



Colossians - Chapter Three

Summary of Chapter Three

Paul's second response to the teaching that threatens Colossian faith offers a description of the Christian life in four parts. After introducing the essential structure of his ethics (vv.1-4), Paul goes on to characterise what a life in Christ is not (vv.5-11), before then describing what characterises life in Christ both within the congregation (vv.12-17), and within the home (3:18–4:1).

Paul states that the natural response to a believer's participation in Christ's triumph, indicated by the fact he now sits at the right hand of God, is to exchange secular for heavenly norms and values. This exchange of the secular life for the sacred constitutes for Paul the central moral reality of the new life; and he envisages it practically in various codes of Christian conduct that he goes on to list and develop.

God's grace enables his people to remove their old ways in order to take on Christ's ways; that is, to exchange all their vices for all his virtues. The virtues are most plainly illustrated in the guidelines for family relationships that Paul goes on to list. He addresses the relationships between wives and husbands, parents and children, and slaves and their masters; all of whom are equal in the sight of God.

Colossians 3:1–4:1, as an integral part of Paul's polemic, sets forth the moral flip side of his theological argument against the hollow and deceptive philosophy that threatens the Colossians' confidence in Christ as the only mediator between God and humanity. While the cast of this part of the letter is less polemical, Paul has shaped the timeless truths of his moral exhortation into a specific response to the Colossian crisis.

VI. Colossians 3:1-4:6 - Instructions on Living the Christian Life

Based on their death and resurrection with Christ, and the hope of a future life with him, Paul encourages the Colossians to continue eliminating sinful behaviours from their lives and cultivating Christian virtues.

VI.a Colossians 3:1-17 - The New Life in Christ

Paul again focuses his readers on Christ, drawing his ethical materials from the Jewish synagogue. On the surface, there is really nothing distinctively Christian about avoiding the vices enumerated in vv.5-11 or pursuing the virtues of holy living referred to in vv.12-17. The will of a good and holy God did not change with Christ's coming. The real issue, therefore, is one of moral competency; believers are made capable by God's grace to do God's will. Paul advises them on what to avoid and how they should be living instead.

VI.a.i Colossians 3:1-4 - The Proper Focus: Christ and the Life Above

This pivotal section marks an end to Paul's polemic against the false teacher and is a bridge to his appeals for the Colossians to live in a manner pleasing to the Lord.

¹ So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³ for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Colossians 3:1-3

Raised with Christ. Dying and rising with Christ signify death to the power of sin and Satan, plus empowerment to live the new life that Jesus calls believers to live in imitation of him. It is a sign of unification with him: <<***For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his***>> (Romans 6:5).

Christ is presently seated at the right hand of God: <<***The Lord says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'***>> (Psalm 110:1), and: <<***God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places***>> (Ephesians 1:20), now in a position of authority where he can make intercession with the Father. The false teacher may have claimed to have heavenly secrets, but Paul dismisses his theology as earthly.

Set your minds on things that are above contrasts with the things that are on earth and refers to pursuing a deeper knowledge of Christ himself: <<***I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death***>> (Philippians 3:10), and all that belongs to living with and for him. This would include seeking first his Kingdom: <<***But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well***>> (Matthew 6:33 NIV), and living a life worthy of his name: <<***so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God***>> (Colossians 1:10), and: <<***As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him***>> (Colossians 2:6).

Your life is hidden with Christ in God. Paul uses the language of Isaiah and the Psalms to express the security of the people of God as they trust in him: <<***For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the***>>

cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock. Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord>> (Psalm 27:5-6), <<O how abundant is your goodness that you have laid up for those who fear you, and accomplished for those who take refuge in you, in the sight of everyone! In the shelter of your presence you hide them from human plots; you hold them safe under your shelter from contentious tongues>> (Psalm 31:19-20), and: <<He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away>> (Isaiah 49:2).

⁴ When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Colossians 3:4

When Christ is revealed refers to his Second Coming: <<Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed>> (1 Peter 1:13), and: <<Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is>> (1 John 3:2); something Paul anticipated could happen during his own lifetime, but knew it would happen for certain at some future point in history: <<For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, we who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever>> (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

The centrality of Christ in Colossians blazes into view again. Believers will know that Christ is their life. Perfection in glory will be theirs when Christ returns, when they appear with him in glory.

VI.a.ii Colossians 3:5-11 - Dealing with the sins of the past

Paul calls the Colossians to make a decisive break with the sinful tendencies they have carried with them into their Christian lives.

