

2021 New Year Message

Let the Word of Christ Dwell in You Richly

Colossians 3:1-17

Key Verse 3:16

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” (ESV)

Colossians is an epistle by Apostle Paul to the church in Colosse which was in Asia Minor. This letter was sent around 62 AD. The main theme of the letter was about who Christ was. Among the four chapters in total, the first and second chapters are a doctrinal section on Christology, that Christ is the supreme Lord of all things. The third and fourth chapters are applications that talk about a principle for how believers of Christ should live. We are faced with a new year in the midst of an unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. How must we live in the new year? How can we serve the work of God? Through this passage, may God grant us a clear spiritual direction.

Look at verse 1. “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” This verse is linked with the previous section, Colossians 2:13, which says, “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins.” We were born in this world spiritually dead in our transgressions and sins (Eph 2:1). We were separated from God and could not come to him. However, through Jesus' death and resurrection, God raised us from the dead. Of course, that he raised us does not refer to our bodily resurrection but our spiritual resurrection. When we believe in Jesus' death and resurrection, that is, the gospel, through faith God gives us new life. The source of this life is Jesus (Jn 1:4). Just as a branch is attached to a tree, our life is rooted in Jesus. Our life is united with the life of Christ. How grateful should we be that we were raised with Christ! How wonderful it is that our life is united with that of Christ!

How should we live as those who were raised with Christ? Verse 1b says, "set your hearts on things above." In the past, when we were spiritually dead, we had no idea about the "things above". We just thought the visible, earthly world was all there was and that is all we lived for. Yet we came to know that there are things above. In that heavenly realm, Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Having subdued all his enemies, Christ now holds all power and authority in his hand, crowned with glory and heavenly blessings. Therefore, as people of Christ, we should not set our hearts on earthly things but on things above (2).

For the Colossian believers at that time, earthly things did not just mean worldly passions, pleasures, and material things. It also meant religious things. Many of the believers in Colosse pursued angel worship, fasting, and legalistic lives. They appeared spiritual. But such things were also earthly things since they, in fact, through them, pursued human glory, religious esteem, and self-satisfaction. Instead of pursuing these earthly things, we must put

our hope in heaven and seek things above as heavenly citizens on earth.

Verse 3 says, "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." The phrase "you died" here means that our old self is dead. When did we die? Romans 6:6a says, "For we know that our old self was crucified with Christ so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with." When Jesus was crucified we too were crucified with him. Our old self died with Jesus and was buried with him (Gal 2:20). When he was resurrected, we were also resurrected, and now we live a new life (Eph 2:5-6). Verse 3 says, "Your life is now hidden with Christ in God." Our new life is united with Christ, and is hidden in God. Wow! This is amazing! Whatever is hidden in God is absolutely safe. No matter how our enemy, the devil, is desperate to find and destroy our lives, he cannot do it because there is no one stronger than our God. Even though we live on earth, our true life is united with Christ, and is hidden safely in God. How assuring and comforting this is! We are sojourners in this world. When our earthly life ends, we will return to God, where our true life is hidden (2Co 5:1). When Christ, who is our life, appears, we also will appear with him in glory (4). At that time, our process of sanctification will be over and we will be transformed into the image of Christ and shine like the sun. I pray that we may continue in this hope and seek things above.

In order to seek things above, what then must we do? First, we must put off our old self, and second, we must put on the new self.

Look at verse 5. "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry." The phrase "your earthly nature" refers to our old self that has the fallen Adamic nature. When we were born again, our old self died with Christ, but as long as we live in the flesh, we are still under the influence of the old self. It is like a snake of whose head was crushed, yet whose body is still wriggling. While living in the flesh, we, as those who have a new life, should continue to put to death the habits of the old self and imitate Christ. When our old self was alive in the past, it was impossible for us to mortify our old nature and grow in the image of Christ. This was because our old self was too strong. But now, since our old self was crushed through the resurrection of Christ, it is no longer powerful as in the past. If we rely on God and fight, we can now win the battle. This is what Romans 6:14 teaches; it says, "For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace."

What are the things of the earthly nature in us that we should put to death? Look at verse 5b again. "...sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry." Our earthly nature is primarily sexual corruption and excessive desire for money. Our old nature tends to be sensual and lustful. We need to kill off these desires. The ending part of verse 5 talks a little more about greed. It says, "greed is idolatry." Greed refers to the desire to have more of something, especially money. People love money and even put it in God's place, and in that sense, greed is idolatry (Eph 5:5). When we lived as unbelievers, we walked in the greed of the old self (7). At that time, we did not even know that this was wrong. But now, since we have been raised with Christ and have new life, we must put off our old self.

