

Sermon – July 31, 2022  
“Seek the things that are above”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Colossians 3:1-17

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people that transforms us into Christ's image and guides us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here right now. Amen*

Good morning! I think it is safe for one to say that summer is in full swing as we experience these hot, hazy, chance-of-thunderstorms days of summer. I do want to thank all who were able to help glean corn this past Tuesday. We were able to harvest about 2500 lbs. of sweet corn that went to feed people in the Northern Neck. That raises the Charge's total of gleaned produce this summer to over 5000 lbs. The corn season may be over, but watermelon season is knocking at the door. Also, a big thanks to everyone who helped with the dinner last night at Fairfields.

This past week marked the end of the church's thirty days of discernment. I want to thank everyone who has taken time to provide information, share their thoughts, listen to each other, and pray together. Fairfields' Administrative Council will consider the next steps at their next meeting. Afton leadership has scheduled a straw poll vote for August 11<sup>th</sup> at 6:30 p.m. Any who have questions are welcome at that meeting, but only professing members will be able to vote. If you still have questions, have new insights, or need to discuss the way forward, please give me a call or come by the office and let's continue to talk and pray.

Let me encourage us to pray for each other using Paul's prayer found in Colossians 1:9-14 as a guide. His prayer is on the back of the bulletin. And also let me continue to encourage us to ask Holy Spirit to speak to us and for us to spend time listening for a response to our prayer. Those short prayers are also on the back of the bulletin.

Let's look at Paul's letter to the church in Colossae this morning and see what we find in God's Word for us this day. Notice that Paul again reminds us that we have been raised in Christ and we are to seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Jesus was crucified on a cross, died, buried, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. We

who through belief and baptism have also died with Jesus and now have Christ in us are spiritually seated in heaven with Jesus. We are to be those looking to the things that are above and not to the things of the world. We are hidden with Christ in God and as such, our primary focus is to be on the things of heaven. We are to be heavenly minded. We are to be growing in the image of Christ while we are living on earth. Paul is going to share with the Colossians what they are to do to be heavenly minded and his words apply to us as believers as well.

One reason that Paul reminds us about where Christ now is, in heaven, is to help us recall that when we believed we were given a gift to help us grow into the image of Christ. We are those who have died with Jesus and have been raised with him. Jesus is in heaven at the right hand of God, but we have Jesus in us and that connects us to Jesus in the position of power with God. Paul's instruction to believers is to put to death whatever is in us that is earthly. There is a lot of translation freedom used with this expression. The idea Paul is sharing is for us to "put off" the old person and "put on" the new. We will find these phrases translated as "clothed," "put to death," "get rid of" and other words which try to capture the idea of putting off the old self and putting on the new. I don't recall the first time I heard this idea in a sermon, but I know I understood as a believer that I was supposed to put something on or do something, but was never sure if I had done whatever it was I was to do. I think I am not alone in my struggle to understand what it might mean for us to put off the old and put on the new.

We might recall that earlier in the letter to the church in Colossae, Paul has used the idea of circumcision to introduce this idea. Instead of the removal of a small piece of flesh, a physical circumcision, Paul speaks to a spiritual circumcision. Spiritual circumcision is the idea of removing all of our flesh, putting off the old self, setting aside all of our worldly attributes and putting on Jesus Christ and the life attributes we find revealed in Jesus. When Paul tells us to put off the old earthly self, he starts a list of "things" we are not to be doing because they have been put off. Now I did not write this list, Paul did, so I don't have anyone in mind as I share Paul's list. We are to put off fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). Paul tells us that if we have these things in our lives, we should anticipate the coming wrath of God. So, if we take a look at ourselves and find any of these things, we might want to pay a lot of attention to Paul's instructions for putting off these things.

