

Series: *Christ Preeminent In You*

Title: "The Earth-Bound Church" (Colossians 3:1-4)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/28/2013

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Let me once again call your attention to the great exhortation that we find in Paul's letter to the church at Colosse, in chapter three, beginning at verse one. I trust that if you are able, you will turn to this passage with me – Colossians chapter three, beginning at verse one. Let us hear the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God:

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. (Colossians 3:1-4)

### **Paul's Positive Exhortation**

In our last message, we considered the positive statement, the positive exhortation, that we find in this passage: "Seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God." And so, we asked the question: What are these "things above"? We saw that Paul immediately answers that question, when he explains that the "things above" are "where Christ is [verse one], sitting at the right hand of God."

The things above which we are to seek – the things that the individual Christian is to seek, the things that the church as a body of believers is to seek, the things that the leadership of the church is to seek – these things are "where Christ is." These things have to do with the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ

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Himself. The things above which we are to seek are inseparable from Christ Himself.

The things above which we are to seek are His person, His attributes, His accomplishments, His resources. Jesus Christ is the eternal God. Jesus Christ is the holy God. Jesus Christ is the unchangeable God. Christ is Lord over all events. Our Lord Jesus Christ possesses and exercises absolute power over all things. Our Lord is Head of the Church. Our Lord has absolute and infinite knowledge of all things. Our Lord is wisdom itself; He does all that He does with perfect wisdom. Our Lord is love itself; He does all that He does in perfect love. These are the things above. These are the things that we find "where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God." We find them in Him.

Furthermore, we saw that where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, we find the heavenly altar, the heavenly mercy seat. And there we find His blood, offered once for all as the full and final atonement for sin. Where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, He intercedes at the throne of grace.

First of all, He intercedes for the salvation of sinners who come to Him by faith, seeking salvation from the wrath of God. And then, day by day, moment by moment, Jesus Christ intercedes for saved sinners when we call upon Him for grace to help in time of need, as we walk as pilgrims in this present evil world, looking toward heaven and home. But we must call upon Him. We must look to

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heaven. We must seek those things which are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God the Father.

We also saw that we will not find any of these things on earth. We *cannot* find any of these things on earth. Only in heaven. Only "where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God." All of the resources for right thinking and for right living come from there. We will not find them on this earth. They do not have their source on this earth. They do not have their origin on this earth. They have their source, their origin "where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."

### **The Corresponding Negative**

But as we look at the Colossian church, and as we look at the Corinthian church, and as we look at examples of other churches that we find in the New Testament, we find a tendency for believers to look elsewhere. We find a tendency for believers individually, and for the church corporately, to think that the resources we need are to be found on this earth, in the things of this earth, in the thinking of this earth, in the approval of men and women on this earth who know nothing of Christ.

We find a strong and continual tendency for believers and the church to be concerned with the things of this earth. Satan always seeks to draw our focus back to the things of earth – the ever-changing philosophies of this world, the man-made doctrines of this world, the empty and weak resources of this world.

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And so, in the passage we are considering, Paul by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit repeats the same idea, but in different words. First, he gives us the positive: "Seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God." But then, he also gives us the negative. Colossians chapter three, verse two: "Set your mind on things above, *not on things on the earth.*"

Christian, you will not find the resources that you need, for this life and for the life to come, on this earth.

Church of Christ, you will not find the resources to carry out Christ's Great Commission on this earth.

Pastor, you will not find the resources to shepherd the flock of God on this earth.

The resources you need to evangelize the world and to edify the saints are not to be found in the riches of this world, and the philosophies of this world. They are to be found in the riches of Christ, and in the mind of Christ, which are not of this earth.

"Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth." Why does Paul say this to the Christians at Colosse? Why does the Holy Spirit through Paul say this to the church in all the centuries that have followed? Why does God say this to us today – "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth"?

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It is for one very important reason. That reason is our tendency, in the flesh, to be earth-bound rather than heaven-bound in our thinking and living. This is the constant warfare between the flesh and the Spirit. This is the constant warfare between the old nature and the new nature. It is the warfare between the things of earth, and the things which are above. It is the warfare between that which is temporal, and that which is eternal.

