

How To Live in Two Places At Once

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- [0 : 00] Good. Well, let's turn now to our Bible readings for this morning. In these early chapters of Colossians.
- So Colossians chapter 2, and we're reading from verse 20. And if you have one of the Vista Bibles, that's page 984.
- So Colossians 2, and reading from verse 20. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why?
- As if you are still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations? Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch. Referring to things that all perish as they are used.
- According to human precepts and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism.
- [1 : 23] 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. Well, amen.
- May God bless his word to us this morning. Well, good morning, everybody. It's lovely to be with you here this morning.
- Lovely to see you all. And for those that you can't see at Bath Street and Goons Park, I trust that it's lovely for you to see me. But please do open your Bibles again to Colossians and chapter 2.
- [2 : 29] And again, that's on page 984 in our church Bibles. If you don't have a Bible, do feel free to grab one from the sides just now. That would be helpful as we're going through this passage together. Now, as Christians, as a Christian believer, you are living in two places at once.
- We have two residences. But Scottish government, if you're listening online, don't hit us with the second home tax yet. Because let me explain. We are, as Christians here and present, living in Glasgow.
- But we are also really present in the heavenly places. We are, chapter 3, verse 1, seated in Christ in the heavenly places at the right hand of God the Father.
- And mercifully, that's well beyond the jurisdiction of the Scottish government. Now, this is mysterious and perhaps we'll never fully understand this reality. But it is nonetheless true.
- If you are a Christian, when you repented and put your trust in Jesus, you were brought into union with Christ. And so you have been joined with him.
- [3 : 48] Joined across boundaries of space and time in his death. In his resurrection. And in his ascension to the right hand of God the Father. Chapter 3, verse 3.

You have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. And unsurprisingly, this incredible reality has a whole range of implications for our lives now as Christians.

The way which we live our lives now has surely got to change. Because we no longer belong to this age. We no longer belong to this world.

Our entire identity has been transformed forever. Christ is our life now. And this also means that it isn't going to be easy.

If you've ever lived or been on holiday abroad, or perhaps some of you here are living in a foreign country just now, you'll know that it can be difficult. If you don't understand the street signs, you don't know what half the food on a menu is, you can't get a decent cup of tea anywhere, it's hard.

[4 : 58] You don't fit in. You just feel a little bit out of place. Sometimes you even feel unwelcome. Well, how much more is that going to be the case?

When we don't just belong to another country, but to another world altogether. So what should our Christian life look like now as people who have died to this world and yet still live in it?

In other words, how do we live in two places at once? Well, to help his readers with this problem, Paul wants them and us to reckon with three key realities. Our past death, our present life, and our future hope.

And that's what we see in these verses which Paul read for us earlier. So firstly, our past death to this world. You may remember from previous sermons in Colossians that there were problems afoot in the church in Colossae.

Problems which were caused by people seeking to impose extra requirements on Christian believers. Their doctrines and their practices were communicating to the church there that mere faith in Jesus just wasn't going to cut it.

[6 : 10] It's not enough. They passed judgment upon and they excluded people who weren't complying with their additional rules. Additional regulations about which foods you could and couldn't eat, which fasts you had to keep, which spiritual experiences you needed to have in order to count yourself a proper Christian.

And the well-meaning Christians in Colossae, well, they were being taken in by this. Their motives were good. They were wrestling with this problem of how do we live in two places at once. They knew their lives as Christians should look different to how they looked before.

They knew they should try to live godly lives. But these false teachers were leading them down completely the wrong track. Leading them away from Christ.

Their solution just amounted to more and more and more rules and regulations. More requirements to entry. More rungs on the ladder to climb to holiness. But Paul's writing here to correct that notion.

And he's writing to encourage the believers. So Paul, ever the master of encouragement, starts by reminding them that they're dead. What could be more encouraging than that? But that's what Paul does here.

[7 : 23] He reminds the believers in Colossae that they have died. Verse 20. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world. Why? As if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations?

See, in this instance, it really is encouraging to know that we've died. Because Paul's point is that these things, the very things which are proving to be so discouraging for the genuine believers, well, they no longer have any hold over them.

These super spiritual false teachers are mounting up all sorts of requirements for what it is to be a real Christian. You can't touch this. You can't eat that. You've got to practice this fast. You've got to have this punishment for your sin.

But Paul says no. Because that attitude is just man-made worldliness. It's self-made religion. And it just amounts to hollow and empty religiosity.

And even more than that, Paul says, behind it all lies a deeper spiritual power of evil. The elemental spirits of the world, as he calls them here. Now, this might sound a bit distant or far removed from you, a bit fantastical, elemental spirits.

