

Series: *Christ Preeminent In You*

Title: "Government Is Not God" (Colossians 3:1-4, Philippians 3:17-21)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 12/29/2013

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At the beginning of Colossians chapter three we find a commandment from God to His people individually, and to His church, the Body of Christ, given to us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through the pen of the Apostle Paul. If you are able to do so, I hope that you will turn in your own copy of God's Word to the book of Colossians and follow along as I read this passage, and then also as we consider some other related passages today. Let us begin in Colossians chapter 3 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.

In this series of messages, we have been seeing that the truths that we find in these words are an imperative that we find not only here in Colossians chapter 3 but throughout the Word of God. This is a constant emphasis throughout the pages of Scripture.

Thus far, we have seen it in the Old Testament prophets. We have seen it also in the words of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospel records. We have also seen it in the book of Acts in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the early church, and the heavenly boldness with which they proclaimed, even at the risk of their lives,

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the message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone.

More recently, we have begun to look at this imperative as we find it in the epistles of the Apostle Paul to the various churches of the New Testament period. Paul also, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, emphasizes these things over and over again.

He emphasizes the fact that Christians are Heaven-bound people. We are Heaven-bound in two senses of the word. We are bound for Heaven. Heaven is our ultimate destination, the New Heavens and the New Earth. And furthermore, we are to be bound or constrained by the things of Heaven, and by the Christ of Heaven, by His person and His authority, as we walk through this present world on our way to our ultimate destination.

Three Great Propositions

And so I have been putting before you three very important points of emphasis in this regard that we find throughout the epistles of Paul to the churches. We have been considering them in the form of three propositional statements.

The first of those propositions is that believers in the Lord Jesus Christ presently possess a Heaven-bound status that is in Christ. We have seen this in previous messages. We are no long merely children of the first Adam, the man of dust, our father according to the flesh. We are now in Christ, the Second Adam, the Man from Heaven. We are, even now, not merely in the flesh. We are in the

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Spirit. We have been born again, born from above, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are, even now, the Heaven-bound sons of the living God. That was our first proposition.

And then, the Lord willing, in a future message we are going to take up a third proposition concerning this great truth, and that is that our Heaven-bound position in Christ, our position of being hidden with Christ in God, is a matter of inheritance. We have, as the Apostle Peter tells us in his first epistle in chapter one, verse three,

a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled that does not fade away, reserved in Heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

But today I want to turn our attention to a second, connecting proposition from the opening verses of Colossians chapter three, and that is the great truth that we presently possess the guarantee of that future glory, that future inheritance. Many, many passages in Paul's epistles speak of this great fact. But let me call to your attention to a few key passages in particular.

The Present Foundation of Future Glory

First of all, please turn with me, if you are able, to Ephesians chapter two. The point I want to emphasize is found in verse six, but I want to begin reading at

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verse one to establish the context for us. Ephesians chapter two, beginning at verse one:

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and [notice, verse six] raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:1-10)

Here we have the foundation of future glory. You were once in your sins, Paul says to the Ephesian believers. You were once dead in trespasses and sins. You

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were once confined under the spiritual death that you inherited from your father Adam, the man of dust. You were once slaves of this world. You conducted yourselves according to the course of this present world under the curse. You could do nothing else because you were spiritually dead – dead in trespasses and sins, cut off from God

But God, in His great mercy, made you alive together with Christ. Raised you with Christ, just as Paul tells us in Colossians chapter three, verse one – "If then [or more accurately, since then] you have been raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is."

And here in Ephesians Paul further explains why and how this is possible. Ephesians chapter two, verse six: God has "raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus..." That is our present position. Because we are in Christ, we are seated in the heavenly realms with Him already. This is the realm in which the believer's blessings are to be found. This is the realm in which the resources for living life in this present world are to be found.

And why has God done this? Why has He seated us already, positionally, in the heavenly realms in Christ? Paul tells us in the next verse, Ephesians chapter two, verse seven. God has done this, God has seated us in the heavenlies in Christ, so "that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."

The foundation of the future glory that every believer in Christ, both Jew and

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Gentile, will enjoy for eternity, is the fact that we are presently, positionally, seated in the heavenlies with Christ because we are saved by grace through faith, and not by works. We now have, through Christ, access to the resources of Heaven for the living of life in this world as God's workmanship, Ephesians chapter two verse ten, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

Our Present Citizenship of Glory

And this brings us to a second point of emphasis in Paul's epistles, and that is the fact that we are no longer citizens of this present world. We are no longer citizens of this present world-system. We find this in many places in Paul's epistles but let me call your attention in particular to Philippians chapter three. The point I want to emphasize is found in verse twenty, but I want to begin reading at verse seventeen, because Paul is setting up a great contrast for us once again. Philippians chapter three, beginning at verse seventeen:

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame — who set their mind on earthly things.

[And then notice, verse 20] For our citizenship is in Heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who

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will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself. (Philippians 3:17-21)

"Our citizenship is in Heaven." What does this mean? The Greek word that is translated "citizenship" in the New King James Bible, or "conversation" in the Old King James, is a very rich word. It means, first of all, that our *place* of citizenship as believers is in Heaven.

But it means more than that. It means that the *form of government* to which we are subject, and the laws by which that government is administered, the constitution of our government as believers, is in Heaven and not on this earth.

Now this is not to say that we are not to be subject to earthly governments and earthly constitutions while we are in this world. That is not the Holy Spirit's point. Elsewhere in Paul's epistles God makes it abundantly clear that while we are in this world we are to be subject to the authority of the governments that God has established on this present earth.

