

**SERMON: Image Is Everything**

SCRIPTURE: Colossians 3:1-11

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**Introduction:** You can't be anything you want to be. I don't know where this notion crept into America, but it's not a biblical idea. Think about it. What if after watching the Summer Olympics this year you decided you wanted to be like Michael Phelps. But you're 50 years old and you've never learned how to swim. It may be a little too late for you. Or what if you want to be a professional basketball player when you grow up, but your parents are only 5'6". You can shoot a thousand baskets a day and improve your vertical leap to 40". But the fact of the matter is that there are going to be people that are 6'8" that shoot just as good as you and jump just as high as you. You can't be anything you want to be. But you can be everything that God wants you to be, with excellence.

Don't set your sights beyond what you were made to be, but at the same time don't set your sights too low. We were all created in the image of God and are called to be like Christ. There is no higher goal in all of life than to be like Christ. And the good news is that if you really want to be Christ-like it is attainable. You can't do it on your own, but you can be like Jesus and there is nothing higher than that. Image is everything if it is the image of God that you are seeking. And that is why Paul is admonishing his readers in Colossians to seek Christ.

Colossians 3:1-11

*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, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

*Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, 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. 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. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all.*

We can put on the image of God. As a matter of fact we were created in his image and we're called to be like Christ. This is great news, but it is a challenge as well, because we don't always want to be like him and we're so easily distracted. And so Paul has some very clear instructions for how we can become more like Christ. This passage is telling us that image is everything. It is all that matters. That is, the image of God in us. There is nothing or nobody else that we are to model our image after. Paul was exhorting the Colossians to devote their whole life to being

clothed only in the image of God. And that is what I think this passage is asking each of you to do this morning: Devote your whole life to being clothed only in the image of God.

I'd like to suggest that there are three steps the text commands us to take if we are going to be clothed only in the image of God. First, you need to never lose sight of your end result. Second, you need to throw away all of your old clothes. And third you need to start wearing only the clothes in your new wardrobe. I will use these three steps to organize our time this morning. So let's start by looking at the first step: Never Lose Sight of Your End Result, found in verses 1-4.

### **Never Lose Sight of Your End Result. (vv. 1-4)**

When I say never lose sight of your end result I'm talking about that day when Christ will come again and all Christians will be with him in perfect glory. If you have received Christ then the end result is not just wishful thinking. You will be in heaven with Christ. However, even if you know Jesus and you have been saved you are also still being saved. Or to say it another way, even though you have been made completely new by what Christ did on the cross you are still being renewed and you won't be completely restored until the last day when Christ returns. If you want your image being renewed, now, you will have to maintain a focus on your final result, then.

The text starts off in verse 1 by saying, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ." This phrase frames the rest of the passage. Paul assumes that his readers are Christians. And so he starts out the letter by affirming the fact that they are Christians, but then he follows up this statement of fact with 6 commands. We will cover 5 of those commands this morning. These commands, "set your hearts on things above, set your mind on the things above, put to death what is earthly in you, get rid of interpersonal sin, and do not lie to each other" were given because these Colossian "Christians" were struggling with the temptation to live like non-Christians. These commands were given to contrast the reality of the Colossians' faith with how they were really living.

The first command says, "Set your hearts on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." We see from the context, in Chapter 2, that the Colossians were not setting their hearts on the things above, but instead they were seeking after earthly things; they were caught up in a whole host of earthly things. They were in danger of becoming completely sidetracked from the gospel that they once received. That's why in verse 2 Paul commands them to, "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." If they are Christians they shouldn't be focused on the things that non-Christians are focused on; they should instead be focused on Christ alone.

Verse 3 reminds them that their identity is wrapped up in Christ in every way, including his death. "For you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." They died to their old way of living and to sin. They died to the earthly things. And if they died with Christ, then they have indeed been raised with Christ, even though their physical resurrection and full redemption had not taken place yet. The phrase, "your life is now hidden with Christ, in God," is a very important phrase for us to understand if we are to understand the rest of this passage. How is it possible that our life is now hidden with Christ when Christ is seated at the right hand of God and we are still here on earth?

For those of us who have received the grace of God our life is even now secure in heaven. We already have eternal life. We are still living in this temporal life, but we possess now eternal life. This world is not our home; we await our heavenly home which is already ours by promise. So there is an “already”, but a “not yet” tension that runs throughout this passage and that runs throughout our entire Christian life as well.

