. Choice expresses itself in action. We're not perfect yet, so we need to make steps to do right. And what will that mean? Well, it could mean a number of things.

It might mean, for example, avoiding or walking away from situations where the sinful nature might overwhelm us and we might become enraged. It will mean biting our tongue rather than lashing out at one who has hurt us.

[23 : 20] It will mean confronting the person who's wronged with the wrong that they have done, but at the time when our emotions are under control. It means choosing not to allow our anger to express itself in all sorts of things that the Old and New Testaments express as being wrong.

That is, in gossip, in slander, in vindictiveness. You see, our anger, unlike God's anger, is rarely righteous because it is saturated with our self-interest.

It is rarely untainted by ourselves. Therefore, our anger is mostly, not wholly, but mostly wrong.

Please understand what I'm saying. Christianity is not simply about being Christian.

It's about choosing to be Christian and about acting according to those choices. It's about actively putting off and putting on, as Paul has made clear in this passage. It's about doing certain things as well as thinking certain things and choosing certain things.

But remember where the power for all of this comes from. It comes from God, who is renewing us now and has given us a spirit of power, love and self-control.

[24 : 30] My third case study, you'll get the hint now, so you can go away and do all the rest for yourself because you can see the pattern. But after we've done three, hopefully you'll have got the idea. This third study is greed.

Now, the first thing we need to do is to get our thinking straight by starting with the truth of the Gospel. Now, the Gospel makes a number of things particularly clear. First, we need to do is start with Gospel truth.

Now, the Gospel tells us that God made us. He made us for right relationship with Him and with each other. And when He made us, He gave us everything we needed.

He made His world complete and good. I'd love to be back in Genesis 2. Everything was there. It was all untainted by our sinfulness.

But it wasn't enough for our predecessors and it's not enough for us. We wanted more. We wanted to be God rather than living as God's creation and under God's bounty. And so in our greed, what we did, in Adam, as it were, snatched out after being our own God.

[25 : 37] And from that moment on, our life has been marked by an endless search for more.

Hasn't it? More wealth, more power, more prestige, more possessions. Our acquisitiveness as human beings has no end.

But the Gospel doesn't stop these. See, the Gospel goes on to tell us some other truths. It tells us about a man who was God. Who refused to exercise his rights as God. A man who humbled himself as a human being by dying at the hands of other human beings.

Who put aside his rights as it were. The one who looked at what God had given him and took delight in it. He saw obedience to God and living in right relationship with God as the greatest gain, even though it would cost him his life.

For him, God and relationship with God was enough for him. He said, if that's what I have, that's enough for me. Even if it cost me my life. And because of his action, we've been given a new chance.

He did what we didn't do and thereby opened up for us the gate to God again. He acted to bring us back to God. And because of his action, we know that God always has our best interests in mind.

[26 : 50] Because he didn't spare his son. Because of him, we know that God loves us and has given us all that we need. And that leaves us with choices, doesn't it? Those choices are very clear.

We can continue to live as we did in the past. That is, continue to last after more and more and more and more. We can continue to acquire more, to want more, to worship our own wants and desires.

Or we can choose to live God's way. To live under his loving rule. We can choose to live in his goodness and bounty and be satisfied with what he gives. We can choose to be content if God has

given us food in our stomachs and a roof over our heads.

Having done this, we can turn our choices into actions. Since we're not yet perfect, we'll need to get some steps right.

And what will that mean? Well, it might mean a number of things for us. I'm just giving you some examples. It might mean avoiding situations where the sinful nature might overwhelm us. It might mean asking the bank to withdraw a certain amount out of our bank account each month so that it might go to gospel causes.

[27 : 56] It might mean choosing to give money away before it lands in our hands if we can ever deal with it well. It might mean giving to the poor. It may mean not accepting a pay rise and a promotion when these things might mean decreased family and gospel time.

It may mean not buying a new car but instead paying for a Christian worker to preach the gospel. It may mean giving up a lucrative and secure career in order to go into Christian ministry.

It may mean humbling yourself to live on the financial edge dependent on the generosity of other Christian people. Can you understand what I'm saying? You see, Christianity is not simply about being Christian.

It's about choosing to be Christian, acting like a Christian, putting off and putting on things. It's about doing certain things as well.

But remember where the power for all of this lies. It comes from God who is renewing us. And he has given us the spirit of power, love and self-control.

[29 : 02] And he will help us in this task. And he will renew us day by day. Even as the day approaches. So let us pray. Father, we thank you so much for your son.

We thank you that in him we have been shown how to live before you. But not only that, in your son we have been forgiven for the fact that we don't live rightly before you. Father, we pray that you'd help us to live a life before you as one who has died with Christ.

Who lives with him and who will be raised with him. And help us please in our everyday life to make choices. And to do the actions that arise from those choices.

And please fill us with your Holy Spirit. That we might do this and that we might be renewed day by day. Please give us this spirit of power, love and self-control.

That we might live in a way that pleases you. But above all, Father, please help us not to rely on our own deeds. But on what has been done for us in Christ.

[30 : 15] We thank you for him again. And we pray these things in his name. Amen.