

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE
COLOSSIANS

DAY
15 - 21

DAY 15 - Set your heart on Christ

Read Colossians 3:1-4

1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. **2** Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. **3** For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. **4** When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Having shown them what not to do in the previous section, Paul now moves to speak about what the new life in Christ should look like. It should look like a life that is focused on Christ. Christ who is 'seated at the right hand of God'. This imagery shows that Christ is exalted and glorified in heaven. Peter spoke of this at the very birth of the Church on the day of Pentecost when he said in **Acts 2:32-33**:

32 God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. **33** Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.

Paul also spoke similarly to the **Philippians** in **2:9-11**:

9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, **10** that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, **11** and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Paul contrasts 'things above' and 'earthly things' here in Colossians. This is not because the physical world is somehow evil, but because we should be setting our hearts wherever Christ is. Paul cares deeply for our lives now on Earth, but as we set our hearts on Christ we can see our world and circumstances in a different light. There is a different perspective given to our wants, desires, thoughts and actions when we are keeping our hearts focused on Christ.

We can do this because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The hope of the Gospel is that in Christ we will also rise from the dead into eternal life with God. Paul states this promise again here in verse 4. Christ is coming again, and when he does we will experience our own resurrection as he ultimately fulfils the new creation he has begun.

Then we will be with Christ in glory, setting our hearts again where he is, but that will be with us. For now he is 'above' in Heaven. Our lives are protected in him until that day, so for now we must keep our eyes fixed not on the things of this earth while Christ is somewhere else. Instead our desires, thoughts, hearts and actions should all be fixed above and on Christ.

Read **Philippians 3:17-21** to see the contrast of a life lived set on earthly things compared with heavenly things that Paul expressed in his letter to the Philippians:

17 Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. **18** For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. **19** Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. **20** But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, **21** who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

Questions

Where is the focus of my heart, earthly things or Christ? What does the fruit of my life say?

Are there areas of my life where my mind is set on earthly things?

Am I more concerned with treasures on earth than I am with treasure in heaven?

Actions

Pray and invite the Holy Spirit into your heart. Ask him to help you to live as Jesus and then Paul showed.

Allow God to work with you across the next few weeks, showing you where he wants to draw your attention and desires to himself and not earthly things.

Read Romans 6 to see how much Paul cares about what we do on earth now. We can see that setting our hearts on things above does not mean that this earthly life is not important.

DAY 16 - Take off the Old Self

Read Colossians 3:5-11

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. **7** You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. **8** But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. **9** Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices **10** and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Paul flows from the verses we read yesterday. Because they will be raised with Christ and the future hope of glory with Christ, they are to live a certain way. Paul uses here the image of taking off and putting on clothes to demonstrate the old life before they met Christ, and the new life having met Christ.

What they now do is important, because they are not living in the freedom and potential of what Christ has won for them if they continue to live as they did before. It would be like continuing to wear their old clothes from their old life, when there are new clothes to wear.

God has set boundaries within which we can flourish as humans and here (as many other places in the New Testament) Paul lists through things that define a life outside of Christ and his Kingdom. All of these things ultimately stem from self-centred desires, where we desire things of the earth for our own benefit, or use other people as a means to our own pleasures.

This life stands in direct conflict with the life of Christ and therefore the true life of a follower of Jesus Christ. We are called to live lives of self-sacrifice and generosity, where we store up treasure in heaven not treasure on Earth.

Paul spoke to the **Galatians** in a similar way when in **5:13-26** he said:

13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. **14** For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." **15** If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

16 So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. **17** For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. **18** But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

19 The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; **20** idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions **21** and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. **24** Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. **25** Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. **26** Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

The desires of the flesh are to be put to death in us in order that we can be truly free and love those around us.

In Galatians and here in Colossians, it is not just that we have taken off the old self, but, as Paul says here in Colossians 3:10, we have also 'put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator'. Tomorrow we will see him give examples of this new self.

We see in verse 8 that it is not just outward acts that can be transformed through the power of the gospel, but also our thoughts and words. There is no part of our life that the power of Christ and his death and resurrection cannot reach and transform.

Questions

How open am I to letting God transform every part of me? Are there thoughts, words, or actions that you have not 'put to death'?

Is there a particular thing listed above that you know is alive and well in you even though it should be put to death?

When struggling with our fleshly desires as seen here and in Galatians, do we take time to remember what Christ has done for us and lean on him to help us?

When was the last time you invited the Holy Spirit to help you to live the new life we are called to live?

Actions

Pray and invite the Holy Spirit to fill you today.

If you don't have the gift of tongues, then pray and ask God to give you this gift. The Bible teaches that speaking in tongues helps to strengthen us in God.

If you have the gift of tongues, then speak in tongues for a couple of minutes.

