

# A Call to Holiness

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[ 0 : 00 ] One of the things that I really try to do is I really try to be thoughtful and prayerful! For each sermon that I preach.

But this is especially true at the beginning of the year. As long as I can remember in pastoring, I have always come to the first sermon of the year with a sense of responsibility, a sense of weight. Because in many ways that first sermon is the foundational word that we hear from God for the year. And so I would more intentionally seek the Lord about what he would have that first sermon to be. And so back in October when I took a few days to plan and pray in, I went to Freeport. I felt that this sermon this morning is what the Lord laid on my heart for us as we begin this new year. So if you would please turn in your Bible, if you've not yet done so, to Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter 3.

or we will be reading verses 1-11. Colossians chapter 3, verses 1-11.

1-11. 1-11.

1-11. Paul writes, if then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

[ 1 : 54 ] Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

On account of these, the wrath of God is coming. In these, you too once walked. When you were living in them, but now you must put them all away, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

Do not lie to one another, saying that you have put off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in the knowledge of the, after the image of its creator.

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free.

[ 3 : 19 ] That Christ is all, and in all. Let's pray. Father, we pause this morning as we, for the first time, as a gathered church in kingdom life, hear your word.

Lord, let's speak to our hearts. Speak to our hearts as a church corporately. Speak to our hearts as a church individually.

And God, enable us to hear and obey for our good and for your greater glory, we pray. In Christ's name.

Amen. Those of you who have committed to follow Christ would agree with me that not long after you made the commitment to follow Christ, you started to ask questions like, how can I change?

How can I become less sinful and more holy? And why am I being tempted with some of the same sins I used to commit before I came to Christ?

[ 4 : 43 ] And the reasons that we have these kinds of questions that come to our minds is that we know from Scripture and we know from the lives of other Christians that when we come to Christ, we are supposed to change.

We're supposed to be different from who we used to be, from what we used to be. But the reality is that even as Christians, we find ourselves being tempted by some of the same sins that we committed and even more so, we sometimes find ourselves committing those sins.

But knowing that a new life in Christ is supposed to be different, we ask the question, how can I change? Am I really saved? We ask, how can I become less sinful and more holy?

These questions aren't unique to us this morning living in the 21st century. Christians who lived as early as the 1st century, they grappled with this issue of pursuing holiness.

How do I change? How do I make progress to become more like Christ? They wanted to become less sinful and more holy. And in the New Testament letters, it is clear to us that when these questions were asked by church members, sometimes they embraced practices that were wrong, practices that did not lead them to make any progress in holiness.

[ 6 : 29 ] And one of the churches that experienced this is the church at Colossae. The Colossian church misunderstood how holiness was to be pursued and how it was to be attained.

And for example, we would see over in chapter 2 in verses 20 through 23, the Apostle Paul challenges the empty religious practices that some of the Colossians were engaged in in their pursuit of holiness.

He tells them in verse 23 in particular that their religious rules in pursuit of holiness, he said, they indeed have an appearance of holiness, of wisdom, in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body.

But he says this, he says, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. And so starting in chapter 3 in verse 1, this passage that we just read and that we are considering this morning, the Apostle Paul goes on to explain to the Colossians how holiness is to be pursued and how holiness is to be attained.

And I think it's instructive for us this morning to consider how the Apostle Paul begins his exhortation. Notice that he doesn't start in verse 5 where we read, put to death, therefore, sexual immorality and impurity and passion and evil desire and covetousness.

[ 8 : 07 ] Paul doesn't start there. Instead, Paul begins by giving us instructions on holy thinking.

We find those instructions in verses 1 through 4. But here's our tendency. Our tendency is to quickly read 1 through 4 and slow down when we get to 5 to 11 and we spend our time there.

put these things to death. Stop doing this and put this off. We spend a lot of time there. But brothers and sisters, if we're going to make progress in holiness, we need to spend time to hear what the Apostle Paul is saying to us, to hear what God is saying to us through the Apostle Paul in the first four verses in particular.

Here's how I'd summarize what God is saying to us in these verses before us.

A transformed life that's marked by holiness is founded on a transformed mind that's set on holiness.

[ 9 : 20 ] A transformed life that's marked by holiness is founded on a transformed mind that's set on holiness.

