Portions: “A More Mature Palate” Memory Verse: Colossians 4:2

Feb. 5th, 2023 Scripture Reading: Philippians 4?

Today we are diving into the third chapter of Paul’s letter to the church in Colossae. He has so far expounded much on the supremacy of Christ. In fact, not much else that Paul says makes any sense without keeping in mind his thoughts on Jesus. We have called this series “Portions” because, when it comes to our cultural landscape, the variety and accessibility of different worldviews, religions, opinions, perspectives and such is much like a buffet where we are encouraged to pick and choose, mix and match and come up with our own flavor of divinity. Paul’s message to the Colossians than and to us now is “No, you can’t do that. Jesus doesn’t work like that. He is all or nothing. Fill your plate with him and him alone. He is God revealed to us, the very image of the invisible. All wisdom and knowledge are found in him!” Go to the buffet, and choose Christ!

A little over a month ago, our church hosted Christmas Camp. And I hope I didn’t just give Ms. Sue flashbacks. It was an all day event where kids came to play games and make crafts and learn about not only the Christmas story, but about why Jesus came to this earth at all: to die on our behalf, to save us from our sin, to rise again and ensure eternal life for all who believe. It was a busy week, and we were able to share the gospel with a number of kids who were clueless about it, so praise God! During our Christmas Camp event, we served the kids lunch, and I wonder if you could guess what was on the menu: mac and cheese, corn dogs, chicken nuggets…all kid favorites. We can predict what a kid will like to eat because kids like to eat junk food. I mean, we all do…I know I am not above it, but when I do have dinner proper, I do not have to be convinced and coaxed into eating my vegetables. I autonomously place them on my plate and eat them. I have matured over the years. I no longer eat like a child or make culinary decisions like a child. My palate has matured.

Maturity is the main thrust of Colossians chapter 3. Paul is calling us out of a child like understanding and into Christ. He wants his fellow Christians to “taste and see that the Lord is good!” as Psalm 34 puts it. Put down the junk food and step into maturity as we partake of Christ and his glory. That is exactly where we left off last week. We start with last week’s memory verse: “Therefore, if you were raised with Christ, look for the things that are above where Christ is sitting at God’s right side.” You can’t get more supreme that that! Verse 2: “Think about the things above and not things on earth” Let me just stop there for a second. There are a few things to glean from just this sentence. Paul is going to go on to explain the what here in a moment…what are the things above that we should think about? He lists those, but I want to stop and notice that our actions and the words we say, the beliefs we hold, the decisions we make…these all begin somewhere. We do not just jump into sin…there is a prelude to any sin and that is a thought. Everything we do or say begins as a thought. And yes, that includes our beliefs and what we hold to be true of God. I have to decide in my mind to trust this book. I sometimes have to tell my heart not to fear. I sometimes have to tell my soul to sing praise to the Lord. I often have to tell my tongue to staaaaay. These functions are dictated by our thought life. And so Paul cuts through all the noise and the excuses we could make and the people we could blame to bluntly say, think about the things that are above. That is a good starting place, that is going to solve a lot of our human problems. Amen? So it sounds dumb to say, but we need to think about our thoughts. This is something we have to learn to do…kids do not do this naturally. Just like we know what they want for lunch, we know what they are going to say when asked, “Why did you do that? Who do you think you are? What are you going to do now?” The answer is too classic: “I don’t know.” I have banned my kids from giving me that answer. When they say it, I remind them that they are not allowed to say that. They need to put some thought into what they have done and why they did that thing. I don’t know how well this strategy works, but Paul is essentially saying the same thing…think about what you think about. Is my mind on things above? Critique yourself…grow into maturity.

