

5. It doesn't get more spiritual than this!

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[0 : 00] Well friends, welcome back to our lunchtime service in our slightly new and improved hall upstairs. Hopefully you're a little more uncomfortable, or comfortable even, up here. We're going to begin by reading God's Word.

We're continuing in Paul's letter to the Colossians, looking at the truth about mere Christianity. And this week we're reading from chapter 2, verses 20, down to 3, verse 11, page 984 in the Visitor's Bibles.

Colossians chapter 2. Paul has laid out the truths of the Christian life, what it means to be united with Christ in his death and resurrection.

What it means in terms of our relationship to the people causing trouble in the church in Colossae. Let no one pass judgment on you, verse 16, since in Christ they've been forgiven.

And he continues in verse 20. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of this world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations?

[1 : 14] Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. Referring to things that all perish as they're used, according to human precepts and traditions.

These indeed have an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body. But they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is 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, what is earthly in you.

[2 : 14] Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these, the wrath of God is coming.

In these you too once walked when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away. Anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk from your mouth.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave free. But Christ is all and in all.

Amen. Let's pray for God's help. Our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the time we have now to draw together as your people and listen to you.

[3 : 25] We thank you that you spoke to us in flesh and blood through Christ who now reigns from your right hand in heaven. And we thank you, Lord, that you speak to us from heaven today through the words right in front of us.

Help us, Father, to believe that your voice is the most important thing we can listen to in this half hour. Help us to set our minds on the things that are above.

And through them, Father, make us like the Son whom you love. In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, it is not uncommon for us human beings to live double lives.

Sometimes it takes sensational levels of deception. The husband who, after 18 years of marriage, is followed by his wife to another home where there's another woman and another child.

Or the successful politician who's caught out living in a web of fantasy and it all comes crashing down. Those are the stories which make our newspapers, aren't they?

[4 : 39] The spectacular ones. But it's not always like that. And last week, Paul exposed a sort of double living, which for most of us is probably far closer to home.

It was a sort of spiritual deception. Christians making a big show of pious living and religious tradition and talking a very spiritual-sounding talk.

People Paul called religious kidnappers who try to take ordinary Christians captive with their empty deceit.

Perhaps, though, they're just a little bit closer to home than we might like to think. How many of us are tempted sometimes to pretend that we're just a bit more spiritual, more impressive than we really are?

How easy it is to end up living a sort of spiritual double life. Which is why this next section of Paul's letter to the Colossians is so wonderfully helpful.

[5 : 56] Because what Paul is about to show the ordinary believers in Colossae is that the truly spiritual life is one that belongs to all Christians.

And in one sense, there is nothing spectacular about it at all. It's a life of wholesome, caring community here in the real world.

And yet this ordinary Christian life is a life lived by people who, because they belong to a crucified and resurrected Lord, have died and been raised already.

And whatever anyone tells you, it does not get more spiritual than that. So this week we're going to look at three things the Colossians needed to know about the real Christian life, the truly spiritual life.

And number one is chapter 2, verses 20 to 23. The first truth about the real Christian life. You really did die.

[7 : 03] You really did die. What we saw last week in the heart of this letter is that when Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross for us, those who belonged to him were crucified alongside him.

Our terrible spiritual overdraft, chapter 2, verse 14, was cancelled. Because on the cross, every penny was paid.

In God's sight, the old subprime man or woman, that is you and me, really did die. So the point Paul makes now in this first paragraph is that if that is true, then you no longer belong under the grip of this world.

And what is more, the ways of this world are not the answer to your sin problem. You see, the purpose of Jesus' death was to set them free from what Paul calls, in verse 20, the elemental spirits spirits of this world.

If you remember back to last week, that's his way of describing the basic way that this world works and the dark spiritual forces that work in this world.

[8 : 24] The shock back in chapter 2, verse 8, was that these basic worldly spirits were who lay behind the supposedly super-spiritual Christians.

human religiosity and sham spirituality is just another form of slavery to the dark ways of this age. But Christians no longer belong to this age. Christ's death, we were told in chapter 215, disarmed and disgraced those demonic rulers.

We died to this world and escaped from their grip. So why, Paul asks now, are they still allowing themselves to be bullied around by the basic attitude of this world?

Why do they submit to its religious mentality? The kidnappers, these plausible religious teachers, have all sorts of regulations to keep up the pretense of looking good in this age.

[9 : 34] Paul lists a few in verse 21. Don't handle this. Don't taste that. Don't touch the other. And that sort of thing can look very godly, can't it?

Think, for example, of the way regulations about alcohol have been used over the years. To distinguish the real spiritual Christians from ordinary, mere Christians.

Many good Christians have seen the real damage alcohol does and so on principle they won't touch the stuff. But it's also true that if you want to look respectable, if you've got your eyes set on becoming an elder in the church, then it might just help to drop the odd pious comment about booze.