[8 : 35] What does that mean? But these spiritual powers are real. And they manifest in this world in very real, very tangible ways. We can see their influence all over the world and throughout every age in human history.

In Colossae, there is a purportedly Christian spin on it. But we see the same sort of things in every culture and every religion across the world. Hindus have cleanliness rituals and food laws.

Muslims practice fasting and punish the body. Buddhists go on pilgrimage and have spiritual experiences. There's nothing uniquely Christian about these practices.

Because these things are just the elemental things of worldly man-made religion. And so in a world which is blinded, a world which is in darkness, a world which is under the spiritual powers of darkness of this present age, well, it shouldn't surprise us that we see these things the world over.

And it also shouldn't surprise us that we see them creeping into the church. Now, there's nothing wrong with some of these things per se. Some of them could be good and helpful things.

[9 : 46] But it's not so much the practices themselves that are the big problem. But it's the attitude which comes with them. It's how we view them. Because the big problem in Colossae was that these things were dividing the church.

These things were deciding who really is and who really isn't a Christian. Or they were creating tears in the church of different levels of spiritual maturity. But Paul is making the point that as Christians, we have died to these powers and these realities.

And so we needn't keep lurking in the shadows. These things are the shadowy things of a former age. But Christ has come to be the son of righteousness, dawning over this world in darkness.

And we have now come out of the shadows and into that glorious light. And so Paul asked, why? Why would you go back into the shadows? Why would you go back into the darkness?

Why are you submitting to these things? Why are you letting these charlatans get you down? By requiring such things of you? Christ has already accomplished all that they might be aiming to achieve through these practices.

[11 : 03] If you're practicing asceticism to punish your own sinfulness. Why? Christ has paid for your sin once and for all on the cross. If you're chasing visions and spiritual experiences to bring you into closer relationship with God somehow.

Why? Christ has already brought you into relationship with God. See, these things aren't a way for us to earn our way into God's kingdom.

And neither are they a way for us to earn brownie points now that we're in. There is nothing, nothing at all that you could stand to gain through doing these things which isn't already yours in Christ.

And so I think it's worth asking the question, are there things in our culture which we make into requirements for entry?

Things which, if you engage in them, you couldn't possibly call yourself a real Christian. Or things which might cause us to look down on other Christian believers. Is it that you couldn't possibly be a Christian believer if you haven't read through the whole Bible?

[12:10] Or indeed, if you don't read it all the way through every year? Is it that drinking alcohol is an unforgivable sin from which you can never be forgiven? Is it that real Christians don't go shopping and eat in restaurants on a Sunday?

Now maybe some of these things sound silly, but our silly, sinful human hearts love making up rules, making leaderboards to rank ourselves, don't we? It could be that you want to try and take some agency over your ongoing sin problem by punishing yourself in some way for sin, so you add rules.

Cold showers for lustful thoughts, starving yourself to atone for your anger. Or it could be that you like having rules because it gives you a means by which to compare yourself to others.

Well, I've been at every prayer meeting this year, so I'm much more sanctified than them. God must be terribly pleased with me because I fast every week, don't you? See, these sorts of rules and leaderboards, they only amount to man-made worldliness.

They might look wise and holy. They might have the appearance of wisdom. It might look like the Christian who does the McShane reading plan every year and doesn't drink alcohol and comes to church twice every Sunday and to the prayer meeting.

[13:27] It might look like they're the one that's holy and wise, but it's not these things that save us. You could be doing all of these things and be spiritually dead inside.

Now, these could all be good things to do. It could be real signs of the gospel at work in your heart. But these things won't in themselves change your heart. And that's Paul's point, isn't it?

It won't change your heart. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

They will not change your heart. So you can add all the regulations you want. You could chart everyone in the church's attendance and publish the Holiness League table at the end of the year.

You could beat yourself up every time you stumble a little bit and sin, but none of that will change the fact that your heart is still sinful. I don't know how many, if any of you, ever give something up for Lent.

[14:37] Chocolate's a common one. Maybe it's drinking alcohol. Maybe social media. But if you tried it, has it ever been your experience that by giving up that thing, you lessened your desire for it?

Or did you instead find that actually in every moment in that 40-day period when you were giving it up, that your craving for that bar of chocolate or your itching to get your phone out and go back on social media was heightened?

That you maybe even find that your desire for that thing was increased because of this restriction that you imposed on yourself. But this shouldn't surprise us because outward rules and regulations concerning passing and perishable things are never going to penetrate the dark recesses of a heart which is plagued by sin.

