

Lives Worthy of the Lord

Stuart L. Love

University Easter Service

Elkins Auditorium

April 4, 2007

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

Colossians 1.9-10

When preparing a meditation for an Easter service, we usually we turn to a passage from one of the four Gospels. Today, however, we are utilizing Paul's letter to the Colossians. Why is this? It is because Colossians itself can be regarded as an Easter meditation that celebrates the resurrected life.

As Paul compliments our sisters and brothers at Colossae on their devotion to Christ, he is concerned that they (and we) live in the present as if we are already in heaven. Paul says, "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is ... for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (3.1-3). Apparently, Paul's point is that *what* Christ has accomplished by his death and resurrection, has actually and completely liberated us from the powers of evil and given us access to God.

You see, in Christ, we have a new, full life that began in faith when we were baptized. Baptism for Paul in Colossians marks the beginning of a totally new way of living (2.12-13; see Rom 6.4). It can be compared to a burial and a resurrection, a burial because we have in effect died and are buried (*hidden*)—not in the earth, but in God, along with Christ, where all wisdom and real knowledge lie hidden—"in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2.3). But through baptism we are also "raised" with Christ "through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (2.12). By God's grace, God our Savior has raised us up with Christ—"he has rescued us from the power of darkness, and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son..." (1.13, 14).

To drive this point home *in terms of how we live* Paul compares the separation of our old and new life as the putting off of old clothes and the putting on of new ones. For example, we are not to lie to one another, because in Christ we have "stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed ourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (3:9-10). In the sacred, sacramental rite of baptism we died and we were raised to a radically new way of life with Christ.

How can I illustrate this? Do you remember the baptismal scene in the movie, "O Brother Where Art Thou?" Ulysses, Pete, and Delmar, the escaped prisoners from the chain gang, hear singing and see women and men clothed in white walking among the trees making their way to the river to be baptized. Delmar, sweet dim-witted Delmar, runs into the water and joins the baptismal procession. After his baptism, Delmar rejoins Ulysses and Pete and exclaims, "...the preacher has saved me from all my sins ... the preacher's done washed away all my sins and transgressions, including the Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo. It's the straight and narrow from here on out. Neither God nor man has anything on me now. Come on in boys the water's

fine.” Paul most probably would raise an eyebrow over Delmar’s ignorant bliss but the scene does remind me that in baptism we as believers die and are raised by the power of God to a new life.

My message, however, is not on baptism. My message is that the life of the resurrection emerges out of a decisive death and that as God’s new creation we need not follow any other requirement, whether it be ascetic demands or a belief that human destiny is controlled by the stars. We need not add to Christ any New Age practices. We need not live in the guilt of human condemnation that insists we are not humble enough. We need not add to Christ special practices to support the adequacy of our standing before God. We need not dwell on spiritual visions or submit to anyone’s regulations—“do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.” All such matters reflect the *appearance* of wisdom, a *superficial* piety, a *false* humility, and a *treatment* of our bodies in ways that really never check a life of self-indulgence. Paul calls us to something that is quite the opposite. In Christ there is “fullness” and “completeness.” In Christ we have been enthroned with God in the heavenly places. In Christ we already share in the riches, treasures, and inheritance of God’s kingdom.

Oh yes, we are still in movement. We still need to put to death whatever does not contribute to life. We need to rid ourselves of sexual impurity. We need to purge ourselves of wrath, anger, malice, slander, and abusive language. And the list could go on. Why is this so? It is because God has stripped away the old clothes—the old self with its practices.

Raised to the new life, we’ve put on new clothes. We’ve put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, love and forgiveness. These are the clothes of the manner of life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him. Let us allow Christ’s peace to rule in our hearts. Let us this day be thankful as we let the word of Christ dwell in us richly. Let us this day teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, Christ’s wisdom. And let us this day devote our words and deeds to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Let us this day dwell in the all sufficiency of Christ.

Let us lead lives worthy of the Lord.

Stuart Love teaches New Testament and Christian Ministry at Pepperdine University and is a co-editor of *Leaven Journal*.

Daily, we need to live in manner appropriate to what we have already received by God in Christ. Paul deliberately uses death and rebirth themes to signify our incorporation into a new body and a new life as God's people. Also, as you've probably noticed, we are, through the course of our worship, reading almost the entirety of Colossian letter. *For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, full pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.*

Colossians 1:9-10

Paul's prayer is that the Colossians may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (1:9)—for a reason that they “may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God” (1:10). The fullness of knowledge for which he prays is not a speculative understanding of some abstruse mystery, but “the knowledge of [God's] will”; it issues in a life “worthy of the Lord” who rules it; it brings forth the fruit of good works; it shows its inward power in endurance and patience; it expresses itself in joyful thankfulness to the God who has manifested his transforming power.

In the famous story of Solomon, Israel's king asks, “Give me now wisdom and knowledge” (2 Chron 1:10ff.). Solomon sought practical wisdom, good sense, clear discernment of right and wrong. James asks, “Who is wise and understand among you?” His answer: “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above ... For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace” (3:13-18). Such “wisdom and understanding” is “spiritual” in the sense that it belongs to the life of the spirit; it is acquired through devotion, not through rational speculation.

To lead lives worthy of the Lord refers to conduct that is appropriate to their baptism—putting to death, getting rid, leaving the old clothing behind, stripping off the old self with its practices consistent with the spiritual reality that in receiving Christ Jesus as Lord, we called to continue our lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, Christ in us, the hope of glory (2:6; 1:27).