Let me talk about the wrath of God for a moment as wrath is not a place where we focus much of our thoughts. In general, people don't associate the wrath of God with God. They

believe God is only a loving God. There is a survey that I found this week done in the early 1990s about the faith maturity of Christians. Of those surveyed, most (97%) believed that God is forgiving and loving (96%), but far fewer believed that God is judging (37%) or punishes those who do wrong (19%). It would be interesting to see this survey repeated today among Christians and to see what those statistics might be in the general population. Let's say that in general Christians have a view of God as loving and not judgmental, but in his letter to the church in Colossae, Paul speaks to the coming wrath of God on those who have the attributes he lists. Another way God's wrath gets communicated in our culture is that God is looking down on us, waiting to zap us with a lightning bolt when we do something wrong. We see this in cartoons frequently, and unfortunately that idea has grown in the culture to the point that many people think of God as waiting for them to mess up so He can zap them with some bad thing. Paul's idea of the wrath of God is not at all like these misconceptions. Paul mentions God's wrath here, but we have to go to Paul's letter to the Romans (1:18-32) to find what he shares about the wrath of God with the church in Rome. What we will find there is that God's wrath is not us being smitten from heaven when we step out of line. Paul's understanding of God's wrath is God letting us act in our free will to continue in our sin. Paul's words in Romans are God "turns sinners over to themselves." The idea of turning them over to themselves is God allowing us in our free will to self-destruct in our sin. People desert God and God leaves them to themselves allowing them to self-destruct. Wrath is we who are in sin choosing to go it alone, without God. We set aside God's Word and redefine truth to meet our desires. We choose to remain in our sin and God allows us to do so and to suffer the consequences of our choice. The sin we choose becomes our punishment. This is how Paul speaks to the wrath of God. But, God is also a God of love. We know this because while we were still sinners Christ died for us. God is steadfast in always extending love to us, giving us grace, prevenient grace, to enable us to turn back to Him and be welcomed again into loving arms through Jesus Christ.

Paul is not done with the list of old self attributes he is developing. Paul adds more to the list of things that we must put off: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from our mouths. And Paul is still not done; he reminds us we are not to lie to one another. These things are the practices of the old self, and for those who have been raised with Christ these attributes should be gone, put to death when we died with Christ.

Let's look at Paul's list of attributes for those who have put on the new self in Christ. First, we are to put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. And we should recognize many of these as fruit of the Spirit. To this initial list Paul adds that we are to bear with each other. Bearing is walking with our brothers and sisters even if they are struggling. We are to come alongside them and bear their burdens. And don't miss this next addition, Paul tells us that if we have a complaint against another, we are to forgive them as we have been forgiven. Yes, Paul is meddling here, no complaining about others, only forgiving. Christians are to set aside what we find that leads us to complain about others in the church or in the world and instead of complaining about each other, we are to forgive them as God forgives us. We are to put on this attribute and never take it off. Christ is in us. We are to be Christ in all of the places we are sent and forgive instead of complaining. Paul is not done. He tells us to put on love. Love is the binder that holds everything together. Love one another. And Paul keeps going, adding that we are to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. When our hearts move towards the things of earth, we are to let the peace of Christ rule instead. Paul's list keeps growing, telling us to be thankful, to let the Word of Christ dwell richly in our hearts. As those with the Word in our hearts, we are to admonish each other in wisdom. This is the idea of forbearance, where we share wisdom from Christ's Word with each other in a manner that builds up and does not tear down. We are to share the wisdom we have received with love, the binder of all. And yes, this is also a gift of the Spirit. And on top of all of these attributes, Paul tells us we are to have gratitude in our hearts that comes out of our hearts as singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. These are not the top hits from our youth. Turn to a psalm and sing one of the verses, sing a hymn. Sing "There's within my heart a melody; Jesus whispers sweet and low, 'Fear not, I am with you, peace, be still,' in all of life's ebb and flow. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, sweetest name I know, fills my every longing, keeps me singing as I go." And when we sing, we are to sing with joy.

Okay, so we have a list of attributes to put off and a list to put on, but how do we do this? It is one thing to develop a list, but how do we put off the old self and put on the new? Many, if not all of us, have tried to live as new selves, one who has these attributes, only to fall back into the old self. We try to live as those who have put on Christ in our own strength. We seek to modify the behaviors of our old self. We tell ourselves, "Maybe if I just work on one of these and try hard to improve, I will begin to grow into my new self." That is not how putting off and putting on works. That approach is behavior modification and it is not something our old selves

will allow. If we are trying to improve ourselves in our strength, we will fail. This is what many Christians are trying to do, modify their behavior, to grow out of the old self into the new. If you haven't figured it out, this approach is a lesson in frustration. It takes something different. It takes transformation to put on the new self. It takes dying and being raised in Christ.

