

It was game five of the NBA finals in Toronto. The Warriors were on the hunt for their third consecutive NBA title. Most importantly, after being sidelined for a month with a right calf strain, Kevin Durant had finally come back, and with him, no one believed the Warriors could lose. But then it happened.

Durant took what looked like a harmless step back with his right foot, and something popped, namely his Achilles tendon. That one play ended not only the Warriors championship dream but also Kevin Durant's career for an entire season to come. No matter how hard he tried, it would be quite some time before he had any hope of returning to his former greatness.

I speak to a lot of people who feel that way about their relationship with God. Maybe at one time they felt God's presence in their life in a powerful way. They felt his love; they were filled with joy. God's Word jumped off the page and spoke to their heart. They could see the changes he was making in their life. It's like they were playing at the highest level, but then something happened, and everything changed. Maybe a relationship crashed, mangled their self-worth, making them wonder if they could ever trust again. Maybe an old addiction reared its ugly head. Maybe an unkind comment resurrected bitterness towards a parent. Or maybe they just felt God was distant and was giving up on them.

Maybe, even like Kevin Durant after his initial calf strain, they tried to come back — more Bible reading, more prayer, more faith, more church activities, and more spiritual discipline. But it just didn't work, and they were worse off for trying.

What if I told you the answer to this isn't trying harder to be a better Christian, but rather it's in becoming who you are? It's like when a baby is born, much of what he or she will be like when they grow up is already programmed into their DNA. In the same way, when we're born into God's family, God places spiritual DNA into our spirits, and we begin the lifelong process of growing into what he meant us to be. Our relationship with Jesus isn't meant to be striving to become something we're not, but rather growing into who we truly already are.

We're in the fifth week of a series called "Worth It: Listening to the voice that matters most." This is a series about our identity; about the basis of our worth and significance. Last week we saw from the book of Ephesians that in Christ we're saints, redeemed, beloved, chosen by God, and sealed with the Holy Spirit. All these things are true of us, but today I want to go further, and ask,

how do we really change? How can we actually begin to reflect these realities in the way we live? And what we're going to see is we change by understanding our true identity in Christ and becoming who we are.

### **The Colossians tried to change through legalism**

I want us to look at the third chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Colossians. Paul wrote this letter to them, although he'd never been there. It was AD 60-61, and he was in prison in Rome. He'd heard they were struggling in their understanding of who Christ is and how he wanted them to live. And part of that misunderstanding revolved around this idea of how to change. In fact, at the end of chapter two, Paul addressed this head-on.

**Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!?" These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.**  
**Colossians 2:20-23**

It's clear someone had come into this body of believers and taught them that you change by trying harder and keeping a list of rules. Today, we call this legalism. Legalism focuses on cleaning up the outside but ignores what's happening on the inside. Legalism makes becoming a righteous person into something humanly manageable. Legalism can become a very powerful but very seductive way to establish our identity. As long as we're successful in behaving the way we think we should, we feel really good about ourselves.

Perhaps you've heard the story that Jesus told about the Prodigal Son. This story is not just about one son but two sons. The younger son was the one who rebelled against his father, ran off with his inheritance, and wasted it on wild living. He was the one who finally came back, thinking his father would be angry with him, but instead his father was waiting for him, ran to greet him, and threw him a party to welcome him home.

But what we sometimes miss is there was also an older son in this story. He was the one who stayed home and always did what his father asked. He was the good boy who kept all the rules. But

when his little brother came home and got such a grand welcome from his father, he was resentful. He said, "All these years I've worked for you, and I never was out of line. But you never threw me a party."

But the father said, "Hey, we had to celebrate. Your brother was lost and now is found. Besides, everything I have is yours. So, come and join the celebration!"

But he never did, and the story ends with him alone, full of resentment towards his father.

You see, you can keep all the rules like the older son and yet still be full of resentment because the Father isn't operating the way you think he should. You think you should be rewarded for being good. You wouldn't say it, but you think God owes you something. That's legalism, and the failure of legalism is it doesn't address the heart. Like Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day, "*You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence*" (Matthew 23:25). Though he kept all the rules, inside that older brother's heart was full of pride and bitterness.

It's like when I went to India earlier this year. I did everything possible not to get sick. I was scrupulous about what I ate. I wiped down every dish I ate from and every glass I drank from. But, still, even with all of that, some minuscule bacteria entered my system, and I got sick. That's the failure of legalism — you can be scrupulous about keeping the outward rules, but that won't keep the bacteria of sin from entering your system. That's why before God tells us what to do, he tells us who we are, and we only change from the inside out as we become who we are.

### **Before God tells us what to do, he tells us who we are**

**Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. vv. 3:1-4**

Now in this passage, Paul does tell us what to do —twice. He says to set your hearts and your minds on things above rather than earthly things; set your hearts and minds where Christ is seated at God's right hand. That's the place of power and authority. Remember he just got done talking about how they were submitting to rules as if they still belonged to the world. Here he's saying, don't be so preoccupied with all the rules and regulations you think you have to keep; focus on things above. Focus on Jesus. Focus on his power and authority. Focus on his victory over sin, death, and the devil. Focus on who you are in him. Focus on the sure hope you have to one day be like Jesus and with him.

