

The Key To Everything

Tourists are everywhere. They arrive in their air-conditioned buses, stay for a few hours or less, take lots of photos including selfies to prove they were there and then they are off to their next stop! This tourist mentality is in contrast to the New Testament picture of the pilgrim. The pilgrim, or disciple, is committed to perseverance, to patient growth and to continual learning.

Sadly, for many people, the Christian life has been reduced to little more than a weekly visit to church. Their expectations of change can be very limited. When distracted by other things, they gradually push their commitment to Christ to the margins, so that faith becomes an accessory rather than the driving force of their life.

One of the core ideas of Paul's letter to the Colossians is the call to continue in Christ, to learn more of Christ and to persevere in Christian living. The small community in Colossae was a young church plant which Paul had never visited, but for which he prayed, and about which he was deeply concerned. They were faithful to the gospel, but they were under threat. We are not entirely sure about the false teaching that was in danger of capturing their hearts and minds, but probably it was a form of false teaching that sounded 'Christian' but was not. The suggestion being made is that other forms of spirituality are all equally acceptable. Christians were tempted to think that knowing Jesus was not enough. Other religious activities or occult powers, or other systems of knowledge were needed if they were going to flourish. 'No!', says Paul. He warns them about being kidnapped by such teaching and underlines that if you have Jesus, who is the image and fullness of God, the Creator and Lord of the universe, then you have enough.

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From this foundation the letter then provides help for every area of life - ethics, behaviour, lifestyle and relationships of all kinds. This is because everything flows from a right relationship with Christ. He is the key, the one who unlocks all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (see chapter 2, verse 3). He is the key to everything.

We see this very clearly in chapter 3, verses 1 to 11. It is our Epistle reading for this Sunday. First then we have **'a new orientation'** in verses 1 to 4. READ. The simplest definition of a Christian is this: someone who is united to Christ. The key to living as we should is therefore to have this 'new orientation' – to fix our eyes on Christ. Paul speaks here about our hearts in verse 1 and about our minds in verse 2. So this covers our wills, our emotions and our intellect. Every dimension of our being is to be focused on Christ. This is an all-embracing invitation. Everything is to be brought into line and submitted to Jesus Christ. Now that we are raised with him, we must be intent to fix our thoughts on things above.

So, how do we do this? This doesn't mean that we don't ever think of earthly things. We are not to be uncaring or indifferent. After all, Jesus taught us to pray for our 'daily bread' and for our enemies. But it does mean we follow a new order of priority. Our number one thing is not to be 'me', 'me', 'me'. No, as Jesus said, 'Seek first God's Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these other things will be added to you'. (Matthew 6:33). Our number one priority is to put God first. Then again we need to respond to people and events around us as Jesus would. That's big. We need to know about Jesus' words and actions to be able to do that. For example, one day Jesus was in the Temple in Jerusalem watching people pay their Temple Tax as they went in to pray. The coins jingled as they

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fell into the great box. People in fine clothes made a great thing of the amount they paid. Then a widow snuck up and dropped her two copper coins in. Two little chinks. Remember what Jesus said? ‘I tell you the truth. This poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.’ (Mark 12:41-44). Now do we think like that?

And also, our response in every situation is to serve and honour God. Paul says here in verse 3, ‘Your life is now hidden with Christ in God’. Our Christian lives, because we have been raised with Christ, bring glory to God. This may be hidden from other’s eyes – sometimes it’s hidden from our own eyes – but it’s not hidden from God’s eyes. Being faithful, being diligent, persevering, all this may not lead to outward success or recognition. But this life is only part of it. God honours that and as Paul writes here, ‘When Christ who is your life appears, then you will also appear with him in glory.’

This then is how we set our minds and hearts on things above, we follow a new order of priority, we see and respond to everything as Jesus did, and our response in every situation is to serve and honour God.

Then second in this passage, we have to understand we have **‘a new nature’**. This is verses 5 to 10. READ. If we belong to Christ, we must lay aside our old way of life and put on the new life. We are to recognise that we are entirely new people, and we should behave that way. These are things that need to be dealt with decisively – desires and behaviour that need to be killed off. In the light of our new nature (see verse 10), and because of coming judgement (see verse 6), we are to live entirely new lives. Indeed the purpose of Christ’s coming was to restore the image

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in us. Our new person is being 'renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator'. (see verse 10). As we grow day by day to be more like Christ, as we submit our lives to his rule, so the image is restored. It is a wonderful description of God's purposes of restoration, making us the person he intended. And this happens as we fix our gaze on Jesus, the true image of God.

Belonging to Christ, we must lay aside our old way of life. Here are things in our lives that need to be decisively rejected. READ verse 5. And Paul uses some graphic images. We must kill them (verse 5). We must discard the rubbish (verse 8) and throw off worn and dirty clothes (verses 9 and 10). Each of these phrases call us to act decisively, to make a clean break with anything that doesn't belong to our new nature as those who belong to Christ.

The point is made even more clearly in verse 10: '(You) have to put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.' That is God's restoration plan. That is his purpose for our lives. We should be like Christ himself. With our eyes fixed on him and our hopes fixed on that future day, it truly will happen.

Then there is one other aspect of this new life which Paul touches on. We are also part of a '**new humanity**'. Verse 11 READ. When he writes 'here' at the start of this verse he means place. That is the community of God's people in Colossae. The emphasis is 'we don't behave like that here'. All these distinctions of race, religion, class and caste provide the best soil for mutual suspicion and distrust to flourish. These divisions were of great importance in the ancient world. We, of course, have our own similar divisions today. So Paul says that they have become irrelevant in Christ.

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These barriers and habits in a church with an unfinished agenda are not natural nor normal. God is changing everything to be in the image of God. So differences of background, nationality, colour, language, social standing are irrelevant to the question of the love, honour and respect that are to be shown to individuals and groups. God is at work changing things to conform to his will.

A Chinese woman was speaking to her church group. She was describing her decision to become a Christian and be baptised. She said that, because she honoured her father, she told him first and asked what he thought about it. He replied, 'I am happy for you to become a Christian as long as it doesn't change you.' She knew what he meant, yet she also knew that the gospel does change people, making them different inside, giving them a new heart, a new spirit, a new motive and a new self. When you are united to Christ you become a new person.

Let us pray that today there will be some further progress in the image being restored, that there will be a further step forward in your life in becoming more like Jesus Christ. Amen.