Verse 4 tells us that, “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” The already part of our faith is that Christ is your life, “now”. The “not yet” part of our faith will be fully realized when Christ appears. The “already” part is that Christ has already saved us and our life is now eternal. But if you’re going to be clothed now in the image of God you must never lose sight of the “not yet” – which is the full picture of who you are becoming; your end result. You must be living now in the light of where you will be living in eternity!

I have the honor of marrying Bryan Knowles and Jessica Wadsworth at the end of next month. It has been a great privilege over the last couple of months for Maggie and me to meet with them as they prepare for marriage. As I thought about how to make this “already”/“not yet” dimension of our faith clear to you this morning I thought of Bryan and Jessica. A couple who is engaged to be married is not yet actually married, but they will be. But even though they are not yet married their whole life now is shaped by the fact that they will be married soon. Bryan and Jessica are constantly thinking about the day when they will be married. They’re living their lives now in full expectation of what has not yet happened, but which will happen. They’ve sent out hundreds of wedding invitations. They’ve planned the ceremony. They made travel arrangements for their honeymoon. They’ve got a lease on an apartment. They’ve put a budget together. They’re setting up joint checking accounts. They’re picking out things to furnish their new apartment. They are doing things now to prepare for the day they will be married. They are truly “seeking” wedding day things.

Also, their whole identity is wrapped up in the fact that they will be married in one month. People have thrown showers for them in anticipation and celebration. People are buying them gifts. When people talk to them they will inevitably ask them how things are going in preparation for the wedding. Their whole life is wrapped up in the fact that they will be married on December 31, 2008.

Now there are areas where this illustration breaks down. For if we have received Christ it’s a done deal, there is no engagement. If we’ve received Christ we are with him and we will be with him when he appears again. Bryan may get run over by a truck this afternoon and in that case there won’t be a wedding on December 31<sup>st</sup>. But in our relationship with Christ circumstances won’t prevent his coming. There are no analogies that can perfectly describe our relationship with Christ, but hopefully this illustrates the posture we should take as Christians who are waiting for the day when Christ will return and we will be like him.

Since, then, we have been raised with Christ doesn’t it make sense that we would seek the things that are above where he is? Doesn’t it make sense that we would be thinking about Christ and above things? That’s what Paul was commanding the Colossians to do since they had in fact been raised with Christ. But instead they were being drawn to the things that non-believers are

drawn to. They were living their days of “engagement” so to speak as if they were never going to be married.

Are we any different? What if Paul was addressing this letter to us? “Members of First Free since you are truly Christians set your minds on the things above. Seek Christ in every endeavor of you life. Daydream about heavenly things. Be obsessed with being more Christ-like day and night.” The phrase “since you have been raised with Christ” might have burned in the Colossians ears as they contrasted their faith with their life? Does it burn in your ear when you consider the things that you spend most of your time thinking about? Does it burn in your gut when you think about what you spend most of your time and money trying to achieve?

Do you think about your inheritance in heaven or do you worry about the effect the economy is having on your personal finances? Do you think about the amazing home that you will have with Christ in glory? Or do you do everything you can to make your home more attractive? Do you remember the amazing grace that God has lavished on you? Or are you plagued with guilt and anxiety? Do you think about how Christ is seated at the right hand of God and in complete control of everything? Or do you think about how bad it’s going to be under this next administration? Are you trying to grow in your faith? Or are you trying to climb the ladder of success. Are you seeking to be conformed to the image of Christ? Or are you trying to keep up with the Joneses? Do you think about how much you’ve been saved from? Or do you think about how bad your health has been lately? Do you rest in the promise that your life is safe with God? Or do the recent terrorist attacks fill you with terror? Are you overwhelmed that you are a child of God? Or do you stay up worrying about your own children?

If you know Christ, you have been raised with him; set your heart on the above things; set your mind on Christ. A lot of these other, earthly thoughts and desires are legitimate things to think about and to pray about, but the point here is that they are very small in comparison with what we have in Christ. If we have our eyes fixed on Jesus then the things of this earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. If only that day on which we will meet the Lord would become like a wedding day when a bride and a groom meet each other at the end of the aisle I’m convinced that we would live different lives now, during this “not yet” season of our faith.

The next step involved in changing your image is to get rid of all of your old clothes. This set is found in verses 5-10.

