New Identity, New People, New Behaviour
Colossians 3:5-17

A New Identity

Maybe you saw in the news the story of the Russian double agent living in Britain, who was poisoned with a nerve agent. Fortunately he and his daughter were recently released from hospital. And that may be the last we hear of them, because, according to the news, they'll be issued with new identities, and their lives will never be the same again.

But if stories of spies and nerve agents doesn't interest you, what about the film *The Sound of Music*? Captain von Trapp, with seven children, has a new governess, Maria, come to the house to look after them. But when Maria asks the housekeeper about the military lifestyle the children are made to live, the housekeeper replies: 'The von Trapp children don't play. They march.' Because, obviously, if you're a child of Captain von Trapp, that's what you do, you march.

But that's always the case, isn't it: what you do, the life you live, is intimately tied up with your identity, with who you are, isn't it? The Russian double agent's life will change forever, because *who he is* is going to change. The von Trapps march, because they're von Trapps.

I mean, think about living here in Switzerland and how your identity, how you think of yourself, affects the way you live. Maybe you're Dutch, and that matters to you, so whilst you might live in Switzerland, you always make sure you have a supply of stroopwafels and an orange t-shirt. You're British, so you wouldn't dream of going without Marmite, in fact you go through elaborate schemes to get it past security at the airport. You're American, so you shop at the American Market in Nyon. It's who you are.

Or turn that on its head. Maybe the fact that *where* you live has changed has fundamentally changed *the way* you live – yes, you're American, or Dutch, or whatever, but now you live in Switzerland, so, *obviously*, eating a pot full of melted cheese suddenly becomes a delicacy. How you think of yourself, your identity, has changed in some way, you're in Switzerland, so you live differently.

And last week we saw that as Paul begins chapter 3 he reminds these Colossian Christians, and you and me, that when we become Christians our identity changes. By faith we're united with Christ. So when he died, we died: chapter 3:3, 'for you have died'. When he was raised from the dead, we were raised with him: v1, 'you have been raised with Christ'. And now, v3, 'your life is hidden with Christ in God.' That is who you are.

And because this is who you are, you're going to think differently about life, Paul says: v1, 'seek the things that are above' v2, 'set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth.' But not just think differently, but live differently.

Old Behaviours

Look at v5, 'Put to death therefore what is earthly in you.' And he lists 5 sins to kill. In other words, because your identity has changed and now you're in Christ,

because you're setting your mind on things above and not stuff on the earth, kill the stuff that doesn't fit with your new identity.

This week, Su and I went for a walk with my Aunt and Uncle who were visiting. And as we were walking, my Uncle noticed a large weed in the grass, and he said that he and my Aunt fought this running battle over this weed in their garden – because she really liked it - because it had a nice flower, but he hated it, and kept pulling it up, because it was a weed, and wanted to take over the garden. And the problem is that we can have that conflicted attitude to our sin, can't we? We can be like my Aunt - we know it's a sin, but actually we quite like it. But Paul is saying, no, you need to root it out and kill it.

And look at his first list of 5 sins: v5, 'Put to death what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry.' Now, regardless of what was going on in Colossae, if you were to take a look at our current western culture, and think through what's wrong with it, I suspect that pretty soon you'd be talking about the pornification of culture, and the elevation of sex as a god, and alongside that greed and materialism, and the insatiable drive for more. So whatever these guys in Colossae were struggling with, this list is strangely pertinent to us too isn't it? I mean which of us doesn't feel the pull of porn, or see its influence in our families and friends? Which of us doesn't experience the desire for ever more stuff, or for a different kind of life in ways that go beyond the aspirational and instead eats away at us and destroys our sense of contentment in God? Which of us hasn't felt the temptation to find our sense of worth and significance in stuff, or in lifestyle, and sacrificed other stuff for it – a state of heart Paul calls here, 'covetousness, which is idolatry'?

And Paul says, because of who you now are in Jesus, because you're dead to sin and alive to him, put this stuff to death. Don't tolerate it, kill it. Don't feed it, starve it. Don't give it air to breathe, suffocate it. Don't play with it, execute it. Sin is your mortal enemy, Paul says, so treat it like that.

But how can you do it? It's fine for Paul to say 'kill your sin', but how do you go about that? Well, I think Paul gives us three means of attack. Firstly, he's already told us that it begins with the way you think. To set our minds on things above means to begin to see all of your life as under Christ's Lordship. But it also means that when your thoughts have time to wander, they wander up, not down. When you're not thinking of anything else, begin to train yourself to think about Christ and his kingdom and his power and his glory, and not your wrong desires.