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).

Colossians 3:5

Put to death. Because believers have died with Christ: <<If with Christ you have died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?>> (Colossians 2:20a), they can get rid of sinful practices: <<So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus>> (Romans 6:11), and: <<for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live>> (Romans 8:13). The language of putting to death indicates that Christians have to take severe measures to conquer sin. Watchfulness and prayerfulness against it will

be the first steps: <<*Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*>> (Mark 14:38), with self-discipline following: <<*If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell*>> (Matthew 5:29-30).

Fornication or sexual immorality, Greek *porneia*, refers to every kind of sexual activity outside of marriage. Many of the items that Paul lists have to do with sexual purity, stressing the importance of bringing this area of life under the control and lordship of Christ.

Which is idolatry. Greed, sexual sin and other vices can intrude into one's relationship with God, taking his place as the focus of devotion. Like all pagan worship, these actions and thoughts consist of giving allegiance to something in the transient world of present experience rather than to the creator God. The inevitable result is death, whether that is physical, moral or spiritual death: <<*For the wages of sin is death*>> (Romans 6:23a).

⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.

Colossians 3:6

The wrath of God is coming. In line with the OT prophets, who spoke of the day of the Lord as a time of coming wrath: <<*For a day is near, the day of the Lord is near; it will be a day of clouds, a time of doom for the nations*>> (Ezekiel 30:3), <<*Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near, and as destruction from the Almighty it comes*>> (Joel 1:15), <<*For the day of the Lord is near against all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head*>> (Obadiah 15), and: <<*The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness*>> (Zephaniah 1:14-15), Paul reminds the Colossians that God will suddenly intervene in human history and will hold everyone accountable. Those who live evil lives will face final judgment.

Those who are disobedient. God did not create mankind to sin, and his wrath and judgement ordain proper judgement on them. They are inherently children of disobedience, obeying only their own selfish lusts.

⁷ These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.

Colossians 3:7

These are the ways you also once followed. Believers should recognise this condition, as they once lived with a similar focus on earthly things before becoming Christians. Indeed, they are still capable of living that way without the

power of the Holy Spirit within them and Paul reminds them of how it once was: <<*You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is at work among those who are disobedient*>> (Ephesians 2:1-2).

⁸ But now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.

Colossians 3:8

You must get rid of all such things. Paul lists five more vices in addition to those of v.5 that Christians need to get rid of. These five all have a bearing on social relationships among believers. These all suggest controlling thoughts and therefore the tongue, i.e. abusive language, is seen as the most destructive organ in the body: <<*And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell*>> (James 3:6). Such language includes not just swearing but anything that causes alarm and distress, especially gossip.

⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.

Colossians 3:9-10

Do not lie to one another. This not only includes lying to deceive but also pretending to be something that is not a truthful reflection of the inner person. Paul was a man who practised what he preached: <<*The God and Father of the Lord Jesus (blessed be he for ever!) knows that I do not lie*>> (2 Corinthians 11:31), and: <<*In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!*>> (Galatians 1:20). It should always be remembered that the Gospel is about truth!

Seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self. Self is the generic Greek term for man or human, with the old self an allusion to Adamic man apart from Christ and the new self as being in Christ: <<*We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin*>> (Romans 6:6). Paul picks up here what he has said earlier about Christ circumcising Christians by removing <<*the body of the flesh*>>, refer back to Colossians 2:11. Here, he employs the metaphor of taking off and putting on clothing. The aorist tense of the two participles suggests that it is an event that has already taken place. A qualitative change of identity has already occurred in the lives of believers. It now only remains for them to bring their behaviour into line with their new identity: <<*and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*>> (Ephesians 4:24).

Being renewed in knowledge, written in the present tense, indicates that the transformation of Christians is an ongoing process. The renewal is in the image of its creator, which links humankind with its origin: <<*So God created humankind*

in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them>> (Genesis 1:27). To become more like God in the way he intended people to be is what it means to become truly human in God's image.

It is Paul's and indeed God's expectation for people to see clearly, and to understand, the deeper issues behind apparently casual sexual behaviour, casual speech, and a casual attitude to sin in general.

¹¹ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Colossians 3:11

There is no longer Greek and Jew. There are no status distinctions among the new covenant people of God: <<*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*>> (Galatians 3:28). No one has a special claim on God or is treated with less dignity than any other.

