

Series: *Christ's Preeminence Demonstrated*

Title: "A War Worth Fighting" (Colossians 3:1-11)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/17/2017

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Today once again we are considering the great statement that we find in the opening verses of Colossians chapter 3. And as always, if you are able to do so, I hope that you will open your own copy of God's Word and read along with me as we examine these verses together, as well as some other related passages later on in this message. I am reading, first of all, Colossians chapter 3 beginning at verse 1, through verse 11. The Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul writes these words:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. ³ For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

⁵ Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, ⁷ in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.

⁸ But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, ¹⁰ and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him

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who created him, ¹¹ where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all. (Colossians 3:1-11)

Thus ends the reading of God's Word.

Introduction

If – or since – then we as believers have been raised with Christ in newness of life, it is our responsibility to seek those things which pertain to that newness of life.

Those things are not to be found on earth. Why is that? The Word of God gives us several reasons.

First of all, this present earth is under God's curse because of sin. Spiritually speaking, all things that have their origin in this present earth are therefore under God's curse. The things of this present evil world are spiritual poison to the believer in Christ.

And why is this true? It is true, secondly, because this present earth is under the sway of Satan. James 3:15 tells us that the wisdom that we find in this present evil world is – and I quote – “earthly, sensual, and demonic”. It is “earthly” – it has its origins and derives its principles from this present depraved world-order. It is “sensual” – the thinking of this world is rooted in corrupt desires and affections. It is “demonic” – it has its roots in the demonic.

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What is the demonic? The demonic has to do with those things that are animated by demons – by the agents of Satan in this world, the angels who fell with him into sin and continue under his leadership. Demons are the spiritual agents who are active in all forms of opposition to the one true and living God. Scripture also tells us that demons spread lies and errors of all kinds among men, and that they seek to seduce believers into all forms of error and sin. Demons are spoken of as "seducing spirits."

Thirdly, Scripture declares to us that the things of earth are of "the flesh" and the things of the life that we now have in Christ are "of the Spirit" – that is, of God the Holy Spirit. This is the essence of the difference we have in the passage before us – the "things above" which are diametrically opposed to the "things on the earth."

As the Apostle Paul writes in Galatians chapter 5 verse 13, Christians "have been called to liberty" – that is, liberty from the condemnation of the Law. But, Paul says, "do not use [that] liberty as an opportunity for the flesh." What we have here in the original language is a military term. Literally, the Holy Spirit is saying through Paul, do not use your freedom from the condemnation of the Law as a "base of operations" for Satan's forces to launch an attack upon your soul.

And so Paul continues in Galatians chapter 5 at verse 16 with these words:

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh lusts [or wars] against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not

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do the things that you wish. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

19 Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, ²¹ envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. ²⁴ And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. (Galatians 5:16-26)

The Warfare Between the Flesh and the Spirit

I have never known a person who was truly a Christian – I have never known a person who truly understood what it means to be saved from sin – I have never known such a person who did not often have this question on his mind: If I am truly saved – if I am truly in Christ, if indeed God the Holy Spirit has brought me to newness of life and taken up residence within me – if I am indeed a Christian – then why do I still struggle with sin?

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That is the very issue the Apostle Paul is addressing here in Colossians chapter 3.

You see, dear friends, as Christians we are involved in a constant warfare between the flesh and the Spirit. A continual and irreconcilable war rages within every true believer in Christ. The Spirit wars against the flesh, and the sinful flesh against the Spirit. If we deny that fact we are denying the plain teaching of Scripture.

Now, why is that true? At this point in our study I believe it is vitally important to explain why this is true.

Our Position in Christ

Let me begin by explaining our position in Christ – the position that Paul speaks of in Colossians 3 verse 1 when he says that we have “been raised with Christ.”

When a person is converted, when a person becomes a Christian, that individual is fully and completely justified in Christ before God. Isaiah chapter 6 verse 10 tells us that we are, at that moment, and ever after, clothed with the robe of Christ's righteousness. The Holy Spirit takes up residence within us. We become the temples of the living God on earth.

But even though all these things are true, we are still sinners. We are still "in the flesh." Martin Luther used the illustration of the farmers' dunghills in the fields of Germany. In the wintertime, the snow completely covered the dunghills – but underneath that beautiful white snow, they were still dunghills!

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And so it is with each of us: We wear the robe of Christ's perfect righteousness, so that we are really, perfectly, positionally righteous in the sight of God. Our sin problem has been dealt with, once for all. But underneath that garment, until we go to be with the Lord, until we are not only justified and sanctified but also ultimately glorified, until then we are still sinners in bodies of flesh living in a world under the curse.

Doing What We Hate

And because the Holy Spirit has taken up residence within us, an inevitable and irreconcilable warfare begins. The Word of God describes it as the warfare between the flesh and the Spirit. What is the nature of that warfare? Let me give you an illustration that I believe closely pictures the force of what the Word of God says about this warfare.

In our time medical science has gained the ability to transplant a heart from one person to another. There are also liver transplants, kidney transplants, and other types of organ transplants. When I was young, these kinds of surgeries were new and they were rare, and they made news headlines around the world. But today they have become almost routine.

But even with all of the advances of medical science, all the advances in organ transplantation, medical science has not been able to overcome an essential problem. Every time a doctor transplants a new healthy heart or liver or kidney to take the place of a hopelessly diseased organ, the patient's body tries to reject it. The patient's

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body tries to kill it. The transplanted organ is beneficial and life-saving to the body, but the body's natural defenses go to work to try to reject it as a foreign body.

