Set Your Mind on Things Above
Colossians 2:16-3:4

Paul begins this passage by saying, v16, 'Therefore…' so he's building off what's gone before. And up until now we've seen how these Christians in Colossae are coming under certain influences that are telling them, that if they really want to grow spiritually, and flourish as an individual and experience that fullness of life we're all looking for, Jesus is ok, but he's just not enough, what you really need is this… and you can fill in the blanks. But in response to that Paul's been saying, 'no! Christ is everything! All God's fullness dwells in him, and it's in him that you'll experience fullness of life.'

And then he says, v16, '*therefore...*' Given that Jesus is everything and has done everything you need to thrive and flourish and enjoy real fullness, 'let no one pass judgment on you…' and v18, 'Let no one disqualify you…' because it seems that these Colossians have got people telling them that if they really want to be in, if they really want to experience all that God has for them, you've got to stop doing some things and start doing other things, like religious stuff. You've got to avoid certain food and drink, and you've got to start observing certain days. And Paul says, no you don't and one reason you don't is in v23, these things 'are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.'

These religious rules and practices, and the people who promote them, might all look very spiritual, they might all be very religious, but they have zero power to stop the indulgence of the flesh.

Now, what is that? What does it mean to indulge the flesh, and why would we want to stop doing that? And how could we stop doing that? Well, that's what we're going to look at.

Indulging the Flesh
Now when Paul uses the word 'flesh' like here in v23, he doesn't always means the same thing. Sometimes he means our physical bodies – our literal flesh and bones. But at other times, like here, he means something else. He means the sphere or domain of sin's control in our lives. The flesh is our life lived apart from God. It's our thoughts and emotions and wants and desires, our life, our *flesh*, lived without any reference to God. And it's hostile to God; it chafes under what he says is good and right. It's why some translations call it our *sinful nature.*

And we're born with it. Theologians call it Original Sin. Now, personally, I don't know how anyone could deny that. Some people do, and they think we're all basically good and we just need to be given the right chances in life or a decent education and we'll all turn out ok. I can only think they've never looked after a two year old toddler. Because I don't think any sane parent would deny the fact that we are born sinners. To deny it you'd have to deny the toy your toddler just threw at you, 'no that toy doesn't exist!'. Or, moving up the ages, you'd have to deny the business man, in his suit, I saw blind drunk at 7.30 in the morning in Geneva this week, trying to negotiate his way around a scaffolding pole. Or, bringing it closer to home, you'd have to deny the burning anger you feel when someone crosses you. Or the afront you feel when you're not chosen for something, or you don't get your way.

But the scary thing is that Paul says we *indulge* the flesh. So what does it mean to *indulge* something? Imagine a parent indulging a child. They give them what they want, don't they. In fact, when you say, 'he was an indulged child' what you mean is, his parents gave him more than was good for him, they let him get away with stuff they shouldn't, they pampered him more than they should.

And the problem is we can indulge our flesh. We can live lives of self-indulgence. In fact, our two-year-old-toddler-self tells us we start indulging our flesh, and demand others indulge it, as soon as we can do anything! And in Galatians Paul lists some of the stuff we indulge, Gal 5:19, '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.'

Now, some of those are outright bad, aren't they? But others start off good, or are at least neutral, but when indulged, become bad. I mean take sex, or anger, or jealousy, they can all be good and right in the right place, or the right time – in fact the absence of them would be wrong. I remember counselling a man whose wife had committed adultery with his boss. And there was this total absence of anger or jealousy. And I was sat there thinking – this is abnormal, in this situation you should feel anger, you should feel jealous for your wife. But to *indulge* them, to feed them, to make the thing itself your chief end, or to make the thing itself its own pleasure, then things start to go seriously wrong.

And yet, our Western culture, currently, is practically built on indulging the flesh. We don't call it that, of course. We call it being authentic. And to really thrive, we've got to let the authentic *us* out. We've got to set it free and nurture it and feed it and not allow anyone else to stop us.

Ok, but why do we indulge the flesh? For two reasons: for pleasure and for pain. Firstly, we indulge the flesh because it feels good. Because it's pleasurable. Because it gives us a kick. There's an excitement to an illicit relationship; there's a kick in getting angry; there's a certain happiness that comes with drinking too much; there's a rush from watching what you shouldn't watch.

But we also do it for pain. When we're hurting, or sad, or lonely, or feel the downward drag of self-loathing – we indulge to anaesthetise the pain. Maybe we binge, or overeat, or drink, or watch porn, or spend, or allow the downward spiral of self-pity to accelerate – we indulge our flesh, because we think it will numb the pain and make us feel better.

So… if it brings pleasure, or numbs our pain, why would you want to stop that? Why look for something, as Paul says in v23, that has the power to stop the indulgence of the flesh? Well, for a few reasons. When you indulge in something, what you can find is that, eventually, the pleasure you had in this thing begins to wear thin. It's become a thing to be used, and, as such, it begins to lose its beauty. You've put all this weight on it to give you pleasure, whether that's food or sex, or possessions, and you discover that's it's robbed you of its pleasure. It's just become a thing to be consumed.

Now why is that? Because all along the stuff that brings pleasure and delight in life was supposed to lift your eyes to something higher, to a greater pleasure, to the ultimate joy-giver. As CS Lewis said, it was like a sunbeam, to be enjoyed, but also to run your eyes up the sunbeam to the sun. But when you make it the sun, and seek happiness in the thing itself, it grows stale. And you realise it can never fill you like you thought it might. You discover that you can have all the money, all the food, all the women, all the wine in the world, and still be hungry.

But maybe you also realise that giving free reign to your desires doesn't lead to you flourishing at all. And it dawns on you that the really fruitful people you admire, the kind of people who spread joy around them, who make others' lives better, and change the world around them for good, aren't self-absorbed, or self-indulgent. They aren't feeding their bitterness or unforgiveness, they aren't covetous or greedy, they don't keep getting angry with others, they're not ambitious for themselves alone. And you realise, that rather than self-indulgence making you the kind of person you want to become, it destroys you. Like a snake eating its tail, if you're always turning in on yourself, and feeding yourself with yourself, you end up consuming yourself.

But you can also want to stop indulging your flesh because you realise you're trapped. You thought that living for yourself, or giving yourself to something, would bring you pleasure, or *make* you in some way, but what you find is that you're just becoming more selfish, and your relationships are being wrecked. Or you find you need ever more of this thing and you're becoming hooked. You need freeing, but you discover you have no power to free yourself. You want to experience fullness of life but you realise you're empty to do anything about it – and indulging your flesh can't get you there.

So what do you do? Well, maybe you turn to religion.

Trapped in the Shadows

Now maybe you grew up in an environment where Christianity was all about what you did. And if you were at church three times on a Sunday, and kept the rules, God might just accept you. Or maybe it was about what you didn't do, like drinking, or watching movies, or who you didn't mix with, or places you didn't go. Or maybe you didn't grow up in a church at all, and it's those very things that make you distrust the whole idea of Christianity, because you can see how it all ends in pride, or worse, false humility, and finger pointing at those who don't do what they should do, or do do what they shouldn't. And you think, I don't want anything to do with that.

But, interestingly, most of those things are done, or rules imposed, to try and stop the indulgence of the flesh. And yet, it's exactly that kind of religion that Paul takes aim at here. Verse 16, 'Let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.' Don't let anyone tell you you're not making the grade because of what you do, or don't, eat or drink; or whether you do, or don't keep the yearly, monthly, weekly Jewish celebrations. Because the path to fullness is not about the diet you follow, or the days you keep. All this might look very spiritual, Paul says, but you're not more acceptable, or more holy, or more spiritual, for declining a drink than accepting

one. You're not more spiritual because you do celebrate some festival, than if you don't.

These things, Paul says in v17, are just 'a shadow of the things to come.' All along the Old Testament laws on foods and feasts were pointing to a greater reality to come. But if you think they're the reality themselves, that's like falling in love with someone's shadow. I mean, what would you think if someone came to me and said they'd that they'd seen someone's shadow and they wanted to spend the rest of their life with that shadow, and marry it, because they knew that shadow would complete them. Or imagine if one day you're friend refused to talk to you but only ever wanted to talk to your shadow. You'd say they were a sandwich short of a picnic.

But it wasn't just diets and days. These Colossians were also being told that the way to really flourish, and escape the flesh, was by asceticism, probably by some serious fasting, or by having ecstatic visions. Verse 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.' In other words, they were being offered the chance to become a part of a spiritual elite, who fast for longer, or whose worship is better, or whose visions are greater. But Paul says, that far from that *stopping* the indulgence of the flesh, it feeds it, because it makes you proud. It puffs you up, because now you're better than others – you're in the elite. So, the kind of religion that Paul describes in v21 as "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch', is itself indulging the flesh.

But, it can all appear so right, can't it! As Paul says in v23, these things 'have an appearance of wisdom' – I mean, of course rules and regulations, or abusing our body, or becoming super-spiritual, will bring our flesh under control, won't it? No, says Paul, precisely because the flesh can't fight itself. You see, becoming more proud of your moral or religious achievements is not an answer to your pride, is it? And whilst there's a self-control that's a fruit of the Spirit, there's also a huge self-control that's born of our desire to be something. You can be incredibly self-controlled and self-disciplined and there be nothing of God in it at all. Just look at some of our top athletes.

So, no wonder Paul says that this stuff has no power to really set you free. Instead those who get caught up in this kind of religion, v19, are 'not holding fast to the Head' who is Christ.

Ok, so what can do it? What can break the power of self-indulgence and living for ourselves. What can bring you up and out of the shadows?

