

“Self-Made Religion vs Christ-Made Religion”
Colossians 2:20-3:4
August 29, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We come now to our final Sunday in Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae, before we pause this series for a few months, and shift over to Deuteronomy. This morning we come to Colossians 2:20-3:4, though I’m going to back up a little and begin reading in verse eighteen.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Paul writes to the Colossian church:

^{2:18} Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations—²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch” ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

^{3:1} If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, we know that those who walk in the ways of your word are blessed –
those who keep your testimonies
and seek you with their whole heart.

Lord, make our ways steadfast
in keeping your statutes.

Keep us from dishonoring your name,
by fixing our eyes now on your word.

Teach us the way of righteousness,
so that we might praise you with upright hearts,

Grant this for Jesus’s sake. Amen.

[Based on Psalm 119:1-2, 5-7]

Introduction

Paul here contrasts two kinds of religion. And these two kinds of religion have relevance for everyone here, because if you have ever tried in the past to achieve personal growth ... or if you are trying to grow in character and as a person right now ... or if you ever plan to try to grow and mature as a person in the future, then you will go about it in a certain way, and that way will likely fall into one of these two categories.

And that's not limited to seeking personal growth. If you ever try to achieve status in the world, or security in your life, then in those attempts, you again, will almost invariably pursue it in one of these two ways.

And that will be true regardless of your religious perspective. If you are a Christian, it's not guaranteed which pattern you will adopt to pursue those things, even if it should be. And if you're not a Christian – whether you are devout in another religion *or* you are thoroughly secular, even then you will, in all likelihood, fall into one of the patterns described here.

So what are those patterns? What are those paths, or those religions?

Paul identifies them here as self-made religion, and as Christ-made religion.

And if you want to understand yourself, and how you pursue growth, whether it's spiritually, socially, or in terms of security, then you need to understand these two types of religion.

And that is what we will focus on this morning – how these two patterns play out spiritually, socially, and in terms of security.

The Spiritual Element

First, let's consider the spiritual element. How do self-made religion and Christ-made religion each approach spiritual growth?

Paul labels the first pattern “self-made religion” in verse twenty-three, but he describes it before that. In verse twenty-one he speaks of self-made religion as being focused on submitting to certain kinds of regulations.

In a somewhat mocking tone, Paul summarizes it in verse twenty-one as: “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch.” He explains in verse twenty-two that this pattern is characterized by regulations focused on things that perish, and rules devised by human beings.

He admits in verse twenty-three that these rules do have the appearance of wisdom. They look rigorous and severe, he says.

As we mentioned last week, while the specifics are uncertain, these false teachers were likely adapting Jewish laws to impose strict regulations on other believers concerning food and other things.

Those regulations, Paul seems to admit here, did seem to promote self-denial, and self-discipline, and a severity and rigor that one might assume was good training for the body. In other words, whatever the details of the beliefs about foods and festivals, it would seem to make sense that these practices being insisted on by this self-made religion *would* actually cause some amount of spiritual growth and character development. It seemed like it would teach discipline, and self-control, and self-denial, in a way that would lead to growth in character, and moral behavior, and spiritual strength. And so, Paul says there is an appearance of wisdom here.

But then ... at the end of verse twenty-three, Paul drops the grenade he's been holding on to. "But" he says, these practices, actually "are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh."

All the rigor, all the severity, all the self-denial, Paul says here is of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

But how could that be?

After all, don't we all know people who seemed to conquer different indulgences of the flesh through the sort of severity described here? Whether their goals were religious or secular, they seemed to grow in character and spiritual strength as they put away their former indulgences of the flesh through severity and self-generated effort. They stopped doing that thing they wanted to stop doing, or they started doing more of those things they knew they should do, they cleaned up their life or they achieved something great, they came to live a more disciplined or purposeful life, and they seemed to do it all themselves. They openly adopted self-made religion, or self-made secular habits, and it seemed, to our eyes, to effectively stop the indulgence of the flesh in their lives.

But Paul here seems to deny that that's possible. Is Paul wrong? Is he confused?