Approach the words you speak today with humility and allow God to lead you to use your words in love.

DAY 17 - Put on the New Self

Read Colossians 3:9-14

9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices **10** and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. **11** Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. **12** Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. **13** Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. **14** And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Yesterday we looked at what Paul says we should 'take off'. Those things that define a life that has not been transformed by God and that don't belong with the Kingdom of Jesus Christ and the life of his disciples.

Today we look at what we are to 'clothe ourselves' with as followers of Jesus Christ, set free from the desires of the flesh: living as people who have 'put on the new self'.

Before Paul lists some of those qualities, he reminds them of two things. The first, in verse 10, is that the new self is **'being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator'**. This is a process that will continue throughout their entire lives. We are not going to be perfect, but we are invited to join with the Holy Spirit's work in us to continue to renew and transform us more and more into the image of Jesus Christ.

The second, in verse 11, is that in the Church, they are to be a community with no separate factions or cliques. Their entire identity as a community is built on the reality that they are all there equally because of Christ. No previous worth, honour, background, ethnicity, religious observance, traditions or status count in this new life and community.

No one is above or beneath another in status or value. Everyone relates to Christ, and each other, on an equal basis. There should not be 'Jewish' or 'Gentile' divisions within the church for example, because, as Paul says in verse 11 'Christ is all, and is in all'.

Having established these things, he then continues by giving something of a description of what their (and our) lives should look like in verses 12-14, which culminate in love.

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. **14** And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Paul wrote something similar to the church in Galatia to show them that previous positions or honour were to be set aside and replaced by a community rooted in love. In **Galatians 1:6** he wrote:

6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is **faith expressing itself through love.**

Here in Colossians we see that love is at the core of what it means to put on the new self. In **1 Corinthians 13** when Paul is in the middle of teaching about using Spiritual gifts, he takes the time to show how everything we do as Christians is all about Love.

1 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. **2** If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. **3** If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. **4** Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. **5** It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered,

it keeps no record of wrongs. **6** Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. **7** It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. **9** For we know in part and we prophesy in part, **10** but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. **11** When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. **12** For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. **13** And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

We can see many parallels between this passage and what we read here in Colossians. Truly the new life in Christ is one where love for each other, expressed in the ways Jesus and his Apostles taught us (here in Colossians 3:12 through 'compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience'), stands as its defining characteristic. All of this is based on Christ's love for us.

The other thing Paul references here is forgiveness. In the Lord's prayer Jesus showed us that we were to forgive as we were forgiven and then even gave this warning in **Matthew 6:14-15**:

14 For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. **15** But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

The reality is that within our lives in the church, we are going to hurt people and others are going to hurt us. We are going to give, and have opportunities to forgive. Forgiveness can be hard, but there is help from God to do it and it cannot be avoided if we are to live as Christ has taught us to, free in him and loving his people.

This life of self-sacrificing love is what all Christians are called to.

Questions

Are there people in the Church that you know you need to forgive?

Are you ever tempted to use worldly standards (like wealth or background), to see yourself as higher or lower than others in the church?

Who might God be asking you to show, patience, gentleness or humility to today?

Actions

Read Galatians 5:14-25 as Paul says very similar things to the Galatians.

Pray and ask God to help you to forgive those you need to forgive. You could pray with a friend if you are finding this difficult.

Pray and ask God to help to put on the new self.

DAY 18 - Let Peace rule your Hearts

Read Colossians 3:15

15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

Today we shall look at peace. The peace spoken of here is peace between each other in the church, rather than an individual or internal calmness. It is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus, who, as Paul said in chapter 1:19-20 'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by **making peace** through his blood, shed on the cross'. God has given us peace with himself through his death on the cross.

We see here and elsewhere in the New Testament, that not only is there peace between us and God, but God has also made peace between us and each other.

In **Ephesians 2:14-20** Paul wrote of what Jesus Christ has done for Jews and Gentiles:

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, **15** by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, **16** and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. **17** He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. **18** For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. **19** Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, **20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

This peace is also to be outworked in our everyday lives with those in the church. Later in **Ephesians 4:1-4** Paul spoke (like he does here throughout Colossians) of life in the Christian community that demonstrates what Christ has done for us. And again like in Colossians, that life is all rooted in the unifying reality of Christ that binds them (and us) together:

1 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. **2** Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. **3** Make every effort to keep the **unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace**. **4** There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism; **6** one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

There is a call for us as Christians, to make every effort, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, to live without unresolved conflict with one another. This is easier said than done and often requires wisdom, humility, forgiveness and an awful lot of help from the Holy Spirit as we continue to live side by side with each other as imperfect people.