But the second thing Paul does is name these sins. And when we begin to get honest about our sin, and name it, that's when we start to make progress. Because sin grows and festers in the dark, doesn't it? But bring it out into the light, begin to be specific… not just, 'well, this week isn't going so well, I'm struggling a bit', but 'this is my sin, this is what the problem is, this is what I've done, this is what I'm doing, and that's why I'm struggling', then we begin to move forward. The fingers of sin's stranglehold on our necks begins to be prized off.

I mean, think about the very first chapters of the Bible. What's one of the first things Adam and Eve do after they sin? They hide. They cover themselves. But Paul names the sin, and that undoes our tendency to hide – behind masks, and words, and pretence. And instead, Paul has said, your life is hidden with Christ in God, that's where you're to hide – in him, not from him. Confess your sin, name it, to God, to yourself, and probably to a brother or sister you know you can trust. Maybe this seems a trivial example to you, it wasn't to me, but I once said to a friend how I was struggling with frustration over something. And he said, Martin, shall we call it what the Bible calls it, let's call it *anger*? And naming it was a big step to dealing with it.

But the third thing Paul does here, that can help us kill our sin, is tell us how God sees it. Verse 6, 'On account of these the wrath of God is coming.' So how can we cling to, and tolerate that which God hates? How can we hang on to the stuff that Christ died for? If at the cross Jesus took God's wrath upon himself for this sin, how can I play with it and entertain it?

Now maybe you think the idea of God's wrath, of God being angry at sin, is unbecoming of God. But isn't the opposite the case? Wouldn't it be unbecoming, unfitting for who God is, if he didn't care about justice, or righteousness, or holiness? If he didn't care about the lives trashed by sexual sin, or by covetousness? If he didn't care that we put created things in the position of the creator, and gave our lives to them in worship rather than him? And God hates sin because he loves us, and he loves the honour of his name. He wouldn't be God if he didn't.

And knowing that God hates sin, and because of it his wrath is coming, should be a great incentive to turn away from it.

But with that warning in our ears, Paul brings us back to the truth of how Christ has changed our lives: v7, 'In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.' You used to live like this, you used to live in a world where these sins were normal, they fitted your identity as one in the world, you used to be one destined for wrath, but now your world has changed and you're living in Christ, so, v8, 'You must put them all away.'

Now, when I was a doctor I was given a freebie T-shirt by the manufacturer of a medicine that helps regulate a particular bodily function. And on the front of the t-shirt was the name of the medicine, and on the back there were diagrams of how it worked, and I thought it was funny in a kind of doctors'-black-humour funny. But then I became a pastor, and the girls would refuse to let me wear it: 'Dad, we're not going out with you dressed like that! You're a pastor. You can't wear that.'

And that's the metaphor Paul uses next. Because you're in Christ, there are going to be certain behaviours you deliberately take off, just like a dodgy t-shirt. Verse 8, 'But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander and obscene talk from your mouth.' And if the first list of 5 sins was to do with sex and covetousness, this list of 5 is to do with anger. And in particular the kind of

anger and talk that wrecks a church and destroys relationships. And Paul seems to sum it up in v9-10, 'Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self [literally, the old man] with its practices and put on the new self [literally, the new man].'

So, because who you are has changed, because you're now united in Christ, because God has moved you from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of his Son; because you've gone from living in the old man, Adam, to the new man, Christ, because you've moved from the world of sin, and instead are now hidden with Christ in God, every day choose to dress differently. Think differently, behave differently, and now speak and interact with others differently. Because now you're in Christ, you've put on the new man.

And this new identity you have Paul says, in v10 'is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.' And the first chapter of the Bible tells us that everyone of us is created in God's image. But sin, and these sins, has defaced that image, but now, in Christ, that image is being restored. And you're part of that new creation, Paul says, of this great renewal of humanity that God's up to.

Which explains why he's so concerned about the kind of stuff that damages it.

A New People

Verse 11, 'Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.'

Now, how do you divide up the world? What boxes do you put people in? If you were a Jew in Paul's day, you divided the world into Jews and non-Jews – or Jews and Greeks as they called them – circumcised and uncircumcised. Or, if you were a Greek, you divided the world into Greeks and barbarians – and they called non-Greeks *barbarians* because of the way they spoke Greek: bar bar bar… which is how I speak French. But of course, if you were a barbarian you could at least look down your nose at the Scythians, those uncivilised northerners from around the Black Sea, who Josephus, the Jewish historian, called 'little better than wild animals!' But even if you had the misfortune to be a Scythian, at least you were a free Scythian and not a slave!

The problem is that when you begin to put people in boxes like this is becomes fertile soil for pride and prejudice to grow, doesn't it. Those immigrants; those left wingers, or right wingers; those conservatives, or liberals; those blacks, or whites. The moment our identity depends on our tribe, we can begin to think, I'm in and you're out; and I'm better than you. But in Christ, God is doing something very different. He is creating a new people, from every tribe, where humility, and not pride will be the marker. And he doesn't do that by imposing some dull, colourless uniformity, but by creating a deep, heart level unity.

