

Series: *Christ Preeminent In You*

Title: "Heavenly Boldness in Acts" (Colossians 3:1-4, Matthew 5:10-16)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 11/24/2013

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Today we continue our study of the great command that God has given us in the book of Colossians, in chapter 3. Let me read those words for you once again. Colossians chapter 3, beginning at verse one:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

We have been considering these verses together over a number of messages. We have taken note of the fact that this imperative, that we are to seek those things which are above, that we are to set our minds on things above, and not on things on the earth, is a command that we find not only here in the book of Colossians. We find it throughout the Scriptures.

We have seen that we find this command in a special way in the book of Acts. We must always remember that the book of Acts is a book of facts. It is a book of history. It is the record of crucial events that took place in the early history of the church. In the early days of the New Testament church, God is not only giving His people this command, to be Heaven-bound and not earth-bound in their thinking and living and witness, God is moreover taking steps to implement and inculcate this way of thinking among the people of God. And He does this by placing a series of challenges before them.

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Now, often in this series I have used the word "bound." I have spoken of being "earth-bound" versus being "Heaven-bound." That is the sense of the issue that confronted the early church. And I say this for two reasons, and they have to do with the two different senses in which we can use the word "bound" to describe something or someone.

First of all, it is accurate and Biblical to say that God was teaching the church to be careful to what and to whom it was "bound" in the sense of orientation - in the sense of connection, obligation, and limitations. God was constantly challenging them: Is your orientation toward the things of Heaven, or the things on earth? Are you living under obligation and loyalty to the things of this world, or under obligation and loyalty to the Lord of glory? And are your thoughts and your actions limited, and defined, by the things of Heaven or by the things of earth? That is the first sense in which this term applies.

The second sense in which God was dealing with the church has to do with the sense of ultimate destination. Christians are not earth-bound people. We are Heaven-bound people. Our citizenship is in Heaven. God was teaching His church to understand this, and to live this. When we read the names in the record in the great roll call of faith in Hebrews chapter 11, we find that the people who are named there realized that they had no continuing city on this earth. No permanent place on this earth. Their destination was not here. Their destination was the eternal city, whose builder and maker is God.

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God was teaching the church that it must be Heaven-bound and not earth-bound in those two senses. The church's thoughts and our actions must be defined by the things of Heaven. The church's loyalty must be to the King of Heaven. The church must have an ever-growing consciousness of the fact that the things of this earth are passing away, and that we are being sanctified, set apart, for glory to come as citizens of the New Heavens and New Earth.

And so God in His providence confronted the early church with a series of crucial challenges to guide them and to prove them. Those challenges all surrounded the definition and the proclamation of the Gospel.

And so we may ask the question, How did they face those challenges? Were they thinking in terms of the things of this earth, or the things of Heaven? Was their orientation toward the thrones of sinful man, or toward the throne of the holy God – "where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God"? To what persons and to what things were they bound in the sense of obligation and loyalty? What was it that controlled their thinking? And to where did they see themselves bound in terms of destination?

Because the book of Acts is a book of history, there are many events that answer those questions for us, and give clear examples to us. Because of the limits of time, I want to emphasize one particular element, one particular product or result, of God's implementation and inculcation of a Heaven-bound way of thinking and acting among the people of the early church.

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The Challenge of Ridicule

The thing I want to call especially to your attention is the boldness of the witness of the early church. From the very beginning, the church faced the challenge of ridicule from unbelievers. The church faced opposition from unbelievers. They faced it from the Jews. They faced it from the Gentiles.

We find this, first of all, in the second chapter of the book of Acts. When the 120 people in the upper room at Jerusalem received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other languages, proclaiming the wonderful works of God, there were those who said this, chapter 2, verse 13: "They are full of new wine" – these people are drunk. And we are told that it was said in a mocking way, in ridicule.

It is also noteworthy that this response reflected a naturalistic outlook. Nothing supernatural has happened here. Nothing really out of the ordinary. These people are simply drunk with wine. That explains it. And how often today do people reject the Gospel and reject Christianity because they reject the supernatural power of God? And, how often today, is the church ineffectual and uncertain in its testimony because it does not rely without apology upon the supernatural power of God?

But what did Peter say in response to this ridicule? He said this, Acts chapter two, verse 15: "We are not drunk... [But] this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel..." What is happening before you is because Jesus Christ, whom you crucified, God the Father has raised from the dead, and He has now seated Him on the throne of glory in Heaven. And Peter reminds them of the great prophecy of Psalm 110, in

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which David said, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool.'"

Peter declares to them that the One who is spoken of in this Psalm is the Lord Jesus Christ. And so he says, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:34-36). And what was the result? What was the response? The response, at least on the part of some, was no longer ridicule. Verse 37:

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren what shall we do?" Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for [that is, because of] the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

They were "cut to the heart." They were deeply pained in their minds when they realized that the One they had crucified was their Messiah. They were deeply agitated. They were deeply sorrowful. And out of that response of godly sorrow, three thousand of them came to saving faith in Jesus Christ that day.

Because Peter, and the other apostles, and those who were with them, were not afraid to point the people to the throne of God in Heaven, not afraid to point men to Christ seated upon the throne, three thousand people came to saving faith in Christ. Because the response of the disciples to the ridicule of unsaved men was not an earth-bound response, not a response of apology, not a response of shrinking away

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or running away, but a response of boldness based upon heavenly authority, God the Holy Spirit did a great work among the Jews who were gathered for the feast of Pentecost.

Not Ashamed of the Gospel

This is how we must meet the challenge of ridicule in our time. We must not be afraid to proclaim the supernatural truth of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Romans chapter 1, verse 16 the Apostle Paul says "I am not ashamed" of this Gospel. No feeling of fear or shame prevents me from proclaiming this Gospel.