Or to put it more simply, what the Apostle Paul was saying to the Colossians and really to all believers is that what we believe shapes how we behave. And so this morning and our remaining time, I want to consider two aspects of Paul's instructions on holiness which God's people are called to.

The first aspect to which we are called is seen in verses one through four and it is this.

Seek what is heavenly. Seek what is heavenly. Now, first off, you may think, well boy, that doesn't sound too practical.

I was really hoping that I would have some steps to follow. If you're thinking that way, you're thinking the way the Colossians were thinking and you're prone to fall into the same error that they fell into.

[ 10 : 40 ] The second verse is one through four again. If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth.

For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ through as your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Although these words seem simple, they're actually quite profound what the Apostle Paul is saying. Notice that Paul starts by saying if then you have been raised with Christ.

And it's important to see that Paul is not doubting that the Colossians had indeed been raised by Christ because he uses the word if.

It's just a way of arguing. It's just a way of persuading the Colossians about what has happened to them and how they need to live in light of that. Paul uses the same method in verse 20 of chapter 2 where he says if with Christ you have died to the elemental spirits.

[ 11 : 56 ] And so what Paul is saying is you really have died. That's what he's saying to them in verse 1. He's saying you really have died. and been raised with Christ.

And verse 3 makes it even clearer when he says plainly for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. So what Paul is saying to us is he's actually addressing a very important and a very precious truth for all believers and it is this truth of our union with Christ.

See God didn't save us and have us at a distance. God saved us and united us with his son and Paul is speaking about this spiritual union that we have with Christ in his death his burial and in his resurrection.

Paul states this earlier in Colossians chapter 2 look over there for a moment in verses 13 and 14 when he says and you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh God made alive together with him having forgiven us all our trespasses by canceling the record of death that stood against us with all its legal demands this he set aside nailing it to the cross.

Water baptism communicates this union with Christ in his death burial and resurrection. The apostle Paul says something very similar in Romans chapter 6 verses 1 through 4 and in this passage in Romans 6 1 through 4 Paul is arguing against those who believe that since they are Christians that they can just continue to sin because God has a lot of grace he's a gracious God and he will forgive them and Paul argues from the vantage point of water baptism again this union with Christ and here's what he says what shall we say then are we to continue in sin that grace may abound by no means how can we who died to sin still live in it do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father we too might walk in newness of life so on the basis of our union with Christ and the new life that results we have to walk in that newness of life notice in verse 4 of chapter 3

[ 14 : 50 ] Colossians 3 again Paul points to a future glory that belongs to the people of God to those who belong to Christ he says they will appear with him in glory now what does all this mean what it means is that in light of the spiritual union that we have with Christ believers are called to seek the things that are above where Christ is that's what our union with Christ calls us to and anything less Paul is saying is not consistent with that union that we have with Christ this is the first step to practical holiness again verses 5 through 11 Paul is going to tell us do some specific things but the foundation to doing those things is this way of seeing ourselves this way of understanding that we have been united with Christ and we are called to set our minds on the things above we are called to seek the things that are above now obviously

Paul is not telling us to disengage from the world it's very clear when he goes on in chapter 3 and then into chapter 4 that he is not telling us to disregard the real responsibilities that we have as husbands and wives as fathers and mothers as singles and as students as employers and as employees and all the other roles and responsibilities that we have we are to engage these things do these things but as we do these things our minds are to be set on heavenly things because of our union with Christ and so how do we seek heavenly things how do we set our minds on things that are above well we do so by taking seriously and valuing the things of God remember the sermon on the mountain when Jesus said

Jesus said wherever your treasure is your heart is going to be there also and so what we are called to do then is to guard our hearts we are called also to guard our appetites and consider what we value as treasure we are to guard against allowing our hearts to drift and be set on empty things in this fleeting life and when we understand this profound union that we have with Christ we will indeed treasure our union with Christ and we will seek the things that are consistent with it so again how do we seek the things that are above the false teachers and others in the church in the Colossian church they were seeking them through spiritual experiences they were worshipping angels and they were having visions and they were following rules and regulations about food and drink food you should eat not eat in observing holy days and Paul says to them those things can't help you he says those things cannot stop the indulgence of your flesh you can do them again and again it's not going to help you but brothers and sisters the way we seek the things that are above are the ordinary means of grace that

