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## A Higher Desire Colossians 3:1-4

**Intro:** We've finally made it to the last 2 chapters of Colossians and, as is his habit, Paul now moves from declaring truth and teaching doctrine into the practical application of the doctrines he's been teaching. This is Paul's normal normal writing style; we see it explicitly in many of his Epistles. But it's also very practical. In fact, it's Paul's normal writing style precisely because it's so practical. After all, it does little good if Christians *declare* and *defend* the truth, but fail to also *demonstrate* that same truth in their daily lives. Some Christians will defend the truth at the drop of a hat, but their personal lives deny the doctrines they profess to love. In this country, we have too many people who are professing Christians but practicing atheists. They claim to know and love Jesus and yet, God never enters their mind or influences their decisions or actions. Even when they go to church, all they can think about is how long it will last. Their habits and the practice of their lives is no different than that of an avowed atheist.

Now, we should keep in mind that the pagan religions of Paul's day said little to nothing about personal morality. A worshiper could bow before an idol, put his offering on the altar and go right back to living the same old life of sin. What a person believed had no direct relationship to how they behaved, and no one would condemn them for their behavior. But the Christian faith brought a whole new concept into pagan society: what we believe has a very definite connection with how we behave! As Paul has elaborated, faith in Christ means being united to Christ, and if we share His life, we must also follow His example. Jesus Christ cannot live in us by His Spirit and permit us to live in sin.

If you have ever been to a Bible conference, youth conference or marriage conference you will have noticed that they all had a specific theme or primary focus that set both the tone and the parameters for the conference. This letter also has a theme, and it hangs over the body of the letter like a banner at a conference, setting the tone and directing the flow of the writing. The theme verse is [2:6](#); it's Paul's call to keep the Lord Jesus Christ as the center of the Christian experience. Of course, since Paul was writing in response to the immediate threat of false teachers that were plaguing the

Colossian believers, he begins by elaborating on this call in a negative way. He warns his readers against the false promise of these false teachers in most of ch2: Beware (8); let no one judge you (16); let no one cheat you (18) do not subject yourselves to regulations (20).

Now, in our text, Paul begins to elaborate this call to remain centered on Christ in a positive way. Echoing the key doctrines of Christ presented in ch1-2, he shows how the believer's identification with Christ leads to a new a new way of life. He accomplishes this in 3 basic steps. 1<sup>st</sup>, he begins with an overall call to adopt a mind-set that reflects our new identity in Christ (1-4). He then elaborates on this new way of thinking (5-17) by contrasting the old way of life that we are to **put off** (5-11) against the new way of of life we are to put on (12-17). Paul ends the chapter with a reminder that this new life doesn't absolve Christians of their responsibilities to each other within earthbound institutions but provides a new motivation to live out those responsibilities in an appropriate manner (18-4:1).

1-4- 2 parallel commands make up the heart of this small paragraph: seek those things which are above (1a) and set your mind on things above (2a). Paul then links these commands to reminders of the believer's identification with Christ in both death (3) and resurrection (1) and he concludes with a declaration of confidence that this identification will extend all the way to Christ's second coming, when believers will appear with Him in glory (4). Again, the positive tone of these commands contrasts with the negative focus of the previous chapter. From what the believer is not supposed to do – allow false teachers to push their agenda on them – Paul now turns to what believers are to do – focus on the new, heavenly dimension of reality that has been made available by the first coming of Christ.

Of course, the second half of v2 reveals that Paul hasn't entirely left the negative behind. The things above that Paul want his readers to concentrate on stands in contrast to the earthly things of the false teachers and their hollow and deceitful philosophy. But, from a broader perspective, our text summarizes and emphasizes most of the key theology presented in ch1-2; where, though Christ is the focal point, the specific focus in ch1-2 is always on the significance of Christ as He relates to the status and experience of the believer.

This same focus dominates our text as Paul points to the believer's union

with Christ. As he explains it, our past experience of dying with Christ and being raised with Him is the basis for our present status as people whose heavenly identity is real and secure, yet hidden, and it is an identity that will be gloriously manifested in the future. These are the constant tenses of the Christian faith: our past choice to accept Christ established our present status of being united with Christ which provides us with a future expectation of seeing Christ in His glory and participating in that glory with Him.

