

Colossians 3:2

“Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”

Whether it is driving a car, playing a musical instrument or taking part in sport

- We all know that there is a world of difference between theory and practice
- A while ago I took part in an exhibition put on by the Fire Brigade
- That included a driving theory test, using a computer and multiple choice answers
- The person running the test said that no one had achieved the pass mark all day
- I am pleased to report that I achieved more than the pass mark (you knew I would didn't you?)
- But, of course, that does not mean that I could drive a fire engine
- If you play a musical instrument you will know that it is possible to study theory and not be able to play a note
- And everyone knows that in any sport it is possible to talk a good game
- (indeed pundits and commentators make a living at talking a good game)
- without necessarily being able to play it at all, let alone play it well

The apostle Paul knew there is a world of difference between theory and practice and this is shown in Colossians

- for while the first two chapters contain important theory of the Christian faith; the third moves to the practical
- it amounts to a sustained exhortation, it is a call for consistent living
- and is a well-balanced description of the normal Christian life
- so, in this second part of the letter to the Colossians there are five practical areas
- the Christian and Christ; the Christian and the local church; the Christian at home
- the Christian at work; the Christian and the outsider and in this first practical area
- Paul summarises the practical area of the Christian and Christ
- and does so by giving what Dick Lucas calls ‘the four imperatives of Christian spirituality’

The word 'imperative' is important

- so many people think that being a Christian is a matter of believing in God, saying nice things about God
- occasionally attending services or events designed to please us, maybe even 'feeling blessed'
- trying not to do bad things and doing some good things, but this letter will not let us get away with that
- for it begins by charting the truth about God, the God and Father of Jesus Christ
- being a Christian was and is not just about being religious but about having Jesus as Lord
- in fact the apostle Paul says that Jesus must come first and be supreme in our lives
- Paul challenged the Colossians not to cling to their own ideas
- But to counter wrong teaching with what is right and to counter wrong attitudes with right ones
- Some of the Colossians were spiritually superior so, after the theory, Paul gets to practice

The most important thing for a Christian is to maintain a relationship with Jesus Christ, if this is not right

- everything else is out of place, like a jigsaw, where if one piece is wrong nothing else can come right
- the four imperatives are not options they are compulsory – if you want to be a Christian, live like this
- but they are not rules and regulations but a charter for freedom to live for Christ together
- let's return to the driving metaphor - if no one kept the Highway Code there would be chaos on the roads
- Someone could say, 'I want to be free to choose what side of the road I drive on'
- It seems obvious but if people could decide which side of the road to drive on
- It would not amount to real freedom, it would amount to disaster
- The Ten Commandments effectively mean, 'if you want to be free – live like this'
- And these imperatives (must-do's from Paul) amount to the same
- The Christian who wants to be really free in Christ should live like this

I SET YOUR HEARTS ON THINGS ABOVE (where Christ is seated) v. 1

The verb (one word in New Testament Greek) rendered ‘set your hearts’

- Is a present imperative, suggesting a continuous action, in one sense a good word would be ‘seek’
- But it is ‘seek’ in the sense of ‘aiming to do’ rather than ‘looking for’

If you ‘set your heart’ on something, it becomes an all-absorbing aim

- you might have set your heart on going somewhere on holiday or university or future plans
- this is ‘aiming to do’ and it is an exercise of the will
- for the Christian it is important to set our hearts on things above
- ‘things above’ are defined ‘as where Christ is seated at the right hand of God’
- but this is not a one off action that we did in the past it is a continuous process
- it is a relationship, a perspective, a vision and a goal that totally transforms the rest of life

Where Christ is seated at the right hand of God is not just something that Paul throws in here

- it is the very ground of living the Christian life, the right hand of God is the place of highest honour
- proclaiming Jesus as Lord is the very basis of the Christian faith
- it is commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and his exaltation that energises the Christian
- Paul undoubtedly has Psalm 110 in mind, it is a Psalm of Messianic victory
- As Jesus is given the highest place in heaven – the LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand’
- How can he be given a lesser place in the world, particularly in the lives of Christians?
- We all know what it means to have our hearts set on something
- As believers we need to have our hearts set on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God

II SET YOUR MINDS ON THINGS ABOVE (not on earthly things) v. 2

The translation offered by the NIV makes these imperatives more or less the same

- the great commentator Lightfoot remarks ‘you must not only *seek* heaven ...
- you must also *think* heaven’ and maybe that is as close to an understandable distinction as we shall get
- to ‘set your mind on’ or think on ‘things above, not on earthly things’
- amounts to a complete contrast to the world at large, it is the contrast between temporary and eternal things