READ 3-4 Paul references the hiddenness of our lives in Christ. Remember, he is talking to people who are being bombarded with the gnostic idea of hidden information…secret knowledge. We see the same today. Any infomercial or new product pitch claims to have a better solution for some problem. It’s a solution you don’t have access to so buy our thing and then you too will be in the know. Paul is saying, we don’t need hidden knowledge, we know that we ourselves need to be hidden in Christ, who by the way, is our life. Maybe you have said about someone, “Sports is his life” Or “She just lives for her music.” Can people look at our lives and say, “They really love Jesus. Jesus is their life.”? And if people were able to say that about someone, they would also be able to note a certain maturity about that person. This verse is a companion to other places in Paul’s letters: “To live is Christ, to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21) or “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). In other words, Christ defines our life.

Now Paul gets into some specifics: READ 5 -11

Now this list that Paul gives us is not all that surprising…most of us would be able to duplicate such a list. We easily recognize these items as bad things. Sexual immorality, corruption, greed, rage, obscene language. Even the general unchristian public would agree that these things are generally to be avoided. But here is where we differ…our reasoning. See, we don’t just think murder and envy and rage and immorality are bad because they hurt other people; they are bad ultimately because they are an affront to the image of God in which we were created. And as such, these things are not to just be avoided, what does Paul say in verse 5? They are to be put to death! Why? Because Jesus was put death on account of these things. As Paul said earlier, he nailed all these sins to his cross When we fill up on Jesus, when he becomes our all in all, he empowers us to put to death our sins. He empowers us to enter more and more into maturity.

So now that he as addressed the things below, Paul now shares with us what he means by the things above. READ 12-17

Once again, not many of these items listed will come as a surprise, but also once again, it is the reasoning behind the mature behavior that sets us apart. Why do we forgive others? There are many reasons: to have peaceable relations, to smooth things over, to move on, to set ourselves free from a grudge…but in Paul’s thinking, the ultimate and primary reason we forgive is because God has forgive us! We have been forgiven and so we forgive. It’s not at all because of some sort of uprightness in us, it is an action we take solely based on the actions that God has taken on our behalf. He forgave, and so because we live into his image in us, we too forgive. We live peacefully not because we are peaceful but because Christ in us is peaceful. We live according to his word not because we are such great students of it, but because the word of Christ dwells richly within us. Verse 17 ties up any loose ends we might find by saying: “Whatever you do, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Can you imagine what our lives would be like if we actually lived this way? Oh the things I would not say…the hurt I would not inflict…the anger I would not allow to get the best of me…Yes, I need to learn to be self-controlled, but this maturity that Paul talks about is not just a matter of catching myself before I sin, it is a matter of allowing Jesus to become master over my thought life. When that is the case, then there are comebacks and insults and comments that will not even occur to me to utter. When Christ is my all in all, these smart remarks are never even conceived in my mind and so they never give birth out of my mouth.

Paul closes out this chapter with a glimpse of what life would be like if we were to do everything in the name of Jesus. And he gets pretty specific here as he focuses on the homelife of the average family. READ 3:18-4:2

Paul addresses everyone here. As he begins, “Wives, submit to your husbands…” you can kind of feel the Colossian men nodding along. Yeah, you tell em Paul. That is the way it should be.” But then Paul sets his sights on the men…love your wives. You are not off the hook here. In fact, yours is the harder calling. Any submission your wife might give in a marriage is contingent upon the amount of love they receive from their husband. In fact, I would say, in most cases, wives do not at all mind submitting to a man when they trust him to always love them. Children are to obey…I love this verse. I quote it faithfully to my kids. I love the implications of such a verse and I am so glad it is here for us, in the bible for all to see. And why are kids to obey? Because the parents are always right and wise and patient and deserving? No…kids obey and adult children too, because it pleases the Lord. So it could end there and we could all go home inspired, but Paul insists on turning the tables on parents as well. And specifically, fathers…do not provoke your children in a way that discourages them…Oh. And we were doing so well…