1- As we have said, Paul is now drawing positive conclusions from the same theological arguments he used in ch2 to warn the Colossians about false teaching. The legalistic rules and ascetic practices of the false teachers, all having to do with the things of this world, have zero ability to subdue or even suppress the power of the sinful nature and, if adopted and pursued, they only serve to separate believers from their Head, Christ; the only true source of spiritual life and strength. The false teachers insisted that following their philosophy and self-deprecating lifestyle was the means to spiritual fulfillment but Paul strongly affirms that spiritual fulfillment is found in Christ and, as such, it is therefore only in Christ that believers can experience this fulfillment for themselves.

When Paul says to seek those things which are above, he's not instructing believers to seek to possess these things. We already possess them by virtue of our union with Christ! Our exalted position in Christ is not a hypothetical idea or a goal for which we are to strive. It is an accomplished fact. What the phrase literally means is to set your heart on things above. Believers are to seek to orient themselves totally to these new heavenly realities. We're to tune our hearts into the heavenly frequency, triangulate it and then move in that direction. We're never to strive for a heavenly status since that has already been freely given to us in Christ. Instead, we're to make that heavenly status the guidepost for all our thinking and acting.

Also, by using the present tense, Paul shows that we should be constantly occupied in striving for this orientation. We don't strive for the heavenly status but we are to strive to orient our lives to this new status. How do we do this? We seek those things which are above by deliberately and daily committing ourselves to the values of the heavenly kingdom and then living out those values in front of a lost and dying world.

While this is a positive and encouraging verse for the Colossian believers, it's still a sort of backhanded slight against the false teachers who plagued them. These false teachers offered access to the heavenly realm to all who adopted their philosophy. Nowhere does Paul disparage the Colossian's concern with the heavenly realm, but he does move to redirect it, and in doing so, presents a completely opposite perspective from that of the false teachers. Their idea of accessing the heavenly realm takes the earthly situation as their starting point, from which by their own efforts and techniques they will move beyond the body, gain visionary experience and ascend into heavenly places. But Paul, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, moves in the reverse direction. He sees the starting point and source of the believer's life in the resurrected Christ in heaven, from where it then works itself out in earthly life (religion vs relationship).

By reminding us that the heavenly realm is where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God, Paul not only defines the realm but, more importantly, he provides motivation for us to seek to orient ourselves to that heavenly realm. Paul has made it clear that spiritual growth only comes from Christ, so it's naturally in our best interest to focus on the place where He is. In addition, our identification with Christ in His resurrection means that in an ultimate sense, heaven is where we truly are also (positionally). Since this is true spiritually, it is only natural that we seek to align our entire being with our true heavenly identity.

**2-** Paul reveals just how important this perspective is for believers by repeating the essence of his command here. But, there are 2 basic differences in this phrase. First, Paul shifts from the general seek to the more specific set your mind or think. Paul likes this verb: 23 of the 26 NT occurrences are his. This verb doesn't refer to a purely mental or intellectual process but to a fundamental orientation of the will. It not only alludes to the basic inner attitude that lies behind the seeking of v**1**, but it's also in the present tense, suggesting it is to be a habit of the mind.

The second difference is likely the real point of the verse: we're not to have our minds set on earthly things. Paul probably repeated the command of v**1**, slightly varied, just to set up this additional point. It's almost certain he's suggesting it's the false teachers who are preoccupied with earthly things at the expense of heavenly things – which is an ironical twist. As **2:18** suggests, the false teachers, with all their visionary experiences and ascetic

practices, would have been the ones bragging about their focus on heavenly things. In reality, as Paul's effectively explained, by bragging about those vision and by cutting themselves off from Christ (2:19), the false teachers have their minds set on the things of this world. The things above are clearly tied to Christ, who is enthroned above, and must reflect the values of the kingdom He has ushered in. Anything else, or anything less, is no more than worldly thinking.

3- As per his usual practice, Paul now grounds the commands of v1-2 with an appeal to theology: you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Of course, the Colossians haven't died physically, but they've died spiritually (2:20). The Colossian's union with Christ in death, burial and resurrection provides them with the spiritual security they were craving, including especially forgiveness and protection from evil spiritual powers. It's abundantly clear that Christ's death, burial and resurrection are the essential events of God's plan of salvation, they're the climax of the salvation-historical drama.