God gives us it's nothing out of this world it's nothing super spiritual it's certainly supernatural but it's not spectacular it's the ordinary means of grace that God has given to us in the Christian life the word of God reading it studying it meditating on it sitting under it as we're doing this morning memorizing it as we're seeking to do with verses to remember we do it through prayer corporately and individually tomorrow night we're going to gather for the first time for this year as a church to pray that's a means of grace and brothers and sisters listen your mind is blinded if you believe that it makes no difference whether you come or not you're blind to the truth of the means of grace that God has given to us in prayer individually and also corporately and if your thinking is that it really doesn't matter if I come or not if your thinking is you're able to come but won't come my friend

I encourage you to cry out to the Lord to open your eyes to remove the blinders because that is a means of grace that God gives us to cause us to seek heavenly things we do it by living in community we do it by locking arms with brothers and sisters and worshipping and fellowshiping and exhorting one another and correcting one another and encouraging one another and cultivating godliness together we do it in community community is a gift that God has given to us the Christian life was not meant to be lived as a lone ranger all by yourself there are some things that God has for us that we will only get in community that's where he's placed it and that's where we will receive it and it is a means of grace you know one of the beautiful pictures about coming to the Lord's table you see when we are baptized that's once for all but when we come to the

[ 20 : 49 ] Lord's table it is a renewal of our commitment there's a renewal to say I am I am still on the journey I am still pursuing Christ I'm still feasting on Christ and brothers and sisters the visual of that when we are gathered to see our brothers and sisters who are continuing on the journey continuing to feast on Christ that is a means of grace that is a means of grace I have no way of proving this but I can tell you that if we sought to live the Christian life alone from the day we committed to follow Christ versus embracing community as many of us have done over the years we'd have a very different outcome life would be very different because God never designed it that way community is a means of grace by which we can seek heavenly things so I want to ask you this morning to what extent are you motivated to have your heart set and your mind set on the things of God what extent are you motivated to live a holy life and how much is your union with Christ informing and governing your life as you seek to live for

Christ in this world see brothers and sisters we who have professed Christ we who claim to belong to Christ we don't have the license to live as we choose to live as we want to live we are called to live in a way that is consistent with one who belongs to Christ and what scripture says is we are to be seeking the things that are above we are to be seeking and setting our hearts on the things that are out of this world as opposed to the things in this world and so whether we are in our homes or we are in our neighborhoods or we are on our jobs in our businesses in our schools and universities wherever we are we represent Christ because we are united to Christ we have been brought in a spiritual union with Christ and so if we're going to make progress in holiness we must be mindful of this union with Christ mindful of the new light that has resulted we must be mindful that our minds need to be transformed first and foremost so that's the foundation for pursuing holiness we set our minds on heavenly things the second point we find in verses 5 through 11 but notice how it is based on the first notice that we are told in verse 5 put to death therefore the therefore connects back to what

Paul was saying earlier put to death therefore the therefore is therefore for that reason because it connects us back to the first argument that he makes and what Paul tells us to do in verses 5 through 11 can be summarized this way mortify what is earthly the foundation is to seek what is heavenly and then we are to mortify what is earthly this is my second and final point the word mortify means to put to death that's where we get the word mortician it's a very similar word one who handles dead bodies Paul says put to death what is earthly in you and listen brothers and sisters this is a logical command we die to sin we become alive in Christ so putting to death that which is sinful is a logical step and so

Paul tells us in verse 5 put to death therefore what is earthly in you sexual immorality impurity passion evil desire and covetousness which is idolatry now Paul is not being exhaustive in this list Paul is not attempting to name every single sin we need to put to death he doesn't have to no doubt the sins that he mentions were purposeful and they no doubt had relevance in the church at Colossae it has relevance for us this morning but again this is not all he's calling us to put to death all sins are captured in these three words what is earthly what is earthly he begins with sexual immorality which refers to all kinds of sexual activity outside of the bond of marriage between a man and a woman everything that falls out of that is sexual immorality then he lists impurity which refers to any kind of moral corruption it's a very broad category the next is passion or lust and it refers to sinful sexual desires sexual desires that are prohibited so notice that it's not enough for us to put to death the act of sexual immorality we are also called to put to death lust and brothers and sisters wisdom will call us to do that because it is when lust is conceived that it ends up in the sin the act of some kind of sexual immorality next he lists evil desires again a broad expression for desires that we know are sinful and contrary to the will of

