

Set Your Mind on Christ Ascended

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[0 : 00] Church, our sermon text this morning is Colossians chapter 3, verses 1 through 4. That's page 984 in the Pew Bible. Go ahead and turn there with me. Colossians chapter 3, verses 1 through 4.

As we turn there and before we read, let me pray for us. Our Father, we do indeed hunger for the day.

When with Christ we will stand in glory. And Father, we thank you that you've given us your clear and present word in the scriptures to speak to us as we run the race looking forward to that day.

So would you equip us this morning, Father, through your word, by your spirit, that we might set our minds on Christ and live for him looking forward to that great day.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Colossians chapter 3, verses 1 through 4. Let me read this for us. 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 : 24] 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. So I wonder if you think people can really change.

Do you remember that great scene at the end of Rocky 4? You can talk to me about it afterwards. Rocky's just beaten the Russian, right? And the great call that he has is people can change.

If you take a walk through the aisles of a bookstore, you might actually get mixed messages about whether or not people can change. On the one hand, there are lots of books in the self-help section. Lots about mindfulness and recovery and change and so on. Beth told me that she saw a whole section of magazines actually devoted to this the last time she was there. So on the one hand, maybe people can change.

[2 : 27] But on the other hand, the sheer number of those books kind of makes you pause, doesn't it? If people really can change and if someone has actually figured it out, why are there so many books on the topic? And why do they keep being published?

Does any of it really work? In chapter 2 of Colossians, right before the text we just read, the Apostle Paul has been exposing the emptiness of what we might call man-made spirituality, of religion apart from Christ.

Whether it's rules that promise to make us good and upright, or whether it's rituals that promise to deliver exciting spiritual experiences, Paul says apart from Christ, it's all empty.

That's how chapter 2 ends. Look there with me at verse 23. He says, That is, The gospel of Jesus Christ is something different.

In chapter 3 of Colossians, Paul is going to show us how the new life in Christ really does change us. Not from the outside in, like the old religious rules and rituals try to, but from the inside out.

[4 : 09] The heartbeat of chapter 3, if you take a step back and look at it, the heartbeat of chapter 3 is actually found in verses 9 and 10. And there Paul says, 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.

For those in Christ, something deep inside has happened. You've put off your old self. You've put on the new self.

And the image of God, the very image of your creator is being renewed in you. Now, verses 5 through 9 talk about putting off the old self in Christ, and verses 12 through 17 talk about putting on the new self in Christ, and we're going to get to those passages in the next two weeks.

But before Paul gets to all that, there's a critical first step. Before we can put off the old self, and before we put on the new, there's a principle or a practice that undergirds all the rest, like the deep pillars that hold up a bridge.

If you've been over the new Tappan Zee Bridge recently, you realize how giant those pillars are, holding up that bridge, crossing that river. Or like a foundation holding up a building. There's a practice that precedes and undergirds all of this.

[5 : 27] What is it? The opening verses of chapter 3 tell us. Verse 1 says, Seek the things that are above. And then clarifying what he means, Paul says in verse 2, Set your minds on things that are above.

So the practice or the duty that undergirds all the rest of Christian living and holiness and transformation is this, that we intentionally and constantly be setting our minds on things above. In other words, if we're going to see any progress in putting off our old nature, if we're going to see any growth in putting on the new nature of holiness and Christlikeness, we have to be deliberately and daily setting our minds on things above.

Now what we're going to do this morning is we're going to unpack this exhortation to set our minds on things above. And we're going to unpack it and we're going to look at it from three different angles. First, we're going to look at the object.

What are these things above that we're supposed to be setting our minds on? And then second, we're going to look at the motivation. Why should we actually be doing all this in the first place? Why should we? Why can we do this?

[6 : 37] And last, we're going to look at the practice. How do we do it? What are some practical steps that we can take to be daily and deliberately setting our minds on things above? So let's begin with the object, with the what.

What are these things above on which we should be setting our minds? Is Paul saying that we should have our head in the clouds all day? I mean, what are these things above? Are we just supposed to be staring at the clouds, forgetting about all of our troubles, whistling a tune as we go, daydreaming about pie in the sky, by and by, forgetting about all of our worldly cares?

No, look again at verse one. If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Whatever else Paul might mean by the things above, this much is clear, it's where Christ is.