Well, that sounds good, but how do I do that? I mean I'm glad Jesus is up there seated at the right hand of God, but meanwhile, I have to live down here. I have to live my life in this world, and the pressures and temptations are real.

But notice that surrounding these commands about setting our hearts and minds on things above, Paul reminds us who we are. He says four things that are true about us in Christ, and these are the basis for the commands. We have to start there. That's why he starts with, "Since, then..." well, we should ask, since what? Paul says, "since these things are true of you." In other words, before you do anything, know who you are.

### **We've been united with Christ in death and resurrection**

First, he says you've been united with Jesus in both his death and resurrection. This is a past tense thing. He points back to the time you trusted Christ as your Lord and Savior. In verse three, he says when that happened, "*You died...*" In verse one, he says, "*You have been raised up with Christ.*" We talk about how Jesus died for us, but did you know you died with him? So, when Jesus died on the cross, you died. And when he was raised, you were raised. Baptism symbolizes this. When you put your faith in Christ, you get baptized. It's like you go under the water and die, and then you come out raised to new life. The water itself doesn't do it, but it symbolizes the spiritual reality of dying with Christ and being raised up with him to live a new life. You can't have one without the other. You can't die with Christ and not be raised with Christ.

When Paul says you died with Christ, part of what he means is you died to sin. In fact, in Romans, Paul says, "*We are those who have died to sin...*" (Romans 6:2). Do you know that about yourself? When confronted with sin, do you say to yourself, "I'm dead to that?" When you're confronted with lust or greed or jealousy or resentment, do you say, "I'm dead to that?" You may be thinking, "That sounds great, but I don't feel dead to sin. Someone who's dead is totally unresponsive. If I'm dead to sin, wouldn't that mean I'm totally unresponsive to it? In fact, I find myself very responsive to it. So that's not consistent with my experience."

In case you haven't noticed, we all struggle with sin. Paul doesn't mean we no longer desire to sin or that temptation has no influence over us. What he means is sin no longer rules us. Apart from Christ, we are slaves to sin. But when we died with Christ, the power of sin to rule us was broken. Not only are we free from the condemnation it brings, but we're free from its power to dominate us as well. Why? Because we died to it, and with that, we've been raised up with Christ to new life.

When I was in high school, I had a legendary football coach who defined "old school." He was a strict disciplinarian and perfectionist that instilled fear into his players. I was his quarterback, and he was particularly hard on me. I never felt like I could please

him, and I often had nightmares about messing up and incurring his wrath. But I didn't realize how dominant this man had become in my life until I played my last game for him. Walking off the field, it was like I'd been set free. And when I went on to play in college, I had a new coach and new obligations to him. My old coach had no power over me. Now, I hadn't died, but as far as his domination of my life was concerned, it was over. I was dead to him, and I was alive to my new coach. And that's the sense in which we have died to sin and been raised up with Christ.

Before you do anything, know who you are. Know that you've been united with Christ in his death and his resurrection.

### **Our life is hidden with Christ in God**

The second thing he says about who we are is in verse three, "... *your life is hidden with Christ in God.*" This is a present tense thing. "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." What does that mean? It means our true life is concealed; our true life is hidden in Christ, who sits at God's right hand. That life is perfectly secure there; no one can touch it; all that happens to us on this earthly plane, all the winds and storms of life, all the judgments that people make about us, touch but the surface of who we are. Our true identity is hidden with Christ.

Think of a man who lives a simple life. Nothing about him seems very extraordinary. One day he dies. He has an ordinary funeral. A few people attend and say some nice things. But then it comes time for his lawyer to read his will. His family gathers around, and to their astonishment, they discover he was a wealthy man. He had millions hidden away, and no one knew it!

In many ways, this is the way it is with every follower of Christ. The world looks at us and, in many ways, we just seem like ordinary people. Sometimes we even look rather pitiful. We make sacrifices for our faith. We give money away. We spend our precious Sunday mornings at church. We deny ourselves pleasures and freedoms that others enjoy. But what is true about you is hidden from their eyes. Our true wealth is hidden with Christ in God.

Sometimes it's hidden from us as well. I'm convinced we can't always see who we truly are in Christ. Each of us is being transformed into his image at this very moment, but we can't see that. One day I had this crazy thought. What if God thought more of me than I think of myself? What if God were to give me a progress report on how I'm doing in following him. What if his progress report of how I'm doing is far better than my progress

report of how I'm doing? I'm pretty hard on myself. Most of the time, I feel like I'm flunking the spiritual life. But what if he'd give me an A? What if he sees good things in me, things produced by His Spirit, that I can't see? I think this verse might support that. My true life, who I truly am, is hidden even from my eyes.

One of the classic stories that come out of the world of literature is *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, written by James Thurber. Walter Mitty was a shy, unimpressive little man who had an amazing fantasy life. In his fantasies, he was a great man. He did heroic things that could take your breath away. He'd be doing his normal, everyday, run-of-the-mill things, and at the same time, he'd be imagining himself to be the greatest of heroes, accomplishing amazing things. Of course, none of it was true, which made the story a kind of tragedy.