Transformation is not from our works, not from our will, not from our own self desire or out of our own work to actuate these new attributes in our old self. Transformation is a gift from God.

Look up at verse 10 if you are following along in your Bible. Paul writes, "and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator." It is not the old self that is being slowly, painfully matured into the image of Christ. It is the new self that we put on in Christ when we were raised with him that is being renewed. The new-self is what is "renewed" not the old self. The old self is not improved over time. The old self must be removed, The new self we have put on is what is being renewed. It is from this starting point in Christ that we can put on the new self. What we have put on becomes who we are. More and more of the new self is made active over time as we grow into the image of Christ. And we did not put on the new self ourselves. Christ did this for us when he died on the cross and was raised from the dead. Christ is in heaven at the right hand of God the Father and we are there with him. We have his resurrection power in us. We as believers are new people. Yes, we live in the now of earth physically, we are tempted by what is around us, and we will find the old self emerging as we live in this earthly realm. But, even while we live in the now of earth physically, we have been remade into those who are in the now of the kingdom of God spiritually through Jesus Christ who is seated at the right hand of God. Think of it like this, "We are now be!" Let me say that again, "We are now be!" We have put on the new self in Christ. Now we are to be who we are in the power given to us through Holy Spirit. This is a gift from God through Jesus in the power of Holy Spirit. Christ is in us now. We are transformed into a new person not by our work, but by a divine act. We are walking into holiness, enabled by Christ within us, being renewed in knowledge according to the image of our creator. We have resurrection power to accomplish this putting off and putting on. Martin in his writings on Paul's letter states it as, "These teachings constitute an inescapable call to make the ethics of the Savior the ethics of the saved."<sup>1</sup> We have put on the new self and now we need only to grow in the knowledge of Christ. To help us grow in the knowledge of Christ we are to let the Word of Christ dwell in our hearts. We do this in many ways, but reading our Bibles, and dwelling on a

few verses is one way. Dwelling in the Word is when we read the same verses daily for many days and let the Word of God stay in our minds and hearts as we let the text speak to us. One author compares this to a cow ruminating on grass. We bring the words to our minds and think about them, turn them over, look at them, and listen to them, letting Holy Spirit inform us and guide us as we dwell in the Word of God. Let me encourage us to let Holy Spirit lead us to texts that we are dwelling in daily.

Let me make one last point this morning from Paul's letter to the church in Colossae. Many of us will remember the fad that emerged years ago related to the initials WWJD. That stood for What Would Jesus Do? Some may still have a bracelet or necklace with those letters. We were encouraged to ask ourselves that question before we acted on some challenge or trial we had encountered. Paul gives us a different approach for discerning if our actions are consistent with the new self or if they belong to the old self. Paul first tells us we are to ask ourselves if what we are proposing to do can be done in the name of the Lord, in the name of Jesus. Will what we propose to do honor Jesus and be consistent with his holy name? The second criteria is for us to ask ourselves, "Can I thank God the Father through Jesus for the opportunity for doing this thing?" If we are able to answer these two questions in the affirmative, then what we are planning may be consistent with having put on Jesus. If not, what we may be proposing may be some action inconsistent with the new self we are seeking to mature. So, put on the new self in Christ and then ask ourselves as we live in this earthly place if what we are doing honors Jesus and is consistent with his holy name and if we can thank God the Father through Jesus for the opportunity to act as we are. If not, then we may need to look again to Jesus and put off the old self and put on the new.

*Pray with me: Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of putting the new self on and setting me free from my old self. Guide us, Jesus, that we might more fully realize that we are and may now be. Forgive us, Jesus, when we seek to put back on the old self, and lead us always to grow into the new self in Christ. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Garland, David E.. Colossians, Philemon (The NIV Application Commentary Book 12) (p. 228). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition