

J.D. Jump

8/1/10

All God's Children UMC

Changes

A Sermon on Colossians 3:1-11

Let us pray.

Loving God, come and dwell among us this day as we gather to study your word. Open our hearts that we might receive what you would have us to hear this day that we may grow closer to you in each and every step we take.

In your holy and precious name we pray.

Amen

Once, during his Sunday sermon, a pastor noticed one of the men in the congregation get up and walk out of the service, and return just before the final hymn. After the service, the pastor went up and asked the man where he had gone. The man replied, "I went to get a haircut." The pastor asked the man, "Why didn't you do that before the service?" The man replied, "Because I didn't need one then."

As human beings we are intimately aware of changes in our everyday lives. Hair and fingernails grow, body parts age and do not work as well as they once did. Even our skin changes on a weekly and monthly basis. In fact, in a year we lose approximately 9 pounds of skin cells. Changes occur not only in our physical bodies. Sometimes our thinking can change as we learn and experience new things.

Anyone who has ever tried to follow a New Years resolution knows that change is not easy for human beings. Trying to change the way we act, the way we talk, and especially the way that we think is all but impossible.

That is what makes today's passage from Colossians so challenging. The passage says that since we have become new people through the grace of God then we need to change the way that we think and act.

In order to understand what that means we must first understand the circumstances under which Colossians was written. Colossians was written by Paul, an early apostle of the Jesus Christ who single-handedly started the church's mission to the gentiles. Paul started many different churches all over the Roman Empire and more than half of the New Testament consists of letters that he wrote to churches and individuals all over the known world.

Colossians was written during a somewhat turbulent time in the history of the early church. When Jesus ascended, he left the first Christians waiting in anticipation of his second coming. The earliest understanding of Jesus teaching had made the Christians believe that he would be coming back within a few short years, certainly within their lifetimes. As time had passed and people started to get older they started to get anxious about Jesus second coming. During this period in the history of the church there were groups of people who called themselves Christians, but who were starting to deviate from the teachings that were being given by the apostles.

Throughout Paul's career starting churches, he crossed paths with some of these sects fairly often. Paul makes reference to some of these sects throughout his writings. The most notable example of this is present in Galatians chapter 2 where Paul calls some of

these so-called Christians, “false believers.” Paul’s letter to the Colossians is warning the church against changing their beliefs because of what they had heard from some false believers. So, Paul is writing to help a Church that he started in order to return to the right teachings of God and to move away from the teachings that he knows to be false.

The first part of this passage is a transition that gets into the meat of what Paul is trying to say. What Paul is doing is reminding the people of God who and what we have been called to be. Paul is reminding the people of God that we are called to higher things since we have died and risen with Christ.

This might seem counterintuitive to us. We understand that we are changed because we have accepted Jesus Christ as our savior. What we realize, however, is that we do not feel any different even though we are new in Christ. We still have the same aches and pains, and more importantly we still have the same wishes and desires that we had before, even the ones that we now know are wrong.

How do we reconcile the fact that we feel the same while at the same time we know we are different? Perhaps we can understand this conundrum by looking at an area of psychology known as Gestalt psychology. The basics of Gestalt psychology can be understood by the principle that states, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” This is what Paul is referring to when he writes that that we “have been raised with Christ.” Because we were raised with Christ we are part of the body of Christ. The whole of the body of Christ is greater than the sum of its parts because it is made up of individuals who are broken and imperfect but it is still able to do the perfect work of God. We are able to do greater things in Christ and as part of the body of Christ then we can without Christ.

What does this mean for us in our everyday lives? Paul gives us two lists of things to avoid as changed people. The first set of things to avoid that is presented in the second half of verse 5, “fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).” The second set of things to avoid is mentioned in the second half of verse 8, “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.”

Since these two lists are both oddly specific, it would be easy to stick simply to these lists and say, “if it is not mentioned in this text, then I don’t have to worry about it” but that is not the case. These lists were not meant to be exhaustive lists, but were illustrations that were supposed to show the reader two categories that they should seek to improve in their lives in Christ. The first list is tied in with the way that people worship false Gods rather than the true God they should be worshiping. In the second list are things that tend to hurt human relationships. In the context which Paul is writing this second list could rip apart a Christian community very quickly and leave Paul’s good work lying in ruins.

What is hard about the lists that Paul presents to us is that they represent things that human beings are naturally drawn to. It becomes hard to break away from the human things in order to follow the things of God that Paul presents. We want to follow the things of God but we are still human and have human tendencies and desires. As human beings there are two potential flaws in thinking that we can fall into. One is comparing what we are called to do as Christians and the things that we want to do as humans and think we could never possibly live up to the things that God is asking us to do. The other is treating the commitment to the things of God as a New Years resolution. This might work in the short term, but ultimately falls apart just like most people’s New Years resolutions fall apart.

How do we become the people we are supposed to be as Christians if we can not change our human tendencies when we are transformed in Christ? What Paul is suggesting here is not a sudden but a gradual transformation. In fact, just because we are supposed to be striving against the things that are of the earth and striving for the things that are heavenly does not mean we will ever achieve those things. The fact of the matter is most of us will not master all of these earthly vices before we die.

The way that we are supposed to do this is through lots of hard work and lots of time. In this passage Paul is showing the people at the church in Colossae what they should work at to become the people of God that they are supposed to be. This is done by practice. When we practice fighting all of the evil things in our lives then we gain spiritual strength and it will make it easier to do the right thing in the future. The eventual hope is that we will gain enough spiritual strength so that one day we will not even be tempted to sin anymore.

This is spiritual exercise which is similar to physical exercise. As Jason could explain to you in great detail, physical exercise works by exerting your strength and tiring out your muscles in order to make yourself stronger. What is actually happening when you work out is you are ripping your muscles so that they can grow back stronger. It is much like this with becoming spiritually stronger. You must work hard in order to make yourself stronger. It is only through the hard work and pain that we become stronger.

In order to make this process of spiritual exercise easier for us, the church has built some of these spiritual strengthening activities into the organization of the church. For instance, the institution of marriage helps God's people to fight fornication and impurity, and tithing helps us to strengthen ourselves against greed. The church is using its

organization to help us. The church and Christ are our work out partners, so we never have to work out alone. There are always people to keep us accountable to our work out routine and in turn we can help to keep each other accountable.

But what does all of this have to do with the body of Christ? What difference does it make whether or not we try and improve these things in our lives? At the end of this passage Paul gives us a vision of what the world would look like if all Christians worked toward this goal together. "There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" This is the vision of Christianity, that all people will be treated equally. Regardless of their skin color, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. This is more than forcing ourselves to look past these things in our fellow human beings, in the world that Paul envisions no one has to look past these things because they don't notice them in the first place. And while humanity has started down that path there is still a long way to go.

I truly believe that this passage has everything to do with where All God's Children has been and where it is going. All God's Children is all about allowing people with different backgrounds, incomes and skin colors to worship God together. I want to commend the people of All God's Children for beginning this work because for the most part people are only working toward this reality very slowly. I also want to thank you for allowing me to be a part of the work of All God's Children this summer. You have made me feel welcome and at home and I appreciate all that you all have showed me this summer.

I would also like to challenge All God's Children to keep working toward the vision presented in Colossians 3:11. The first steps that you have taken are tremendous but there is still a long way to go. My hope and prayer for All God's Children is that you can discern

what the next step of the process will look like and that you will get through this tremendous time of transition stronger and closer to God than you have ever been before. If all of humanity can work toward a world where race, class, ethnicity, color, and sexual orientation do not matter, then one day we will surely reach paradise on earth and Christ will be all and in all.

Amen