The problem of the indulgence of the flesh is not solved by man-made fleshly religiosity. Jesus nailed the religious leaders of his day on this point.

In Mark chapter 7, they come to him and ask in their usual pious manner, why do your disciples not walk according to the traditions of the elders? It's the same thing, isn't it? Why aren't your disciples submitting to the man-made regulations?

[15 : 59] And Jesus cuts right to the heart of the issue by calling them out as hypocrites. He quotes from the prophet Isaiah, this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men. And he goes on, there is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him.

But the things that come out of a person is what defile him. Our sin problem is a spiritual one, not a bodily one.

And thus the answer to it is a spiritual one and not a bodily one. So we can change our diets and our diaries, but it won't have a lasting effect on our hearts.

The answer to sin is not doing, but dying. Dealing with sin requires a death. But here's the amazing thing, because remember, this is Paul's very point.

[17 : 04] His point is that for Christian believers, the death that's required has already happened. Their sin has been paid for, and so there's no need to go back and add on endless terms and conditions to a contract that's already been signed.

There's no need to try and climb a slippery ladder of righteousness in the vain hope that you might make it high enough on your own steam. It might be tempting in light of our ongoing struggle with sin.

To think that the answer to be more holy, to grow closer to God, is to add on extra requirements and restrictions. More rules, more regulations, but that's not what real holiness looks like at all.

Real Christian holiness isn't restrictive or miserable. It's liberating. It's joyful. If we reckon rightly with our past death to this world, as Paul calls us to do, then we'll remember we have died to the elementary powers of this world.

We've been set free from the penalty of our sin. We've been liberated to a life of service to Christ, unshackled from these restrictions, unshackled from these additional requirements.

[18 : 16] Now, that doesn't mean that we just crack on and sin all the more that grace might abound, but it does mean that we embrace with thankfulness the good gifts that God has given us.

God is a God who loves his people. He loves us so much that he sent his son to die for us. But Christ didn't come and die for us and save us that we might trudge back into slavery.

No! He died to set us free. So we need to reckon with our past death to this world. But secondly now, we need to reckon with our present life in Christ.

See, we haven't just died to this world and been left in some kind of limbo. We've been raised to new life in Christ. Verse 3, you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Our whole life has changed. Our whole identity has changed. And so our whole life is going to look completely different. People seek identity in all sorts of things, don't we?

[19 : 20] And the things which are important to us will end up shaping our character. What we live for shapes how we live. If work is important to you, then you make decisions which help you get ahead in your career.

If family is important to you, well, you prioritize spending time with family, perhaps sacrificing your career because of it. If your education is important to you, then it will shape how many hours you spend in the library, how hard you study at school.

But if Christ is important to you, what will your life look like? If the one defining feature of your identity is that you have died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God, how is it going to shape your life?

What is going to be your priority? What things are you going to sacrifice? How will you spend your time? Now, Paul's going to unpack in the rest of this chapter and into the beginning of chapter 4 more of what this looks like.

And while worldly religiosity is not the answer, we do need to be clear that godly living does take real conscious effort. We need to deliberately put off the old self and put on the new.

[20 : 46] But crucially, we do these things not in an attempt to climb the ladder. These aren't things which contribute to our salvation. Because again, Paul's message here isn't you need to die and you need to be raised.

No, he says you have died and you have been raised. And so as we seek to live this new life in Christ, we do so knowing that the ultimate outcome of it is secure already.

We have already died with Christ. We have already been raised with him and we have been seated in the heavenly places. With him. Now isn't this an altogether more encouraging place to start when we think about how we live the Christian life?

When we think about our Christian walk, the dynamic is not that we're trudging along, slogging along one painful step at a time on the long and winding road to heaven, hoping that one day we might just make it.

we are there already in a real but hidden sense we have made it and one day we will be where we are.

[21 : 58] We will fully and bodily be where we now are spiritually in Christ. And brothers and sisters, I for one am so glad that Paul has included this little section here before he goes on to exhort us as to what it looks like to put off the old self and to put on the new.

God willing, we'll return to those verses at a later date but just scan your eyes quickly over that next section now. Look at the things which characterize the old self. Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness, idolatry, anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk and look to what characterizes the new self.

Compassion, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, forgiveness, love. Which one looks more like you now.

If Paul launched straight into this list of instructions without all that he's already said in this letter, it would be crushing. None of us are capable of doing this on our own.

No amount of asceticism and fasting could get us there. No rules could bring us across that line. But how wonderful that instead we have this glorious reminder that Christ has already done it.