### **Get Rid of All of Your Old Clothes. (vv. 5-10)**

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.” This first group of earthly sin listed in verse 5 all seem to fit together. They are all in one way or another sins committed first with the eyes. These sins have to do with dwelling on or seeking things we don’t have or were never meant to have. They all involve looking at the things the world wants and wanting them for ourselves, even though we are Christians. The problem with this is two fold. First, if we’re looking at the things the world wants we’re not looking at Christ. Second, if we’re seeking pleasure or fulfillment in anything other than Christ we are idolaters. Anything we put above Christ is idolatry, but it’s also stupid, because there is nothing that is above Christ. Verse 11 tells us that

Christ is all and in all. Christ is enough for us. Why would we seek pleasure or fulfillment beyond Christ when there is nothing beyond him? Why would we want to possess anything when we are possessed by Christ and possess eternal life that can not be taken from us? If your life is with Christ, you don't need anything else. Put to death what is earthly in you and seek the things above. Throw away your old clothes; you have new clothes to wear.

The second group of sins are listed in verses 8-9 and they have a common theme as well. "But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other..." These are all relationship problems. When we harbor bad feelings toward other people they will work themselves out into bad words against each other. What is inside of us will eventually make its way out of us. Usually bad thoughts toward others stem from us feeling wronged by them or threatened by them. So if the first group of sin results from looking at things outside of us, then the second group of sin seems to be the result of focusing too much on ourselves, and not on Christ. When we're focused on ourselves and not on Christ then eventually we will be confronted with a whole host of relationship problems because others may not be as convinced as we are that we're the center of the universe.

If we are seeking the things above and setting our mind on the fact that Christ is our life and that our life is hidden with him, maybe we won't be focused on what other people think of us. If we are focused on what Christ has done for us, maybe we won't be so focused on what other people have done against us. If we are focused on the grace we have received, maybe we won't be so quick to dish out judgment to others. If we're constantly amazed at the fact that we have been reconciled to God, maybe we will be more devoted to being reconciled to one another.

Sometimes as parents we tell our kids to not do something and when they in turn ask us why we simply tell them "because I said so," or "because I'm the parent." Paul doesn't use this method. Instead when giving them a command he is constantly telling them why. So when he says "put to death that which is earthly in you" in verse 5 he follows it up in verses 6-7 by saying "because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived."

He's reminding them of who they are. It would be like me saying to one of my children when they asked me why they had to do their homework, "Because you are a part of my family and in this family we are faithful to our commitments." You see I would be appealing to a value that we as a family have: faithfulness. Paul is doing something similar here. He's saying, you are a Christian, live like it. You are an object of grace, not an object of wrath. The judgment of God comes on those who are not covered in the righteousness of Christ, but you have been covered in the righteousness of Christ. If you have been clothed in the riches of grace and mercy why in the world would you wear clothes of wrath and condemnation?

Now, we all deserve condemnation, but if anyone is in Christ there is now no condemnation. Don't lose sight of who you are in Christ and who you will be – throw away your old clothes, live like those who are under the grace of God, and be devoted to being clothed only in the image of God.

The third step in renewing your image and to being clothed only in the image of God is that you have to start wearing only the clothes in your new wardrobe.

**Start Wearing *Only* the Clothes in Your New Wardrobe. (vv. 10-11)**

You'll notice I didn't say buy a whole new wardrobe. The fact of the matter is that you already have a new wardrobe if you have new life in Christ. The challenges we face come when we continue to wear old clothes, but also when we fail to put on the new clothes that we already have in Christ.

Look with me at verses 9-10. "Do not lie to each other since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self." Here Paul gives another reason for his commands. Why should you put to death that which is earthly in you? Why should you put aside interpersonal sin? Because you have put off the old self and because you have put on the new self. You already have the new clothes if you have Christ. But verse 10 goes on to say that you're still being made new. "Since you have taken off your old self...and have put on the new self, which is being renewed." Again the "already"/"not yet" tension is present here.

If we have received Christ we have put off the old and we are new creations – but we are also being renewed until the day when Christ is revealed. The process isn't over. We don't just hang out between the time of our salvation and the time when Jesus comes back. We are being renewed in the mean time. This process is called sanctification. We are supposed to become more and more like him until the day he is revealed. 1 John 3:2 says it this way: "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

We are being renewed now. And that renewal begins in the realm of our mind. Continuing in Verse 10 Paul says, "We are being renewed in knowledge." When we spend our time thinking on Christ and seeking him we will start to think like Christ and live like him. When we constantly remember the gospel then our lives will be renewed by the gospel.