While verse 5 talks about the nature of sin in our hearts, verses 8 and 9 talk about the outward

manifestation of that sinful nature. Look at verses 8-9. "But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices." Anger, rage, and slander are the same as murder (Mt 5:21-22). We should put off these as we do our dirty clothes. Lying means to intentionally deceive others. Lies are a common vice in an unbelieving society, and even believers tend to take it lightly. But lies come from the devil, the father of lies, and God hates it more than any other evil (Jn 8:44). We often think we don't lie. But, as the prophet Jeremiah said, our hearts are corrupt and deceitful above all things (Jer 17:9). Whenever we open our mouths, we lie. For example, to exaggerate is to lie. When we show off, we magnify our strong points, and we don't talk about others' good points. People talk long about others' mistakes while they hardly talk about their own shortcomings. All of this is lying. We should always repent of our corrupt self and cast out lies.

Look at verse 10. "...and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." We have already put on the new self. We have become a new creation in Christ (2Co 5:17). Our new self is "...being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." By putting on the new self, we are blessed to come to know him. To know God is to have eternal life (Jn 17:3). By knowing him we become like him. As we become like him, we come to have the same divine character as him, and thereby we gain an even deeper knowledge of him. This knowledge is not speculative. It is a living knowledge that is working and effective in our real lives (1Jn 2:3). When God gives us new life, he activates our spiritual senses and enables us to have living and spiritual knowledge. He also renews our will so that we may be strongly drawn to the things that please God. God makes us holy by constantly renewing our knowledge and will. He restores the image of God in us and brings us into the blessed fellowship of the Holy Triune God through our union with Christ. This is the purpose for which God created us and also saved us. There is no discrimination: Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythians, slave or free. Christ unifies all things. Christ is the Lord of all, and in all (11).

What then should we put on? Look at verse 12. "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." As verse 10 says, we have already put on the new self, and God accepts us as righteous. However, this righteousness is like wearing a robe prepared to enter a wedding ceremony. Now the inner person must be renewed for the robe to fit. This means to receive a new heart and a new spirit from God, to receive a new knowledge, new character, and a new desire. Practically speaking, we must become a people of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (12). As members of Christ, we should bear with each other and forgive as the Lord forgave us (13).

Look at verse 14. "And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Here, love is "agape," which refers to God's unconditional love. The supreme ethic of believers is this agape love. Love is the fulfillment of the law. You never get tired no matter how hard you may work for the one you love. Rather, you become full of joy. Those who love others, of course, never do anything harmful. Rather, with love, they constantly do good things for others. This love is the bond that unites the community of believers, just as a

garment is kept neat with a belt.

Look at verse 15. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.” Christ became a peace offering between God and sinners like us who lived in enmity with God. Thus, God in Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the peace of God. This peace is a profound one from heaven which is not the same as the world gives. It is peace that comes from a deep assurance that we have already received forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. It is peace that cannot be taken away even if you may lose everything in the world. We must ensure this peace is the greatest influence that controls our inner person.

But in reality, it is never easy to let the peace of Christ always rule in our hearts. Due to the pandemic, one missionary did not earn enough money. With the meager income he calculated his essential spending and found that only \$200 was left. He and his family had to survive a month with that sum. When he thought about his future, it was quite certain that his family could not afford the rent and would be thrown out on the street. He was attacked by serious anxiety. He could not let the peace of Christ rule his heart. This is an understandable situation. How should he rule his heart with the peace of Christ? He needs power. The power that comes from the grace of God. The power that comes from prayer and faith in God. Philippians 4:6-7 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." If our hearts are not ruled by peace, we must repent and pray. We should hold onto the word of God's promise and believe. If we don't have faith, we have to persistently pray to God to help our faith. Then God will surely guard our hearts and our minds with his peace. Also God will eventually solve all our problems.

Look at verse 16. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (ESV). The phrase “the word of Christ” refers to the Scriptures, that is, the Bible. The Bible is the word of God that bears witness to Christ (Jn 5:39). The new life as believers we now live is a life in which the word of God should dwell richly. When the word dwells in us richly, we can teach and admonish one another with God's word. We will be able to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs that come from the word of God. We will be able to praise God with gratitude in our hearts. And whatever we do, whether in word or deed, we will be able to do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (17).

We have many problems in this Coronavirus pandemic era. A missionary says that she feels limited raising disciples. In the past, when she taught her students through one-on-one bible studies, she used to spend 3-4 hours at a time. She listened to the Bible students for hours and taught the word deeply. However, now it has become almost impossible to have a lengthy one-on-one Bible study because it is done through video calls. The Bible students hang up if something happens. It seems impossible to raise disciples through video calls. One tour guide missionary says that these days his income is literally zero. He cannot find a way to support

himself. Others say that they were locked up and couldn't leave the house at all for four months, which made them mentally depressed. Still others confessed that they have become spiritually lazy as they watched too much news and movies on YouTube. Some say that their house is too small to have a quiet space to pray in. Indeed, there are many challenges due to the pandemic. In these times of trial, we must let the word of God dwell in us richly.