It's also clear these events mark the transition from the old era to the new; from the old covenant to the new covenant; from the OT to the NT. By believing in Christ, the Colossians have identified with Christ in these events and so experience all the benefits they confer. But, these events they identify with Christ in should also mark a radical transition in their lives and conduct. Setting our hearts and minds on things above and not on earthly things is both necessary and possible. It's necessary because our union with Christ means we no longer belong to the realm of this world but to the heavenly realm. It's possible because our union with Christ severs us from the tyranny of the powers of this world and provides us with all the power needed to live a new life (1:10-14).

Paul goes on to say that our lives are hidden with Christ in God. What does he mean by this? Nowhere else in the NT is there a reference to believers being hidden. Now, we've seen the language of hiddenness earlier in the letter (1:26) and in a context that coincides with our text. Just as the believers life is hidden and will appear (4), so too, the mystery had been hidden and has now been revealed. As we saw in 1:26, this hidden/revealed idea was fundamental to the widely accepted Jewish worldview. According to this Jewish perspective, many things related to God and His purposes exist in the present, but because they are in heaven, they're hidden from



human sight. All these things will one day be revealed as they come to pass and are seen by people on earth.

In the same way, Paul's saying that at the present time our heavenly identity is real, but it is hidden. We've certainly not been physically transported to heaven; nor do we, who belong to the heavenly realm, look any different from those around us who still belong to this world. Thankfully, v4 will affirm that this will one day change. In the meantime, our true status is veiled. The Christian life is a hidden life as far as the world is concerned because the world doesn't know Christ. And, though we may not look any different than those around us, Paul's point in this context is that we certainly need to behave differently.

4- This vs is the answer to the previous verse. The verb appear is the counterpart to hidden in v3 and the your life in v3 is picked up and elaborated here as Paul identifies Christ as the One who is our life. Sometimes we say "Music is their life" or "Sports is their life" or "They live for their career." But, of the Christian, it should be said that "Jesus Christ is their life." This idea reflects the overall focus of the letter and it also reminds us of Paul's other autobiographical remarks in Gal 2:20 and Phil 1:21. These verses reflect Paul's conviction that the life and destiny of the believer is inextricably bound up with Christ. As Christ died, so believers die with Him, When He died, believers were buried with Him. As He was resurrected, so believers were raised with Him. And when He appears in glory at His return, believers will appear with Him!

Our identification with Christ, which is now real but hidden, will one day, on that day, be manifested to all (I Jn 3:2). Because Christ is now in us (1:27b), we have the hope of glory, and it's that same union – expressed in the other direction – we in Christ – that will bring this hope to its certain accomplishment. As the passage in I John suggests, the believer's appearance in glory of in a state of glory will mean a final transformation into the image of Christ by means of resurrection. In Christ, God has restored the perfect image of God that was so marred and disfigured in the Fall, and believers who are joined with Christ will share that image.

Being raised with Christ emphasizes the new status of believers, which requires a new way of life. This new life gets under way with a new orientation as believers set their hearts and minds on things above, where

Christ is. Christians already have knowledge of the heavenly realm through faith in Christ. They don't obtain this knowledge by using other mediators, by pursuing visionary sideshows, by submitting to legalistic regulations or by mortifying their bodies. Furthermore, since Christ reigns over all, every aspect of our lives should be ruled by Him. Every thought, aim, value, aspiration and striving should come under His Lordship. Thus Paul exhorts believers to set their hearts and minds on those things that are related to the heavenly realm, where Christ dwells and rules from.

This Christian mindset has 2 components. On the one hand, it's something that might be expected to flow naturally from our new relationship with God in Christ, drawing sustenance from the life of prayer, worship and service that characterizes the way of discipleship. At the same time, it's something that has to be worked on, to be put into practice by an effort of will and determination. Or, to put it another way, the Christian outlook is a matter of co-operation between the work of God's Holy Spirit and the Christian in whom the Spirit is working. So, Paul can command the Colossians to have this way of thinking; and at the same time he can stress that their real life is already found in Christ. The Christian mindset is the result of living out the implications of the salvation that God has generously given. 😊