In other words, Jesus Christ is the focal point of heaven, the things above. In other words, if we have thoughts of heaven, if right now we picture the dwelling place of God in our minds, if we think about the present spiritual dimension of reality where God dwells in fullness, that's what the Bible means by heaven, by the way, if we're thinking of that, and if Christ is not there, and if Christ is not the central reality of that picture, if Christ is not the all-consuming center of its glory, and worship, and joy, and life, then we aren't thinking biblically.

In Revelation chapter 5, the apostle John is given a glimpse into heaven, given a glimpse into this spiritual dimension of reality where God dwells in fullness, and what he sees, and what he hears, is actually all creation praising Christ.

[8 : 25] They're singing, worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power, and wealth, and wisdom, and honor, and glory, and blessing.

To set our minds on things above means above all, to set our minds on Christ. And then Paul adds this detail in verse 1, did you catch it?

That Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Now that's a reference to Psalm 110, which is a psalm about the coming Messiah's enthronement and his reign.

And because Jesus is that long-awaited Messiah, this expression, seated at the right hand of God, is actually one of the most common ways the writers of the New Testament talk about Jesus' ascension and exaltation in heaven 40 days after his resurrection from the dead.

You see, the same Jesus who became incarnate in the Virgin Mary, who lived a perfect life under God's law, who suffered and was crucified as the atoning sacrifice for our sins, who was raised bodily from the dead on the third day in power, that same Jesus has ascended in glory and lives right now, seated at the right hand of God the Father.

[9 : 41] You see, Jesus is not just a historical figure of long ago, although he certainly lived in history. He's living and reigning right now at the right hand of God, as real and as present as he was 2,000 years ago.

So as we set our minds on things above, we're above all setting our minds on the Lord Jesus ascended and seated at God's right hand.

This is where we are to fix our minds. But what's the significance of Jesus' session, as it's sometimes called? That is his being seated at the right hand of God.

What does it tell us about Jesus on whom we are to set our minds? Well, in the Bible, at first, Jesus' session at God's right hand, his being seated at God's right hand, means that Jesus is ruling right now from heaven.

To sit at God's right hand is a royal metaphor. It means that Jesus is the one who's in control, even though the world seems out of control, even though so much of the world is at present in rebellion against God, even though the church at times seems to be so beleaguered and weak, Christ is sitting on the throne and he will return.

[11:04] And then on that day, all of our trials and all of our hardships will be seen for what they truly are, light and momentary afflictions that have been preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond compare.

Second, Jesus' session at God's right hand means that his work of atonement is complete.

Hebrews 10, 11, and 12 says that the Old Testament priests had to stand daily at their service, offering repeated sacrifices.

But, when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, the writer of Hebrews says he sat down at the right hand of God. He sat down because the work of atonement was finished.

It was totally complete. There was nothing left to be done. All that was needed to forgive our sins and reconcile us to God had been accomplished once and for all at the cross where he, the sinless one, took the place of the sinful many and bore all their sins away.

So when you set your mind on things above, when you set your mind on Christ seated at God's right hand, you set your mind on a finished work of atonement. That all that is needed for you to be reconciled to your creator has been finished.

[12:21] And third, Jesus' session means that we have a perfect mediator in heaven. Friends, you realize that seated at God's right hand is Jesus, our perfect high priest, who, as Hebrews 4 says, sympathizes with all of our weakness.

Jesus, in every respect, has been tempted as we are yet without sin. And so we can draw near to God in confidence. We can draw near to God in confidence that the throne of God is no longer a throne of judgment, but a throne of grace.

And because Jesus is seated there, we will receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need. So there's a beginning.

But you know, these three short observations, they just scratch the surface, don't they, of the glory of Christ? How else might you be setting your mind on the ascended Lord Jesus? What else of the glories and beauties and wonders of Jesus full of mercy, love, and power can we be setting our minds on today and throughout this week?

It reminds me of a song we sing here at Trinity from time to time. The second verse goes like this. It says, Could we with ink the ocean fill and were the skies of parchment made, were every stock on earth a quill and every man a scribe by trade to write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry, nor could the scroll contain the whole though stretched from sky to sky.

[13:55] On and on we could go reflecting on Christ, our crucified, risen, and ascended Lord. But for now, we have to go to our next point because eventually we have to take the Lord's Supper this morning.

So let's keep going. Our next point, we move from the what of setting our minds on Christ ascended to the why. Why on earth should we be doing that? Why can we be spiritually raised to new life in Him?

The difference between a person in Christ, a genuine Christian believer, and a person not in Christ, someone who has no saving faith in Jesus, is as big and broad as the difference between life and death, friends.