In the same way, spiritually speaking, the Holy Spirit is a "foreign body" to our sinful flesh, and our sinful flesh – our old nature, our sin nature – constantly tries to "reject" this "foreign body." As the Apostle Paul writes, "the flesh lusts [or wars] against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Galatians 5:17).

The association of sin with the flesh is so complete that here in Colossians chapter 3 Paul calls the sins of "fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness" our "members which are upon the earth" (3:5). As Paul under Divine inspiration so eloquently puts it in Romans chapter 7, we do the very things that we now hate, because of the presence of the Spirit within us. If you are able to do so, please turn with me in your Bible to Romans chapter 7. In Romans chapter 7 beginning at verse 7, Paul says this:

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the Law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the Law had said, "You shall not covet."⁸ But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire.

In other words, it is because of the holy standard of God's Law that we understand what sin is. And so he says, in verse 12, that "the Law is holy, and the commandment

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holy and just and good." And indeed it is. It is the perfect standard of righteousness required for fellowship with the holy God of the universe. And so then Paul continues, in verse 13:

Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin [in other words, so that I might understand how God defines sin, sin], was producing death in me through what is good [that is, through the instrumentality of God's holy Law], so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful [in other words, so that I might really understand the seriousness of sin in the eyes of God].

But then beginning in verse 14, Paul describes the warfare, the conflict, which this sets up within the believer in Christ. Romans chapter 7, verse 14:

For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am carnal [that is, fleshly], sold under sin. ¹⁵ For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. ¹⁶ If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the Law that it is good. ¹⁷ But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. ¹⁸ For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. ¹⁹ For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. ²⁰ Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

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Verse 21 –

I find then a law [that is, a principle], that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. ²² For I delight in the Law of God according to the inward man. ²³ But I see another law [or principle] in my members, warring against the law of my mind [that is, against my regenerated mind, the new man in Christ, the new man who desires to obey God's Law], and bringing me into captivity to the law [or principle] of sin which is in my members.

Notice Paul's use of the term "members" here in Romans chapter 7. It is the same word that is used in Colossians 3:5 – "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth." And here in Romans, Paul uses the term twice, and both times he is referring to the natural man, the old man, the sinful man, our sin nature.

And in Romans 7 verse 24, Paul cries out with the cry of every true believer in Christ:

O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

And immediately he gives God's great and glorious answer, verse 25:

I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the Law of God, but with the flesh the law [or the principle] of sin.

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Present Comfort, Ultimate Victory

Yes, dear Christian, there is warfare within you – the war between the flesh and the Spirit. But please listen carefully to what I am about to say. This warfare is not a cause for despair for the Christian. In fact, Scripture makes it clear that we can take great comfort in this irreconcilable warfare, because it is a sign of two things.

First, this warfare is a sign of the fact that the Holy Spirit in fact does live within us as the guarantee or down payment against the day of our ultimate redemption from these bodies of sin, as we are told in Ephesians chapter 2. We would not have this warfare within us if we were not Christians, if we did not have a new nature, a new principle of righteousness, warring against the old nature, the old principle of sin within us.

Secondly, the presence of this warfare in our lives demonstrates that God the Holy Spirit is indeed at work conforming us more and more to the image of Christ (Romans 12:1-2; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

And here is our great hope, dear Christian: The warfare will end. Through the grace of sanctification, God the Holy Spirit will have the ultimate victory over the flesh. Romans chapter 8 tells us that those whom God justifies, He inexorably sanctifies, and He ultimately glorifies. Our sanctification is not complete in this life, but we have the assurance that God will "deliver us from this body of death...through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:24-25).

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Our Duty in the Warfare

But dear friend, you as a Christian have a duty in this matter. God calls upon us to submit to the work of the Spirit in sanctifying us. In Romans chapter 8 beginning at verse 12 we read this:

Therefore, brethren, we are debtors – not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but [notice] if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. (Romans 8:9-14)

Dear friends, this is the very same commandment we find in Colossians chapter 3:

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

In other words, your desiring, your working to put to death the sinfulness within you is evidence of your salvation. It is evidence of the fact that you have been raised with Christ, evidence of the fact that you are setting your mind on things above, where Christ is, and not focusing on things on this sinful earth.

That is the positive side, dear friend. But there is also a negative side to this: If this is not true in your life, if you are not engaged in the warfare against the sin that is

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within you, then on the authority of the Word of God there is every reason to doubt that you are a Christian. This is a serious matter.

The Christian's Anti-Rejection Medicine

A few moments ago I used the illustration of an organ transplant to picture the warfare of the flesh against the Spirit. Just as the physical body tries to reject the transplanted organ, in the same way, in the spiritual realm, your sin nature wants to reject and suppress and destroy the work of God the Holy Spirit within you.

What is the answer for the believer in Christ? The answer is that God has given us the most powerful and potent spiritual anti-rejection medicine imaginable. That medicine is Holy Scripture, the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God. Holy Scripture is where we gain the knowledge of Christ.

As we saw much earlier in our study, this is how Paul encouraged the Colossian believers in chapter 1, beginning at verse 9. He said, we

do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding [and dear friends, that comes from the Word of God]; ¹⁰ that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; ¹² giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of

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the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

Yes, the Christian life is a struggle. Yes, it is a warfare – a warfare within us between the flesh and the Spirit. But dear Christian friend, it is not a warfare without hope. It is a warfare that God the Holy Spirit will ultimately win. And it is a warfare worth fighting. The Lord willing, we shall see this even more, as we continue this study in our next broadcast.

About the Broadcast

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TeachingtheWord Ministries
Box 2533, Westminster, Maryland 21158 USA