

A long time ago, September 17, 1977 to be exact, I stood in front of a host of witnesses and declared that, from that day forward, I would be Jana's husband; "in good times and bad, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and health," as long as we both should live. What I did not know was that at that same moment I was attending a funeral of sorts. (LET ME EXPLAIN, quickly, before I dig myself a six foot hole!) When I said those vows in a public proclamation "before God and these witnesses," my identity changed. I became Jana's husband. The day before I was not Jana's husband, for 25 years prior to that day I was not Jana's husband, but on that day and every day since I have been Jana's husband. And she has been my wife. In fact her change of identity was marked by a change of her last name. On that very warm Saturday in September when she traded the attention of all other men for the inattention of just one, she too died to her old life.

I hope you can remember a day in your life when your name changed. A day when you took on the name of Jesus Christ and said, "I am a CHRISTIAN." If you never have I hope you will. Like so many brides and grooms who don't fully appreciate their change of identity, there are many people who consider themselves Christians but don't want to die to their old way of life. There are far too many today who attend the wedding but don't participate in the funeral. They want all the privileges of their new identity they just don't want to die to the old one. That's why Paul's words in Colossians 3 are so important. We will never appreciate all that God has for us until we learn to put off the old identity and put on the new.

In Colossians 2:1-3 the apostle Paul says, "For I want you to know how great a struggle (agon) I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, ² that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and *attaining* to **all** the wealth that comes from the **full** assurance of understanding, *resulting* in a **true knowledge** of God's mystery, *that is*, Christ Himself, ³ in whom are hidden **all** the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Paul says he "struggles" or agonizes on behalf of those who have been victimized by the evil one and are not experiencing all they could and should be.

In chapter 3 he returns to this "true knowledge" in v. 10 when he describes the new person "who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him." This "renewal" (reformation, restoration) is the goal of the Christian experience. God formed man in His own image but when Adam and Eve fell, the image of God was defaced; not erased, defaced. So then, we were formed in the image of God, deformed by sin, but we are being reformed or renewed as God works within us. The good news is that we are being transformed into the image of God. **The renewal that God offers, is based on past events, secures future blessings and inspires us to accurately represent Jesus in the present.** The bad news is that it won't happen without a fight. Colossians 3 describes that fight.

Paul begins chapter 3 looking back, reflecting on a past event. **When we changed our name we changed our standing...v. 3.** The word "if" (v. 1) could just as easily be translated "since" as the NIV does. On the basis of our identification with Christ, we were raised up with Him. When we take on the name of Christ we die to our old identity. Just as a bride or groom dies to their old identity as single people living only for self, those who choose Christ die to living for self and begin to live for Christ and others. That is why he says we are to "consider

ourselves dead.” (3:5-7).

There is no way to be a true Christian without experiencing death. There is no resurrection without a crucifixion. There is no way to be raised up with Christ without first dying with Christ. “Do you not know,” Paul says to the Romans, “that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection.” **Romans 6:3-6**

Have you ever wondered, “If my old sinful nature is dead then why won’t it lie down? I mean, if I’m dead to sin then how is it possible to still sin?” Here is Paul’s answer: “Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Him*, in order that our body of sin might be done away with.” (Ro. 6:7). The word “done away with” (katargeo) is used by Paul on 25 different occasions. The word does not mean “to destroy.” In classical Greek the word is rarely used but when it is it means to be unemployed or unused. Here it means to render inoperative, ineffective. It has not been annihilated. It has been subjugated. The word always refers to a nonphysical eradication by means of a superior force coming in to replace the force previously in effect i.e., light vs. darkness. Darkness is annulled or rendered inoperative by light. Darkness still exists but it is overcome by light. Here the meaning is to annul the body as an instrument of sin so that we will no longer be slaves to sin “for he who has died is freed from sin.” Therefore, Paul says, “consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” **Romans 6:11**

Returning to the illustration of marriage, one of the best ways to maintain a long healthy marriage is by considering yourself dead to all other men/women once you say, “I do.” I’ll never forget a couple coming to me for marriage counseling and the wife telling me that they were really struggling in their marriage because he continued to date other women! When we changed our name to “Christian” we changed our standing.

Paul then briefly alludes to a future event in v. 4. **When we changed our name we changed our future.** “When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.” 2:15. The decisive battle is won but the war is not over. We know however that someday we will be part of that triumph as we follow our victorious King into glory.

