

## “Look Up”

Genesis 2:18-24 • Colossians 3:1-17

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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In the last few years, genealogy has become very popular thanks to the internet and the much easier availability of historical information. Companies like Ancestry.com have been behind this increased interest people have in finding out about their family history. But I think a big part of it is that in our fast-paced, modern, disconnected society we have lost that sense of inherited identity. A hundred years ago most people didn't have to think about who they were or where they came from. They inherited their identity from their parents and family. If your parents were farmers, chances are you would also be a farmer. Before the Twentieth Century, families often lived in the same place for generations. Today the average American moves every 13 years. Sometimes it's across town, often it's across the country.

As a result, many people are searching for some sort of rooted identity. One of the genealogy websites was running a commercial recently with a middle-aged man talking about how he had grown up thinking he was primarily German. His family even participated in German-heritage events. But after using one of the DNA test kits he discovered that his ancestry was more Scottish than German. So he says he exchanged his lederhosen for a kilt. The message is that he wanted to act like his identity.

Last week we learned that the Apostle Paul gave us the results of *our* identity test. He tells us that in baptism our old self was buried with Jesus and that in his resurrection we received a new identity. Now in chapter 3 he begins by saying, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” In other words, Paul is saying that if you've experienced God's presence in your life it's absurd to keep living as if nothing's changed. That would be like continuing to make payments to the bank on your car loan even

after you've paid it off completely. What Paul's saying is basically, “it's time to stop living like your old identity and start living this new one. It's time to exchange your lederhosen for a kilt.”

One of the things I love about Paul's letters is that he begins them with such lofty theology but then he gets down to specifics about what it means for your life. So what does it mean to set your mind on things that are above instead of things on earth? Transformed relationships! That's why I think this is such a great passage for weddings, because marriage is where pretty much every relationship issue possible comes up. So God gives us some instructions on how to make it go smoothly.

The rest of this passage is divided into two sections, one concerning the things you and I need to *stop* doing because of our relationship with Jesus and the other concerning the things we must *start* doing. The things that you must stop doing are so serious that Paul says we are to put them to death. He mentions sexual immorality, impurity, evil desire, covetousness (which he links with idolatry), anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk (which would include the kind of jokes you tell), and lying. Each of these things will hurt the other person in a relationship and will damage the relationship itself.

One way to think about this is that these things are like bricks that you are using to build a wall between you and the other person. When you lie to someone you are putting a brick in that wall. Anger is not always bad but when you express that anger, especially in the form of wrath, it adds bricks to the wall. Slander is a form of lying because it involves lying *about* someone.

Paul reminds us that those are all practices of our old self. We need to stop hurting one another like that because that's not who we are anymore. In verse 12 he tells us that instead we are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. And so we need to live consistent with our true

identity. I love the image he uses here. It's like getting dressed up. What you wear can send a powerful message to others about you. One of the reasons police officers wear a uniform is that it communicates who they are almost instantly without having to tell anyone. Commentator Kent Hughes says, then, that you and I are supposed to put on the "wardrobe of the saints." When we put on these attributes it communicates to others that we are God's.

The attributes you are to put on begins with compassionate hearts. This concerns your attitude toward others. When you see people suffering are you moved to compassion, which literally means to "suffer with?" Or are you more likely to avoid the person who is suffering? Jesus always went to those who were sick or marginalized. He not only healed people but he showed them that they were valuable to him. He didn't have to but he touched the lepers he was healing. Matthew 9 tells us, "When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had *compassion* for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

To compassionate hearts we add kindness, meaning we act on our feelings of compassion. As followers of Jesus there is never a reason to be unkind. Kindness means acting in the best interest of the other person. To kindness we add meekness or gentleness. Many people consider meekness to be weakness but it's not. It takes great strength under absolute control to be gentle.

Paul then gives us two attributes that go hand in hand. These two are absolutely critical to relationships, especially marriages: patience and forgiveness. The opposites – impatience and unforgiveness – are at the root of many broken relationships. We are to put on "patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other." Paul goes on to tell us the source of your ability to forgive – God has forgiven you! He says, "as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

Finally, in verse 14 Paul says, "And above all these put on love, which binds everything

together in perfect harmony." In our culture today we have a very distorted understanding of love. We think of love as a feeling we have toward someone, a feeling that we can't really control. We "fall" in love. Some people claim to fall *out* of love. Paul says "put on love." Love is not so much a feeling but a commitment. Jesus told us and also demonstrated what it means to love. In John 15 Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." And then he did. As Jesus showed us, love is primarily about self-sacrifice. That's why love binds everything together in perfect harmony. When everyone gives up their own desires for the needs of others there will be perfect harmony.

Here's the thing. None of these things that you and I are to put on come naturally. They are all foreign to our human nature. We are all much better at anger and covetousness than we are at sacrifice and patience. So how do we go about putting them on? Verses 1 and 16 hold the keys. In verse one we are to *seek* the heavenly things. Verse 2 repeats the idea saying that you are to "set your mind" on those divine attributes. The way we do that is found in verse 16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." The best way to seek the way of Jesus is to read and meditate on God's Word and to meet with each other to apply it to your lives. We all need the church. The result will be the kind of community that can only happen because of Jesus, a community that is not divided by religion or race or nationality, but instead is a community where Christ is all, and in all, where the peace of Christ rules in our hearts and where we are truly thankful and it shows. Let's be that kind of church.

*Amen.*