

## “Hidden in Christ”

**First Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Dave Carlson  
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**Old Testament Lesson: Matthew 24:1-8**

**New Testament Lesson: Colossians 3:1-10**

Dorothy Parker was a 20<sup>th</sup> century writer who overcame a conflicted and unhappy childhood to become an famous poet, critic, and satirist, best known for her wit and wisecracks pointing out the shortcomings of urban life.

The newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst once suggested to Parker that her short stories were too sad. “Mister Hearst,” she told him, “there are 2 billion people on the face of the earth, and the story of not one of them will have a happy ending.” I have to agree with Hearst. That is a very negative statement.

We face a lot of negativity each day – from TV and radio news, from our family members and loved ones, from scary medical diagnosis and all the other pressures of life. How we respond to negativity defines who we are – and whose we are. Those who take their life’s direction from God as brothers and sisters in Christ have a unique way of rising above earthly struggles.

The letter to the Colossians shows great concern with how people approach earthly struggles. It says, “... If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” You see, the Colossians were struggling to know what is most important in life – earthly, religious rules or spiritual union with God. What does it mean to eat or not eat certain foods, for religious reasons to not touch people with certain diseases, to wash your hands at certain times merely to maintain ritual purity. They were afraid of being defiled spiritually by touching something physically. Where does heaven end and earth begin? What’s the relationship between physical behavior and spiritual existence?

The letter to the Colossians draws that line by separating right behavior from wrong behavior. It says, “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).” Thinking of the line between heaven and earth as being tied to right and wrong behavior, any one of us could slip from one side to the other at any moment, and we do. We are all capable of wrong behavior. We all slip up from time to time.

This is why Colossians hangs some flesh on the bones of our morality, its origins, and implications. It says, “These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life (of separation from God before accepting Christ as Lord and savior.) But now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.” “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.”

Christ is the image of our creator, right? It is in Christ and only in Christ that we can live life according to the will of God. Being in Christ means taking responsibility for how we used to be before coming to faith or how we can’t help but be in spite of our faith if we’re still engaging in bad behavior.

We all have a past riddled with bad behavior, whether that's years ago before we became a Christian or minutes ago before we left the house or got out of the car – if maybe on the way here you had a bad word to say about another driver, or construction detours.

How do we stay connected to God in such a way as to keep from acting on bad impulses? Through Christ, through the cross, which represents Christ. In explaining the power of the cross, theologian P.T. Forsyth put it this way. He said, "In (our) religious experience, we can trace two vertical and personal movements: God seeking (us), and (we) in ... turn responding obediently to that revelation."<sup>1</sup> Forsyth says Christ is the embodiment of those two movements – God toward us and we in response moving toward God. Think of the cross. We stand around the cross trying to figure out how our faith impacts our lives and inviting others to come alongside us and do the same. Then we remember *Jesus* and how central he is to who we are and how we live our lives? And Jesus draws us in, shaping us in the image of God, and reflecting that out to others.

What Colossians is saying is that if we get too caught up in the hustle and bustle of earthly existence, we fail to appreciate and affirm God's presence all around us. We become shaped by the world and not by God.

For instance, here's a picture of Yuri and I relaxing during our sabbatical travels, which will help illustrate the line between hustle and bustle and resting in God's grace and mercy, which is always a good place to come from in approaching life. So, here we are after a busy morning of touring churches and other historic and religious sites. That's me relaxing with a cool afternoon drink called a Spritz – very popular in Western Europe. If you look closely, you can tell I'm using earbuds to listen to some highly theological lecture – or maybe some fun music; I can't remember. It says there at the bottom, "Spritz Bliss!" – and that's what it was. Just lovely. And here's Yuri indicating in her ever-so-dainty way that we have another stop to make before it gets ANY later – "Get a Move On!" it says. Oh, and here's what the stop was in the FB comment, where Yuri says, "Dave ...! We have a lace museum to see!!!" (triple explanation point). Now the truth is, I put those words in Yuri's mouth through the magic of Facebook. And the lace museum? It was OK – once!

The point is we concern ourselves so much with our plans that we forget to stop and contemplate our simple existence as people of faith and how that shapes our actions. We need moments when we can just spend time with one another and bask in the beauty of God's creation and let that shape who we are, instead of being so overwhelmed with hustle and bustle that we forget who we are and act out under the pressure.

"Set your minds on things that are above," says Colossians, "not on things that are on earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God." True life is knowing how to pace ourselves and not getting so tied to earthly existence that we miss out on the blessings God sends our way – even the blessing of a relaxing afternoon pitstop in an otherwise busy day.

While we can encounter God anyplace in all of creation, the place we count on most when seeking God and God's place in our lives is the church. When we enter the church building, it is our chance to consciously take on the new way of being that God calls us to.

Or as Colossians puts it, "to clothe ourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator," according to Christ, who brings us and others into relationship with God.

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<sup>1</sup> -P. T. Forsyth, as quoted in A. M. Hunter, *P.T.Forsyth*, (Naperville: SCM Book Club, 1974), 78.

The world is full of people who are engaged with the darker, less helpful aspects of life, people who dearly need to meet and embrace the Lord. When you encounter such people, don't leave them there with no connection to God, no place to hold onto.

Put it on your heart right now to draw them into this community of faith. What better way for people to come to know God and embrace a life of faith? What better way to help people rise above challenging destructive behaviors and instead come to embrace a life that reflects the love of God, in service to Christ. Amen.

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

O great and glorious ruler of the universe and ruler of our hearts, each and every day, we, your people, are judged. We are judged by others, and we judge ourselves.

But what are we measuring ourselves against? Are we just trying to keep up with society? Are we seeking the approval of our teachers, our bosses, our neighbors or our friends – more than we seek your approval?

Help us sense again that still, soft voice that beckons us to a new reality, a new way of measuring ourselves. Not by the car we drive or our ZIP code, but by the condition of our souls and by how we treat others.

God, speak to us again your high callings and remind us who our judge really is. We pray that you will walk with us every step of the way, as we work to live up to your heavenly standards.

There is no other place to look in knowing and embracing a godly life than in the person and Spirit of Jesus Christ.

So, it is in his name and using his words that we pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**