

Colossians 3:1-18

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[0:00] Happy New Year. I hope that your Christmas and New Year celebrations have been fun and joyous for you.

! They begin like this.

Whatever difficulties I meet with, how many soever, and how great soever. Number two. Resolved to be continually endeavoring to find out some new contrivance and invention to promote the aforementioned things.

And on and on to number 69. I also saw this week that a professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary posted, I resolve nothing.

New Year's resolutions are for people who weren't already awesome the year before. And so this year, whether you have resolved something like Jonathan Edwards, or something more typical like, you know, eat healthier, or resolved against resolutions, or have resolved that you are, in fact, awesome, and you need to, you know, let others know how to change and be like you, this is a time where our culture pauses and considers change.

[2:09] And I don't know the statistics, I don't know if there are actually statistics, or they're just all made up, about how well people do with their New Year's resolutions. But from my experience, and from the experience of people I know, it's not great, right?

And so, like for you, if you made a resolution last year, do you remember what it was, let alone how did you do with it, right? So, that raises the question for us, how do people change?

If so many set out and fail, often within weeks, or days, or hours, is personal change really just a hopeless endeavor?

How do people change? Also, around this time of year, as it's resolutions season, so to speak, you'll probably see articles, tips on how to follow through, how to change with your New Year's resolution, how to make those changes that you want.

And it could be as simple as, you know, switch up your wardrobe, get a makeover, and that's as deep as some, you know, rom-coms go in character development. And the truth of it is, you will feel different about yourself, at least a little bit.

[3:33] Perhaps more helpful than that is something like environmental design, by which people say, arrange your surroundings in such a way that it's inconvenient to do a bad habit, and convenient to practice a good one.

Put the cookies on a high shelf behind the stuff you never use, and put a fruit bowl out on the counter. Inconvenient to do the bad habit, convenient to do the good one.

My sister is a nutrition researcher. One study that she worked on was in a community with a higher than average obesity rate. And they would go into restaurants, and as part of the dining service, ask patrons, before their meal even arrived at the table, would you like half of your meal packed to go? And then we'll serve you only half of it now. And it was to make portion control convenient to that community. Some people these days talk about temptation bundling.

Put something you don't like together with something you do. So if you want to be the person who goes to, you know, exercise more, make the rule that you can only watch that show that you want while you're on the treadmill.

[4:44] Something like that. These are the things that people use as tools for change. People also use therapy as a tool. Working with a licensed counselor or a psychologist can help you emotionally.

They can help you process old hurts, find coping strategies for your present difficulties, or to see circumstances through different eyes. These are all ways that people use to change in our own lives.

And they all work to some extent. You know, we kind of went from the lesser to the greater here. But in all of those things, the question is, have you changed?

Take that environmental design one. Hide the cookies. Make it inconvenient to get to them. Have you changed? I mean, at the end of the day, you still want those cookies.

Right? You're simply betting on your own laziness in that circumstance. Right? You have not changed. You're leveraging your own problems to help yourself.

[5:49] Right? And so I don't say this to dismiss these tools, externals, environments, bundling, therapy, all those things that people use as tools. These are what Christians have long called common graces.

God has made humans in his own image. So even when people don't honor him as God, we are still capable of serious goods like medicine and industry and figuring out some hacks of habit formation.

And just like any other tool, they can be used well or poorly, with good intent or ill, by skilled and wise practitioners or not.

And they clearly have differing levels of inputs and outputs. Changing where you store the cookies is very easy, but it was going to have far less impact on your life than spending an hour each week with a counselor helping you reframe your outlook.

But the kind of change the Bible talks about, the kind of change that you and I are called to as followers of Christ, is deeper than all of those.

[7:01] There are no hacks for us to get there, so to speak, because it's a different kind of change altogether. And those secular tools of change, what is the common denominator between them?

There are actually two. First is the mode of action, how they work on a person. A makeover is external. It works from the outside in.

Change your wardrobe, you'll feel better on the inside. Environmental design. Hide the cookies. By definition, it's the environment. It's outside. Pairing things that you like with things you dislike.

Again, outside. It's an outward behavior. And the second common denominator between them is the goal, and specifically, who sets it.

No one chooses my New Year's resolutions for me. That's, I get to choose what I want, or nothing at all. And you get to choose what you want. No one's going to impose New Year's resolutions on people.

