**Keep Seeking Christ**

June 30, 2013

Colossians 3:1-17

Key Verse 3:1 “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”

The words “set your hearts” in verse 1 come from the Greek word “dzay-teho,” which means seeking in order to find out by thinking, meditating, reasoning, and inquiring into. Most versions of the Bible translate the phrase as “seek,” or “keep seeking.” So we made the title, “Keep Seeking Christ.” In the previous message we learned that just as we received Christ Jesus as Lord we must continue to live our lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith and overflowing with thankfulness. This is a wonderful key verse to guide our new lives in Christ. But the problem is that it is not easy to continue to live in him practically because sin is deeply rooted in our nature and character. Sometimes our enemies are outside, such as persecution, trials and hardship. But mostly our enemy is inside. Sins like selfishness, pride, lustful desires and greed are ingrained into our personality. They tarnish and corrupt our entire being. It became our habit to live by this nature. It is very comfortable to do so. Sometimes we try to enjoy the pleasures of sin. We are afraid of losing our sinful nature, thinking we will lose the joy of life. Today’s passage teaches us that we have to put that inner enemy to death. Furthermore, we need to clothe ourselves with God’s nature. In order to do so we need to keep seeking Christ. When we keep seeking Christ, we can grow strong and mature. We can fight against our sinful nature and grow as spiritual people who can please God.

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.” The phrase, “Since you have been raised with Christ,” means that we have a new life. Our sins are forgiven. Our old self is gone, and the new has come. Now we have become a new creation in Christ Jesus. We don’t need to try to be a new creation by doing something. We have already become a new creation. Now we can live a wonderful new life as a citizen of God’s kingdom. As a new person, what should we do? Verse 1b says, “...set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”

Martin Luther once challenged one of his students by saying, “I’ll get you a new horse and carriage if you can pray the Lord’s Prayer and concentrate on every phrase without losing your train of thought.” The young man thought, “no problem.” After he had prayed the prayer, he however confessed to Luther, “all I could think about was the horse and carriage.” As much as he tried to concentrate on the Lord’s Prayer, his mind was drawn elsewhere. Have you ever had such experience--where you just can’t take your mind off of something? Maybe it was an upcoming exam, or a job interview, or a big game - something that you just couldn’t get your mind off of. Unfortunately, when we get our minds stuck on things like that, they are usually things we don’t want to think about or shouldn’t be thinking about. We know we shouldn’t worry about them, but sometimes we just can’t seem to stop worrying about it.

In the time of Noah, people were only thinking about eating and drinking, marrying, buying and selling, planting and building. These things in themselves are not bad. But people were thinking only about these things and pursued them as their life goal. They sought money, power, and pleasure as the chief end of their pursuits. They gave their whole lives to obtain these things, and then the flood came and destroyed them all. When we think only about earthly things, we remain earthbound. Earthbound people and things will all perish. But when we think about spiritual things, we can grow as spiritual people. God prepared his kingdom for such people. Setting our hearts and minds on things above does not mean that we ignore our basic human obligations. But it means that we are not bound by earthly life. We pursue a higher goal, a higher quality of life as new creations in Christ Jesus. Foolish people try to gain both the world and God. Yet they are rejected by both. C.S. Lewis said, “If you seek heaven, you will gain earth as a bonus. But if you seek the earth, you will lose both.” Jesus said, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

As I mentioned, “set your hearts on things above,” means “keep seeking Christ.” It is like running a marathon. Our lives are not a short sprint or a single wrestling match. We are in a marathon race, the finish line for which was crossed only at the end of our lives on earth. In Philippians 3:12-14 Paul 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.

But we are not alone in our race of faith. Many people feel that they are alone. Even in a big ministry, people feel loneliness in a crowd. Loneliness leads to depression. But Christ is with us and is interceding for us, cheering for us, and providing everything we need to live a victorious life. Romans 8:34b says, “Christ Jesus who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” Christ is interceding for us to plead the forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our faith to fight the good fight, and for victory over our enemies. This was Paul’s secret power source. So he confessed, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Php 4:13). The Lord strengthens us in many ways: through prayer, through the words of God, through fellowship with God’s people, through spiritual mentors, through good Christian literature and movies. Thank you, Jesus!

But while we are living in this world, we have to struggle against our sinful nature. Look at verse 5. “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry.” This struggle is a matter of life and death. We cannot have a tolerant attitude toward sin, or compromise with sin; we must put to death whatever belongs to the earthly nature. C. S. Lewis tells the following story: A disfigured man comes before a holy angel of God with a red lizard on his shoulder. This lizard represents his lustful desires which have held him in bondage and degraded his existence. The angel offers to deal with the lizard. But the lizard whispers into the man's ears, trying to convince him that life without him would not be worth living. After a painful struggle, the man finally consents to the angel, who immediately takes the lizard from his shoulder and destroys it with one swift blow from his sword. Then the man suddenly changes his appearance. All of his ugliness and distortion disappears and he becomes handsome and strong. At the same time, out of the remains of the lizard rises a great white stallion, which the man mounts, and both leap upward and onward, soaring to great new heights. Though it may be painful, we need to put to death the elements of our sinful nature. When we do so, we can experience glorious new life.

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.

Paul notes in particular that we must not lie to each other (9). Lying is the typical expression of the old self, because lying serves only one purpose; to exalt ourselves and advance our own interests. For example, when I was studying for my Ph.D., I would often hide from my advisor because I had not made progress, and was reading Korean newspapers a lot out of despair. But if I ran into him, I would lie, saying that everything was fine. I lied because promoting my self-image of being a smart guy was more important than admitting that I needed help. The Bible tells us to speak truthfully in love (Eph 4:15). This is the character of God’s children. When we do so, we can experience the kingdom of God in our fellowship. We can grow to maturity in Christ, both as individuals, and as a body. Verse 10 says, “...and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” Being renewed is an ongoing process. We are all in the process of being made new in the image of God. There is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all (11). Christ removes all kinds of barriers. In Christ we are all brothers and sisters. In Christ we are a new community in his likeness, regardless of human distinctions.

Look at verse 12. “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” We are God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved; this is our new identity. In the past we were not God’s people. We were ugly, terrible and wretched sinners. We were not dearly loved; we were obnoxious enemies of God. But God, in his great mercy, forgave all our sins and made us his precious, holy children, who are dearly loved. Now that we are God’s children, we must live accordingly. Our inner character should reflect God’s character. God’s character is marked by compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 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.

Look at verse 17. “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Jesus Christ is Lord. He is the head of the church. Whenever we gather, we must do everything in him and through him and for him. When Christ is honored, God is pleased and he will bless our community abundantly. The famous musician Johannes Bach did not sign his name to his compositions. Instead, he wrote the letters “INDNJC,” which stand for the Latin “In Nominee Domini Nostri Jesus Christi,” which means in English “In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.” This is the right attitude of a person in Christ.

The most important thing in our new life is to keep seeking Christ. Christ is our life goal. We must keep seeking Christ, thinking about him. Christ is in us. Christ is with us. Christ is interceding for us. So we should let Christ rule our hearts and our community. Then we can grow in the image of Christ, and our community can be like the kingdom of God and can be used as God’s instrument of righteousness.