What's truly amazing about the Christian life is that it IS true! We're caught up in incredible things that should take our breath away. Our true lives are hidden, bound up with Christ's in God; that life is totally secure, and will one day be revealed for what it truly is for all to see. It's not an imaginary world. It's not wishful thinking. It's not the power of positive thinking. It's invisible, but it's real. Our true identity is bound up and hidden with Christ, who sits at God's right hand.

Before you do anything, know who you are. Know that your life is hidden with Christ in God.

### **Christ is our life**

The third thing he says is true about us is that Christ is our life. He says in verse four, "*When Christ, who is your life...*" This is another present-tense reality: Christ IS your life. If I were to ask you, "Is Christ your life?" You might answer, "Well, not really, but I want him to be." Then you might go into more detail about areas of your life where he clearly gets put on the sidelines of your life. You want to be able to say he is your life, but you know you don't always live like he's your life.

But God's Word says he IS your life. It's a fact. It's a done deal. It's not dependent on anything you do. And it's not something you have to wait until heaven to experience. Right here on planet earth, right amidst all the mess, all the responsibilities, all the worries, and all the heaviness of life, Christ IS your life! Part of what that means is you have his life within you. The apostle John wrote, "*And this is the testimony; God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. Whoever has the Son has the life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life*" (1 John 5:11-12). So,

we've become partakers of his life. By the way, that's why I'm not afraid of death, because even if I die, Christ is my life!

Russel Moore wrote,

**"For too long, we've called unbelievers to 'Invite Jesus into your life.' Jesus doesn't want to be in your life. Your life is a wreck. Jesus calls you into his life. And his life isn't boring or purposeless or static. It's wild and exhilarating and unpredictable."**

Before you do anything, know who you are. Know that Christ IS your life.

## **We will appear with him in glory**

The last thing he says is true about us is a future tense reality. He says, *"When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."* Your life may now be hidden with Christ in God, but what is now hidden will soon be revealed. When Christ returns, when he reveals himself in all his glory to this world, when the curtain is pulled back for all to see, then your true identity and your true life in Christ will be revealed for all to see. You see, our hope is not only to one day see Christ face to face, but to one day be like Christ, and share in his glory. And then what we truly are in him will be seen by all.

N.T. Wright writes of that time.

**"Then it will be seen with what faithful diligence and perseverance many outwardly 'unsuccessful' and forgotten Christian workers have served their Lord. Paul, the prisoner, an eccentric Jew to the Romans and a worse-than-Gentile traitor to the Jews, will be seen as Paul the apostle, the servant of the King. The Colossians, insignificant ex-pagans from a third-rate country town, will be seen in a glory which, if it were now to appear, one might be tempted to worship."**

Could the same be said of us? It seems the most important things about us are invisible now: we've died and been raised up with Christ, our lives are hidden with Christ, and he's our life. But one day our true lives will be revealed with Christ in glory.

I hope you see that before God tells us what to do, he tells us who we are. We change by knowing our true identity in Christ and becoming who we are.

It's like the Ten Commandments. Do you know what God said to the Israelites before he gave them the Ten Commandments? He said, *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery"* (Exodus 20:2). Before he tells them what to do, he tells them who they are. He doesn't start with the

commandments. Instead, he first says, "You're mine. When you were slaves, I freed you." He starts with who they are.

It reminds me of a story from the life of Jesus. A group of men approached him. They were really angry. They had a woman they caught in the very act of adultery. Grabbing her by the arm, they flung her to the ground before Jesus. Jesus, surrounded by an attentive crowd, stood up and looked at her. She was clearly guilty of adultery. He knew it, she knew it, and everyone watching knew it.

The religious leader looked around, making sure everyone was listening and said to Jesus. "Teacher, this woman is an adulterer—we caught her in the very act! Moses, in the law, gives orders to stone such persons. What do you say?"

I'm sure everyone strained to hear Jesus' response. Jesus then bent down and began to write on the ground with His finger. Was he thinking? Making a point? Stalling? We don't know, but everyone wanted to hear his answer. He finally straightened, looked at them, and said, "The sinless ones among you, go first. Throw the stone." In the silence that followed, he bent down once again and wrote in the dirt.

Maybe it was the sound of sandals shuffling away that first made the woman lift her head. She turned to look at the men who'd dragged her there. The oldest ones were already halfway across the courtyard, while the younger ones were beginning to mutter curses and shift on their feet.

That was when the woman heard a voice behind her. It was the rabbi they called Jesus. "Where are they? Does no one condemn you?"

She could hardly believe the simple truth of her reply: "No one." "Neither do I," said Jesus. "Go on your way. And from now on, don't sin."

Notice what he said first and what he said second. First, he said, "I do not condemn you." Second, he said, "Go and sin no more." He could have said it the other way around.

That's how it works. Before we can do anything, we have to know who we are, and that starts with knowing he loves us, he forgives us, and we belong to him. Then, and only then, can we go out to live lives that are holy and pleasing to him.

Before God tells us what to do, he tells us who we are.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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