[7:58] I don't think. That'd be weird. You choose what you're interested in. And so these tools of change that the world has, by common grace, have two commonalities.

One is internal, one is external. The mode of change is outside of us. It's some other thing. And the goal, the target, is inside out. It comes from within.

We'll find today in the scriptures, as we turn to Colossians chapter 3, that the biblical vision for change is the exact opposite.

We don't set the goals. God does. The target is an outside-in reality. And the mode of change doesn't come from clever tricks or environmental design.

It comes from a heart-deep work of God in the Christian life. And so I'm going to pause and pray, and then we're going to open up the scriptures to Colossians chapter 3.

[9:06] Father, as our church family is partially here and partially scattered to the winds for travel, for holiday travel, Lord, will you bless us all, wherever we are, by reminders of how good you are.

And as we open up your word today, would you be glorified in us? Lord, would you open up the eyes of our hearts that we might see Christ, in all his glory, might come to be changed by him for our good and for your majesty.

We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. Colossians chapter 3, beginning in verse 1. If then you have been raised with Christ.

Okay, we'll stop there. Everything that we're going to talk about today is based on that first clause.

That's the starting point. If we haven't, as Paul says here, been raised with Christ, nothing that follows will have application to us until this does.

[10:26] This is the foundation. So what does it mean to be raised with Christ? Well, he actually explained it in the previous chapter. If you back up to chapter 2, beginning in verse 9.

I'm just going to read off this page. Paul said this,

Now, we're not studying chapter 2 today. We're studying chapter 3. So we won't delve into some of the particular details there, like the connection between circumcision and baptism in the Old and the New Covenants.

But in general, what this means is we were dead in our sins, spiritually speaking, before Christ. And we were subject to judgment before a holy God.

Because all of us have sinned before and against a holy God. And God in the flesh came, Jesus came and died on a cross so that our sins, verse 14, might be nailed to his cross.

[12:33] And all who trust in him can have their sins forgiven. And because he rose from the grave as well, have the promise of new life with him forever.

And so, if you've not come to that point of recognizing your guilt before a holy God, and your need for a Savior, and the fact that he is that Savior, and that he offers free reconciliation by his cross out of his love, and have turned away from the old, and to him, and calling him for rescue, that's the starting point.

That's the first change, being raised to new life with Christ. And so, we continue back into chapter 3. If then, you have been raised with Christ, and friends, I hope that you are. I hope that you are raised with Christ. If you need to talk to somebody about that, I would love to talk with you about it. But it's not the end point.

It's actually the entryway to more and more. So, if then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

[13:54] 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. And when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

And Paul's logic here is this. We who once were dead in trespasses and sins, having put our faith in Jesus Christ, have died to self and sin and this world, and have true life in the risen Savior.

So, when we look for a source of vitality and change in our lives, it isn't just found in habit formation, or in environmental design, or temptation bundling.

It comes from this life-giving Savior. Life change comes from the life-giving Savior. So, look, direct our gaze to him.

And where he is, where does he rule and reign? Heaven. So, seek the things that are above. And isn't that interesting? The actions that Paul wants us to take.

[15:12] He says, seek the things that are above. Set your minds on the things that are above. He doesn't offer us externals.

He, you know, it's not like hide the cookies. It has to do with our hearts, our focus, our mind's attention, our heart's gaze.

Twice he tells us to fix our sights on things that are above, and he's about to explain what that is in just a moment. He directs our gaze away from something, the things that are on earth. And so, the rest of this passage breaks down into kind of those two things.

Towards heaven and away from earth. For real change. He begins, verses 6 through 11, are going to be taking our eyes off the things of this world. Verses 12 through 17 are going to be directing our eyes heavenward.

And it's at this point that I want to just pause quickly and say that this, what we're about to look at here is not everything that the Bible has to say about life change. When we preached through Colossians here at Shoreline a couple years ago, this section, Colossians 3, 1 through 17, was three separate sermons.

[16:30] And even that didn't cover everything that was, you know, in this passage. This is a broad overview of the process of biblical change in believers.

And it's not even the only kind of change. Today is about growth in holiness. There's also growth in walking with God, learning to walk with God through the valley of the shadow of death.

There's growth in wisdom, biblically. There's growth in caring for others and more. But this is a significant portion of the change that the Lord desires for his people.