Living in the Light

Now shadows have a certain beauty, don't they? Think of the shade of a tree. But think that the shadow's the tree, and you'll miss the even greater beauty of the tree, and the sun that shines upon it. And Paul says that the Old Testament laws were pointers to something far greater and far more beautiful. Verse 17: 'These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.' Because it's in Christ that true freedom comes. And it's in finding a greater pleasure that all these earthly pleasures find their right place.

And he gives us three things to do with Christ that do have the power to stop the indulgence of the flesh.

Firstly, ***understand who you are in Christ.*** Verse 20, 'If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world…' Chapter 3:1, 'If then you have been raised with Christ…' If you're a Christian, Paul says, then something extraordinary has happened to you. By faith you're united with Christ, and what's true of him is true of you. Because he died, you died; because he rose, you can experience new life; because he broke the power of sin and satan, you can live free. And now, when God the Father looks on you, he smiles. He rejoices over you with singing. Because he sees you in Christ.

So, you don't have to fight the flesh to make yourself acceptable to him, or to be *in*. In fact, there is nothing you can do to make yourself more acceptable to God, or more loved by him, or more *in* than you already are. Christ has done it all for you. His death and resurrection, and you being united to him by faith, has fundamentally changed your status, and when you understand that, Paul says, it will change how you live. I mean, think of a young man who gets married. Before he was single, so he lived like a single man. Then he gets married, he's united to his wife. Does he go on living like a single man? No! From now on he lives like a married man. He does what married men do. Or imagine someone who moves from England to live in Switzerland. Does she carry on living like she was in England? Well she could, but that'd be a shame! Instead she can put away the umbrella, and her wellie boots – I won't be needing those anymore, and she can start enjoying chocolate and cheese and spend her days triaging and recycling. She can begin to live like she's in Switzerland - because she is.

You see, the danger is that we're like the man in the street who's forgotten who he is. Instead, when you become a Christian your life changes for ever: you're in Christ; you died to sin, so you don't live in it; you changed allegiances, so you live like it. And the degree to which we understand who we are in Christ is the degree to which we'll live in the power and freedom of who we are in Christ. Dead to sin, but alive to God.

I read a story last week of two sisters who were party monsters. They partied hard! And then they became Christians. And a few weeks later they received an invite to another party, and they had to RSVP, so they did. And they replied, 'we regret that we cannot attend, but we both recently died!' And when we know deep down that we died with Christ and now live to righteousness, we'll be as unresponsive to the pull of the flesh as a corpse is.

But secondly, Paul says**, *set your mind on things above.*** Verse 1, 'Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.' Verse 2, 'Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.'

Complete this expression, 'he's so heavenly minded he's….' What? Of no earthly use. That's what we think, isn't it. You can be so caught up in other-worldly thoughts you have no useful, people-helping, joy-bringing, world-changing thoughts for down here. In fact, we think that to be well-grounded, or to have

your feet on the ground are strongly positive, don't we, whilst having your head in the clouds is negative.

So what does Paul mean? He means to live all of life down here in the light of heaven's perspective. It means to, increasingly, allow the fact that Christ is Lord and sovereign over all, shape all – all of your life, including how, and in what, you seek your ultimate pleasure. You see Paul reminds us that Christ is seated at the right hand of God, and in Psalm 16 David tells us that at God's right hand are pleasures for evermore. So all our earthly pleasures are like CS Lewis's sun beams… they're to run our eyes along the beam to the sun, to the source of true and lasting and ultimate pleasure; to the fount of all true joy and happiness – which is Christ.

And when Christ is your greatest pleasure, and his values, and his priorities, and he himself increasingly becomes the centre of your attention, and not yourself, you can truly begin to enjoy this other stuff as it was meant to be. Not as a god, but as a gift. Not as your all, but as a ray of light from the one who is all. Because when you know he's your sovereign Lord, and you know that increasingly, you can't help but respond differently to those daily temptations to indulge yourself.

And so, far from that resulting in your life being of no earthly use, you'll be of far more use than when you're trapped in the ever decreasing circle of self-absorption. Instead you can live the fruitful and effective life you want to. You can face suffering and trials with poise, because you know this life is not it, that there are pleasures at God's right hand that this life and this world know nothing of. And you can give your life in self-less service, rather than spend your life in self-indulgence, because you know there are greater realities than your ego. You can stand up for truth or for justice, on campus or at work, and face the cost of doing so, because you know the court of popular opinion is not the Supreme Court. There is a Supreme Justice, but it's not your colleague, it's Jesus.

So to set your mind on things above doesn't detach you from this world's problems, it empowers you to live life in the world amongst all its problems, and bring Christ's love and joy and peace and solutions to those problems.

But the third power of Christ to help you stop living self-indulgently is ***being in community.*** Verse 19, these others he says, are '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.' So how can you grow and become all you were meant to be? Not by striking out on your own, as your own authentic you, but by being in the community of Christ's body, his church. Because we need each other to support us when we're weak, to lift us up when we fall, and to challenge us when we're in danger. To tell us, 'hey, look up, Christ is seated at the right hand of God.'