Apart from Christ, we remain spiritually dead to God and captive to sin and guilt and death. But through faith in Christ, we become a new creation. The old has passed away and the new has come.

We're alive to God and free from sin and guilt and death. And what's true of Christ our Savior is now true of us. He has been raised, therefore we have been raised with Him spiritually now and bodily in the day to come.

[15:07] And Paul says, if you've been raised, then you can set your mind on things above. You're no longer captive to the old ways of seeking and thinking and setting your mind.

Now that raises two important points for us, I think. The first is this. Friend, where do you stand with Jesus Christ? You see, apart from Him and our own spiritual effort and our own moral performance, we remain lifeless to God, spiritually dead.

Now that's a pretty stark claim. I realize that. It's not an easy one to come to terms with at first. But you see, that's the very reason why Jesus died and rose again.

Christ came in love to enter into the death of all those deserving death so that in His resurrection they might come alive to God. And the free offer of the gospel is that when we admit that we're spiritually dead apart from Christ and when we place our trust in Him alone to give us life, He does just that.

He breathes new life into our hearts, He forgives all our sins, and He reconciles us to God. So friends, where do you stand with Christ today? Today, place your trust in Him and come and know what it's like to have real spiritual life.

[16:33] The second point is this. If you have been raised with Christ, then you are now able to set your minds on things above. In other words, your thought life need not be controlled or dominated by your old self.

Those old things you used to tell yourself about yourself. the old ways you used to describe and define yourself, whether they were self-exalting or self-debasing, whether those things used to make much of yourself or whether they used to make little of yourself, whether they were thoughts full of pride or full of despair.

I'm the best. I'm the worst. I'm good enough. I'm smart enough. And gosh darn it, people like me. Or I'm terrible and I'm not worthy of love.

The truth is those things need no longer be where you set your mind. The truth is you've been raised with Christ.

There's a new power of life in you that has overcome death and now you can set your mind on things above. You have the power to do that now, to have a whole new mindset, a whole new focus, to silence and still the old voices and to set your mind on what's really real and really true about you.

[18:01] So we've been raised with Christ. That's why we can set our minds on things above, but why ought we? Why should we? Paul answers that question in verses 3-4. Look there again. Why should we set our minds on things above?

He says, For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ and God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. So why should we set our minds on things above?

Paul says here, because Christ is our life. Our life is hidden with Christ and God. Hidden in the sense of safe and secure, but also hidden in the sense of waiting to be fully revealed for what it is. As verse 4 says, when Christ returns, then we will appear with him in glory. Even if our lives right now from an earthly perspective seem less than glorious, maybe you think your life feels kind of boring.

Maybe it's even somewhat embarrassing to you at times and to others. Paul's saying that's not really your life. Your life is hidden with Christ and God and one day your real glory, glory received from the Son of God himself will be displayed before all creation.

[19:17] That's who you really are. And so we ought to daily and deliberately set our minds on things above because we so often forget that Christ is our life.

Our hearts are so forgetful, aren't they? How easily do our jobs become our life? How quickly does our marital status become our life?

How naturally do our hearts drift into believing that our kids are our life or our financial well-being is our life or our physical appearance or our physical ability is our life? Friends, when any of these things become our life, that is when they become the determiner of our joy and happiness, when they become the driving motivator of our thoughts and actions, then we've allowed our minds to be set, as Paul says, on earthly things.

You see, when Paul says, don't set your minds on things that are on the earth, in verse 2, here, earthly things doesn't have to exclusively mean overtly sinful things, like lust or anger or greed.

Those things certainly count as earthly things, but we can also be setting our minds on earthly things when we take something that's good and right in its own place and elevate it and make it our life. When you set your mind on a certain job or set your mind on having a spouse, when you place your hopes and affections and joy in that thing, whatever it is, then it's become your life.

[20 : 44] And friend, when a created thing becomes your life, we are doomed for disappointment. None of those things can hold the weight of your life.

Your job, whether it's wonderful or miserable, is not your life. And your marital status, whether it's one that you want or one that you don't want, it's not your life.

Christ is your life. And when you set your mind on things above, you're remembering what and who your life really is. So that when temptation comes, the temptation to despair because work isn't what you want it to be or your dating life isn't what you want it to be, the temptation to act out in anger or jealousy, when temptation comes on account of those things that have become your temporary life, you can say, wait, wait, wait.

No, that's not my life. Christ is my life. He's the one who loves me and gave himself for me. He's the one who sits at God's right hand and will return one day and unveil a glory in me so weighty and so real that creation will tremble with awe at the sight of us.

