

Pentecost 8+
Rev. Doug Floyd
Colossians 3

Years ago, Saturday Night Live had a skit that poked fun at the self-help and self-therapy industry. The character Stuart Smalley sat in front of a mirror and recited a series of affirmations like, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me.” The sketch was both funny and a little uncomfortable because the character was clearly full of self-doubt. These affirmations were supposed to give the character courage to face the day.

While this skit was poking fun, the need for a sense of self-worth is strong, and many people struggle with a sense of who they are. People seek to find identity and value through goals, jobs, affirmations, membership in groups, relationships, and even acts of service.

This reminds me of the story an Olympic athlete told of preparing for the Olympics and training to set a world record. The athlete said that once he achieved his goals, he struggled with depression because he still didn’t have an identity outside of accomplishments. We may compete with one another, hurt one another, and take advantage of one another because we struggle with a lack of self-worth.

When Paul writes the Colossians, he is trying to help them understand who they are in Christ. Their conversion to Christ is so much more glorious than they may realize. As N.T Wright observes, “Having taken off the shabby ‘clothes’ appropriate for the old age, the Colossians are to be fitted out with beautiful new robes, appropriate for their new position.”¹

At the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3, Paul highlights their new position in Christ. First, he mentions their identification with the death of Christ in baptism.

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. ²

These regulations are signs of true believers among the pagans, but ultimately, they are powerless to strengthen anyone especially believers in Christ. Though they may seem stringent

¹ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 146.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 2:20–23.

and even holy, Paul says that they are forms of self-indulgence. In Baptism, we die to the powers of culture that might pressure us to behave in certain patterns.

Even as we are buried with Christ in baptism, we are raised to newness of life. At the beginning of chapter three Paul writes,

If 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. ³

Our identity, our value, our affirmation are all rooted with Christ in God. Paul tells us to set our minds on things above. What are things above? This is not some abstract conception of heaven. Rather, it is tangible. We see a glimpse of this in Philippians.

[W]hatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. ⁴These traits are holy traits, are heavenly traits. We set our sights on higher things, not self-righteousness or selfish things.

We must come to rest in the fact that our sense of self-worth is not rooted in ourselves or in some narcissistic forms of self-affirmation, but rather in Christ Himself. Our lives are hid with Christ in God. We look to Jesus Christ who is the author and finisher of our salvation. In Christ, we discover that we cannot be separated from the love of God:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. ⁵

As we learn to rest in God's unshakeable love, we are free to humble ourselves, to let go of petty jealousies, to bless and encourage one another. In Christ, I can rejoice in the blessings that others enjoy even when I feel as though I am lacking those same blessings.

This is a sign that I am maturing and trusting God's absolute faithfulness toward me. In this position of trust or rest, In Christ, I am free to bless the saints around me, to honor them and to serve them.

In our world where people are striving for recognition and for limited resources, it is easy to see how people might face evil desires, covetousness, and more. In Christ, we are free to turn away from that life. For we enjoy the abundance of God's goodness and grace. There is no shortage.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 3:1–4.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 4:8–9.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 8:38–39.

The evil one and the world around us may try to make us think there is a lack, and we may not get our due.

In Christ, that is no longer the case. We can rest even when it feels like we've been overlooked, forgotten, and even despised. Christ is faithful. We are free to "put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." ⁶ Earlier in the letter, we were told that Christ is the image of the invisible God. Now we are told that in Christ, we are being renewed in knowledge after the image of the Creator. We are shining out as God's glorious images in this world. All the distinctions of class and race, and status are gone. We are all one in Christ.

Paul reminds us that we are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. If we can truly rest in that truth, we are absolutely free. We can take risks. We can humble ourselves without worry of being diminished. Paul gives us a glimpse of what this looks like, put on "compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."⁷

We rest in the absolute, unshakeable love of God. As N.T. Wright says, Colossians is leading us to be a people of thanksgiving, of thanksgiving. Every aspect of our lives becomes an opportunity to worship God and to encourage one another in the Lord. Now, this does not mean we won't face difficult times. We continue to face suffering and pain at times. Or as Paul says in Romans 8,

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.⁸

With this assurance, we can embody the love of God to one another, to our family members, to our friends, and even to our enemies. I personally have found that in times of great suffering, I've come to discover the love of God that is beyond knowing. Sometimes I've experienced it in warm feelings, but many times I've experienced it in the Word of God and in the encouragement of friends around me.

Let us find our hope in Christ, in His Word, and in the friends and saints around us. Then let us pour out our lives to one another in acts of lovingkindness.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 3:9–10.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 3:12–14.

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ro 8:35–37.