And so we look away from the things of this earth and we look towards heaven. We're going to see how and why we do this and we're going to see the results. So, beginning in verse 5.

Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you. Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

[17:36] 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 away. Anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is, did you catch that?

Seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all and in all.

There are a handful of realizations I want to point out in that passage. He says, put to death, in verse 5, put to death what is earthly in you.

I emphasize that because your natural inclination and mine is to say that evil is drawn, you tempted me into it, you, is to blame someone else.

[18:58] But recognize that our sin comes from us. Jesus said, out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.

No one made you lose your temper. Sure, they might have presented an opportunity for it, but you did that. No one made me say those cruel words.

Perhaps they upset me, but I said them. Our sins come from within, not from without.

And so we must deal with them accordingly. The second realization here is, what kind of list is this?

This list of what the Lord desires to change in us doesn't look like most New Year's lists, right?

You know, this isn't like try new things or lose a few pounds. And you probably expected that, right?

God wants bigger, different kinds of changes than we do.

[20:09] He's bigger and he's different. We expect that the Bible has to do with moral categories and we want lifestyle changes, right? But these also don't always look a whole lot like what Christians discuss, like our lists of resolutions.

We tend to go a bit deeper than New Year's resolutions. Most people in our culture don't meet weekly, like our community groups do, to discuss scripture and truth and our struggles with gossip and parenting and marriage.

And these are definitely deeper things to focus on. But when we talk about sin struggles, we normally talk about that outward fruit, the behaviors that came out of the heart, right?

I need to stop looking at porn. Well, that came from somewhere. I need to stop gossiping. Well, that came from somewhere. I need to stop this or that behavior. That came from things like covetousness, which is a heart issue, not just the words that come out.

It came from evil desire, not just circumstances around me. And so Paul is taking it a step further than we tend to.

[21:27] We normally talk about the what we do. And he's talking about the why we do it, the internal heart motivations.

This is a list of the inclinations of the heart. So he doesn't say stop visiting that website. He says put to death your evil desires.

And so this is that one step deeper than the sinful action down to the heart of sin. Now that we, you know, as we experience the world, we see, we don't see other people's hearts.

We see their outward actions. We can only make judgments based on that. Even the people we know closest, we still don't see their hearts. We see their actions. But how often do we only look at our own actions?

How often do we, I'm tempted to, all day long, to just look at my outward actions? And not delve deep into the why I do the things I do.

[22:33] What's actually driving me. It's interesting. Um, the way we consider sin typically is pretty one-dimensional. Right?

Why do people look at porn? One Christian counselor that I quite admire, he wrote an article and listed out 19 different heart motivations that he has seen in counseling that people use porn for. Some of them include the most obvious, sin as my pleasure, he called it. But also, sin as my comforter.

Sin as my revenge. Sin as my reward. Sin as my affirmation. Sin as my reward. Sin as my reward. Sin as my reward. Each of those is a different heart issue. It needs to be addressed differently. It's not enough to know how we sin.

[23:37] We need to know why we sin. That's why Paul goes all the way down to heart motivations. That's how we put it to death.

Because it's at the root that we kill it. Not at the surface. If the Lord is leading you to kill a particular sin, and he is, if you're still alive, do not look solely at the outward behavior in your own life.

Do the work of getting down to the level that Paul is working at here. To the underlying motives of your heart. I'll give you an example.

Recently, I was having a conversation with somebody at Shoreline who was asking for help in getting unrighteously angry at their child's disobedience.

Now, we could simply leave it at, I'm getting angry at my kids too much. Pray for me that I'll be more patient. And that's a good prayer request. But if I leave it there, I won't have known the why.

[24:50] I only know the what. If I only know the what, I can't really help that person until I've dug deeper like Paul does here.

We need to dig deeper. We need to interrogate our sins. Uncover the root. And so I asked, when your child disobeys, what in particular are you reacting against?

Because there are a lot of different facets, features of disobedience that might excite our anger. Right? You know, you might be angry that in their disobedience your sibling is about to get hurt because of what you're doing and that's why I'm mad.

Or I'm mad that you're making too much noise. or that you're defying me. Or that you're breaking something. Or that you're interrupting. There are so many different reasons we can get angry over a child's disobedience.