Why is that? The Apostle Paul immediately tells us: This Gospel is "the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes..." The Gospel of Jesus Christ has inherent power, authoritative power. Why? Because this Gospel points sinful man to the one Holy Man, to Jesus Christ who is seated on the throne of Heaven.

In our witness before men, we must point them to things above, and not the things of this earth. We must point them to the One who is seated on the throne of glory. That is the true nature of the Gospel. And that is why we must not fear to proclaim it. That is why we must do it even when we know we will face the ridicule of sinful men.

If the Gospel were merely about changing man's present circumstances, it would not be good news at all. Change man's present circumstances all you will, and man is still dead in trespasses and sins. Man is still bound for Hell. Sinful man needs to

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become alive in Christ. Sinful man needs to become dead to this world. He needs for his life, his eternal life, to be hidden with Christ in God. Sinful man needs to lay hold of the present assurance that when Christ who is our life appears, those who are saved will appear with Him in glory. That is the great need of sinful man, and Christ's church must not be afraid to say so.

A Biblical Attitude Toward Ridicule

Dear friends, if others choose to ridicule the Gospel, and if others choose to ridicule us because of the Gospel, that is no shame upon us. Our Lord Jesus Christ said this, Matthew chapter 5 beginning at verse 10:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in Heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a

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lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven. (Matthew 5:10-16)

There you have it: the Heaven-bound outlook. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before men without apology. If they persecute you for righteousness' sake, great is your reward in Heaven. Some will see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven. Others will heap condemnation upon themselves because they choose to remain in unbelief. But whatever happens, God will use your witness. Maintain, at all times, the Heaven-bound outlook as you bear witness for the Lord Jesus Christ in this world.

In 2 Corinthians chapter four beginning at verse 17, the Apostle Paul spoke of his own afflictions for the sake of the Gospel, and he said this:

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:17-18)

That is the outlook that we see the Apostle Paul maintaining throughout the record of his missionary journeys in the book of Acts. "We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal." Whatever ridicule or

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persecution we suffer for the sake of the Gospel here and now, it is at work producing reward for us in the world to come. It is working, for us, "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

Notice the contrast that Paul sets up for us. The afflictions that we experience for the sake of the Gospel are "light" in comparison to "the far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" that the ridicule and the afflictions and the persecutions are bringing about. Literally, Paul is saying that the glory, the future reward, that is being brought about by these adversities, is an "exceeding excess" of glory. An "exceeding excess" of honor from God. Glory beyond measure. Notice also that Paul says that these adversities are "but for a moment" in comparison to the eternal glory that awaits the believer in Christ.

If our focus is on the things that we presently see, then we will be inclined to give up. We will be inclined to keep silent. We will be inclined to act, or rather to not act, out of fear, the fear of men, and what men will say, and what men will do. But our only concern needs to be what Christ will say, what Christ will do. We need to be seeking Christ's "well done" rather than the praise of men on earth.

That is how God implemented this great imperative in the early church. He taught His people that the praise of men on earth is temporary. The rewards of man on earth are temporary. The things that man can do to us are temporary.

But the things which are as yet unseen are eternal. Those are the things that are real, and those things will only remain unseen for a short time. And so we must

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"redeem the time." We must not labor to build upon the foundation of Jesus Christ "wood, hay, and stubble" which will be burned, which will be consumed in the purifying fires of God's judgment at the Last Day. We must seek to build on the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ "gold, silver, and precious stones" that will last for eternity.

Peter's Backsliding

We find in Acts chapter 15 that Paul and Barnabas spent a considerable period of time preaching the Gospel and teaching the saints in the city of Antioch. We find also, in the second chapter of Galatians, that Peter subsequently came to Antioch as well. But Peter, Paul tells us, soon acted in a way that denied the truth of the Gospel.

Peter, as well as Paul, had proclaimed that salvation is by faith in Christ alone apart from the works of the law. That was the great declaration to the churches that resulted from the first council of the church, which was held at Jerusalem. There were those who were saying that you needed to have faith plus works in order to be saved. You needed to believe in Christ but also keep the law of Moses in order to be saved. But Peter knew very well that this was not true. He knew that salvation had come to both Jew and Gentile by faith in Christ alone.

But Paul tells us in Galatians chapter 2 that when certain Jews came to Antioch, Peter went back to practicing the law of Moses. He stopped eating with Gentiles. And Paul said to Peter, You and I know that a man is not justified by the works of

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the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. By the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. Therefore why are you compelling Gentiles to live as Jews? Why are you compelling them to keep the law of Moses?

Peter's Repentance

Why was Peter doing it? He was doing it because he feared the ridicule of certain people. But it is clear that Peter took Paul's words to heart. Peter repented. He refocused his thinking. He sought the eternal praise of God, not the temporary praise of sinful men. Peter himself was to suffer great ridicule, and great persecution, and ultimately death for the sake of the Gospel of Christ. But Peter wrote this to the believers, in First Peter chapter 3 beginning at verse 14:

But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled. But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. (1 Peter 3:14-16)

"Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts." Set apart the Lord God in your hearts. Give Him first place. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Be ready to give a defense of

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the hope that is in you. And what is that hope? It is the great hope that when Christ who is our life shall appear, we also shall appear with Him in glory.

Never forget that, dear Christian. Seek that boldness, that Heaven-bound orientation, that we find in the early church. Oh, how we need it in the church today. Much of the church has become so afraid of what the unbelieving world will say, what the unbelieving world will think, what ridicule they may bring. We must once again become like the early church, proclaiming the Gospel and living the Christian life with the glory of Christ and the glories of eternity foremost in our minds, without shame and without apology.

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