As I've mentioned before, Augustine addresses this sort of question in his work *The City of God*. There he discusses how the Roman pagans tried to put their vices of indulgence of the flesh to death. After all, Augustine notes that these pagan heroes of the ancient world did not serve Christ, but they did seem to be able to learn to avoid certain sinful and indulgent patterns. So how did they do that?

And the answer he comes to, he writes, is that "The ancient Romans [...] as their own history teaches and stamps with approval, '[...] were eager for praise, generous with their money, and longed for boundless glory and riches with honor.' This glory they loved with a passion." he writes. "It was for its sake that they wanted to live and for its sake that they did not hesitate to die. Their boundless desire for this one thing kept all other desires in check." [Augustine, *City of God*, V.12, p. 159].

A little later he writes: "For the sake of this one vice – that is, the love of praise – these men suppressed the love of riches and many other vices." [Augustine, V.13, p.163]

The way, Augustine says, that these early pagans put one set of vices – one set of sins – to death in their lives, is that they found an even stronger vice to give their ultimate allegiance to, as their rival.

And so, to defeat their laziness, they pursued a prideful love of praise. To defeat their greed for money, they cultivated a greed for worldly honor. And they were able to suppress those vices they wanted to suppress, by appealing to a stronger vice – a stronger sinful pattern.

“For the sake of this one vice [...] these men suppressed many other vices.”

But, as Paul points out here, that’s not actually stopping the indulgence of the flesh. It’s just indulging the flesh in one way in order to keep from indulging it in other ways.

And Paul spells that out back in verse eighteen. There he said that these people who were excelling at this self-made religion were also “puffed up without reason by” their “mind of the flesh.” [Wright, 127]

These men were known for their rigor, yet they still had a mind of the flesh, Paul says. How could that be?

Well, for Paul, and for the Bible, the sins and the indulgences of the flesh are not limited to sins of sensuality.

In his letter to the Galatian church, Paul gives a representative list of what fleshly indulgence really looks like. He writes:

“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.” [Gal. 5:19-21a (see Wright, 133)]

Of course some of that is what we’d expect to hear: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, drunkenness, orgies, and such.

But other items there are different. Rivalries. Dissensions and divisions and strife. Envy and jealousy.

And with that, we can see more clearly what Paul means. The false teachers seem to be rigorously putting away the vices of the flesh – they are pursuing scrupulous laws and rules to the point of absurdity. [Wright, 131] But they are doing it in a way that divides the people, and forms dissensions and rivalries. Paul says, in verse sixteen, that they are doing it in a way that is characterized by arrogance and pride – they are “puffed up without reason.”

In other words, their method for personal growth and transformation is to use one fleshly vice to suppress the other fleshly vices: to use arrogance and pride to suppress sins of sensuality.

And Paul tells us that such an approach is both hollow, and pointless.

It’s hollow because it remains outward without getting to the heart. Paul’s criticism in verse twenty-two seems to intentionally echo the criticism Jesus makes of similar laws in Matthew 15 and Mark 7. There Jesus quotes from Isaiah 29:13, where God criticizes the Israelites because, he says:

This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. [As quoted in Matt. 15:8-9]

Paul here is critiquing self-made religion because it is ultimately hollow. [Wright, 131; see also Moo, 238] While it improves their outward appearance, and maybe even cleans up their outward actions, the hearts of those who pursue growth in this way remain dominated by the flesh, as they actually cultivate arrogance and pride in order to overcome other more outwardly obvious sins.

Similarly, we see in Paul's critique that this self-made religion is not just superficial, but it's also pointless. Because those who practice it remain slaves. They may trade slavery to one vice for slavery to another vice – they may trade slavery to laziness or lust or drunkenness or greed for slavery to pride and arrogance, but they remain slaves to vice.

Maybe they feel that their new master has more benefits than their old master. That may be so. But that is not spiritual growth or character development. That is just a mercenary-like approach to our vices, choosing the commander who we think will pay us best, even as we sell ourselves to them.

And we too can follow this pattern that Paul identifies in the false teachers of Colossae, and those Augustine identifies in the ancient pagans of Rome. We too can try to grow and develop ourselves spiritually or build up our character by turning to one vice to help us defeat another.