It's true, Paul says, verse 23, these things do have the appearance, the reputation of wisdom. It can seem godly to follow man-made customs and act terribly pious and deny yourself bodily.

But just remember, verse 22, that these things all worry about stuff which belongs to this world. Things which perish as we use them.

[10 : 54] What we eat or drink or watch. What these sort of rules don't do is have any real and lasting effect on our hearts.

They're of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh, in restraining our sinful nature. No, it takes something far deeper than that to deal with our sin problem, doesn't it? It takes a death. Step one in the genuinely spiritual life, remember that you really did die. In Christ, you do not belong under the grip of this world and its ways. Its rules and regulations are not the answer to the problem of our flesh. So belonging to Jesus frees us from the tyranny of all that sort of spiritual snobbery and kidding on. When you trusted a crucified Christ, you really did die. Number two, chapter three, verses one to four.

[12:07] You really were raised. It's obvious right away, isn't it, that these two paragraphs belong together. If you died, verse 20, if you have been raised, verse one.

They're unpacking what it means to be united to a dead and risen Lord. And here's the message of this paragraph. Because we have been raised, it's time to start pursuing the things which belong to the heavenly realm, the realm from where Jesus reigns and where we now truly belong with him. Let me read a paraphrase of these verses which I think does a good job of getting under the skin of the letter. Chapter three, verse one. Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. For you have died to this life and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.

And when Christ, who is your life, is revealed to the whole world, then you will share in his glory. Now let's just notice something very encouraging for us mere Christians in what Paul's saying.

[13:43] Why does it often feel like we're leading a double life? Why is the ordinary Christian life so difficult? Well, because there is something slightly double about it.

What we truly are, verse three, is hidden. It's true now, isn't it? We have been raised with Christ, but it is not yet visible.

As long as we're in these bodies, there'll be a pull from the things of this world. It isn't going to be easy. So if you feel split and divided and frustrated, if sometimes you even feel like a spiritual fraud, God, well, don't despair.

That is how it's supposed to be. If Christ is all that we saw last week, then the end is not in doubt. In his eyes, it is done.

And verse four, one day we will see it too. But for now, this invisible, hidden reality is it. This is what it means to be genuinely spiritual.

[14:59] It means living now in light of a hidden reality. So Paul's answer is not to pretend like the spiritual frauds, that we're something we're not.

It's okay. It's okay to feel unfinished. His answer in verses one and two isn't to pretend we're more than we are, but to set our hearts on being what God has already declared us, to set our minds on what is wholesome and true.

Now, the rest of the letter will apply that in really concrete terms, but Paul knows that first, we have to commit ourselves to pursuing the things of Jesus' kingdom.

If we're in him, then we belong where he is. We've been transferred, we read that in chapter one, didn't we? Transferred to the kingdom of God's beloved son, where now, verse one, he is reigning already at God's right hand.

But while we are still here below, our minds are a bit like steering wheels, aren't they? Where we linger in our minds, then these bodies of ours very soon follow.

[16:20] If we toy in our hearts with the things of earth, then we pretty soon give way to them in our conduct. To set our minds elsewhere takes real resolve, doesn't it?

Real discipline. Last week, I was talking to a student who felt just like me that he'd been allowing his mind to spend too much time on things which weren't wrong, but which just weren't helpful.

Computer games or mindless television, that sort of thing. And both of us had noticed that week that a lack of concern for what really matters, the heavenly reality, had begun to leak over into the rest of our time.

Gospel fruits just seemed like less of a priority. It's not really surprising, is it? Somehow our minds never just set themselves on Christ-like things themselves.

The things of this world will always be a snare. But don't entertain them, says Paul. You do not belong here. If we feel divided and split, then the answer is to remember that the heavenly reality is real, and this earthly one is the shadow.

[17 : 42] So Paul says set your hearts on that. You don't need to pretend like the charlatans. Instead, the way to integrate our double lives is just to remember what God has already declared us to be.

And that means nurturing the life we value, our new lives. You really did die. You really were raised. And thirdly, verses 5 to 11, there is a lifetime of more death and resurrection ahead of us.

Now, what Paul's about to say is something really difficult to hear. Often you see the next part of a sermon coming a mile off, can't you? And I wonder if Paul's readers were dreading what he'd have to say about the real spiritual life here in the real world.

life. But friends, Paul, more than anyone, knew how difficult a demand the gospel makes on us. And that is why he set all the challenging teaching at the end of this letter below the incentives of verses 1 to 4 that we've just read.

It's the knowledge of Christ's appearing, verse 4, that gives us the longing to be what we truly are. So the grounds for every command which follows is that we belong with the risen Lord Jesus, that he is all of our hope and all of our life and all of our identity here on earth.

[19 : 15] And that's what the therefore in verse 5 is therefore. This is what it means in practical terms to live with the hidden reality of being dead and raised in Christ.