Barbarian was a term that was normally used for the non-Greek speaking Gentile nations: <<*I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish*>> (Romans 1:14). It is a term used in some translations for the islanders on Malta, where Paul was shipwrecked: <<*And when the barbarians saw the beast hanging from his hand, they said to one another, This man is certainly a murderer, whom, [though] saved out of the sea, Nemesis has not allowed to live*>> (Acts 28:4 Darby).

Scythians were a people group located along the northern coast of the Black Sea. To the Greeks, the Scythians were considered a violent, uneducated, uncivilised and altogether inferior people. In contrast to such discrimination and prejudice against other races and cultures, Paul shows that Jesus, who is all and in all, binds all Christians together in equality, irrespective of such differences. After all, every single person is God's creation and each one is forgiven through the sacrifice of his Son on the Cross. The acceptance of such diversity is a key feature of the church.

VI.a.iii Colossians 3:12-17 - Putting on the virtues of Christ

Having described some of the destructive human traits in vv.5-9, Paul now calls the Colossians to a holy lifestyle, consistent with their new identity. Believers have been chosen by God and stand before him as his beloved holy ones. They are called to live up to what they are in Christ.

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

Colossians 3:12

God's chosen ones. All people who acknowledge Jesus as Lord, whatever their former lives were, are now God's elect and are called to be holy as his beloved children. They are to be merciful in action, attitude and affection, using their heart as their guide, with their most tender feelings being for those in distress and

affliction, i.e. clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

Humility is one of the key Christian virtues: <<*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves*>> (Philippians 2:3). It was a virtue seen in Paul's own ministry: <<*When they came to him, he said to them: 'You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews*>> (Acts 20:18-19).

¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Colossians 3:13

Bear with one another. Tolerance is a virtue within the Christian community, although Paul clearly does not want the Colossians to tolerate the false teaching.

Forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you. When wronged and betrayed, Christians are called to forgive others, i.e. you must forgive, even as they have been forgiven for their betrayal of Christ: <<*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*>> (Matthew 6:14-15), <<*Then Peter came to him and said, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?'* Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times'>> (Matthew 18:21-22), and: <<*Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven*>> (Luke 6:37).

¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Colossians 3:14

Above all else, Christians are called on to love one another: <<*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you*>> (John 15:12).

Which binds everything together may suggest that love unites all the virtues.

¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Colossians 3:15

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. If one is at peace with God then they will know peace: <<*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*>> (Philippians 4:7). This peace is possible only if there is true unity, both with God and within the church. All are members of the one body in communication, cooperation, connection and

dependence on their head, Jesus Christ, the Saviour and sustainer of the church, his body. Because of this, all should be thankful, as bountifully blessed, both now and forever.

¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

Colossians 3:16

The word of Christ probably refers to the teaching about Christ as well as the words of Jesus himself, which were part of the oral traditions passed on to believers in the early years after Christ ascended to heaven, before the Gospels had been written. Paul also confirms the validity of the written bible: <<*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness*>> (2 Timothy 3:16).

Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom indicates that the responsibility lies with each member of the church to help others grow and not just those who serve in leadership.

Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs is one way in which to teach and admonish. This may refer to different kinds of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs found in the OT Psalter. It seems more likely, however, that Paul is referring both to the canonical psalms and to contemporary compositions of praise. Corporate worship has a teaching function through the lyrics of its songs. This was particularly important in the oral culture of Paul's day.

¹⁷ 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.

Colossians 3:17

And whatever you do, in word or deed is to be done for God's glory and in the name of Jesus, i.e. through him: <<*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God*>> (1 Corinthians 10:31).

In the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father. The centrality of Christ does not diminish the Father but brings him glory.

VI.b Colossians 3:18-4:1 - Rules for Christian Households

Paul gives instructions for the various members of a Christian household. He addresses wives and husbands, children and fathers, and slaves or bondservants and their masters. Significantly, he addresses the women, children and slaves directly as equal members of the Christian household, and he addresses each of them first in their respective sections.

¹⁸ Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

Colossians 3:18

Wives, be subject to your husbands. Instead of telling wives to obey, Greek *hypakouō*, as was typical in Roman households, Paul appeals to them to submit or be subject to, Greek *hypotassō*, based on his conviction that men have a God-given leadership role in the family. The term suggests an ordering of society in which wives should align themselves with and respect the leadership of their husbands; refer also to Ephesians 5:22-33.

