**4th August 2019**

**Colossians 3.1-17**

What are the higher things in life for you? We often use ‘higher’ as a metaphor for better, more refined or more advanced.

Paul suggests that we should set our minds on things that are higher (above us). It is curious how readily we think of ‘up’ as being better than ‘down’. Although, when we do look up, the sight can indeed be glorious – a beautiful blue sky; sunrise and sunset; and especially the stars at night (those living in remote areas will have a better idea than those in light-polluted towns and cities of just how spectacular this can be). To set our minds on higher things implies that we are aiming for the spectacular glory of God – and Paul says that the way to do this is to leave behind the things below.

I spoke on Thursday night at the Reasons for God session about the church being responsible for so much injustice and discrimination. Karl Marx famously viewed religion as the opium of the people and an instrument of oppression. The rulers would use religion to get the masses to think about higher things and look forward to a heavenly reward so they wouldn’t agitate for a chance in their earthly circumstances and want a better life in the here and now.

Marx argued that if you believe in a life after this one you won’t be concerned about making this world a better place. You can argue the opposite of course. If this world is all there is, and if the goods of this world are the only love, comfort and wealth you will ever have, why should you sacrifice them for others? Christianity offers you resources to give up everything for the sake of others. Christianity offers a hope and joy to make possible sacrifice for a difference.

The Bible gives us tools for analysis and critique of religiously supported injustice from within the faith. Just read the prophets – or look at Jesus versus the Pharisees. Self-righteous religion is always marked by insensitivity to issues of social justice. Look at me, I have pulled myself up by my bootstraps why can’t the feckless poor etc etc. But true faith looks to God – to higher things – rather than to our subjective and biased opinions. God, the scriptures tell us, has a great concern for the poor and marginalized.

I suggested on Thursday that we should not abandon the Christian faith but move to a fuller and deeper grasp of what Christianity is. Look above! Look for a higher value, ideal, principle. The Bible has taught us to expect abuses of religion and what to do about them. Christian history has remarkable examples of self-correction e.g. slave trade and the abolitionists, Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement. They called Christians to be truer to their beliefs and realize what the bible really teaches even if it meant giving up power and bearing the cost of all that.

The section at the end of this passage emphasizes Christian freedom from the need to worship God in law-based ways. Instead, Paul invites his hearers to centre their lives on an orientation to God (v.2). He reminds them of their real priority: their focus on the renewed life they share with Christ in God. This life, though hidden now, will one day be revealed. Paul has used the language of ‘the hope of glory’ consistently through this letter (e.g. 1.27), perhaps in part as a riposte to the mystery religions with their promise of stage-by-stage revelation.

But then Paul comes back to questions of ethics, with a list (v.5) of the sort that features elsewhere in his writing, and links back ultimately to the holiness code of Leviticus 18. Is this inconsistent with the earlier stress on freedom from legalism? Rather it flows from the Christian’s new identity in Christ, whose life is perfectly oriented towards God. In this life, there is no room at all for greed and idolatry, or anger and abuse and sexual immorality. Lying is particularly alien to the one who is the God of all truth, and who gives all knowledge to those made in God’s image. These new ethical habits are expressed in the language of clothing – the new Christians have stripped off their old lives and been clothed anew. How are they to make these new clothes their own, rather than being like children dressing up in clothes that don’t belong to them? Once again, this would have reminded Paul’s hearers of their baptism, where they would literally have left behind their old clothes and received new ones as they came up from the water.

 ‘Giving in to feel good’ is a phrase that psychologists use to describe how our own [self-regulation fails](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/dont-delay/200804/giving-in-feel-good-why-self-regulation-fails). It describes what happens when we know what is in our best interests (in terms of eating, drinking, exercise, etc.) but we avoid the anxiety-inducing behaviour and do the thing we know we shouldn’t. We give in to feel good.

The message to each of us should be clear as well. If we focus on our feelings in the short term, we'll undermine ourselves in the long run.[[1]](#endnote-1)

A Psychologist wrote: I've been teaching my 3-year-old daughter this. A typical "lesson" goes something like this.

Me: "Sweetie, it's time to pick up your toys before we go."
[Mood now visibly changing.]
Daughter: "I don't feel like it. I don't want to."
Me: "Sweetie, according to research it's not the best strategy to focus on your feelings now, it's . . . sweetie?? Where are you?"

Ok, so it *is* about delay of gratification, and we do (should) learn this early in life. But the evidence seems to show that we all can (and do) act like 3-year-olds at times.

In fact, we may spend a lifetime acting like a 3-year-old and rationalizing it to ourselves the whole time. I don't feel like it. I need to feel better in order to act. First, I need to feel better.

No, you don't.

In fact, your feelings will follow your behaviors. Progress on that task will improve your mood.

In this reading, Paul gives us a list of the things that we shouldn’t be doing, and who wouldn’t want to get rid of these things? But do we give in to feel good? It can be hard to put these things into practice. It takes constant effort. Through the daily practice of prayer and meditation on Scripture, we can build the spiritual, emotional and mental resilience to get better, bit by bit, at not giving in.

