

Our Identity in Christ - Kevin Miller, 30 minutes, **Colossians 3:1-17** (#512)

Introduction: “Who are you?” That might be one of the most fundamental questions that any of us could ask one another. Sometimes, we ask because we are wanting a name: “I’m Kevin – the pastor.” More often, however, we mean something deeper, something about identity, about how we think of ourselves in this world: “I’m Wade’s son,” “I’m a teacher of God’s Word.”

I find it ironic that our world has become absolutely obsessed with identity over the past few years. Ironic, because Christians have cared about identity long before it became popular. If we are in Christ, then we have been changed by Him. If we have been changed by Him, then we belong to Him, are called out by Him, and are marked by Him. Our identity is different. The old ways of our world’s thinking fade into the background, the new ways of Christ’s kingdom become what is most important. Or do they?

It is my conviction that identity is likely the greatest challenge not only facing *the* Christian church worldwide, but also *our* church right here in Sioux City. You and I face pressures every single day to have our identity be about something else, something lesser than Christ: is it in your job? Your wealth? Your family? Or perhaps it is found in your hobbies, the brands you support or boycott, the politics that you hold to, or how you look? There are tribes of Christians that emphasize each of these aspects of identity. But, as we’ll see in **Colossians 3** today, none of those identities are what Christians are called to embody. None of those take primary importance. In fact, every other identity we have – every lesser identity than what we have in Jesus – doesn’t exist on its own or by our preferences, but instead should be transformed first by our Christian identity.

How’s that look? What steps are you and I and every Christian called to for following after and living for Jesus? And how can our culture’s fascination with identity be not just a challenge that we wrestle with, but more importantly, an opportunity for the church to show the world what really matters, what our lives are really supposed to be built upon? Let’s see in **Colossians 3...**

3:1-4 Note very carefully the little words at the start of this verse: “If then...” Before we move further, ask yourself: “Am I a Christian? Am I identified with Christ in death and life?” Only if that is true will the following verses make much sense. If they don’t, then the challenge for you right now is to hear and see all the ways that Christians are different, are being remade in the image of our Savior, and then to have that for yourself by calling upon Him as your own Savior.

To those of you who are Christians, I want you to be challenged by something here as well: if you have been raised with Christ – and you have, if you are a Christian – then you are to be, you *must be*, transformed. It’s not a matter of preferences or options or alternatives. To be a Christian is to be marked and changed by Jesus. In what ways? How so? In these verses, we see two changes that will largely set the tone for everything that follows: we are to live our lives in the here and now by seeking and setting.

First, seeking: if you are in Christ, then the call upon your life – the challenge and goal that you are to orient yourself towards, the destination that you are to bend your back and put the paddle in the water and row with all your might to – is to seek the things that are above. We’ll see in a few minutes what those “things” are, but for now, Paul focuses on where “above” is. Paul doesn’t mean some sort of superficial spirituality. He isn’t talking about the sort of thing that is so cheered by Oprah or so popular on the religion shelf at Barnes and Noble. Nor does Paul settle for a cultural Christianity – one that sounds good, posts feel-good thoughts on social media, or is about being a nice person who cares about poverty, organic coffee, and injustice. Those things may or may not be a part of a Christian’s life, but Paul means something more, deeper, and fundamental than them: what we seek are the values, traits, and attributes that are common in the kingdom. They are the norm where Jesus is. They are what is embodied by Christ Himself and upheld in the presence of the Lord. Said shortly: Christians are to practice what Christ Himself lived out. We live differently because our King, His kingdom, and our destiny is different from the world around us. So, we seek what is above.

But we also “set.” In **verse 2** we read that the Colossians – and you and I – are to “set your minds...” Where? Not on the latest scandal. Not on the latest sports scores. Not on what the political commentators, talking heads, and paid influencers think. No, we are to set our minds on the things... notice again... that are “above.”

There was a phrase decades ago that went something like this: “she’s so heavenly minded that she’s of no earthly good.” Frankly, I’m not sure this was ever a helpful phrase, but I think the point behind it was to say that we Christians have a mission in the here and now; that even as we look towards the coming Kingdom, we also need to be on mission here with our lives. If that’s what is meant then fine, well and good. But I’d like to suggest that almost no Christian is in danger of being too focused on heaven. I know I’m not, and I don’t see this as a danger in our own church. Instead, our danger is to be so earthly-minded that we are of little heavenly good. We are bogged down by the cares of the world rather than the cares of our Lord. The call that Paul writes here is the correction to that: give your best thinking, and even your most thinking, to what will matter not just for a 24-hour news cycle, or even for a week or two; no, give your best Spirit-enabled, God-glorifying, cross-responding efforts towards what will matter for eternity.

The reason why Paul puts seek and set as the framework for what follows is because we need to keep the goal in mind. Our destiny is not something here, in the sense of this world. No, our destiny is an eternal one, united with our Savior. Given that truth, all that we think, say, and do must change. In what ways? What follows comes in several parts, two of which we’ll focus on today. The first speaks to what some translations call the “old man,” or the “old self...”

3:5-11 It’s time to put some things to death. Even that imagery is a bit shocking in our day and age, isn’t it? Make no mistake: Christianity is not some nice, Mr. Rogers kind of faith. We are called to battle. Not a political one. Certainly not a crusade. But a spiritual battle. And the enemy is not others or those we disagree with – not here, not primarily. Instead, the enemy written of here is our old self.