The Nature of Human Government

But the governments of this present world are temporal and temporary. The long succession of human governments through time are temporary institutions in the plan of God. God uses human government to prevent men from doing even more evil than they do in the presence of such governments. That is the sole

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Divine purpose of human government, of this present world-system.

Look at the constitution of my own country, the United States of America. It is, quite probably, the greatest governing document ever written by human beings. Many other nations have patterned their constitutions after it over the last two hundred years. But why was it written? Why is a human constitution written? It is written because man is sinful. It is written because checks and balances need to be placed upon the sinful propensities of fallen men.

And no matter how good a form of government is, what does it take to ruin it? What in fact, is ruining it today? We can sum it up in one word: *sin*. That is all it takes. The sinful nature of man. The sinful mind of man. The sinful acts of man. The sinful will of even one man determined to have his own way, and the sinful willingness of others to let that one man have his way.

Dear friends, the governments of this world will never save a soul from sin, never save a soul from the wrath of God. The governments of this sinful world will never prepare a soul for life in the world to come. Human government will never produce the fruit of the Spirit within a human being.

God is not human government, and human government is not God. God through the Apostle Paul pointed this out repeatedly to the early church living under the Roman Empire: Caesar is not lord. Only Jesus Christ "received up in glory" (1 Timothy 3:16) is Lord of all.

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No government is the preserver and sustainer of mankind in general, or of believers in particular. Only Jesus Christ, the Creator and Sustainer of this world and this universe, can do that.

The Church's Entitlement Mentality

But today, much of the nominally Evangelical church has forgotten this. And much of the visible church today is ineffectual because of it. It is ineffectual no matter how big the buildings, no matter how big the crowds. It is ineffectual in doing what Christ has commanded His church to do. And the problem manifests itself in at least two ways.

The first way has to do with an entitlement mentality. Many churches and Christian institutions are coming to depend upon government for their sustenance. Recently I received a copy of a letter that was sent to the parents of students who attend a Christian school in my area. This letter asked these parents to provide private information, such as their personal incomes, so that the school could use this information to apply to the government for financial assistance.

Now, this is truly ironic. One of the principal purposes of establishing a Christian school is to remove the influences of pagan government from the education of our young people. No government financial assistance comes without strings attached. This school, and many others like it that are pursuing provision from the hand of government rather than the hand of God, are simply opening the door to the establishment of government control over Christian education.

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Dear friends, practically speaking, what this school and others like it are doing is simply stupid. And spiritually speaking, it is darkened. It is a shameful thing for those who are seated in the heavenlies with Christ to open the church, and to open Christian education, to the influences and control of pagan government by becoming beholden to that government instead of to God. It is setting an ungodly example for the young people they are educating, and it is setting an ungodly example for their parents.

Our citizenship is in Heaven. Our reliance is on God, not Caesar. The government of the church is the government of God, not the government of Caesar, not the government of unbelievers.

Subtracting From the Gospel By Adding To It

But this wrong attitude regarding government on the part of Christians and the church is manifesting itself in an even more damaging way than this, and that is in relation to the Gospel.

Large segments of the nominally Evangelical church are rapidly abandoning the twofold mission that our Lord Jesus Christ gave to His church before He ascended to Heaven. That mission is a simple one, but it is cosmically profound. This is the mission, the commission, that Christ has given to His church: Evangelize the world with the one true Gospel of salvation by faith in Christ alone, and edify the saints – build up those who truly believe the Gospel message by instructing them

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in sound doctrine from Holy Scripture, so that their lives will be forever changed by it.

But large segments of the nominally Evangelical church have effectively stopped doing these two things. And much of this terrible change has taken the form of subtraction by addition. What do I mean by that? I mean that in many churches today, other things, other priorities, human, earthly priorities, have come in that are crowding out the true, God-given mission of the church.

Large segments of the Evangelical church have become obsessed with human government in various ways – political activity, so-called economic justice, social reform, moral improvement, and a long list of other things. And so, many churches today have redefined the "gospel" [so-called] in those terms.

But dear friends, listen to me carefully: The Gospel plus anything else is less than the true Gospel. The power of such a so-called "gospel" resides in the weak arm of fleshly wisdom, not in the mighty arm of the all-wise God. Such a "gospel" is so earthly minded that it is of no heavenly good. Scripture condemns such thinking. It says that while these ways may seem right to many of today's church leaders and their followers, "the end thereof are the ways of death" (Proverbs 14:12).

Today much of the church has embarked on a fool's errand. The church is seeking, through reform of government and by seeking the largesse of government, to give the world some of the temporal benefits of the Gospel

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without the preaching and the power of the Gospel. It seeks the temporary "salvation" of the nation – the temporary "salvation" of a world-system that God says is perishing – rather than the eternal salvation of souls.

But man's destiny is not tied to any earthly nation or political system. Man's destiny hinges upon each individual's relationship with Jesus Christ. For each individual who has ever lived or will live, Jesus Christ is either Lord and Savior or condemning Judge. There is no third alternative. No human government can save a soul from Hell. No human government can prepare a redeemed people for life in the New Heavens and New Earth.

"Of Whom the World Was Not Worthy"

If Christ's church does anything else instead of proclaiming the one true Gospel to the world, and pursuing Scripture-driven holiness in every area of life and ministry, we fail. The men and women of the great roll-call of faith in Hebrews chapter eleven understood that "here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come" (13:14), "the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (11:10).

They were those, chapter 11 verse 38 tells us, "of whom the world was not worthy." Literally, this present world system was not worthy to have them living in it. But in stark contrast, the Apostle Paul exhorted believers to remember our destiny – Philippians chapter three, verse seventeen:

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For our citizenship is in Heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself (Philippians 3:17-21).

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