THE NEW SELF IN CHRIST

Colossians 3:1-17
Key Verse: 3:10

“And put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”

Last week, we studied Colossians chapter 2 with the prayer that all WIU students might put their hope and trust in Christ, who is the source of all wisdom, knowledge and understanding. Those who live by faith in Christ can experience the fullness of God. What is more, those in Christ have undergone a circumcision of the heart that is by faith. We know that circumcision was accomplished through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We understand from Scripture that circumcision means the “putting off of the sinful nature.” Still we wonder, if we have already been forgiven, why must we restrain our sensual indulgence at all? In today’s passage, Paul emphasizes that in every Christian there is the old self, whose desires and nature belong to the earth, and there is the new self, whose desires and actions belong to heaven above, where Christ now reigns. The old self is surely under God’s judgment. But it is the promise of God that those who make every effort to grow in the new self made possible through Christ have the hope of glory when Christ appears. May God bless us to learn the lifestyle of the new self in Christ!

I. Set your hearts on things above

First, You have been raised with Christ (1). Look at verse 1. “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” In this verse, Paul assures us that when we believed in Christ Jesus’ death and resurrection and received him as Lord in our hearts, we were raised together with him from death to life (1:22; 2:12-13). This is a fact of Christian life that what Christ accomplished through his death and resurrection became our accomplishment through faith in him. Christ, through his anguished cry on the cross, “It is finished,” indeed won the victory that gives all men who believe a living hope in the kingdom of
God. Jesus promised in John 5:24, “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” We were dead in our sins. But God made us alive with Christ. Praise God and give thanks to Christ Jesus, our Savior!

Second, Grow in holy desires (1-2). Look again at verses 1 and 2. “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, and not on earthly things.” In these verses, Paul turns from what has been accomplished through our faith in Christ, to what is still “up in the air”. The assurance of what Christ has done for us is the foundation for what must still be done in our Christian life. Therefore, Paul exhorts us not once, but twice, to “set our minds and hearts on things above.” We must not be deceived by what has already been attained into ignoring the spiritual struggle that still remains. For those who think that they have a guaranteed ticket to paradise, please consider the example of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. They were already there in paradise. They had the command of God to protect them from temptation and death. But they were too confident. They did not meditate on God's command and rules for living in paradise. Instead, they were attracted by some interesting new ideas from a silky smooth salesman. When they let the devil draw their attention to the good taste and potential benefits of eating the forbidden fruit, they rejected everything that God had told them, and ate from the tree from which he had forbidden them to eat. In short, when the man and woman forgot that God's paradise belongs to God, they became careless regarding their desires. However, once the desire to enjoy the forbidden fruit was born in their hearts, it was already too late. They fell, and were cast out of paradise. We have been born again through our faith in Jesus’ death for our sins and resurrection. But we must renew our holy desires in Christ day by day, or else our hope in his kingdom will be in vain.

Look again at verse 1. “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” What are the things above? They are the spiritual gifts that Christ gives to his servants, enabling them to serve as
instruments of righteousness in this sinful generation. They are the promise of the Holy Spirit, eternal life and the hope of the kingdom of God. St. Paul had pursued diligently all the worldly treasures he could find through a Judaistic life. But of what use and account were they? They had led him into violence and blasphemy as a persecutor of the church. So Paul testified in Philippians 3:7, 10 and 11 “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ.... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” Paul’s struggle to know Christ was not a short sprint or a single wrestling match. Instead, Paul understood that he was in a marathon race, the finish line for which was crossed only at the end of his life on earth. In Philippians 3:12-14 he says, “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” In short, those who have been raised with Christ are those who are now qualified to run the race of faith. Victory is assured, but only for those who run it. We cannot find the finish line anywhere here on earth. The finish line is there with Christ at the right hand of God in the heavenly kingdom. So we must set our hearts and minds on crossing that line by faith in Christ.

Third, A life hidden in Christ (3-4). Look at verses 3 and 4. “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, you also will appear with him in glory.” Jesus, in his parables, compared the kingdom of God to a treasure hunter. Matthew 13:44-45 says, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.” The hope of eternal life is a priceless treasure for men who are bound in a world of sorrow, decay and death. But as long as we are still in a body of flesh, our fingers cannot close around the prize, nor is
there anywhere or anything where we can keep such a treasure secure. Or is there? Through our baptism into Christ's death, we sold our earthly treasures and hopes, burying them with Christ, so that we might purchase in Christ a living hope in the kingdom of God. We ourselves, because of the weakness of our flesh, are incapable of maintaining such a hope by our own efforts. So, by faith, we keep the treasure of life we received hidden in Christ. In Christ, the image of the invisible God, our life is kept safe. It is ours now. But, like lottery winners, we must be prepared to claim it when Christ appears. This is our struggle from now on. Like Paul, we must press on to claim the reward for which Christ Jesus has called us heavenward.

II. Putting on the new self

First, Shedding the old self (5-8). Look at verses 5-8. “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.” In these verses, Paul refers to the old self, the life we lived when our hope was something or someone in the world. It is a way of life that is ruled by earthly, sensual and selfish desires. It is a way of life that leads to judgment and death (6). These things contribute nothing to our struggle to obtain our hope in Christ, and in fact distract and divert us from doing so. So, we must put them to death, if we are to take hold of our new life in Christ. But, as we know too well, the habits and practices of our old self are not skin deep. It is relatively easy to stop taking drugs, drinking or indulging in sexual immorality. But it is not easy at all to overcome the persistent desires we sought to satisfy by engaging in these things. As any smoker can testify, to stop smoking means almost inevitably to gain weight. It is the desires of the flesh that rule our hearts and keep our eyes fixed on the things of this world. We must be clear that it is our desires that rule our hearts, and which will lead us either to life or to destruction. We must overcome those desires and actions which lead us to come under God's wrath. We must obliterate them from our lives. Not only
so, but we must learn to follow those desires that lead to life and the kingdom of God.