You see, when you become a Christian, the most important thing you can say about yourself is not, I'm a Jew, or a Greek or a Freeman; or I'm French, or I earn more than you, or I have more degrees than you. It's that Christ is all and in all. And that radically changes how you see others.

Look at v12, where Paul describes us as 'God's chosen ones, holy and beloved', which is exactly how the Old Testament writers referred to God's people, Israel: Chosen by God; Set apart by God and for God; And loved by God. And that's you – if you're in Christ, Paul says, if you're a Christian, that's true of you. You'e chosen, you're holy, you are deeply loved. And it's also true of the person sitting next to you. And when you know that, it can't help but affect the way we treat others.

New Behaviours

Now, sadly, sometimes, when you hear people talking about being God's chosen, his elect, it has this whiff of pride about it, doesn't it? God chose *me*! Which is ironic, because when God choose Israel as his people he made it clear that it wasn't because they were better than anyone else, but because they were weaker and altogether less impressive than anyone else. And if God has chosen us in Christ it's not because having us on his team he somehow looks better, but because we were in a hole, and up to our necks in mud, and needed saving! And that should profoundly humble us, as well as fill our hearts with thankfulness.

You see, look at v12 where Paul now gives us 5 virtues, 5 pieces of clothing, to put on in place of the stuff we've taken off: 'Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.' And that's what it means to be God's chosen people, that's what God's elect really look like, that's the kind of clothing you'll recognise them by – that they will treat other people like that. So instead of using people or stuff for your own ends, in the 5 sins we're to kill, or the anger and words that destroy, in the 5 sins we're to take off, we're to put on heartfelt compassion for the other; kindness in a dog-eat-dog world; humility and meekness instead of self-promotion and point scoring, and patience, because you know we're all a work in progress. That's the kind of clothing God's people wear, Paul says.

And that will result, v13, in 'bearing with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgiving each other.' So Paul's not looking through rose-tinted spectacles, is he? He knows you're going to have complaints against others in the church. But when you feel like complaining, forgive. Don't nurse it, forgive it. In fact, Paul says, v13, 'as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.' In other words, when deep in your heart you know you're underserving of God's love, when you're painfully aware of your own sin because you name it, and yet you know he has forgiven you, you can't hold on to unforgiveness against another, can you?

Instead, v14, 'Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect unity.' Now, whether Paul has in mind a large cloak that covers everything else, or a belt, that stops everything else falling down, love isn't an optional extra, is it. It's the supreme virtue, and probably the hardest of them all. I mean, you can bear with another, but to bear with another *in love*, that's different. It's why we need God's resource, as Paul says in Romans, the Holy Spirit pours God's love into our hearts.

And so to finish, Paul says this local church should let two things influence their community life together. Verse 15, 'And let the peace of Christ rule…' and v16, 'Let the word of Christ dwell…'

Now, outside, there was something called *Pax Romana* – sure Rome might control everything; sure, Roman soldiers might be garrisoned in our town; sure, we might have to swear allegiance to the emperor, but at least the Roman army has brought peace and security. But inside the church Paul is calling for a different king of peace, not a pax Romana, built on the threat of force, but a pax Christiana – that when you understand that Christ is Lord, and we are hidden in him, we won't go to war with one another. Instead, Paul says, v15, 'Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts' – let it be the umpire, the referee of the match, the decider for how you live together. And as you do, he says in v15, 'Be thankful.' Instead of pointing out all that is wrong with the church, or your brothers and sisters, or maybe even your husband or wife, be thankful – train your eye to see God's grace at work in their lives, and thank him for it.

And then, v16, 'let the word of Christ dwell…' Let the message of God's grace to us in Jesus, let the Good News take up permanent residence. Open up the home of your heart, welcome it in, and let it stay. And, he says, 'let the word of Christ dwell in you *richly*' – not superficially, not shallow-ly, but deeply.

I mean, think about a BBQ. A piece of chicken on a BBQ tastes great. But marinate it in a sauce and you take it to another level. So let God's grace to you in Jesus, let his forgiveness of you, his love for you, his patience towards you, let that sink in and marinate your heart, individually, and corporately. Let it flavour your life, v16, 'teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.' Let God's love for you and others in Christ seep into how you influence others for good, whether that's your family, or friends, or homegroup.

And as you do, you'll sing. You know, when I feel gloomy, the best way to get my heart singing again is to set my mind on things above where Christ is, to remember that he loves me, and that inner songs starts again.

And then he finishes, v17: 'And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.' Now, what does it mean to do something in someone else's name? It means to represent them. So in everything, not just as we gather on Sunday, but as we spread out on Monday, you're in Christ, you've died and now you live in him, that's your new identity, so be thankful, and whatever you do, home, school, work, church, do it in his name.