### **The Earth-Bound Church**

This is the great problem of the church in our time. What is it that captivates the attention of the average professing Christian today? What is it that captivates the attention of the average church today? What is it that captivates the attention of so many church leaders today? The things above, or the things of earth?

Or let me put it to you a different way: Why has the church lost its spiritual influence today? Why has the church lost its power today? Why is it that only 15% of adults in evangelical churches read the Bible even once or twice a week? Why is it that over one third of the people in evangelical churches today never read the Bible at all?

Why is it that systematic, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, expository preaching of the Word of God has mostly disappeared from our pulpits? Why is it that biblical preaching has given way to a topical approach that is geared toward the felt needs of the audience? Why is it that the church has become unplugged from its true source of power and authority, holy Scripture? Why is it that the

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worldly mindset has come into the church, filling the spiritual vacuum that has been left by the neglect of the word of God? Why is it that man's word, not God's word, shapes the agenda in so many churches today?

Why is it that independent surveys have found that most evangelicals cannot articulate or defend even the most basic Christian doctrines from the Bible - essentials like the authority of Scripture and the basic elements of the Christian gospel? Why is it that these same studies reveal that most evangelicals cannot defend Christian moral positions on abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, and sex outside of marriage, from the Bible?

Why is it that four out of every ten adults in evangelical churches do not believe that the Bible is totally accurate? Why is it that nearly half of evangelical church members do not believe that Jesus Christ was sinless? Why is it that over half of evangelical church members today do not believe that Satan is real? Why is it that nearly 6 out of 10 evangelical church members today do not believe that Jesus Christ is the only way to eternal life?

Why is it that nearly three quarters of the young people leave evangelical churches by the time they graduate from high school? Why is it that only two percent of evangelical churches are growing today because new people are coming to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ?

Dear friends, I submit to you that we find the answer here in Colossians chapter three. I submit to you that the average Christian today is an earth-bound Christian.

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I submit to you that the average church today is an earth-bound church. I submit to you that many, many pastors and church leaders are focused on the things of earth, not on things above.

The focus of so much of the church today is on the things of this earth, where weak and finite man is, and not on things above, where the all-powerful and eternal Christ is. The things that hold the interest of much of the church today are man's ways and not Christ's ways. The things that captivate the attention of much of the church today are man's pitiful and failing resources, not Christ's powerful and infinite resources.

### **A Humanistic Mindset**

The earthly-minded view predominates in the church today. A humanistic approach predominates in much of the church today. Let me explain what I mean by that. The focus is on making man feel good about himself, and feeling comfortable in this sin-cursed world, rather than on proclaiming to the great mass of lost and dying individuals that they are sinners under the curse of God and under the wrath of God, that they are but a heartbeat away from leaving this world – in which many churches are trying to make them feel so comfortable – they are but a heartbeat away from departing from this world and being cast into Hell for eternity.

That is not what the church by and large is proclaiming today – that there is heaven to be gained, and hell to be shunned, and that the only way to have eternal

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life is to seek the Lord Jesus Christ who is sitting at the right hand of God, and the only way to live life in this present world as preparation for the life to come is to seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.

The humanistic approach even permeates much of the church's thinking and teaching about Jesus himself. There is an over emphasis on the humanity of Jesus, and a tragic under-emphasis on the deity of Christ. Much of the church today, in its earthbound thinking, has a very low view of Jesus Christ. The earthbound, humanistic approach dominates much of the church's thinking and much of the church's teaching about Jesus – and thus, it is false teaching.

And with this humanistic emphasis as a result of the church's earthbound thinking, we also find an earthbound approach to church growth. Much of the church today has bought into the marketing philosophies of our day. Much of the church today has decided that it must reinvent itself in order to attract more people. Much of the church today has decided that it must become more like this lost and dying world in order to attract people.

What a fallacy. What a tragedy. The church that should be calling people to repentance and faith in response to Christ's Great Commission to redeem a people for Himself out of this world, to be citizens of the world to come, the church has instead become more and more like the world from which it is supposed to be



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seeking to save people. Dear friends, Satan is delighted. The spirit of God is grieved.