We motivate ourselves out of sloth by prodding ourselves on with greed. Or we motivate ourselves to chastity by prodding ourselves with pride. Or we motivate ourselves to diligence and restraint and self-control in all sorts of areas by prodding ourselves with arrogance and a sense of superiority to others.

And through worldly forms of shame and criticism we often try to motivate others in the same way: whether our peers, or our spouse, or our children. We call on them to turn from one vice by pushing them to focus more on their sinful pride when they are compared to others.

All of this is the pattern of self-made religion. And for all the forms of self-improvement out there, what we find again and again in so many of them is this same pattern.

But then Paul puts the alternative before us. And the alternative he presents to self-made religion is Christ-made religion.

Self-made religion, as we have seen, is centered on what we do. But Christ-made religion is centered on what Christ has done, and on the union that exists between Christ and all who have placed their trust in him.

For, Paul tells us, when we place our trust in Christ, and give him our ultimate allegiance, then we are united to him by faith, and he gives us a share not only in what he has, but also in what he has done and what he will do.

And one of the important things Christ has done, in the past, is that he has died. And if we are united to Christ by faith, then, Paul tells us, we, in some sense, have died as well. That is the point Paul makes in verse twenty: “If with Christ you died” he says. And the “if” there, in Paul’s usage is not meant to pose it as a question or raise any doubt, but instead to state it as a logical condition – it could be translated “Since with Christ you died.” [Wright, 130; Moo, 233]

So, because Christ died, we, in some sense, died with him. But what does that have to do with our spiritual growth or our character development?

Paul goes on. “[Since] with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations”? What does this mean here?

Let’s begin with the reference to the “elemental spirits.” We discussed this a few weeks ago, and while interpretations vary, generally speaking, this seems to refer to the spiritual, social, and moral patterns, dynamics, and laws of the fallen world in rebellion against God. [See 7/18/21 sermon “Multifaceted Deliverance” for more on this.]

There are certain elementary principles of the moral life and the social order that are in rebellion against God, and those principles are upheld and promoted by dark spiritual forces in the world. And fallen humanity has sold itself into slavery to those spiritual principles and forces.

But Paul says that those who are united to Christ by faith have died with Christ, and so have died to those elemental spirits and elementary principles. And this isn’t just a nice metaphor for Paul, but a statement of legal fact. Because death releases someone from slavery and bondage. A master may have had complete power over a slave, but the death of the slave brought the master’s power over him to an end – both practically and legally. The master no longer had any control over him. [Wright, 130]

Now ... when it comes to this life, we might point out that that doesn’t do the slave much good. He may be free of his former master, but he is also dead. But Paul’s point is that through our union with Christ we receive the legal benefits of death without having actually died ourselves. Just as the slave who dies is freed from bondage to his master, so we, by death, are free from bondage to sin – but it is not by our physical death that this happens, but by our sharing in Christ’s death.

We were slaves to sin – slaves to the elemental spirits and principles of this fallen world. In our rebellion against God, we had sold ourselves to sin. And once slaves, we were unable to free ourselves. The best we could do was try to get ourselves transferred between different kinds of slavery to sin – shifting ourselves from being dominated by one set of sins to being dominated by another set of sins.

But in our union with Christ we are freed. Because in Christ we died. And so our term of slavery is over.

The absurdity that Paul is confronting here is that even though Christ has freed them from slavery to sin, the Colossian Christians are being tempted to act as if their best hope is to serve the vices of pride and division in order to be free of the vices of sensuality. They are acting, in

other words, as if they are still slaves, seeking a mere transfer between masters. But in Christ they are free. [Wright, 130]

This freedom, though – and this is key – is not something we do. It is not an accomplishment we reach. It is not an achievement of self-made religion. It is, instead, something Christ has done for us. Because he has died. And because even in dying he is more powerful than any vice we might be enslaved to. And he has set us free by his death.

And so, in Christ, real spiritual growth is possible.