God tells us to put them to death the last item is covetousness or greed which is an uncontrolled desire for more wouldn't it be wonderful if there was just one blow you could hit to a particular sin is gone on your life imagine that every sin we battle and we had this understanding that you know what if you could just get it right between the eyes if you could just get it right once you get it it's gone and that'd be wonderful we'd be very holy people we'd all have halos on our heads but that's not the reality that's not the reality would be great if we could modify anger that way and the other sins that beset us the truth is we will modify sin until the day we die or until the Lord returns sin but our hope is that we grow in sanctification so that the pull of the temptations of sin are not as strong on our hearts and over time we grow in grace and we find that even though we may still be tempted by particular sins and in particular besetting sin that we just tend to face in an ongoing way more than other sins by the grace of

[ 28 : 46 ] God we can begin to see how the sin is not as relentless how the sin is not as as weighty how the pull of it is is not as strong because we're growing in sanctification we will see progress in this life but we will not see a finality in our fight against sin until the day the Lord Jesus returns until the day we die the great puritan pastor and theologian John Owen wrote the choices believers who are assuredly freed from the condemning power of sin ought to yet make it their business all their days to modify the indwelling power of sin what this means is that all believers including those who have made great progress in Christian maturity and Christian holiness whom Christ is freed from the condemning power of sin we sang about it this morning now why this fear and unbelief has not the father put to grief his spotless sin for us we're not condemned if we know

Christ this morning condemning sin has been removed and that's what Owen is saying he's saying yeah that's happened in your life condemning sin has been removed but you must still make it your business your daily business to mortify the indwelling power of sin the condemning power of sin has been removed but the indwelling power of sin remains with every single one of us and again no matter how holy you are you have indwelling sin and that indwelling sin will be with you it'll be with us until the day we die or until the day Christ returns John Owen also said be killing sin or sin will be killing you it's like trying to maintain a lawn and the principle is take over the weeds or the weeds are going to take over the lawn control those weeds or the weeds are going to control the lawn and I'm not much of an agricultural person but I suspect that every bit of agitation on this earth got weeds somewhere in it it's just the way of a fallen world and they use all kinds of things to try to keep it down in a very similar way indwelling sin is in us in all of us different degrees different measures different ways we by the grace of God need to fight it and how do we fight it we fight it by the ordinary means of grace the same means that we use to seek things above are the same means we use to fight sin the word of God prayer community same means no different not spectacular the ordinary and God calls us to receive them they are the means of grace for the

Christian life but this is not just all theoretical this is not just all how we think the practical things we must do as well remember Jesus in the sermon on the mount said that we must be radical with sin in our lives in Matthew 29 Matthew 5 29 through 30 we read if your right eye causes you to sin tear it out and throw it away for it's better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell and if your right hand causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away for it is better that you lose one of your members than that all your whole body go into hell now we know Jesus is not speaking literally I'm reminded of this pastor who said this this woman he was telling a joke about another pastor this woman who gossiped in the church a lot came to him said pastor you know the bible says that whatever causes you to sin we must deal with it and I want to come and lay my tongue on the altar and he said well there's 40 feet see what you can do with it

I couldn't resist that one but the causes of sin Jesus is not speaking literally Jesus is speaking in a figurative kind of way and what he's telling us is that we must take sin seriously he's telling us that we must be willing to deal with sin because sin undealt with will take us to hell sin undealt with will take us to hell sin that we are comfortable with in our lives I will not turn from will not repent from will not by the grace of God mortify will take us to hell because it raises another issue it raises another issue that we see that John talks about in the letter to first John he says those who belong to Christ cannot continue in sin because the seed of