Getting dressed should be a relatively simple process for most of us. In reality, at least for some, it isn’t always that easy. What is the dress code? Have I worn this before? Do these colours match? Our clothes project an image of who we are to others; and we judge others by their clothing almost as instinctively as we breathe. So why does Paul say that we need to clothe ourselves with our new self? Surely our values and behaviours are more significant than external appearance – they should come from what is inside us. But Paul knows that our natural instinctive behaviour isn’t always the healthy or positive one. We have actively to choose the new self rather than the old one. Over time, the new behaviours will become more and more natural, but it can be difficult and require a conscious effort to get right.

On Thursday I talked about Character Flaws. If Christianity is all it claims to be, shouldn’t Christians on the whole be much better people than everyone else? Many people have been put of the Christian faith by so called Christians: those who have been either too self-righteous and judgemental, or whose lifestyles, lies, gossip, anger, lusts, greed – all the stuff named here- have put people off. Not good adverts for Christianity people will conclude.

I suggested that this gives a mistaken belief concerning what Christianity actually teaches about itself. Common grace (James 1.17) is given to all – no matter who performs it, every act of goodness, wisdom, justice beauty is empowered by God. It is a mistaken belief that you need to clean up your life in order to merit God’s presence. Church is filled with immature and broken people! It is a hospital for sinners not a museum for saints.

A person’s good character is largely attributable to their early life chances of being brought up in loving safe stable family and social environment -conditions for which we are not responsible – blame your parents! Yet it depends on how far you have come in your maturity in Christ. It is often the case that those whose lives have been harder, who are ‘low on the character scale of things’, are more likely to know their need for God are more likely to respond to his call. So, we shouldn’t not expect Christians to compare well to those of the non-religious. To go back to a previous analogy, it would be like comparing the health of those in hospital to the health of those visiting museums.

But that is not to excuse behaviour, nor to say we haven’t an ideal to aim for. That’s why we keep our eyes on higher things….

The Ashes series has started at cricket. The rivalry between England and Australia is one of the biggest in sport. Being a supporter involves knowing something about the team – the players, results, history, etc. – but it also involves having an understanding of your rivals. And, if we support team X, then we probably instinctively dislike team Y – and that dislike can be as passionate as the support for our home team. This kind of rivalry seems to be baked into us – we know that we are part of ‘this’ group, and that we are not like ‘that’ lot over there.

Tribalism plays out in different levels. Nationalism is it pitched on a large scale. Yet Paul says that the ultimate goal is to reach a point where those rivalries and differences are set aside, when the bad habits that he lists have gone. No more will we be separated, but we will all be in Christ and Christ in all.

Finally, Paul draws on an idea that he also expresses elsewhere. In Christ, all that separates us is destroyed – ethnic or faith-based distinction, even the distinction between slave and free that split the Roman Empire down the middle. (Galatians 3.28 refers to the male/female divide in this context, but Paul does not include this here.) All human distinctions are secondary to our new identity in Christ. After explaining what must be ruled out and why, Paul goes on to describe the lifestyle that is appropriate to those whose life is hidden with Christ in God: compassion and forbearance, forgiveness, and above all love.

This is the acid test about whether Paul is talking sense or not. Read again the list of sexual and speech related mis behavior in verses 5-9. Then read through verses 12-17. Ask yourself this: supposing there was a town in which everybody behaved in the way described in verses 5-9. And supposing a few miles down the road, there was a town where everybody behaved in the way described in verses 12-17. Which town would you rather live in.?

There will always be some cynics who say they would prefer the first. People are free there, they’ll say. People are having a good time. It’s like Love Island – all fun and frolics. All right, they may lose friends now and again. Some people who can’t look after themselves may get hurt. But they’ll be doing their own thing, living cheerful and robust lives. Whereas the other lot (the same people will say) look like a bunch of wimps. Goody goodies who can’t stand up for themselves. Always saying ‘sorry’ and singing hymns. That is a common reaction you get in the world out there.

But a moment’s thought will show how shallow such an approach would be. The practices that Paul outlines in the earlier section result in communities - families, villages, whole towns – tearing themselves apart. Unbridled sexual license and untamed angry speech result in the breakdown of relationships at every level. Some people may fool themselves that they’re having a good time in that atmosphere. But again, and again, in moments of truth, they will admit they are lost, confused, lonely and bitter.

Nor are the people Paul describes in the latter section a bunch of weak willed wimpish people without much to say for themselves. Anyone who thinks that simply doesn’t know what they are talking about. Have you ever seriously tried to forgive someone who has wronged you? Have you ever seriously tried to be compassionate and patient? If you have – you know its not easy. It takes serious prayer and effort. And people who engage in that effort tend to eb people who are also capable of taking difficult decisions and engaging in challenging activities in other spheres as well. Christian behaviour, becoming the new creation in Christ, in other words makes you more human, not less.

Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the lord Jesus. Settle that in your hearts and minds and a great deal else will fall into place.[[2]](#endnote-2)

1. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/dont-delay/200804/giving-in-feel-good-why-self-regulation-fails> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. T Wright, Paul for Everyone, the Prison Letters, SPCK, 2002 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)