In case any of his readers are in any doubt, Paul demonstrates that this is all of Jesus

- setting your hearts on things above, is not about being religious, not about saying nice things or feeling blessed
- it is about the non-negotiable Lordship of Jesus Christ
- but why is the Christian committed to the non-negotiable Lordship of Jesus Christ?
- for you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God – at first this seems a strange thing to say -
- but the apostle Paul is reminding the Colossians about their Christian conversion, being born again
- a new life in a new community, a community that acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord
- the idea of our life being ‘hidden with Christ in God’ is difficult – we cannot see it because it is eternal
- it is like asking where Britain is on a map of Devon – we can see a real part of it but not all of it
- but when Jesus comes in glory and we exchange time for eternity the nature of that life will be fully seen
- the word ‘glory’s is a word almost exclusively associated with the nature of God – everything else is fading
- In the dark a small hand torch might seem bright, shine it in your eyes and it will make you squint
- but in the light of day, compared with the glorious sunshine, the light of a torch seems insignificant
- indeed, even the beam of a powerful lighthouse is as nothing in the daytime
- what glitters in the world is nothing compared with the glory we have in Christ
- glory hidden from the world but glimpsed by the believer, veiled because it is so bright we cannot see it yet

III PUT TO DEATH whatever belongs to your earthly nature v. 5

Paul reminds his readers that it is their union with Christ that will give them the power for Christ-like (holy) living

- This is the opposite to works-religion which is about trying to lead a good life in our own strength
- But the life of faith is about allowing the Lordship of Christ into every part of life
- I am not a great gardener but when we lived at Mitcham, Surrey, I did quite a bit of work in the garden
- Including cutting down a tree that was old and diseased but it kept throwing up suckers
- There is a sense in which our Christian life is something like that
- When we repented of our sins and believed in Christ the old tree was chopped down
- But the trouble is that it keeps throwing up these suckers; the less disciplined we are the more they take hold
- So, it is not about trying to live a better old life in our strength, but getting rid of the old things
- and it requires a concentrated effort of will, as Paul says, it needs to be ‘put it to death’

Some of the most interesting words in the Bible and particular in the writings of Paul are easy to pass over

- The Bible does not say ‘Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature’ but ‘put to death *therefore*’
- It is because of the Lordship of Christ and newness of life that means what is alien to him should be to us
- Believers are citizens of a new country, not completely accustomed to the new ways
- And what makes it more complicated is that they are still living in the old country
- They say that some of the world’s most beautiful people live in the south of France – if you go there
- And meet a man wearing a vest, rolled up trousers and a knotted hanky on his head – you could take a guess!
- if he is going to acclimatise to the south of France some changes are urgent
- Paul’s expression is to ‘slay utterly’ or ‘exterminate’ those things of the old life
- Not repression where you cannot do as you want, but Christian liberation not to do what you don’t want to do

IV RID YOURSELVES OF ALL SUCH THINGS AS THESE (v. 8)

Christian living is not easy and one encouragement to Christians who are struggling with these issues

- Is that it is anticipated that Christians would struggle with these issues
- It is not always easy to choose Christ's way but for the believer it is always possible
- The first group of sins was about behaviour, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed
- such a life is heading towards its own destination – the wrath of God
- this was the kind of life the Colossians once lived, but should not be living now
- The second group of sins was about attitude and speech
- 'but now' is emphatic ... you used to live like this, *but now*
- 'rid yourselves' has the sense of getting out of filthy clothes
- 'anger', 'rage' and 'malice' are about attitude or disposition
- if there is any difference between anger and rage it is that rage is an explosion
- that even angry people cannot keep up for long. 'Malice' is just a vicious disposition
- Such a disposition spills over into what is said, slander and filthy language

My first trip abroad was to Germany in 1981 when I was one of four British students on an exchange

- On our first evening we heard a man walking towards us, 'what I'd like is a nice bit of bread and cheese'
- the language immediately told us that he was English, the accent told us he was from Lancashire (Bolton)
- When people talk to me about accent I always say I think accents are great, 'I only wish I had one'
- For the believer, it is no good testifying to the new life but speaking with the accents of the old one
- The new way of life must not only be embraced but lived – by the four imperatives
- Set your hearts on things above, set your minds on things above, put the old to death, rid yourselves of it