This is growth that is rooted in Christ. It begins with faith that Christ really is stronger and more powerful than whatever vice we may be facing. It trusts that Christ, by our union with him, really has freed us from slavery to sin. And then it looks to Christ and seeks his help in living out that freedom. It looks to things above, where Christ is, as Paul says in verse one. And it is motivated not by arrogant pride but by love for God and love for others – including love for Christ because of all he has done for us, as we prioritize our relationship to him above everything else we might seek in this life. And even as we strive, we know that the power to turn from sin does not come from us, but from Christ. Christ, and our union with him, is the source of true freedom in Christ-made religion.

While self-made religion calls us to a hollow and pointless process of trading slavery to one vice for slavery to another vice, Christ-made religion so unites us to Christ's death, that we have legally died to our former spiritual status, and we are freed from slavery to sin in order to have true spiritual growth in union with Christ.

That is the first thing we see here as Paul contrasts self-made religion with Christ-made religion in our spiritual lives.

The Social Element

The second aspect we see in Paul's contrast between self-made religion and Christ-made religion comes in the social dimension of our lives.

As we considered last Sunday, in verses sixteen through nineteen of chapter two Paul describes the social approach of the false teachers and their self-made religion: They have judged others, seeking to disqualify them, and divide the community of the Body of Christ.

Why have they approached their social relationships that way? Well, because that's how one attains glory and honor according to the elementary principles of the world – according to self-made religion. In self-made religion, glory is rooted in our relationship to other people. More specifically, glory and status are rooted in how we compare with other people. And so if their honor increases, ours, by comparison decreases. And if they have their glory diminished, then ours, by comparison, becomes brighter. And so, in self-made religion, if we want to increase our status and glory, then judging and pushing others down is a requirement.

In self-made religion, glory is a limited resource. And so I need to diminish someone else's glory if I am going to increase my own. This is how glory in a fallen world works. It is how it worked for the false teachers of Colossae, and it is how it continues to work today.

We see it everywhere. We see it on the larger cultural scale when the more educated dismiss the less educated while the less educated mock the educated elites. We see it when the wealthy assume those with less are lazy, and when those with less assume that those who have more are cheats. We see it when both progressives and conservatives automatically view those who disagree with them as stupid, evil, or both. We see it when members of one race shout or whisper their disparagement of another. Whenever one demographic of society seeks to tear down or disparage another, there is a zero-sum battle for glory going on. Because if my group pushes your group down, then my group's glory and social standing increases by comparison.

But we see it in smaller, individual ways as well. We see it when we treat our financial lives not as a stewardship or a means of providing for ourselves and others, but as a way to distinguish ourselves from those around us. We see it when we whisper gossip or gentle mockery about someone we know to a mutual friend. We see it in our need to prove to those around us that we are right, and they are wrong on a topic – whatever the topic may be. We see it in our need to comment to our spouse about the shortcomings of someone else's child. Whether public or private or somewhere in-between, we treat glory as a limited social resource, that is based primarily on how we stack up to other people.

And we all do this, because we have all bought in, to some extent, to the worldly concept of glory found in self-made religion. And it's pretty ugly.

And Paul rejects it. He rejects the kind of arrogant self-seeking found in the false teachers and their self-made religion, and he calls God's people instead to seek glory according to Christ-made religion.

And we see what that looks like in verses three and four. There Paul writes to the believers in Colossae: "For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

Earlier Paul pointed us *back* to what Christ had done in his death. Now Paul points us *forward* to what Christ *will do* when he returns at his final coming.

And he says that when Christ comes in glory, we too, united to him, will appear in glory.

Now, for Paul, that means both the glory that we will receive simply from the fact of our union with Christ in the gospel, and also the glory we will receive as a reward for our faithfulness to Christ. Both forms of glory – the results of our justification and the rewards of our sanctification – both are bestowed upon us by Christ in our glorification as we share in Christ's glory at his second coming.

But here's one key thing to see: If our glory doesn't come from how we compare to other people, but it comes instead from Christ, then glory is not a limited human resource, but it is an infinite divine resource. And that changes things.

