

Series: *Biblical Separation*

Title: "Is It Christians' Job to Reclaim the Culture?" (Colossians 3:1-17)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 3/2/2014

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## **A Turning Point In Our Study**

Today we have reached another turning point in our study of Paul's epistle to the Colossians. We are about to move into a new portion of the book, in chapter three beginning at verse five, and on into chapter four. In these two chapters we are going to find a different emphasis, a different subject matter being addressed.

So as we begin today I want to remind you of the structure of the book of Colossians. If you have been following this series of studies, you may recall that the outline of the book of Colossians reflects one of the great statements the Lord Jesus Christ made about Himself. In John chapter fourteen verse six, Jesus said to His disciples, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man comes to the Father except through Me."

This is precisely the pattern we find in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians. In chapter one, Paul declares the Lord Jesus Christ as the Way – the only Way to eternal life. He sets forth Christ's person and work as the only means by which we can, as we read in chapter one verse 13, be delivered from the power of darkness and conveyed into Christ's kingdom. That is the focus of Colossians chapter one: Jesus Christ is the Way.

In Colossians chapter two, the Apostle Paul declares that Jesus Christ is the Truth – the only Truth, in contrast to and in opposition to three particular spiritual forces that we find arrayed against the truth of God and against the people of God in this present world. The Colossian believers faced these forces in the first

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century, and believers up to the present day are still facing them. Those three forces are worldly philosophy, legalism, and man-made doctrines. All of these things stand in opposition to the truth of Christ.

And then, in Colossians chapters 3 and 4, the Apostle Paul sets forth the Lord Jesus Christ as the Life. Jesus has delivered those who believe on Him into newness of life – newness of life in this present world, and newness of life in the world to come. That is the point to which we have come in our study of the book of Colossians.

That is the focus in the first four verses of chapter three, which we have been considering together for a number of weeks. "Set your mind on things above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God," the Holy Spirit commands us through the Apostle Paul. "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth."

Why are we to do that? What is the great fact that demands this of us? It is, the Apostle Paul tells us, chapter three verse three, the momentous fact that "you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

The true Christian, the truly blood-bought child of God, the adopted son of God, the one who has been raised with Christ, is dead to sin, dead to this present world, dead to its cultures, and alive to Christ, alive in Him for the purpose of living to please Him in this present evil world, and for the purpose of living with Him, separated forever from both the power and the presence of sin, in the glories of the

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New Heavens and the New Earth. Colossians chapter three, verse four: "When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory."

### **Reclaiming the Culture?**

This brings us to the verses that follow in Colossians chapter three, and this also leads us on into the remainder of Paul's letter in chapter four. What is the focus of chapters 3 and 4? Let me put it to you in these terms: Today in the nominally evangelical church we hear a great deal about the supposed necessity for Christians to change the culture, or to reclaim the culture, to renovate this present world in various ways, in order to supposedly usher in the kingdom of God on earth.

Dear friends, listen to me carefully: The teaching that Christians must be on a quest to reclaim this world's cultures is a false teaching. Many places in the Word of God tell us that this is so. The third and fourth chapters of the book of Colossians are one of those places. The purpose of God in redeeming a people for Himself is not the renovation or the improvement of this present world. God's purpose for Christians is not to reclaim the cultures of this world.

Dear friends, we never had them in the first place. This present world is under God's curse. In Second Peter chapter three, beginning at verse 10, we are told that this present earth is going to be destroyed by fire. The day is coming when God is going to purge this world of all of the remnants of sin and of the curse. He is going to bring about New Heavens and a New Earth.

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The original language of the New Testament tells us that the New Heavens and New Earth are not going to be entirely new, they are not going to be new in time, but they are going to be new in quality. God is going to restore and renew His creation that Satan sought to destroy. He will not permit Satan to destroy it. He will not permit Satan to have that victory.

This present creation is going to be renovated and restored, purged by fire of all traces of the curse of sin, and given an even greater glory than it had originally. And we, the believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, are going to live and rule and reign in it with the Lord Jesus Christ forever.

Never once did the Lord Jesus, and never once did any of the apostles, ever say to Christians, "Go and reclaim the culture." No. First John chapter five verse 19 tells us that while "we are of God...the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one." Galatians chapter one verse four tells us that the Lord Jesus Christ "gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever."

No dear friends, the commission that the Lord Jesus has given to us is not to reclaim the world's cultures, but to be used of Him in saving a people for the world to come. Go and preach the Gospel, Jesus said. Tell people how to be saved from this present evil world so that they may not perish in Hell, but may have life in the world to come. And teach them how to live life in this present world as saved people, as My people. Teach them how to live life here and now in the light

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of the world to come.

This is why any emphasis on the renovation of this present world by Christians, why any emphasis on supposedly reclaiming the cultures of this present world by Christians, is a wrong emphasis, an un-Biblical emphasis. God's plan is not to redeem the cultures of this present sinful world. God's plan is a new creation, New Heavens and New Earth, in which righteousness will dwell forever.

### **Christianity: The Culture of the World to Come**

The emphasis that we find in the remainder of the book of Colossians, in chapters 3 and 4, underscores this great truth. Christianity is not a function of the cultures of this present world. Christianity is the culture of the world to come. And I submit to you that we find one particular word in Scripture that emphasizes the key characteristic of the culture of the world to come, and that word is *separation*. Another word that we find more often in both the Old and New Testaments, expressing much the same thought, is the word *holiness*.