Since our standing is certain and our future secure live in light of the present imperative. An imperative is a command. It is a MUST in order to experience the fullness of life in Christ. I want you to take note of the imperative verbs in this passage. The first imperative is to “keep seeking the things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” (v. 1).

It is true in Christianity as it is in politics, “Where you stand depends on where you sit.” Because we are already seated with Christ we can stand strong against the evil one. **Ephesians 2:4-6** echoes this truth: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus.” So keep seeking, never stop learning, never stop growing.

The second imperative for those who participate in God's reformation project is to "keep setting our mind on the things above and not on the things below" (v. 2). He goes on to describe this process in detail. We develop this Christian "mind-set" by consistently putting off the old and putting on the new identity.

"Put them all aside" (v. 8). He offers a suggestive list of the things that we must put off or put aside. Again, he offers similar instructions to the Christians in Ephesus, "In reference to your former manner of life, lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit." (Eph. 4:22). Sounds easy enough but how do we lay all that stuff aside?

Jesus introduced a life and death concept that Paul expands upon in his letters. Jesus said life doesn't precede death but just the opposite, death precedes life. Death is a necessary precursor to life. So He makes this clear in **Luke 9:23-24** "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it."

To take up a cross meant one thing and one thing only – you were going to die. But Jesus says to take it up "daily." In other words, every day we must practice the crucifixion of anything that is hostile to God. The 8 words, "consider the members of your earthly body dead," in **Colossians 3:5** is just one word in Greek. The NIV uses 3 words, "Put to death, (therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature.)" The old King James Version translates it with one word, "mortify." Here is how Paul says it to the Galatians, "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." **Galatians 5:24**. Notice the progression in Col. 3: **Seek** the things above, **set** you mind on you new identity as a follower of Christ, **crucify** the flesh by considering yourself dead to the things that were part of your old identity and experience life.

The next imperative corresponds to putting off or putting aside the old self. He says, "Put on the new self" (v. 12). If we do, several things will happen:

1. The love of Christ will bind us together...v. 14
2. The peace of Christ will rule over us...v. 15
3. The word of Christ dwell within us RICHLY...v. 16. If you compare Col. 3:16 with Eph. 5:18 you will notice that each letter contains almost the exact same result related to household codes but they differ in that one begins with letting the word dwell richly and the other with being filled with the Holy Spirit. Paul seems to be saying that being filled with the Spirit and letting the word dwell richly are synonymous. At least they are so similar that the result is the same.

Last Sunday I received some news that hit me like a ton of bricks. Last Sunday I heard a brief report about some aid workers killed in Afghanistan by the Taliban. Just another day in paradise. When I heard there were six Americans among the dead the thought occurred to me that a young woman named Cheryl Beckett was serving over there. A couple years ago five of us from Fellowship went to Austria to help conduct a retreat for missionaries serving with TEAM in France. While we were at the retreat center we met Cheryl and fell in love with her. She was at the retreat center to get a little rest from the harsh conditions in Afghanistan. She described to us some of the deprivation she lived with every day so I asked, "Are you planning on going back?" I think she understood that my simple question represented the concerns of any father with a beautiful young daughter who could be planning a wedding or producing

grandchildren or just coming over for Thanksgiving or Christmas. Cheryl smiled and, without hesitation she just said, "Yes, I'm going back."

Sunday afternoon May Owen, one of our team members, called and confirmed that Cheryl was one of the victims of a Taliban ambush. I'll be honest; my first reaction to the news was hardly Christian. I wanted those godless, gutless fools to pay for what they had done. Then I thought of Cheryl. She gave her life in an effort to see to it that people like that can experience the love of Jesus. She was willing to pay with her life so that they won't have to pay for their evil deeds.

The tragedy of last week reminded me once again that life is not a game. It is a war. John White says it well, "War is not something that illustrates aspects of Christian living. Christian living is war. Indeed, I would go further. Earthly warfare is not the real warfare. It is but a faint, ugly reflection of the real thing. It is into the real war that the Christian is to plunge. Wars on earth are but tremors felt from an earthquake light years away. The Christian's war takes place at the epicenter of the earthquake. It is infinitely more deadly while the issues that hang on it make earth's most momentous question no more than village gossip."

Are you willing to follow Christ into the deadliest and most fundamental of all wars? To acknowledge Jesus as Savior and Lord is to join an army. Whether you know it or not you have enlisted and sent into battle for the hearts and minds of men and women. But first things first. If you cannot win the war within your own soul how will you ever win the war for the souls of others?