In listing those things that we must avoid, Paul emphasizes the thoughts of our hearts and the words and emotions from our mouths. In short, we must be careful about what we meditate on in the thoughts of our hearts, and we must watch how we express ourselves toward others. It is not acceptable for a Christian to meditate on obtaining the desires of his flesh. The original Greek for the word translated as “lust” is “inordinate desire.” In short, it is obsession for the things of the world. In fact, all of these desires can be understood as idolatry, for they place the things of this world above Christ and the things of God. In verse 8 Paul emphasizes the words we use. We should not speak in anger or with malicious intent toward others. The word translated as “slander” here is in fact, “blasphemy”, or speaking against God and against his kingdom. When we speak words of doubt to others or even to ourselves, we are blaspheming God and his kingdom. Paul includes filthy language. In today's society, it is thought to be nothing to speak words of despair and violence to express our frustration and vent our feelings. It feels good to be able to curse others out, according to our self-righteous feelings. But we smear the image of God that is growing in us every time we do so. It is not a small thing. Only by not giving way to our angry desires and feelings can we take one more step in suffocating and shedding the old self, and make way for the new self to grow in us.

Second, Christ is all (9-11). Look at verses 9-11. “Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” Lying is the quintessential expression of the old self, because lying serves only one purpose; to exalt ourselves and advance our own interests when in fact such advancement is not warranted by what we have done. For example, when I was studying for my Ph.D., I would often hide from my advisor because I wasn’t working hard enough, or hadn’t made enough progress. But if I ran into him, I would lie, saying I was working like a dog. One time he asked me, “What does that mean? Where’s the evidence?” I was speechless. I lied because, in my sinful delusion, promoting my self-image of being
a hard worker and a smart guy was more important than actually doing it. I also thought it a lot easier. But in fact, it wasn't easy at all, and lying made me always anxious and fearful. When we take off our old self, we must die to our sinful desire to promote ourselves and seek our glory first. But human beings desperately need glory. We need honor and recognition. So, after taking off our old self and dying to our self-glory seeking desires, we must put on the new self and desire the glory of the new self. What is it? Look again at verse 10. “And have put on the new self, which is being renewed in the knowledge of the image of its Creator.” When we shed our old self and put on the new self, we are also exchanging the glory of the flesh and of the sinful nature for the glory of the Creator. There is no comparison, you know (Ro. 1:18-21). But from the Garden of Eden until now, self-glory has appeared to men to be better than the divine glory that we share with Christ in God. It is a lie and a deception. Only those who live to give glory to God and to share in Christ’s glory in heaven can experience true glory that is forever. Only those who acknowledge that Christ is all and is in all can transcend all human barriers and have true fellowship and love with men and with God. Our new self is not an individualistic soloist. Our new self in Christ is a chorus member in the chorus of faith (Heb 12:1).

Third, Bear with one another as you grow (12-14). Verses 12 through 14 are Paul's encouragement for the Colossian Christians to grow in the image of the Creator God, which is Jesus Christ. Mostly, Paul emphasizes that we must learn forgiveness, the forgiveness that the Lord showed us on the cross. Why is forgiveness so important? It is because we must learn the forgiveness of Christ by bearing with the weaknesses and failings of others. Most of all, it is because all Christians are in the process of taking off the old self and putting on the new self. It is like being in a giant dressing room, with some people only having their underwear on, while others are just fixing their ties. All the imperfections and even dishonorable things are liable to slip out from behind the new self, embarrassing and shaming ourselves, potentially outraging or disgusting those around us. But we must not see each other from our self-righteousness, condemning and hating one another. Instead, whatever grievance we have against one another, we must learn to forgive and to see them with hope of God.
One day, if we remain true to the hope to which Christ called us, we will all be fully dressed, and our joy will be complete.

III. Life in the Spirit

Look at verses 15-17. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” In these verses, Paul speaks of the joy that is ours when we live as God’s chosen, holy and dearly loved people. Too many people consider that a holy life is death, because to live a holy life they must die to their earthly desires. Therefore, there is a strong stereotype of Christians as “puritan-like” people who wear only black or white, and who have no expression on their faces, except sadistic joy at depriving others of their fun in the world. It is the devil’s propaganda. The joy of Christian life is greater and more satisfying than all of the worldly pleasures combined, for the joy of a Christian is the fruit of an undying fellowship with God through the Holy Spirit living in our hearts, bringing us peace, wisdom and a thankful mind. We sing, not because I need to practice the guitar, but because there is a reason to sing each and every day, due to the loving embrace of our heavenly Father through his Comforter and Counselor in us, the Holy Spirit. Please, don’t run from a holy life in Christ. Embrace the holiness of Christ, the purity of God’s word and the love of God’s holy mission, and you will have a fountain of joy that no one can take away.

May God richly bless you and give you peace as you grow in the new self through studying God’s word. May God bless this campus, and raise up this nation to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.