If we don't know which of those things is driving us, then we don't know how to actually combat that thing. We might be using the wrong medicine for the, you know, one symptom can be generated by many different causes.

[26:05] And so as we talked, it seemed like defiance was probably the main thing that that person was dealing with. And so we took it one step further. Because in that moment, what is chiefly wrong, I asked, in your own eyes about that defiance?

Because there are different ways we can react against defiance, right? We could be saying, oh, well, you know, if you keep doing this, you're going to grow up into a criminal.

And I'm upset about that. And it's actually a protective instinct. Or it could be, how dare you defy me? A prideful reaction. Or it could be, if you keep doing this, if you keep this up, I'll look bad in front of my church friends.

Which is a different kind of pride. And there are probably other reasons at that very bottom heart level reaction to this other person's disobedience.

What is it that's making you unrighteously angry? Once you can answer that question, then you'll probably be very near the heart of the anger and then can get to work on it.

[27:18] Can you see how the way the scriptures address our problems is different than hide the cookies, make a lifestyle change?

If your anger stems, can you also see that like the way we go about addressing it is so different too?

Because once we get down to the very bottom, to the root of sin in our lives, if your unrighteous anger actually stems from a protective instinct, you're going to grow up into a criminal, right?

The heart work needs to be about addressing your trust in God and not grasping for control over something that we can't actually in the end control.

But if your unrighteous anger in that circumstance stems from pride, well then killing pride is the thing. Growing in humility is the thing. Very different approaches.

We need to know ourselves. We need to, like Paul did, look deep down. See what drives our lives. And it is with that in mind that Paul turns or returns perhaps to setting our eyes on what is above. [28:51] There's a new list beginning in verse 12 and just like before, it has to do with deep heart motivations. He says, verse 12, Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness.

These aren't actions. These are attitudes of the heart. Compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bearing with one another and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you.

So you also must forgive. And above all these, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts to which indeed you were called in one body and be thankful. And let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. This last section breaks down into two parts.

[30:17] 12 through 15, verses 12 through 15, look like the very inverse of the diseased heart of sin we saw in the last section. And verses 16 and 17 look like instructions.

Actually, 15, 16 and 17 look like instructions. And I think that's the point here. The Lord changes our hearts from the darkness of death, verses 5 through 10, to the light of life, verses 12 through 14, through and by the practices of verses 15, 16, and 17.

So let's look at that. How do you convert a desire, right, because we're looking all the way down at heart desires. How do you convert a desire for a sinful thing into a desire for holy things?

The question is, can you? And the answer is, no, you cannot. Right? We can keep a lid on it. We can work really hard to keep a lid on it.

We can hide it away. We can put it out of reach, so to speak. But at the end of the day, you and I still desire want, long for, whatever it is that we love.

[31:45] We need is changed loves. Because my sinful ways expose a sin-loving heart. My lack of holy living exposes a lack of holiness inside.

And so, Paul reaches heart deep. Look at what he says, verse 15. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.

When he says the inner, when he says the peace of Christ, he does not mean here, like, I've got Jesus, I've got some tranquility going on. That's not the kind of peace he's talking about.

The peace that of Christ is the peace Christ made between heaven and earth. We who were once God's enemies have been pardoned and not only that, brought in to heaven's family.

When he says let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, he's talking about the gospel. Let that rule in your heart. And we're going to figure out what that looks like in just a minute.

[33:04] Because the next thing he says is let the word of Christ dwell in you. We do that by saturating our lives with the testimony of this same message of the gospel.

And then he says thanksgiving. To be thankful whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus giving thanks to God the Father through him. How often do we call to mind what God has done for us and contemplate it?

The gospel is the best news. But unfortunately it is easy for you and for me for it to become old news. What does it look like to put these three things, let the peace of Christ that is the gospel, rule your heart, let the word of Christ dwell in you, and giving thanks to God, how do those three things, those are the actions that are prescribed for us in this passage, how do those result in heart change in the way that Paul is talking about here?

From death to life. How does that work? Let's return to that example of the angry parent. How do those three things work in that angry parent's circumstance?

If the defiance, they were angry at disobedience, what about disobedience were they angry at? the defiance. What in the defiance were they most upset about?

[34:34] Probably it was how dare you defy me. So it was like a pride thing, perhaps. Let's just go with that example and say that that's what

it was.