Because that means we don't have to fight others for it. It means that real glory – glory that lasts – comes not from outdoing others around us, but from being united to and pleasing to Christ, as we “seek the things that are above,” as Paul says in verses one and two. And Christ has no limits on the glory he can bestow on others.

And so, in Christ-made religion, our glory increases not as we tear others down, but as we build them up, and care for them, and bear their burdens, and protect and defend their reputation rather than undermine their status in the eyes of others. Jesus sees when we do that – when we love others as he loved us. And he rewards us and increases the glory he will give to us.

True glory comes from Christ – from our union with him and our faithfulness to him. But that glory right now is largely ... and sometimes even completely ... unseen in this life. It is “hidden” as Paul says in verse three, and will only be revealed fully at Christ's final coming, as Paul says in verse four. And that can be difficult for us. And yet that future glory is real. And it should change how we think of ourselves in the world. [Moo, 245, 250; Wright 136-137]

I began a biography this week about a man who grew up overseas. He had a difficult childhood. His mother thought he was brilliant ... but then, most mothers tend to think that about their children – at least when they are smaller. His father was much harsher with him – especially after the parents divorced. His father was often negative about his son's interests and dismissive about what would come of them.

In school, the boy didn't stand out much as a student. One of his former high-school classmates commented that “There were four or five boys considered the very brightest” in their class ... but that young man wasn't one of them.

In middle school he failed a few classes until it was pointed out to him that if he failed enough classes he would be held back. After learning that, his grades improved considerably.

He was also fairly unpopular. Growing up in a culture that valued sports and physical strength, he was viewed as weak and was often isolated because of his lack of interest in sports.

At one point in middle school a group of other boys decided he would be the target of their quest for worldly status through bullying. They attacked the young man, throwing him down a flight of concrete stairs, punching him, kicking him, knocking his head against the ground. He had to be taken to the hospital, and missed a week of school. The targeting continued. The gang of boys beat up the young man's best friend until the friend agreed not only to stop spending time with the young man, but also agreed to lure him out for another beating from the group of boys. When he recounts that betrayal, even now, as an adult, the man still tears up.

Whether in school or at home, he had no status, no honor, no glory, as peers and even his father attacked him in vain attempts to elevate themselves.

This was the childhood of Elon Musk in South Africa.

Today Musk is known around the world as the CEO and Product Architect of Tesla, the founder, CEO, and Chief Engineer of SpaceX, and the founder of a number of other companies. He oversees space flights bringing astronauts to the International Space Station. He is working with

NASA to return to the moon. He's met with multiple presidents. And he's currently ranked as the second richest person in the world, with a net worth of \$151 billion.

But, as one former high-school classmate blurted out in a recent interview, back then, "Honestly, there were just no signs that he was going to be a billionaire!" [Vance, 23-44]

Now, Musk's transformation is a worldly one – from worldly dishonor to worldly glory. It is not cosmic or eternal in its scope.

Even so, think about what it would be like now, to be one of those boys who beat Musk up as a child in middle school ... or even just one of those boys who dismissed and ignored him in high school because he wasn't good at sports ... think of how that must feel today ... the shock as Musk was revealed, years later, to the whole world, as not only brilliant, but now a centi-billionaire.

Here's the thing. As big as that shock might be ... that revelation – that transformation – pales in comparison to the revelation of glory that God's people will receive at the return of Christ. In fact, the two cannot even really be compared.

As one commentator puts it: "The Christian hopes not merely for the coming of the Lord, but for the full revelation of what he or she already is. Then will it be seen with what faithful diligence and perseverance many outwardly 'unsuccessful' and forgotten Christian workers have served their Lord. Paul, the prisoner, an eccentric Jew to the Romans and a worse-than-Gentile traitor to the Jews, will be seen as Paul the apostle, the servant of the King. The Colossians, insignificant ex-pagans from a third-rate country town, will be seen in a glory which, if it were now to appear, one might be tempted to worship. This is how they are to regard their life, and on this foundation, they are to build genuine holiness and Christian maturity." [Wright, 137]

This is the glory that awaits those who trust in Christ and cling to him.