Paul is not enjoining the wives to follow the prevailing cultural patterns of the day but to live as is fitting in the Lord. Seven times in the nine verses of this section Paul roots his instructions in the Lord or an equivalent term, thus stressing the importance of evaluating everything in the light of Christ and his teaching.

¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.

Colossians 3:19

Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. There was a tendency in the Roman world for men to rage bitterly against their wives and mistreat them. Because of their greater strength and louder voices, men in their sinful natures are prone to use harsh words, threats, unkindness, and even physical violence to intimidate their wives. There is no room for even a hint of this in a Christian home; instead, men are called to love their wives as Christ loved the church: *<<Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her>>* (Ephesians 5:25).

Many people have criticised Paul as being sexist and failing to recognise the value of women. Nothing could be further from the truth and women were a key part of the ministries Paul was involved in, including those who hosted house churches. What Paul shows in these two verses is that it is the mutuality of respect and love that makes a marriage what it should be, and that the roles are reciprocal, not identical. Paul provides guidelines on relationships. It is up to those involved to work out the detail.

²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.

Colossians 3:20

Obey your parents. Paul's words to children reflect the fifth commandment: *<<Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you>>* (Exodus 20:12). This statement is not just aimed at young children for the commandment is directed to all ages.

²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

Colossians 3:21

Do not provoke your children. Men are urged to restrain their anger and any other attitudes that can embitter their children: *<<And, fathers, do not provoke*

your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord>> (Ephesians 6:4), lest they despair of pleasing their parents.

Culturally, women would normally be responsible for the basic teaching and upbringing of young children. However, it was the duty of men to teach the children, especially the boys, the ways of God. It would be the father, as the head of the household, who would administer any punishment for wrongdoing.

²² Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, ²⁴ since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.

Colossians 3:22-25

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything. The relationships between husbands and wives, and parents and children are ordained by God from creation. Hence, Paul's instructions on marriage represent the perfect will of God. On the other hand, the kind of servitude practiced in the 1st Century was seldom in keeping with God's will; the Scriptures regulate the institution without commending it; refer to the comments made on 1 Corinthians 7:21, Ephesians 6:5, and 1 Timothy 1:9-11. The evil of trafficking in human beings is condemned in the NT: <<*This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave-traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching*>> (1 Timothy 1:9-10), <<*And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves – and human lives*>> (Revelation 18:11-13).

As in any other city or village in the Roman world, there would have been many slaves and bondservants at Colossæ. Paul treats them with dignity and appeals to them directly to honour Christ in their hearts, work and behaviour. Philemon was a wealthy Colossian church leader who benefited from the labours of his bondservant Onesimus, who had absconded. Paul persuaded Onesimus to return to his master but asked that he be received according to his Christian status: <<*Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord*>> (Philemon 15-16).

Slaves should work wholeheartedly, not primarily to please their earthly masters but as if they were working for the Lord. The principles of Colossians 3:22-4:1 apply to Christian employers and employees today.

Since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward does not imply salvation can be earned. The work done should be a natural response by the believing worker in thanksgiving for what God has done for them by offering his Son in exchange for their guilt and shame.

There is no partiality. All wrongdoers will be judged according to their deeds and thoughts, as confirmed by: <<***He will surely rebuke you if in secret you show partiality***>> (Job 13:10).

The next verse, Colossians 4:1, is included here as it completes the current section under discussion.

^{4:1} Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Colossians 4:1

Treat your slaves justly and fairly. It is estimated that slaves composed about one-third of the population of a city like Colossæ. They were considered to be an integral part of a family, so Paul's instructions for slaves were a natural part of his dealing with family relationships. In both Greek and Roman culture, slaves had limited rights and were subject to exploitation and abuse. Paul does not condone the existing system of servitude but instead provides instructions to believing masters and slaves regarding their relationship towards each other in the Lord, and how this should be lived out within the bounds of their social and legal culture. The result, as is often observed, is that this kind of servitude slowly died out in antiquity through the influence of Christianity, refer to the Purpose section of the Introduction to Philemon. The principles of this passage apply today in terms of submission to any lawfully constituted authority, the only exception being if such a lawfully constituted authority were to require a believer to disobey God's Word or to fundamentally compromise one's commitment to Christ, as in the case of the apostles being instructed not to teach in Jesus' name by the ruling Sanhedrin: <<***But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard'***>> (Acts 4:19-20).

Those in authority may rule over others on earth but Paul wants to remind them that they too will be accountable to the ultimate Master in heaven one day!