

Colossians 3:1–11: ¹If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Be Who You Are

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The text for today's message is the Epistle reading from Colossians, the third chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The renowned artist Paul Gustave Dore (1832-1883) lost his passport while traveling in Europe. When he came to a border crossing, he explained his predicament to one of the guards. Giving his name to the official, Dore hoped he would be recognized and allowed to pass. The guard, however, said that many people attempted to cross the border by claiming to be persons they were not. Dore insisted that he was the man he claimed to be. "All right," said the official, "we'll give you a test, and if you pass it we'll allow you to go through." Handing him a pencil and a sheet of paper, he told the artist to sketch several people standing nearby. Dore did it so quickly and skillfully that the guard was convinced he was indeed who he claimed to be. What he did confirmed who he was."

Like Paul Gustave Dore, we often find our identity in what we do. Who are you? I'm a plumber, an engineer, a secretary, a student, a teacher, and so on. Biology defines who you are, as well. If you're sex is male, then you are a man. If you're sex is female, then you are a woman. Today's transgender crisis is ultimately an attack on your God-given identity: "He made them male and female." Then again, the calendar might define who your are. If you have a number of years under your belt, then you're an adult; if not, then you're a probably a kid. We're uncomfortable when adults act like kids, but then again, we're always telling kids to act like adults.

Being a Christian isn't determined by what you do, nor is it determined by biology or genetics—and it isn't determined by the calendar. You're a Christian by an act of God's grace—you have been reborn into God's kingdom by the Holy Spirit in Baptism. If you've been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection—if you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior by God's gift of faith—then your identity is Christian.

In today's reading from Colossians, Paul calls on the Christians in Colosse to "be who you are." In other words, it isn't what you do that defines who you are Christians, but who you are that defines what you do. So, for Paul,

BE IN LIFE WHO YOU ARE IN CHRIST.

I. Who are you in Christ?

Before you were saved by Jesus, and given new life in Baptism by the Holy Spirit, you were lost in the death and darkness of sin. You were an enemy of God. You were a slave of Satan. You were ignorant of God's Word of truth—you had no true knowledge of God.

But by God's grace, you were raised with Christ. That resurrection from the deadness of sin took place in Holy Baptism. If you want Paul's whole baptism formula, go to Romans chapter 6. But here in Colossians, he summarizes your redeemed and renewed relationship with God through Christ Jesus simply as, "you have been raised with Christ."

You are no longer the world's or the devil's—you are not even your own—you were bought with a price. You belong to Christ. Baptism marks you as a member of God's kingdom. You are a new person—a saint—a holy person of God. You are a Christian—one who belongs to Christ.

That means Christianity isn't merely something you do, like engineering or golf or housekeeping—it's something you are. You're so intimately connected with Christ that Paul says He is your life: "When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." Christ is your life—you live in Him and you live because of Him. In fact, heavenly glory is yours now—though that glory is hidden in Christ. But when He returns, all the world will see who He is and who you are.

II. What does that mean?

Paul says, if you have been raised with Christ, you live for Christ. Your life is hidden with Christ in God, but that life is to be lived so all the world can see Christ in you. That simply means, living your life by the teaching of God's Word and doing good works in accordance with God's Word. Jesus said in John's Gospel, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:31–32). And Paul says in Ephesians, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

This externally lived life in Christ isn't an option for one who is a Christian—Paul uses imperatives—commandments: “Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”

And what does that mean? Paul explains: ⁵Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

Paul explains: since you have put on Christ in baptism, take off the old filthy garments of sin. Put off the sinful lifestyle that marked you as dead in sin, and put on the righteous lifestyle that marks you as alive in Christ. Put off the sin which dishonors the work of Christ in you, and the put on the life of faith active in love for God and your neighbor—a life that shows you are now heaven minded because you are heaven bound.

And that's something we all need to keep in mind: by the grace of God, we're heaven bound so we act like it. And yet we sin—we all sin. The Christian life is marked by the struggle between the old person and the new person—between putting off the old and putting on the new. But Paul says, “you have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” As Christians, your minds have been renewed in the knowledge of God. You know that God demands righteous living—righteous living according to His standards. And you also know that failure to do so leads to punishment and condemnation. But you also know that God is merciful and full of grace. In Christ, the demand for righteous living was fulfilled—

and in Christ Jesus the punishment for sin was satisfied, so that through Christ God can shower grace, mercy and forgiveness on all who believe in His Son.

So when you do sin—when you put that dirty old garment of covetousness, sexual immorality, anger, gossip and lies—when you compromise your identity as one who has been raised with Christ by following the ways of the world, the Holy Spirit calls you to return to your baptism in repentance and renewal—to again put off the old and put on the new.

Repentance and renewal is a daily thing for Christians—we will always struggle with putting off the old person and putting on the new. But God is gracious and has given His Church the ministry of reconciliation. Because we all need daily forgiveness and renewal in Christ, the most important message of the Church is the Gospel of God's grace and mercy in Christ, not just for unbelievers, but for believers who know their sin and their need for Jesus.

Conclusion:

Be who you are. Os Guinness, world renowned sociologist, social critic and Christian scholar, in a recent interview spoke of a Nigerian man who visited his church. This man told the parishioners about how his people are dying for their faith, and he beseeched the Christians of this country not to compromise. Dr. Guinness then mentioned how the Jews during the holocaust were willing to maintain their Jewish identity even though it meant they would be imprisonment and death. But now, when things are easy for them, they are willing so quickly to give up their Jewish identity.

That's true for us Christians, isn't it? It's a lot more comfortable to put on the old self and be like the world. But God put the Church on this earth to be a light in the darkness. The role of the Church isn't to accommodate the culture or be like the culture, but to challenge the culture.

The Church can't be a light in the darkness if she isn't much brighter than the darkness. The Church is to stand on the true teachings of the true Word of God.

The same is true for each baptized believer. You are to be who you are in this world—a beacon of truth and love and good works in the darkness of a world deceive by Satan. The world needs you to seek the things that are above—to be heavenly minded. It's not easy, but Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." It is Christ who gives you the strength to be who you are: to put off the old Adam and put on the New man and live as one who has been raised with Christ!

In Jesus' Name. Amen.