So it is that – if we are to seek what is above, to set our minds on what is Christ-like, we need to die to what is here below. Paul lists the sins that so easily entangle, the things that keep us from being of great eternal good: sexual immorality – which is something not only the Roman culture back then, but our own culture is drowning in. The same goes for impurity and passion. I once heard Pastor John Piper warn against the world’s idea of sex and pleasure – he called his listeners to reject the ideas of casual sex, pleasure without commitment, love without faithfulness. Though a bit crass, his example was to say that what the world values is little different than “dogs in heat.” So it is. We are called to something far more wonderful, lasting, and beautiful than how dogs relate! That is why Biblical marriage is so beautiful. It’s also why it is so attacked by our world.

Of course, our problems occur in other realms, too. Evil desire and covetousness have almost become accepted in our society. “Keeping up with the Joneses” (with apologies to our own Jones family here!) used to be thought of as a bad thing. Now it’s almost a joke, close to an excuse for consumption and showing off. Paul calls this attitude out clearly: it is nothing short of idolatry – worshiping status and things rather than the Savior.

Paul’s charge is to say that, yes, every person prior to Christ once gave themselves to these sins or others like them – and, indeed, God will bring judgment on these, just as He has promised. Yet, in Christ we are new. We are different. So, **verses 7-8**: “once walked” and “but now...” If you are in Christ, then the call is to live differently. It’s time to put these things to death with the help of Jesus. It’s time to put them away through the enablement of the Holy Spirit. Notice that this second list is nothing new – the Colossian culture allowed, perhaps even promoted such things. Our culture does as well. We have weaponized anger for political and social goals. Yet Christians must not give in to that. We make TV shows about wrath, malice, and slander, yet those are not the path of a Christian either. Obscene talk is almost an unheard of prohibition anymore – it’s been in my lifetime what TV and radio have changed from banning profanity to accepting it as reflecting something “authentic” about whoever is speaking.

My point – and, more importantly, Paul’s – is not that we somehow need to outlaw such things. That may or may not be so, but Paul’s point isn’t that we need institutional change, corporate change. No, Paul’s point is that the change that is necessary needs to happen personally, in the lives of those who follow Jesus. That is what we are called to and it is how we will have a lasting impact for our Lord.

If you haven’t been challenged by one of these points yet, let me suggest **verses 9-10**. We live in a culture of deceit. Little white lies are accepted, perhaps even promoted, as a way to keep the peace or to not overly upset people. Friends, there might well be times to hold back saying everything you know, but that is far different from intentionally deceiving somebody else, even for a supposedly “good” reason. What if our church was known for that kind of loving honesty? Notice, I didn’t say unfiltered bluntness. As we’ll see in a moment, kindness is also part of following Jesus. But what if we were known for loving one another so much that we would intentionally put off the old self and put on the new self, even with how we speak to one another and about each other? Whatever other changes might come, I daresay that we would find the joy of **verse 11**, where all the differences that matter so much to the world would matter little to us. Instead, we would find the sweetness of what it means to be a family of faith centered on, zeroed in on, and enjoying Jesus together.

So: the old man, the old woman, the old child – whoever you were before you came to Jesus, call on the Lord to put that off! And trust Him as you take faith-filled steps to put on the new life in Christ. Christians are to be different in our attitudes (**verse 5**), our actions (**verse 8a**), and our speaking (**verse 8b**), here written of by Paul primarily in “do not” ways. But what does that new man, that new self, look like *positively*, what are we *to do*? Let’s keep reading...

3:12-17 It looks like being set apart, which is to say, holy. That’s awfully hard to do if you are filling your mind and your time with worthless things. Similarly, you won’t be kind unless you fill your heart with something other than people screaming at each other online. Humility, though not often valued by our world, is to be a primary marker of every Christian. Meekness – even less valued in our

“the strong will rule the earth” kind of world is to be sought all the more so. Don’t ever forget: it isn’t the strong, it isn’t the leaders, it isn’t the rich, powerful, or the “influencers” who will inherit the earth. No, it’s the meek. And, of course, patience is also absolutely necessary. Patience might be the most overlooked value of all in a world that cares a great deal for instant gratification, with having everything from Amazon packages arriving to projects at work done “now.”

Dear church, I hope you are seeing how radically different of a life we Christians are called to live and to enjoy! Is it any wonder that Jesus so often told His disciples that their work would be hard? That they would be opposed by the world? That the path is narrow and few will walk it? If Christians are to be different in our attitudes, actions, and speech, then what are we to now do? We see the same pattern as before, but now put positively...

Verse 12 spoke to our attitudes. Now, verses **13-14** speak to our actions. Notice how we are to deal with one another, particularly when we have a complaint: we aren’t to get frustrated, still less to complain about it to others. Instead we are to forgive as we have been forgiven. Make no mistake: you cannot call yourself a Christian if you refuse to forgive, if you would rather hold on to your bitterness, anger, or prideful thoughts than release your brother or sister. Is there somebody that you need to forgive today? Make it a point to catch them before you leave. What a mark of Christ’s love that would be! The unity that we are called to isn’t what the world prizes – it isn’t unity around some popular idea or by pretending we have no differences. No, in forgiveness we directly confront our own sins, our own attitudes, and we love one another in the process. Christ first did this by forgiving us – we point to Him well when we forgive one another.

The end of **verse 15 and then 16-17** address our speech. We are to be thankful. Oh friends, to be thankful in a world like ours *is* an act of faith! It is a witness! And how should that look towards one another? Through our words. Holding to what Christ has said, teaching it to one another, singing of His glories. In this way, all that we do will reflect what matters most: our identity in Jesus. What’s one thing you can do this week to reinforce that identity? Let me pray as you consider...