He's my life. Not this thing, not that thing, not the other thing. The Lord of the universe, the one seated at God's right hand, the one perfect in beauty and power and love, Christ is our life, friends.

[22 : 17] I am his and he is mine. Can you say that? That's why we have to daily and deliberately set our minds on things above because Christ is your life and you must not forget.

So then this principle, this duty of a Christian, this first call for us as believers in Christ is to daily and deliberately set our minds on things above.

If we ask what we're to set our minds on, the answer ultimately is Christ ascended and seated at God's right hand soon to return in glory. And if we ask why we're to set our minds on him, it's because that's our true life above everything and anything else.

In conclusion then, let's end by asking how. If setting our minds on things above is the critical component to living this new life in Christ, how should we go about doing it?

And there's a lot that we could say here and I want to end with just three practical helps, three things to get us started to maybe prime the pump along these directions and maybe after the service downstairs over coffee or over lunch, you can talk about more ways that you've found that are helpful to you to continually set your mind on things above, to set your mind on Christ.

[23 : 38] But three things as we close. First, consider the very word set your mind. In our technological age, we specialize in easy and fast, don't we?

With a simple tap of a screen on my phone, I can find information from practically anywhere in the world. Right? If I'm bored, I can entertain myself. If I'm curious, I can find an answer.

We have gadgets and machines that can do anything from make our coffee to make a 3D computer model of the solar system. Writer Andy Crouch calls our time the easy everywhere age.

So what Paul is telling us to do here is very countercultural, is it not? He's telling us to slow down and set our minds.

The word Paul uses here combines both our thinking faculties and our faculties of desire. He's saying, set your mind, but mind here in the Bible isn't just what you think about, it's what you long for in love.

[24 : 44] Set your heart's desire on the things above. Make it your treasure and your longing. Make it your daily bread and your food. It's as if Paul is saying, slow down and think about Christ and the realities of Christ long enough so that your heart starts to warm at the fire.

When I was a kid, we used to play with those little green army men. Do you remember those? And one day we found out that we could take a magnifying glass and if we held it still long enough, we could actually melt their faces off.

Oh man, that was like hours of fun watching them bubble and melt away. Don't read too much into that. But here's the thing.

Like a magnifying glass held out to the sun, Paul's saying that you have to hold the truths of Christ in your mind long enough until the pointed rays of his love and beauty start to melt your cold heart.

That's what he's saying here. Set your mind on it. And that brings me to the second practical help. You know, oftentimes we sit down to read the Bible and pray and it's a very lifeless experience, is it not?

[26 : 10] Perhaps you've tried it. You know, a trusted Christian friend or mentor has suggested that you take the first moments of your day to spend time with God reading his word and praying and that is wonderful advice.

But after reading a chapter and then turning to prayer, your mind quickly runs off to your daily tasks, your upcoming meetings, the conflict you're having with a family member, whatever it is. In other words, you try to set your mind but your mind races off.

And your morning time of prayer and communion with God seems pretty fruitless. You know, one person who had the exact same experience was a guy named George Mueller. Mueller is famous actually for starting orphanages in England in the 19th century.

His autobiography is an incredible story of faith. And for years, this great man of God struggled in the exact same way as you or I do. This is what he writes.

He said, I often spent a quarter of an hour or half an hour or even an hour on my knees before being conscious to myself of having derived any comfort, encouragement, or humbling of soul.

[27 : 14] And often, after having suffered much from wandering of mind for the first ten minutes or a quarter of an hour or even half an hour, I only then began really to pray.

We can relate to that, can't we? We kneel to pray and our mind wanders fifteen minutes, thirty minutes, and then, uh-oh, time's up and we're off to work. So how do we remedy this?

Mueller writes that after ten years of frustration in prayer, he stuck at it for ten years, he had a breakthrough. He said, Now, I saw that the most important thing I had to do in the morning before God was to give myself to the reading of the Word of God and to meditation on it.

That thus, my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, et cetera, and that thus, while meditating, my heart might be brought into experiential communion with the Lord.

I began, therefore, to meditate on the New Testament from the beginning early in the morning. You see the change. Mueller goes on to say that his aim in this sort of just biblical meditation was not to prepare to teach or to prepare to minister or to have something useful to say when he showed up at work, but simply to get food for his soul.

[28 : 39] And then what he found, when he focused on meditating on the New Testament just to get food for his soul, he found that prayer would come, that communion with God would come.