It means firstly, verse 5, killing, what should already be dead. And secondly, as we'll see next week from verse 12 onwards, it means putting on the resurrection life.

So verse 5, yes, we have been raised spiritually in Christ, but as all of us mere Christians know only too well, we have not been miraculously cured of sin, have we?

As far as the old natures are concerned, there is life in the old dog yet. Put to death, therefore, says Paul, literally the parts of your body that are still here on earth.

And then to explain himself, Paul mentions five body parts in verse 5, and then lists five more in verse 8. And you won't find these in any anatomy textbook, book.

[20 : 29] But my guess is like me, you'll know them pretty well when you see them. Bits of old life behavior, which we often find alive and kicking in us. But verse 6, they have no part to play in the life of those raised with Christ.

On account of these, the wrath of God is coming. These are the very things for which Jesus died in our place. And every one of you, he says, once walked like this, verse 7, but not now.

It's time to put that life away. Now I don't think Paul picks these things at random. What they have in common is the power to tear apart Christ's church.

The first list is all to do with sex, and the second list with speech. And both lists have a lot to do with sentiment, how we feel, especially about each other.

Three very powerful and potentially very destructive things. Sex, speech, and sentiment. Verse 5, the first list.

[21 : 40] Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness. Craving the things of this world, which I think in context here means especially within the sexual realm.

Something which Paul calls idolatry. Perhaps that is the plainest way to see how we worship ourselves rather than Christ.

Then the second list, verse 8, primarily speech-related. Anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene, or perhaps better, abusive talk.

what we say about each other in the church is a dead giveaway about how we think of the Lord Jesus.

And if this was the truth about the supposedly spiritual Colossians, then just imagine what damage it would soon wreak in their church family. It's painfully down to earth, isn't it?

[22 : 44] how do we know if our hearts are set on heaven? Well, we ask how we behave in bed and what we do with our tongues.

And in verse 9, Paul puts his finger on one final speech-related behavior. This time, it's lying. But why does this sin get singled out?

Lying seems like such a little thing, doesn't it, compared with malice and slander? Could it possibly be that lying to one another is the giveaway sign of the spiritual fraud?

Why is it that we Christians lie so often? It's a difficult question to ask, isn't it? But isn't that just how we pretend that the old nature is more dead than it truly is?

I'm sure it was a hundred little fibs which were used to prop up these supposedly spiritual double lives. Lies are like the little cracks in the facade, aren't they, through which we see our old nature

shining through.

[24 : 03] Don't lie to one another, says our apostle, apostle. Because that is not who you really are anymore. That's the person who literally, verse 9, you have stripped off like an old, filthy set of clothes.

And in its place, verse 10, is something wonderfully new. Friends, if you're drifting off to sleep, verse 10 is well worth waking up for.

because even now in this life, verse 10 promises something seriously encouraging. Just as there is more dying to do every day, there's more resurrection to be done as well.

We have put on the new self. It's a done deal. But it's also not yet complete. It's being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

I wonder if you can hear the echo there of Genesis 1. Little by little, God's image is being restored and recreated in his children.

[25 : 17] Back to the way we were before we began to love ourselves more than the things of heaven. And the way human beings are recreated in God's image image is by falling in step with God's son.

The image of the invisible God. Slowly but surely, as we get to know the Lord Jesus better, we're made more like him, aren't we?

Paul calls it being renewed in knowledge. And surely that happens as we set our minds on the things of heaven. heaven. The problem is, that is precisely what these kidnapers weren't prepared to do.

Paul calls them worldly all through this letter. They seem to claim special knowledge, don't they?

But as long as their minds are fixed here on earth, then they didn't know the only person in the universe who really mattered.

But day by day, us struggling Christians are learning to put on his image. We're being filled, as Paul prayed in chapter 1, with the knowledge of his will.

[26 : 28] We're being made more like Christ. And the place that will be seen above all is in the very down-to-earth way with which we treat one another. We'll come to know, verse 11, that Christ is all that matters for all Christians.

There aren't special Christians and mere Christians. There aren't sophisticated Greeks and chavish barbarians. All of us are what we are simply because we know him and are being made like him.

Yes, it's hidden. There's a whole lifetime of costly death and resurrection ahead of us. But that is the truly spiritual life, living together day by day here on planet earth, earth, in light of what is true already in heaven.

So help us, God. Let's pray. Father God, we know that these are profound truths, that we belong now with Christ and under his loving rule, and yet their day-to-day outworking seems so unexciting to us compared with the things which often fill our minds.

Help us, Father, to love your son and to love the things of his kingdom more than the promises of this world. Thank you, Father, that as you fit us for an eternity with you, you're already renewing us in knowledge after the image of the son you love.

[28 : 08] We pray these things, Lord, in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.