[23 : 34] We are seated at the right hand of God the Father. And so our focus should be on his complete sufficiency rather than our deficiency.

mercy. And so yes, the putting off of the old self, putting on of the new will be hard work, but it comes as a response to the blessings which are ours in Christ, not as a means by which we earn that blessing.

And Paul says here that the response begins with having hearts and minds shaped and molded by the realities of heaven. 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 above, not on things that are on earth. Now this sounds lovely, doesn't it? Seek the things above. But what does that mean?

What does that actually mean? Well, it's to allow our lives to be guided by heavenly priorities. It's to seek first the kingdom of heaven. It's to do as Paul instructs in verse 16, to let the word of Christ dwell on us richly.

[24 : 46] And Paul's instructions here are active things, aren't they? Seek the things above. Set your mind on things above. Not just wait around until heaven falls on your head. And so if we want our hearts, if we want our minds to be filled with and shaped by the things of Christ, well it follows, doesn't it, that we need to spend time actively seeking him where he is to be found.

So we spend time in God's word. We come to church and hear the word preached. We devote ourselves to prayer. We throw ourselves into our growth group and wholeheartedly contribute to our Bible studies there.

We shape our home lives around church and around the word. And the more we do these things, the more we'll find our hearts and minds are indeed set on things that are above.

The more we'll find that our thoughts and conversations extend beyond what we've been watching on TV or what we had for dinner last night. It can be quite telling, can't it, where our conversations tend to drift to.

When there's a lull in conversation, what are the things that pop into your mind to get the conversational ball rolling again? Or when you've got some downtime on your own and you've nothing much else to do or think about, what are the things which first pop into your head?

[26 : 03] is it something that's bothering you at work this week? Is it your next holiday? Is it a new series on Netflix? Is it whatever the algorithm has been feeding you this week?

Now, it's not wrong ever to speak about these things. There's a time and a place. But if all of our conversations, all of the time, never get beyond these things, then maybe it's a clue that our minds are in fact set on earthly things and not on things above.

There's a well-known saying which says that some people are so heavenly-minded as to be of no earthly good. But I think we have to conclude that that's wrong. James Phillips says, in fact, the opposite is true.

The tragedy about so much discipleship today is that it is so earthly-minded that it is of no heavenly use. Because actually, Paul says, being heavenly-minded is exactly what we need to be.

If our minds are only on earthly things, then what possible heavenly use could we be? We'll just regress back into the elemental principles like everyone else. That doesn't mean we just float around with our head in the clouds, totally disengaged and not taking any interest in the things of this world.

[27 : 20] But rather, that as we live in two places at once, bodily here on earth, with hearts set and longing for heaven, by having our minds set on heaven, we'll be more engaged. We'll be more useful here on earth and in heavenly things.

This is the way which we're going to be able to be salt and light in a world which is still under the grip of these elemental spirits of the world. It's by being heavenly-minded that we can be the sun that this dark world so desperately needs.

If we live with minds set on earthly things, if we live lives according to those same elementary principles as everybody else, then we really will be of no earthly good.

Because what the world needs most is not more of the same. What the world needs most is the light and the life of Christ.

But if we're living lives which are distinctly shaped by different principles, if we're setting our mind every day on Christ seated there in the heavens, if we are recalling every day how he got there through a life of costly sacrificial service, if we remember these things, then we will be able to boldly and joyfully follow in his footsteps.

[28 : 45] If we have minds set on things above, then we'll be willing to hold loosely the earthly things which might otherwise pull us away, and we'll be able to hold tight to the future hope that we have.

And that's the final thing which Paul wants us to reckon with very briefly, our future hope in glory. Because there will come a day when we will no longer be living in two places at once.

There will come a day when we will no longer be in this body of death. There will come a day when we'll no longer be blighted by sin. There will come a day when we will no longer be made to feel deficient by those who proclaim to be God's people.

There will come a day when we no longer face the scorn and hatred of the world. There will come a day when it's no longer difficult to be a son or daughter of God. And all of this is true because there will come a day when Christ, who is your life, will appear.

God has appointed a day when Christ will come again in glorious judgment. We don't know when it will be.

[30 : 06] Could be tomorrow. Could be a thousand years from now. But come it will. And come he will. And when Christ, who is your life, appears, you also will appear with him in glory.

Let's pray. Our Lord and loving Heavenly Father, help us, we pray, to be those who would reckon rightly with our death to the things of this world.

Help us to be those who would reckon rightly with the life which you have given us now in Christ. Help us to be those who would hold fast to the glorious promise of his coming again in glory.

And keep us until that day we pray. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.