God is in them one of the ways that we make our calling and election show is that we deal with sin and we thank God when we are convicted by sin because it is a sign of the grace of God in our lives wanting to repent wanting to turn but brothers and sisters when there is sin in our lives and we are comfortable that we're not convicted by that we need to be concerned by that and see this is why we need community and when I talk about community it's not just big community it's husband wife community it's parent children community where we can say to one another you've been saying that again and again but it doesn't seem to be the evidence of repentance it doesn't seem to be the fruit of repentance Jesus says be radical with sin deal with sin otherwise sin will deal with us and take us to hell and so I asked this morning what are the things that are causing you to sin is it a friend is it a friend that you need to cut off is a device that you need to turn off is it a place you need to avoid whatever it is by

[ 36 : 16 ] God's grace let us cut it off let us turn it off let us avoid it because as Owen said rightly said be killing sin or sin will be killing you in verse six Paul helps us to see that God does not take sin lightly look at verse six he says on account of these the wrath of God is coming brothers and sisters this is not an indulgent parent who is threatening a beating and doesn't follow through this is almighty God the God who cannot lie in his word telling us that because of these sins his wrath is coming and anything other than the wrath of God for sin is a betrayal of the holiness of God God will not be holy if he was not wrathful this sin but thank

God those of us who have put our trust in Jesus no wrath remains for us to face we're sheltered by his saving grace and that being sheltered by his saving grace does something in us when there's sin in our lives that needs to be dealt with that same grace brings us to repentance and to turn from it and to begin to see the things that are above let me end in verse 11 Paul gives us a list of categories of people and he reminds us that no matter who we are what our background is God calls us into a new life in Christ no matter who you are no matter who we are

God saves us he calls us all into a new relationship with Christ we're all being renewed in the image of our creator without exception your nationality doesn't matter your race doesn't matter whether you are male or female doesn't matter your social standing doesn't matter whether you are rich or poor or somewhere in between whether you're educated or you have little education it doesn't matter we are defined by our new life in Christ and our new life in Christ is the identity that trumps every other identity that's why Paul is saying here in this new creation this new creation that we have in community when we come in the community of the saved the community of God's people the only thing that matters is that we belong to

Christ and we all have a new identity in him we are new creations in him and everything else that defined us or even defines us in this world they take a distant second place in our lives and brothers and sisters if there's one place where these things ought to be in the distant background is in the church of God in the house of God where we are to be identified by our new identity that we have in Christ and so as we embark upon the journey of another new year let us answer the call to holiness you've trusted in Christ you have been called to seek what is above you have been called to mortify whatever is earthly in you we don't look at what we do to determine who we are we look to

Christ and our union with him that determines who we are and then we live in light of that we put away anything that betrays that let us remember that the same grace that sanctifies is the same grace that enables us to be holy a transformed life is marked a transformed life that's marked by holiness is founded on a transformed mind that's set on holiness amen I'm going to pray and then I'll take any questions that you might have father thank you for the privilege of being able to gather on this first Sunday of a new year thank you for your word that we have heard again it's living and active the word that produces the result to which you've sent it

[ 41 : 47 ] Lord let that word have its complete work in our hearts and in our lives and in this church help us to seek the things of God which are above and help us to mortify the things of this earth we pray and ask in Jesus name amen any questions on any part of the sermon that's right I regret that I was not taking notes

I know that Troy was and so perhaps but I'm wondering the if you could help us to see how the perhaps or comment on the the walk of the Holy Spirit particularly in in the but actually really I guess in the entirety of the passage but I was thinking mainly in the first in the first four verses right in terms of because we I find well certainly for me and I commented on it earlier is that we just have a tendency to wander kind of thing and we really really need the Lord's help yeah yeah and that's why the same grace that saves us is the same grace that sanctifies us even the desire to want to seek the things above is not of us that is that is the grace of

God at work in our lives one of the things we must remember though is saving grace is by God alone what theologians call it is they call it monergistic it means mono one God alone works but in sanctification it's synergistic it is the spirit and the believer at work so God has given us the means of grace and we are to actively pursue those means of grace the spirit helps us the spirit enables us the spirit works in us God's word works in us so I think we make effort it is grace motivated effort but it is not one side either way in other words no person on his or her own can experience any measure of growth in godliness on the other side what we see in scripture is that the holy spirit does not exclusively by himself without our involvement our active involvement work in sanctification in our lives we see what scripture says is it is

God who works in us both to will and to do his good pleasure so he's working in us and we have to work out that salvation that God is working in anyone else no okay let's let's stand for closing song