Here in verse 15 we are encouraged to let Christ's peace **'rule'**. What that means is that when we are going to say something or do something we should ask ourselves:

'Does this increase peace within Christ's body (which Paul tells us we are all members of) or decrease it?

This doesn't mean that there can never be healthy conflict, challenge, correction or rebuke. It simply means that we should be aiming towards peace with one another because we are one in Christ's body, the Church.

It's not easy, but it is worth pursuing.

Questions

Do the words you say about other people show peace or division between you?

Is there anyone that you really struggle with in Church? Is there anything you can do to let peace rule your decisions and words towards that person?

Is there someone you need to forgive in order to let peace rule your heart?

Actions

Spend some time in prayer thanking God that he has made peace with us through his death and resurrection.

Pray **2 Thessalonians 3:16** over someone in church you struggle with and ask God to help there to be peace in your heart towards that person.

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you something today where you could make a decision with peace in mind, and ask him to give you strength to let that peace rule your heart.

DAY 19 - The Gospel living in us

Read Colossians 3:16-17

16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. **17** And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

We'll look at this passage across the next two days. Tomorrow we'll look at the practical application of today's passage, but for today we will step outside the book of Colossians and simply remind ourselves of the message of Christ as we seek to 'Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly'.

As we read from parts of the gospels and the letters in the New Testament, let us be reminded of the message of Christ, and pray that it lives deep within everything we say and do.

Read John 3:16-17

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Read Ephesians 2:1-10

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, **2** in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. **3** All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, **5** made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. **6** And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, **7** in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. **8** For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— **9** not by works, so that no one can boast. **10** For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Read 1 John 4:9-19

9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. **10** This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. **11** Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. **12** No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

13 This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. **14** And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. **15** If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. **16** And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. **17** This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgement: In this world we are like Jesus. **18** There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

19 We love because he first loved us.

Read Romans 6:22-23

22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. **23** For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Read Matthew 11:28-30

28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. **29** Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. **30** For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Read Matthew 13:44-46

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. **46** When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

Questions

Did any of these scriptures stand out to you?

Are there other Bible verses that come to mind as you think about the Gospel?

Actions

Read these passages again and spend time thanking God for the Gospel.

Choose one of these passages (or just a sentence of one) and spend some time thinking about it and letting it go into your heart.

Come back to one of these scriptures again at some point in your day and read it again.

DAY 20 - Worship

Read Colossians 3:16-17

16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. **17** And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Yesterday we took time to remind ourselves of some of the life changing reality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today we look at how Paul sees the message of Christ being the central truth around which all of our lives are built.

Paul says that the truth of the gospel will powerfully live in us 'as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom'. We can see that teaching and correction/guidance/warning is something that helps us to live in Christ. This requires us to be humble and teachable. If the power of the gospel is going to live in us then we need to be humble enough to be warned against certain behaviours or thoughts. We need to be teachable and able to receive wisdom or guidance from others.

Many of us are happy to correct others, while being defensive and stubborn when being corrected ourselves.

In the Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew 7:2-4** Jesus said:

2 For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.
3 "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? **4** How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?"

If the message of Christ is to dwell among us richly (as Paul desires for them), then there must be genuine humility in our hearts.

Importantly though we can also see that this teaching and admonishment that Paul speaks about does not only come from an elite few (or only from himself), but is from all of them. Our friendships, families, life groups and church communities should all be places where these things are happening. For Paul this is not an optional extra, but foundational to the life of the Church if the power of the Gospel is going to fill every aspect of life. This will happen both formally in church from people given grace to teach the Bible, and informally across church life.

As we see immediately (and possibly unexpectedly), Paul says that this teaching in wisdom will happen 'through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts'. There is lots that could be said here, but three things that are worth noting are that:

- Singing worship songs together in Church is part of how we are taught, guided and corrected. We saw in Chapter 1:15-20 how Paul taught about the supremacy of Christ over all creation and redemption, by using a hymn. He does the same in Philippians 2:6-11.
- Thankfulness (here expressed in singing together) should always be at the heart of a Christian and the Church community. We've seen this a number of times already in the book of Colossians (1:12 and 2:7). That thankfulness should be expressed in prayer, words and songs.

Whether we are reading the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament, singing Christian worship songs, or singing from our hearts as we respond to the moving of the Holy Spirit, this overflow of worship can carry the very truth of Christ and play an important role in our discipleship together as a church.

We see from verse 17 Paul's desire for the message of Jesus to impact and live in every single aspect of our lives.

He said: 'And **whatever** you do, whether in word or deed, do it **all** in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him'. Nothing in our lives is meant to be outside of the Lordship of Jesus Christ (remember the hymn from 1:15-20?). Everything we do or think or say, should be able to have Christ's name attached to it as we follow him together.

Questions

Are you teachable?