### **Unbelievers Increasing Dominate the Visible Evangelical Church**

Dear friends, note once again the very first words that we find in Colossians chapter 3. "If then you have been raised with Christ..." "If then you have been raised with Christ..." Dear friends I submit to you that much of the problem of the evangelical church today is because it is increasingly dominated by those who have not "been raised with Christ." It is increasingly dominated by those who have not been "born from above."

How can I say such a thing? How can this possibly be true? It is for this simple reason. Jesus said this, in Matthew chapter 7, beginning at verse 15:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

Dear friends, much of the church today is producing not the fruits of heaven, but the fruits of earth. Much of the church today is producing "wood, hay, and

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stubble" instead of "gold, silver, and precious stones." Paul tells us in First Corinthians chapter three that earth-bound works, the works that are "wood, hay, and stubble" in the sight of God, will be burned up. Only "gold, silver, and precious stones" – only heaven-bound works – will be rewarded. Only heaven-bound works will endure. Only those things that are the product of seeking those things which are above, where Christ is – only those things will endure for eternity.

In Matthew chapter seven, Jesus went on to say this:

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' (Matthew 7:21-23)

This is the scene at the last judgment. Many will stand before Christ, and they will say "Lord, Lord, did we not do all these wonderful things in Your name?" And the fact that they will say this is an indication that they thought that in doing these things they were Christians. But in fact these people to whom Jesus will declare "I never knew you" were not Christians at all. Notice that He calls them, "you who practice lawlessness." These people have not operated under the

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authority of heaven. They will have done great things by relying on the things of earth.

Many of these people who say "Lord, Lord" will be those who have build great buildings, have build great churches, and great institutions. Many of them will have drawn great crowds to themselves. But the things that they have done, and the methods on which they have relied, will be earthbound things and earthbound methods. They will be wood, hay, and stubble which are only fit to be cast into the fire to be burned.

You see dear friend, only a believer in Christ, only someone who is truly saved, can truly have the heaven-bound view, and can truly turn from the things of earth to the things of heaven, and not be focused on the things of earth. But the situation we see in many churches and in many individuals who profess to be Christian today, but are only focused on earthly things, is an indicator that many of these people have not been truly born from above. They have not truly been raised with Christ.

Now I am not saying that all large churches and all large institutions are contrary to the working of God. I am not saying that a large church or large Christian institution cannot have its orientation toward heaven. But we must discern whether the orientation of a church or an institution or a preacher or an evangelist – whether the work is large or small – we must discern whether it

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focuses on and relies upon the things of this earth, or focuses upon and relies upon the things which are above, where Christ is seated.

### **"Lord, To Whom Shall We Go?"**

In the Gospel of John, we read that Jesus said many difficult sayings to the people who were following after Him. He was pointing them away from the things of earth toward the things of heaven. And many found these things too hard to accept. And so they turned away, and they no longer followed after the Lord Jesus. And Jesus said to his disciples, "Do you also want to go away?" But Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!" And in John chapter 15, verse 5, Jesus said to His disciples, "Without Me you can do nothing."

Man – his thinking, his authority, his power, his works – cannot be at the center of things. That only produces, and only indicates, a counterfeit of true Christianity.

What, then, is the cure for these things? Peter himself said it: Lord, to whom can we go? Where else can we go? What can we do but "seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God"? As we search the pages of Scripture, we find this heaven bound orientation from beginning to end. We find it in the Old Testament. And we find it especially in the New Testament, from the Gospels all the way through Revelation.

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The emphasis, always, is, "Set your mind on things above." The emphasis, always, is "Seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God." Do not set your mind on things on the earth.

This is the sure cure for earthbound thinking and earthbound living. This is the source of sure deliverance from the wrath of God. And as we continue this series, the Lord willing, we are going to examine the various aspects of this imperative, this heaven bound orientation, that we find in so many places in the pages of Scripture. And I believe that we are going to be blessed and lifted up into the heavenlies as we consider these things together.

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