And among other things, it should enable us to endure any dishonor or disgrace that the world or those around us cast in our direction.

Think, for a moment, how differently Elon Musk would have regarded his situation in middle school if he had been told then that as an adult, he would not just be successful, but he would be a multi-billionaire.

If that would have changed how he regarded his present dishonor, how much more should our knowledge that when Christ returns in glory, we too will appear in glory beyond what we can imagine – how much more should that transform how we view the dishonor we receive in our lives now? How much less should we care about being looked down on by those around us?

If we really held onto that truth, then such worldly dishonors wouldn't consume us. They wouldn't dominate our thoughts. Because our minds should be set on things that are above, not things on the earth. And we could resist the temptation to strike back, or slander back, because we saw the eternal glory that was to come, and we dared not diminish that out of a sinful desire to grasp at fleeting worldly glory now.

That is how the social elements of self-made religion and Christ-made religion differ from one another.

The Security Element

So we see the spiritual distinction between self-made and Christ-made religion, we see the social distinction between self-made and Christ-made religion. Third and finally, we should see the distinction when it comes to security.

And this point will be brief.

In self-made religion, our status, and in fact all that we have, is always at risk. We can lose it in an instant. One slip-up and we lose our ability to pridefully think of ourselves as better than others, and so often we then turn back to our former vices for comfort in the midst of our shame. And we feel like failures. Progress in self-made religion is easily lost.

Similarly, glory in self-made religion is always insecure. Even if you gain a lot of it, it is remarkably easy to lose it – to fall in the eyes of others. And while this could be through your own mistake, it might not be. It might just be from someone out-maneuvering you, making you look bad, and taking some of your worldly glory and social standing in their effort to increase their own status in the eyes of those around you.

There isn't much security in self-made religion.

But there is in Christ-made religion.

In verse one Paul reminds the Christians in Colossae that Christ is in heaven, seated at the right hand of God. Then, in verse three, he tells them that their lives are “hidden with Christ in God.”

Now, that idea of their lives being hidden does, in part, refer to the idea that it is not yet seen, but it one day will be, as we have already discussed.

But there is likely a second meaning as well. As we said a few weeks ago, in the ancient world, to hide something meant to secure it. You didn't have a security system in your home or a safety deposit box downtown. And so if you wanted to keep something valuable secure, you hid it. When Paul tells the Colossians that their lives are “hidden with Christ in God” he is also telling them that it is secure – it is in a safe place where no one can steal it, and they need not fear losing it. [Moo, 250]

And, as if to emphasize that point, Paul reminds us that Christ is seated at the right hand of God – the seat of power and authority, from which, we read in Psalm 110, Christ rules with a mighty scepter [v.2], shatters kings [v.5], executes judgment among the nations, and utterly lays waste to those who would dare to battle against him [v.6]. This is the power of Christ, sitting at the right hand of God the Father.

And it is with him that our lives are secure: our salvation, our spiritual growth, our future hope, and our future glory. All of that is hidden with Christ in God. Which means that all of it is secure. We need not fear. We need only trust in God, and cling to him by faith.

That means we can follow his commands, confident that our reward is secure with Christ. It means that when we fail to follow his commands – when we fall short – we can come to him and ask for his mercy, confident that our salvation remains secure, by his power, for all eternity. It means that whatever challenges or losses we may face in this life, we can move forward, we can persevere, confident that our eternal hope is secure with Christ, in God.

This is the security offered in the gospel to all who trust in Christ.

Conclusion

Put side by side, the superiority of Christ-made religion to self-made religion is striking. And yet ... so often we fall into the patterns of self-made religion. So often we act as if we are still slaves to the elementary principles of this sad and fallen world. So often we try to grow by selling ourselves as slaves to pride. So often we try to grasp at social glory by tearing others down. So often we fret as if our future is not secure, and we scurry around as if we could secure it by our own efforts.

But instead, Paul points us to Christ. Instead Paul directs our hearts, and our minds, and our hope to him. Instead Paul says to us: “^{3:1} [Since] then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Augustine. *The City of God*. Introduction and Translation by William Babcock. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012.

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