You see, instead of just reading through a chapter really quickly and then jumping into his prayer list, Mueller slowed way down and said, let me just rest before God and sink my mind into what he's showing me of himself here.

And that biblical meditation opened up a rich walk with God. Mueller's example is that we meditate on the word of God. And he clarifies what meditation means.

He says, it's not the simple reading of the word of God so that it passes through our minds just as water passes through a pipe. You ever had that experience? You wake up in the morning, it's however early you wake up, 6.30, 7.30, 9.30 if you're in college, whatever, you know, and you're like, okay, I gotta do my Bible reading.

You read three chapters and you can't remember even the book that you were reading, let alone any of the content. I've had that happen to me too. Mueller says, it's not just the simple reading of the word of God so that it passes through our minds just as water runs through a pipe, but it's considering what we read and pondering over it and applying it to our hearts.

[29 : 56] Biblical meditation, you see, is not emptying the mind like Eastern religions, but it's filling our minds, steeping our minds in the word of God. Like a good tea, we let the word of God steep in the water of our minds and our hearts until the whole pot is flavored and ready to drink.

So if we're gonna set our minds on things above, practically, we have to slow down and think until our hearts grow warm and we have to come to Scripture as food for our souls. You know, better to choose a short passage and really soak in it, meditate on it, asking God to reveal the glory of Christ in it than to simply read quickly like water passing through a pipe.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer recommended to young pastors in training that in their personal devotions that we confine ourselves, he said. We confine ourselves to a brief selected text which possibly may not be changed for a whole week.

Do you hear Bonhoeffer's advice there? Take one passage and meditate on it for a whole week.

Now perhaps you want more variety than that.

Fair enough. But the point remains. If you have 15 or 20 minutes in the morning, friends, rather than read three chapters quickly and then try to eke out some prayer, read one paragraph slowly.

[31 : 15] Really set your mind to what's there and you'll find it's a very, very different experience. Third practice that I'll mention this morning.

Not only must we slow down and think until our hearts grow warm, not only must we meditate on Scripture rather than simply read it, friends, we have to engage in spiritual things together. The exhortation of Colossians 3, 1 through 4 is given not just to individuals but to the church.

This isn't a solo act. That's why we gather every Sunday to hear God's word preached and to partake in baptism in the Lord's Supper. Together we hear God's word afresh.

Together we take the bread and the cup and have our minds and hearts recalibrated to our living Lord, to Christ who is our life. So do you take a few minutes on Saturday evening before bed perhaps and pray that our gatherings on Sunday would be full of God's spirit and power?

Do you pray that your heart would be open to receive his word and grace afresh together with your church family? Do you pray the same that the hearts of your fellow members would also be open to God's word and to God's grace?

[32 : 25] I guess what I'm trying to say here is, friends, make the most of your Sundays. Take a break from your regularly scheduled busyness if you can and devote time to your church family, to thinking and reading and listening to things that will lift your thoughts and heart to Christ ascended.

You know, I actually see a lot of this happening here at Trinity in our church family and it's so encouraging. Invitations to lunch, hearty conversations over coffee downstairs, exchanging books, trading encouragements after the service, praying for one another.

Church family abound in this more and more. Seek to season your conversations with the salt of the gospel. Come ready with something that God has spoken to you out of the sermon or this week.

Come ready to share a concern of the week ahead. Sundays are a gift to enjoy. Set them apart for spiritual fellowship and conversation, for reading good Christian books when you get home, friends, for slowing down and setting your mind on things above.

So then what we see here in Colossians 3 is that the first and principle and undergirding duty of all Christian growth and change of living this new life in Christ is to seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

[33 : 49] So friends, let us set our minds on Him. Let us do it deliberately and daily, intentionally, and constantly because at the end of the day, Christ is our life and one day He will return and we will appear with Him in glory.

Amen? Let's pray. Oh Lord, we confess that we need so much help in this matter. God, our minds are easily distracted.

Our time is so easily gobbled up by the concerns of our callings and our day. Lord, we confess to You that our hearts have been so cold in setting our minds on things above and yet, Father, this morning we are grateful that You are a gracious God and that You continue to reveal Yourself to us and open Your arms to us and say, come, feast Your mind and heart on me.

So help us to do that when we gather on Sundays, when we go forth this week, when we open the Word in our own private devotions daily. Oh God, by Your Holy Spirit would You come and would You help us to set our minds on things above.

Help us to remember that Christ is our life and in so doing would we live this new life that You've given us. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[35 : 13] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.