And what will that renewal look like? Verse 10 says, "You have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." Our renewal will look like Christ. We will begin to look like Christ now and will finally look like him when he appears. If we are being renewed by Christ, then our image will be according to the image of God. And that is why verse 11 says, "here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

As the gospel changes us and we start wearing only the clothes in our new wardrobe we will take on a new image. And as we are renewed in the image of our Creator that new image will not have the distinctions that the world has. It's not that we won't be distinguishable from other people. It's just that these distinctions won't matter compared to Christ, who is all and in all. These kinds of distinctions are only important for those who have no hope. But these distinctions are not important for those whose life is hidden with Christ and who are being renewed according to the image of their Creator.

**Conclusion:** This phrase “in the image of their Creator” is my favorite part of this passage because it not only ties this passage and the whole book of Colossians together so well, but it also ties together a theme that runs throughout God’s entire story of redemption. And that theme is the image of God in us. We were in the beginning created by Jesus in the image of God. We were created “by him and for him.” But sin to a large degree undid that image and completely destroyed our relationship with God. But Christ at his first advent came as the “image of the invisible God.” And why did Christ come as the image of God? He came to die for us so that the image of God in us could be restored and so that we could have a relationship with God. This is the gospel. And if we receive the gospel we are saved and can have complete confidence that when Jesus comes again at his second advent that the image of God will be completely restored in us.

So it is by Jesus, the image of God, that we are saved and it is by Jesus that the image of God in us is being renewed. And it will be by Jesus that we are fully restored on the last day. Jesus is the means by which we are saved, sanctified and glorified. There is no other means. We light candles during this time of year to remember that Christ came as the image of the invisible God to save us. We light candles to remember that unless the light came into the world we would remain in darkness. Maybe we should keep candles lit all year in anticipation of his second advent, because it is so important that we don’t lose sight of our end result if we are to be clothed now in the image of God. Or maybe we should just keep them lit all year to remind us that only Christ can renew us. But the fact of the matter is that the candles may lose their impact if we burned them all year, but the light of God’s word will never lose its impact and that is why it is so important that we read God’s word daily to remind ourselves that we are only saved by Jesus.

We never had what it took to save ourselves. We don’t have what it takes to perfect ourselves and we don’t have what it takes to renew ourselves either. But the good news is that Christ is what it takes. Not only can we not be anything that we want, we can’t even be what God wants us to be, on our own. But He’s enough to save us and to change us. This message is not a “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” and be a better Christian message. It reminds us that only Christ can do the work. How do we put to death the old self? How do we reconcile relationships and rid ourselves of anger? How do we start to see the gap between what we believe and how we live shrink? It is only through cross of Christ that saved us. As we fix our eyes on Jesus and the hope we have in him, we will continue to be renewed according to the image of the one who created us. The gospel saves us, through Christ. And the gospel will change us even now, through Christ.

Maybe you’ve never received the gospel and you are without hope and without eternal life because you’ve never put your faith in Jesus who died for your sins. You can be clothed in the image of God by receiving Jesus as your Lord and Savior this morning. Following Jesus is not easy. Those who are his are called to devote their whole lives to becoming more like him. But you don’t have to do anything to be accepted by God. As a matter of fact there is nothing that you can do that is good enough to please God. But what Christ has done for you is enough. All you have to do is admit that you are a sinner, separated from him and under his wrath; believe that Jesus died on the cross to pay for your sins; and commit your whole life to following him and living in a restored relationship with your Creator.

Most of you I trust have received the gospel and you, like these Colossians are “raised with Christ.” But maybe if you were to take a hard look in the mirror you would realize you’re your life has some areas that don’t look very much like the image of God. Maybe you’ve got one eye on heaven, but another eye on the earth. If that is you I exhort you this morning to devote your whole life to being clothed only in the image of God by never forgetting your end result – you need to remember daily that Christ died for you and that your life is hidden with him. You need to live today for that day when you will be with Jesus. Second, you need to throw away your old clothes and your old ways of living because you are a child of grace now and those old ways will never completely please you or fulfill you. Be reconciled to each other and forgive one another as Christ has forgiven you. And lastly be committed to wearing only the clothes in your new wardrobe. You may need to preach the gospel to yourselves daily as you seek to be more like the One who created you, the One who is renewing you and the One who will ultimately restore you fully. Be clothed only in the image of God.