Is there humility in you to see that there are times you are wrong or lack wisdom?

Do you take time to worship God?

Do you value the time in church when we worship God together?

Are there areas of your thoughts or actions that, if you're honest, you know are not in God's plans for us?

Actions

Read Galatians 5:13-26 to see something of what life inside and outside Christ looks like. Then invite the Holy Spirit to help you live your life in Christ.

Talk to a friend or your spouse about an area you'd like God to help you grow in. Confess any sin to each other and commit to sharing the journey with each other.

Read Psalm 8, 40, 145, 146.

Read Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-20.

Speak or sing out your own worship to God.

DAY 21 -

Read Colossians 3:18-4:1

18 Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. **19** Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. **20** Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. **21** Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. **22** Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. **23** Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, **24** since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. **25** Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favouritism. **4:1** Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

This passage can be difficult to our modern ears, depending on our upbringing or our beliefs.

We do not have the time to sift through every verse here to try and understand everything that is being said, but it can be helpful to take a broad look at what Paul is trying to achieve in these fairly brief instructions for family life.

Across the New Testament, Paul is generally not looking for the Church to seek to revolutionise the cultures in which they find themselves (which some of us can find frustrating depending on our particular convictions or passions). In reality, there was almost no way that the churches at this point could have made any significant societal change anyway.

There is also in Paul a continual commitment to the gospel spreading, that may be at work here as it seems to be elsewhere, in the New Testament. If the church throws off all societal expectations/practices then there is a very real risk that the Christians will lose all credibility in reaching out to their surrounding society.

Paul, in other letters in the New Testament (and possibly also here), is more committed to upholding the reputation of Christians within their societies (so that the gospel can be spread) rather than them using their new found freedoms in Christ without restraint. The spreading of the gospel depends on this Church community, and any freedom should be placed secondary to the work of the gospel.

Having said that, there is a real and powerful transformation to come into those family relationships. Paul is very concerned with the love and power of Christ filling every aspect of life. This means that love and respect will come to dominate the way families relate to one another. In Colossae at the time (as with most of the Ancient World), the father owned the entire family and there were no restraints in how he acted or treated his wife, children or slaves.

Here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul makes some very radical statements about the mutuality of love and respect to be shared between a husband and a wife, and the way a father treats his children and slaves. Paul places limits on a father's behaviour that dramatically differ from the expectations from the society around them. The influence of Christ is to be present and to radically transform the very fabric of family life.

Paul then speaks directly to slaves, which itself gives dignity to them. Slaves could not simply free themselves from their position in society, but were still to allow the work of Jesus Christ to dwell in them to transform their hearts and show the kind of love and service of Jesus Christ himself. He also speaks to the slave masters to limit their total freedom to do whatever they wished with their slaves.

Although we might prefer him to have spoken about the indignity of slavery (which even though not totally comparable to recent or current slavery, is still one human owning another), instead Paul is *more* concerned with the Gospel influencing every aspect of the society in which these people find themselves and have to live within.

Again though, what he says to the masters is actually incredibly subversive to the norms of the culture. He is limiting what they can do and asking them to constantly remember that they have Christ as *their* master and should have him in mind in the way they treat those under their authority.

What is also telling is that within the church, both slaves and masters are equal. Remember what Paul had said earlier in verses 10-11:

10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. **11** Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, **slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.**

In Christ (and in the church) there is no slave or free, but we are all in Christ. Although in society the reality of life, outwardly at least, appears to remain much the same, what is present in the heart and actions of the Christian and in the Church represents the seeds of utter transformation. You can see in the book of Philemon some of the complexities of slaves and masters receiving Christ and becoming equals in the Christian community.

What it is difficult to take from *this* passage is either a clear dismantling of these family of societal structures, or anything resembling clear affirmation of them throughout any culture through to today (we are certainly pleased that forced service and slavery are no longer acceptable within our society).

What we *can* see clearly though, is a call to allow the work of Christ to influence our relationships within families and every aspect of life. There should be love, trust, respect, restraint and submission between one another. There should not be harshness or domineering behaviour in the Christian family or work.

What we should also take from this is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not for us to receive and keep in some "spiritual" part of our life. Our discipleship is not only to be found in corporate worship, but also in the nitty gritty of normal life: the way a Father speaks to his children and the way we think towards those we work for, for example.

The reach of the gospel is total and should extend into every aspect of our lives.

Questions

How could you treat others better in your family?

What is your attitude like towards those you work for?

How do you treat those over whom you have responsibility?

Are there parts of your work that you do not do with all your heart?

Actions

Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to bring Christ-like love into your family life.

Pray and ask God to help you to have a good attitude at work or school.

Invite God into the ordinary parts of your life today.

Read Paul's letter to Philemon.