In previous messages, I have read for you a key passage in Second Corinthians chapter six that deals with the Biblical doctrine of separation. In Second Corinthians 6, verse 17, the Lord commands us, "Come out from among them [that is, from among unbelievers, and from the unbelieving culture, and from the unbelieving false religions] and be separate, says the Lord."

The word that is translated "be separate" means to observe boundaries

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established by God that mark us off from the unbelieving cultures. The word also has the sense of excluding from our thinking and our living those things that are disreputable in the sight of God. And the word that is translated "separate" in that passage also has to do with our being set apart in the plan of God for His purposes, for His glory.

### **More Like Christ, Less Like the World**

The writer to the Hebrews tells us in chapter 7, verse 26, that the Lord Jesus Christ, when He was on this earth, was and now is "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." When our Lord was on this earth, He was holy. He was set apart from all the defilements of this world and its cultures. He was, the writer goes on to say, "harmless," which literally means that He was without guilt. He was, the writer goes on to say, "undefiled," which means that He was untainted and unimpaired by the sinful cultures of this present world.

He was, the writer goes on to say, "separate from sinners." The word that is translated "separate" to describe the Lord Jesus Christ in this verse is a very forceful word. The phrase "separate from sinners" literally means that our Lord Jesus Christ was totally divorced from the ways of thinking and the ways of living of those who are under the control of the sin-cursed cultures of this present world.

Dear friends, God calls upon us to become more and more like Christ. To become less and less influenced by the cultures of this present world under the

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curse, and to be more and more under the influence of the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

### **What Does Christianity Look Like?**

That is what we find as we consider the verses that follow in Colossians chapter three. For many weeks we've been considering the first four verses of this chapter, and today I want to begin to move on to the verses that follow. So if you are able to do so as you are listening, I hope that you will open your own copy of God's Word to the book of Colossians, chapter three, and follow along with me. Colossians chapter three, 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.

And then continuing at verse five:

Therefore [because these things are true] put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.

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But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, long-suffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.

But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Dear friends, let me ask you a question: As you read those words, does it sound anything like the sinful cultures of this present evil world? Does it sound anything like the things that you read in the news, or see on television, or find in the

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entertainment media? Does it sound anything like the business climate of this present evil world? Does it sound anything like the practices of the governments and the leaders of this present evil world? Does it sound anything like the philosophies of this present world?

Oh yes, some of the philosophies in false religions of this present world preach a kind of morality. But the morality of this present evil world is a fatally flawed morality. It is the morality of self-improvement. But God says that we are incapable of self-improvement. We are incapable of saving ourselves. We are incapable of saving this world's cultures. We are incapable of saving this world itself in a physical sense or in any other sense.

Only the grace of God manifested in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and coming into this world to break the power of sin, to destroy the works of the Devil, only the grace of God can change the heart of the sinful human being so that an individual is capable of the fruits of the kind of life that we read of in these verses.

Only regeneration by the Spirit of God can bring that about. Only the person who has been raised with Christ has the power to do these things. Only the person who has died to this present world, the person whose life is hidden with Christ in God, only such a person can walk and live according to the plan and purpose and standard of God that we find in Colossians chapters 3 and 4.

And only the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ can truly recognize that we do this,

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not out of any effort to save ourselves, but because we have been saved, because we have been brought to newness of life, because we have died to sin, because we have been made alive in Christ, and because God has given us a heart of gratitude for the gracious work that He has done that we could not possibly do for ourselves. Only the person who has been regenerated by the Spirit can walk in the Spirit.

### **Not Of This World**

Dear friends, what we read of in Colossians chapters 3 and 4, and what we read of in the rest of the Scriptures, is something that is far above and beyond the cultures of this present world. It is a new thing. It is a different thing – entirely different. What we have set before us in Colossians chapters 3 and 4 is a culture – a way of thinking and a way of living – that is not of this world and this world-system. It is of the world to come. It is the culture of Christ. It is the culture of the Spirit of God. It is the culture of the Word of God. It is the culture of those who have been restored to fellowship with our Father God.

We ourselves have been made different, made new creations, by the power of God, and so we are to be different even in this present world. We are to be of a different character individually. Our homes are to be different from the homes of any of the cultures of this world. Our conduct in the workplace is to be different from the conduct of anyone else in the workplace. Our conduct before our neighbors and in the church is to be different from the conduct of anyone who is still under the sway of this present evil world.

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Colossians chapter three, verse 16 commands us, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom." Literally, this passage means, "Let the Word of Christ be at home within you." Dear friends, in order for this to be true of us, in order for the Word of Christ to be completely at home within us, in order for us therefore to have the wisdom that comes from God's Word, we must separate ourselves from this present evil world and from its cultures.

### **Key Questions About Biblical Separation**

And so, as we move into a new phase of this series of messages, I want to introduce the remaining portion of the book of Colossians by first of all setting before you the Biblical doctrine of separation. The Lord willing we are going to ask and answer many questions about this vital doctrine:

- Why should we deal with this issue in the 21st century church?
- What is the definition of separation according to Scripture?
- What is the reason for separation?
- What is the standard of separation?
- What is the imperative of separation?
- What is the basis of separation?
- What is the believer's position of separation? In other words, what is our relationship to be to this present world, and to unbelievers?

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- How must we practice separation, how are we to walk in separation from this present evil world and its cultures that are under God's curse?
- What is the price of separation? Is it worth the price? Is there a reward for a separated life?

The Lord willing, we are going to take up these questions as we introduce the remaining portions of Colossians chapters three and four, where we are instructed and exhorted to demonstrate before a watching world, by our separated lives, that Jesus Christ is indeed the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

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