So when I say, how dare you defy me, right? If the peace of Christ, the gospel message, is large in my heart, if it's ruling my heart, when I say, how dare you defy me, I am immediately reminded that I've defied someone much greater.

And I've been forgiven. Not just pardoned, but loved, sacrificed for, brought in, and reconciled.

And that humbles me. Which is exactly what the prideful person needs in that moment to change their heart. The gospel humbles us.

It does. If it doesn't, we haven't understood it, right? And that very thing leads me to one of his other steps, thanksgiving.

[35:52] oh, the great love of Christ for me. Have you ever noticed how hard it is to simultaneously be glorifying God for his goodness and selfishly screaming at your kids?

Completely incompatible. If the gospel is ruling in my heart, it brings me humility and thankfulness which drives out, puts to death, as Paul says, that heart of pride which produces the anger.

Thanksgiving is transformative. Think on that. And then, how do we get there, right?

Both of those things have the gospel large in our hearts, letting the peace of Christ rule our hearts, and the thanksgiving that springs from it, which both drive away the sinful heart and produce loving kindness within us.

Both of these grow within us more and more as we have the third thing, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

[37:16] that's why we're people of the word. And so that's why Paul began verses 1 and 2 saying, set your mind on things that are above.

love. But is that it? Seriously? Like, read this book, and you'll be holy all of a sudden?

Like, is that really enough? It seems so small. It seems like going to the gym and plowing hard is the thing that's going to make us bigger and better.

Could something so small have so big an impact that it changes the who we are inside? Well, first, I think as everyone here has experienced, it's actually not that easy.

It's hard to tear our eyes away from the things of this world, isn't it? It's hard to set our eyes on the unseen. A lot of people are starting a new Bible reading plan, right, this year, so that the Word of God may dwell richly in them.

[38:49] Not in a legalistic sense, like, you've got to do this or you're a bad Christian, but in a, you can have your mind filled with God's Word and be made new and grow to be like Christ.

it's holding forth a gift, a precious gift, a beautiful thing, right? But it's hard. How many people are already behind on their New Year's reading plans, right?

So first, actually, it isn't that easy, which is why Paul has to remind them and command us to do this. and second, as we said, it's not the sole means of change in the life of a Christian.

There are other categories of life change that the Bible has to speak into our lives. But third, God believes that it's good enough.

It is the chief means that he has established for transforming his people. which is why we have passages like Colossians chapter 3.

[40:03] This is how we change and grow to be like Christ. It's the reason we have passages like Colossians chapter 3.

It's like, it's why we have passages like the very first psalm, which tells us that the person who meditates on God's word, letting the word dwell in them richly, is like a tree drinking up a river.

It's transformative. So much so that Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 about this beholding, setting our eyes on things that are above.

He says in 2 Corinthians 3.18, and we all with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord, that's the setting our minds on things above, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

And he says here at the end of it where the power for this transformation comes from. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

[41:26] God the Holy Spirit changes his people as they behold Christ in his word. And so when my eyes, well when my eyes are set on earthly things, right, godliness it looks like a spoil sport, like a killjoy, it

looks boring.

But when I turn my gaze to Christ and I see him as he has shown himself to me, read the gospels friends, he is awesome, when I look to Christ and see the dazzling glory of God and realize that holiness is him calling me, leading me in paths of glory to be like him, holiness, godliness is a delight.

As glorious as God is in your eyes, as full as you can set your eyes on heaven. As glorious as God is in your eyes, so will be your passion for holiness.

And so friends, we look at our hearts of sin and interrogate ourselves to get down to the root and then we look to the gospel, we let that peace of Christ, the peace that he has made between us and him and shown us his very character, how good he is in the midst of that.

And we use the gospel then is the axe with which we destroy the root of sin as we fill up our eyes with glory, overflow with thankfulness, all by letting the word of God dwell richly in and among us.

[43:42] And so friends, I ask, will you fill your view with Christ?

Christ, let's pray. Lord, it is extraordinary what you have in store for us.

We do not have the ability to fully comprehend your greatness, your glory, your loving kindness. the very goodness of your nature, but you design to transform us from one degree of glory to another into the same image of Christ.

Lord, might the peace of Christ rule our hearts, might that overflow into thanksgiving in us all as the word of Christ dwells in us richly.

May we be a people of the word. Amen. Amen.