Now a note here…the CEB the Common English Bible, which is the translation in your pew is a good translation. If you have it, it is readable and useful, but no translation is perfect and the CEB drops the ball here in this verse. Verse 21 they render as “Parents, don’t provoke your children…” while in the Greek, Paul unequivocally uses the word “Fathers”. The verse should read, “Fathers, do not provoke your children…” Now a few notes about this…yes the ancient world was much more patriarchal. The household was ruled by the father and yes, this verse does not give mothers permission now to be the one’s to provoke their children, so in some sense the term   
“Parents” works decently. But in another sense, the words is “Fathers”. Don’t change a word just to appease the predilections of a finnicky culture! The word is “Fathers” because fathers play a crucial role in the leading of their family…not to be in control or to rule with an iron fist, but to exemplify and model the love of Christ within their homes. Make no mistake, this role is the privilege but more so the duty of the father. This in no way diminishes the role of mothers, but especially in a culture like ours that wants to denigrate the evils of the patriarchy, I want to be clear about what the text actually says.

And if things were not controversial enough, Paul goes on to tell slaves to obey their masters. Okay…big sigh…interestingly, the CEB does not shy away from that term. Now of course we need to read the entire section. Paul has a word for those who own slaves as well…they are to be just and fair because they have themselves become slaves to Christ. They have a Master in heaven. We tend to frown on this whole section because we want Paul to tell these slave owners to set their slaves free. That seems to be the only Christian response here. How can someone be fair and just while still enslaving another person? As it reads, Paul seems to be okay with slavery. There is some historical background we must consider. First of all, we have to separate slavery in ancient Rome from slavery as it was found in our own country. While the same term is used, the two are not the same. In ancient thought, slaves were considered property, but they were also people, which is the concept that Paul specifically endorses. He wants to point out that they too are created in the image of God. But slaves at that time actually had a better shot at social advancement within the service of their masters. Free peasants had very little prospect at a better life, and unlike slavery as we know it, most would have been able to buy their freedom at some point. This is not to say that the life of a slave could not be harsh or dehumanizing, but it is so say that simply freeing all one’s household slaves would not necessarily improve their lot. Paul is not an activist speaking out against a man-made institution, but he is speaking life in Christ to those involved in it. Slaves obey, and masters treat them well, the title each might bear pales under their primary identity in Christ. In either case, each person, slave or master, is to serve the Lord. Those who do evil, whether slave or master, will reap the consequences without discrimination. And so the dynamic in this world that Paul describes is one in which a Master would love to have slavers who are Christians…they work even harder and more respectfully and slaves do not mind working for a Christian master because with

him they are treated with all fairness and justly.

Now Paul sums it all up with one more admonition: “Keep on praying and guard your prayers with thanksgiving.” This takes us right back to where we started today. Back in verse two Paul says think about the things above…how can we do this? How do we keep our mind on the things above…we keep on praying!

In this way we keep soldering on into maturity. When our minds are on the things above we don’t need to worry about our status in this life. We can keep our minds on heaven when we are laid up in the hospital, when we have just been shunned or insulted by an enemy, when we have an argument with our spouse, or even if we find ourselves under the ownership of another person. These circumstances are seen for what they are…temporary. Christ is our all in all. We keep our minds set on him.

As we enter more fully into maturity in our relationship with Jesus, we will see our palates mature as well. We will not crave the same things. We will not reach for the same old dish that used to be our favorite. We will not think the same thoughts. We will experience transformation.

In his book, “The Good and Beautiful God” James Bryan Smith shares the story of a man named Carey. Carey was a good father, was successful in his career and even taught Sunday School at his church, but because he traveled a lot for work and had ample opportunity, Carey struggled with pornography. He found his plate being filled with things he should not have been partaking in. Carey still craved the junk. But with the help of a good pastor, with some patience and purposeful prayer, Carey found that his tastes began to change and, ironically, the things that this world considers to be only for the mature were in fact the very things keeping him from spiritual maturity. He was able to conclude that, yes, he was a sinner, but more importantly, he was a child of God! Carey discovered freedom once he anchored his identity in Christ. He had the buffet of all that the world offers there at his fingertips, and yet, he chose not to partake but rather to find his fill in Christ. His palate had matured and he found he no longer had to eat the junk food. May the same be true of us…may we step into maturity and allow Christ to be our all in all. Amen.