1:10— The basic thought is that spiritual growth is fostered by the knowledge of God and manifests itself in an abundance of good works.

“Bearing fruit and growing” refers to those who through the gospel have come to the knowledge of God.

Think of a healthy vine, it grows, puts forth new shoots and branches, and bears fruit. So in the Christian life, growth in spiritual stature and fruitfulness in good works must proceed together; the true knowledge of God promotes both.

A life worthy of the Lord does not create a conflict between intellectualism and the will. It is not a matter of “pure reason” (rational speculation) and “practical reason” (more integrity), using Kant's distinction that is at stake for Paul.

Paraphrasing 1 John, “How can we love God whom we haven’t seen but not love our brothers and sisters whom we have seen?” Is it not like Jesus in John’s Gospel, “If a person wills to do God’s will, he will know the doctrine, whether it be of God” (Jo 7:17).

Isaiah, in the temple, saw the Lord, but the full meaning of what he saw broke upon him when he heard and obeyed the appeal of God’s will to his own will—“I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send?” (Isa 6:8).

We resist attempts to dominate us by the use of argument, and the arrows of intellectual attack. But we are open to the person who prays for us out of deep concern that our wills are attuned to the knowledge of God’s will.

Specifics about living now as if we are already in heaven:

Put to death:

Sexual impurity and greed, anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language

Let us not lie to one another (stripped off the old self)

Let us view and treat one another not from the standpoint of race, ethnicity, nationalism, social classes, but in the renewal of the knowledge related to the resurrected Christ.

Devote yourselves to prayer with thanksgiving

Pray for one another

Be gracious and polite to non-Christians

Other thoughts in Colossians

1:11—The power that strengthens Christians is a reflection of the “glory” of God. It is manifest above all in endurance; it is not the kind of strength that seeks an outlet in domination or in self-assertion of any kind.

1:12—What happens as we grow in the knowledge of God’s will? It manifests itself in good works, in growth in moral stature, and in steadily increasing inward power. This in turn leads to a life of perpetual thanksgiving to God whose grace makes this spiritual progress possible. The spirit of joy and thanksgiving is itself the final mark of spiritual progress.

We must not fall victims to clever spiritual propaganda—to beguiling speech, superficially plausible and attractive, spiritual “fast talk” or “smooth line.”

2:6-7—“...continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, ...” Our salvation is not based on a system of ideas that might become a subject of debate, but a person to whom they must now be loyal.

2:8—Don’t allow yourself to be victimized by humbug masquerading as philosophy.” Don’t be victimized.

Is there a higher spiritual security than what we have found in the liberating gospel of our Lord.

Do you seek assurance for your faith? Is it found in legalistic, ascetic rituals and regulations? Do you seek wisdom and understanding of life? Do you seek joy, community, fellowship? Do you seek to be spiritual?

There are attractions for spiritual security—astrology, numerology, soul culture, new cults, false humility, mystic insights and initiations, spiritual jargons. This is not spiritual excellence.

The key—knowing that we have died to the old life in baptism with Christ—to know the true sphere of the Christian life. Dead with Christ, we are forever removed from the sphere of ascetic regulations, we are to focus our thoughts and desires upon heaven, the sphere of his risen and exalted Master. The whole tenor of our existence here on earth is to be transformed in the light of this new relationship. The moral life of the Christian believer is not the *means* by which one seeks to win salvation, but the necessary *consequence* of the new relationship to God in Christ, into which he enters by faith.

Because of the accomplished reality of the resurrection of Christ, we are to in a continuing way set our minds that are above. We died. Our life is hid with Christ in God. Christ is our life and when he appears, we will appear also with him

—empty spiritual wanderings instead of the maturity of positive and personal faith in Christ.

Set your minds—present tense point to transformation, on things that are above

Not a flight from reality, escape, withdrawal from the strains, stresses, and duties of this world

Not a flight from the conditions of a secular society

Not an escape from the responsibility for “Christianizing the social order”

But, the transformation of life is in the realm of spiritual realities and values “where Christ is.” With Christ the great transformation is no longer awaited with eager longing; it has already taken place. The Christian has been raised from the dead with Christ; our life is hid with Christ in God; its basis is Christ himself

Paul calls for a far more radical denial of self. Instead of regulating the old life by a series of prohibitions—all of that is to be dug out at the roots so that the new life may have full dominion. Put away the vicious habits of death—anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, foul talk; do not lie to one another—that’s the old life with its deeds. Instead put on the new nature, it doesn’t grow old or decay, it takes on the image of its creator

We are “being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Distinctions of the human race are lost so that the fundamental unity of the human race is restored. Chosen, holy, beloved, because of your status before God *Put on* compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience (social dispositions)

). a cutting off that is a metaphor for Jesus’ crucifixion and our participation in it through baptism.

O Brother Where Art Thou

Disenchanted with the daily drudge of crushing rocks on a prison farm in Mississippi, the dapper, silver-tongued Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney) busts loose. Except he’s still

shackled to his two chain-mates from the gang—bad-tempered Peter and sweet, dimwitted Delmar. An odyssey filled with chases, close calls, near misses and betrayal.

In the woods, no Dapper Dan for Ulysses, walking to the river,