

Why live like the world?

Colossians 2:20-3:4

You'll remember last week how we explored how we are complete in Christ in every way to be God's people and to spend eternity with our Lord. We found that in Christ we have also come into a covenant relationship and also even though we are dead, we are alive in Christ, living a new life. We are living that new life because our sins have been dealt with, any debt resulting wiped out and we have freedom from spiritual forces that held us captive.

In our opening verse this evening Paul takes up that idea: *You have died with Christ and are set free from the ruling spirits of the universe.* The same idea comes up in Romans 6:5 *For since we have become one with him in dying as he did, in the same way we shall be one with him by being raised to life as he was.* 6 *And we know that our old being has been put to death with Christ on his cross, in order that the power of the sinful self might be destroyed, so that we should no longer be the slaves of sin.* 7 *For when we die, we are set free from the power of sin.* 8 *Since we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.* Where Colossians differs is it shows that our slavery for sin isn't just because of ourselves but Paul hints at it in verse 20 which goes back to verses 14 and 15 where Paul makes the idea more explicit.

Our identification with Christ in His death, freed us from them as well as from our own sinful selves. Paul is putting this here for a reason. In a moment he is going to talk about the world and it would seem to me that implicit in that is that the world's systems – human systems – are reflective of the “ruling spirits of the universe” which are the things that reflect death not life.

So Paul says, that being the case; why are you still living like the world? Again, he is addressing the issues where the church had been influenced by error.. In verse 21 it's all about law keeping – a typically Jewish thing *"Don't handle this," "Don't taste that," "Don't touch the other"*. Why do you do all this? What is Paul referring to?

Well it's not antinomianism – not obeying any laws – or at least making up our own. What he's making a distinction between is what is of God and what is of man. One feature of Judaism then as well as Judaism now is that it is a religion where law keeping has eclipsed morality. Militant Islam and militant Hinduism and Buddhism is much the same. Devotees religiously keep what they see as are important tenets of their faith, even if they deny basic morality. Therefore a religious terrorist will blow up himself and innocent people even though it denies even their religion. You'll find such people in all religions. Sometimes they are mainstream, sometimes as cults – all of them morally deficient.

This is the point Paul is making here. This is how he describes them in verses 22 and 23: *22 All these refer to things which become useless once they are used; they are only human rules and teachings.* *23 Of course such rules appear to be based on wisdom in their forced worship of angels, and false humility, and severe treatment of the body; but they have no real value in controlling physical passions.*

At it's mildest law keeping is an end in itself and the act is often divorced from obvious morality. Thus a good law keeper may have venerated angels, put on a religious face, or even been an ascetic – making his or her body suffer because Christ did. Since Paul these are all things people have done out of devotion to their faith – even Christians.

Great stuff but do they control physical passions. People may be outwardly religious but what about their private life. What about their thought life? How many religious leaders have fallen because their religion, even their preaching was outstanding, but behind the scenes they were being unfaithful to their wife. Of course the Catholics found a law keeping problem around that for their priests and their religious orders – don't get married. But is that a solution to the potential for sexual indiscretion? Of course not as history proves. Religion is about acts of devotion, but following Christ, being raised with Christ is not about doing things which we hope will get us out of hock.

You have been raised to life with Christ, so set your hearts on the things that are in heaven, where Christ sits on his throne at the right side of God.

In Christ we are free, so the mindset that's in Christ is one where our thoughts, our aims in life, our attitudes, our actions are ones that are focussed on Christ and on our destination: heaven.

I recall preaching on this on Easter Sunday. There's a very unhelpful saying "he's so heavenly minded that he's no earthly good." It's to describe someone who's so into his faith that he's not connected to the real world. That's not what this passage is saying. As we look at our lives, we don't have to be doing things to appease God or we think might please Him in some way.

Remember, we are already fit to go into the most holy place by the blood of Jesus. If our mind is fixed on heaven, where Jesus is, the One we have decided to follow then his is us: *2 Keep your minds fixed on things there, not on things here on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 Your real life is Christ and when he appears, then you too will appear with him and share his glory!*

What He is that's us now – our life is hidden in his. Therefore our only object is to be like Him. To think like Him and act like Him. It is Jesus that now makes us alive. So our call is to live like Him. To think like Him, do like Him, live Him.

That doesn't mean no religion, no standards. It means we live as unto Jesus and in doing so we make a distinction between the emptiness of religion and the fullness of Christ. It's the difference between religious observance and the moral glory of God. Religious observance is good if it brings our bodies under control and makes us more like Jesus and obedient to His ways. It's worldly and wrong when it becomes an end in itself.

As Christians we are not immune. The protagonists may have changed but the issues are still the same. Doing religious stuff in itself is not wrong when it find its root in Christ. But when it's not rooted in Christ – it's dangerous and damaging. Whether that is the way we worship, things we have been taught by others are really important but actually cause division and damage, or things that are laudable in themselves but no-one has asked the question "where's Jesus in this?", if it's not rooted in the right place it's of the world and more to do with the elemental spirits of the universe rather than Christ.

And we must learn to discern as we are bombarded more by Christian things perverted by the world than ever before. How do we find the genuine. One is by heeding Colossians and having our own faith so rooted in Christ, so rooted in His presence, so rooted in His word, so rooted in His church that we can easily spot the world. I want each of us to have that skill because some of the worst and most damaging errors I've seen in this church and others have been where respected people have taught or spoken in the flesh rather

than in Christ. And we respect them so much that we are afraid to bring them to account or say “just a minute, I don't think that's right”.

This passage also reminds us to take a rain check on our ministries as a church. Whether it's Sunday services, or the weekly activities, the small groups, how we conduct church business or whatever – where's Jesus. Is he at the root? Is He anchored in what we do, how we think. If you're a leader or just involved in something here at MRBC then frequently ask – where is Jesus in this? Seriously ask, don't assume. Similarly if you are involved in town activities or outside missions – however laudable they might be, where's Jesus? Where's this activity anchored? Is what I/we are doing in His will? How does it serve His purposes?

Then what about our lives? If it is our church life then, why am I here? Why am I involved in this activity in church, in the community? How does what I do serve the purposes of Heaven? Is this what Jesus wants me to do? Is that a question we ever ask when we do non-church things? We should ask.

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So how different should we be now we know our lives are hidden with Christ in God? We'll go on to that next week.

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20 You have died with Christ and are set free from the ruling spirits of the universe. Why, then, do you live as though you belonged to this world? Why do you obey such rules as
21 "Don't handle this," "Don't taste that," "Don't touch the other"? 22 All these refer to things which become useless once they are used; they are only human rules and teachings. 23 Of course such rules appear to be based on wisdom in their forced worship of angels, and false humility, and severe treatment of the body; but they have no real value in controlling physical passions. 3:1 You have been raised to life with Christ, so set your hearts on the things that are in heaven, where Christ sits on his throne at the right side of God. 2 Keep your minds fixed on things there, not on things here on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 Your real life is Christ and when he appears, then you too will appear with him and share his glory!