One may ask, "What does letting the word of God dwell in my heart richly have to do with my bread problem?" "How can it actually help the situation where we are not able to raise disciples?" The truth is that the word of God matters to our practical issues. This is because God gives us the bread and God raises disciples. Psalm 34:10 says, "The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing." David in the Old Testament was chased after by Saul who was determined to kill him. David had to gather troops, craft strategies, and fight against Saul. But at that time, what did David do? Psalm 119:23 says, "Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees." Also Psalm 119:97 says, "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long." It sounds unreasonable to meditate on God's word all day in times of trial, rather than seek realistic solutions. However, David meditated on the word of God all day long. At that time, God himself defeated those who were against David.

We can say that the word of Christ dwelling in us richly is the same as being filled with the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 5:18 says, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit." Please note the following verses 19 and 20 that talk about the fruit of being filled with the Spirit. "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 5:19-20). This is almost the same as "teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" as written in Colossians 3:16. Being filled with the Holy Spirit means being filled with God's word. Even though each of us faces different challenges, what we must do is to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly and be filled with the Holy Spirit. The word of God is living and active. God's word has dynamic power. It is sharper than a double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts (Heb 4:12). The word of God reveals all our problems and gives us his wisdom. In addition, God himself leads us to follow his wisdom and overcome all our problems.

We learned from this passage that we "must do" several things. We must set our hearts on things above. We must put to death whatever belongs to our earthly nature. We must rid ourselves of all sinful things. We must not lie to each other. We must put on the new self. We must bear with each other, forgive, love, let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, and so on. When we hear all these commands, honestly, it is burdensome. We cannot do these with our own will power. We know that God's commands are right yet we feel burdened because we cannot fully keep them. We feel burdened by God as he seems to make too many demands. However, God does not just give us commands and judges us if we fail. God commands us and also he enables us to obey the commands. How? Through his word, God enables us to obey his commands. The Holy Spirit works in us through the word and enables us to keep his

commands by God's power. Therefore, our job is to let the word of God dwell in us richly. When we receive the word not just with our head, but with our hearts and our spirits, and hold on to it, God himself helps us through the word planted in our hearts. He provides us with desire and his great power so that we can obey all his commands.

Loving the word is the same as loving God. God will surely help us with our practical issues as we continue to love the word and let it dwell in us richly in times of difficulties. Also, even though our present difficulties may not get better right away, what a great privilege it is for us to be those who are filled with the word of God! I believe that God is pleased with such a person of the word of Christ. A man of God is one in whom the word of God rules, even his thoughts, wishes, and deep inclinations.

Not only during the pandemic, but also at all times, of course the time corona viruses are gone will surely come yet, worries, fears and temptations of sin always work in our hearts. If we just try to fight and defeat them on our own, we can never win. We should not focus on driving them out. Instead, we must struggle to let the word of God dwell in us richly. When the word dwells in us richly, worries and worldly thoughts lose their place to stand within us. They get pushed out. I pray that the more difficult the times become, the more we may love God's word. May we read and deeply meditate on the word. There are tremendous blessings in meditating on the Scriptures (Ps 1:1-2). One of the best ways to meditate on the word is to recite it in a low voice. It means to memorize the word by muttering it at least 20-30 times. In this way, we can meditate deeply. Heaven and earth will disappear but God's word, even the smallest letter of the word, will remain unchanged. I pray that we may eat, drink, and breathe God's precious word of life. I pray that we may receive the word with our minds and hearts and entrust ourselves to the word so that the word may transform us day by day (Ac 20:32).

During this pandemic, I have striven to read and recite the word of God. In the early hours of the day, through daily bread, I have meditated on the word of God. I have read through the Scriptures again. When I prepared Bible study for English leaders, I read the passage several times. The fresh approach to the passage with prayerful heart led me into deeper understating of the passage. Above all, I took out my Bible memorization cards that I had already memorized. And from my daily bread notes of the past five years, I selected the key verses of each day into a card to memorize them. Whenever I had time, I spent a few hours a day reciting the word. Over the past eight months, I have again memorized about 3,000 verses. As the word became rich in my heart, in every situation, the word came to my mind, and I started thinking based on God's word. Amid many challenges and trials, heavenly joy overflowed in my heart. God gave me his wisdom every time I needed through his word. God renewed my spiritual desire and helped me to restore early morning prayer. In the past, praying for five minutes seemed like an hour to me, but these days praying for an hour only seems like five minutes. He gave me the joy of meditating on the word and the joy of praying. Indeed, the word of God is the source of all blessings. It gives us wisdom and strength, transforming our character, and granting us power in all circumstances. So this is the confession that comes from my heart. "Your promises have been thoroughly tested, and your servant loves them" (Ps 119:140; ESV).

In conclusion, God knows everything and rules over everything. When we look at our reality anxiety, worry, fear, and despair come to us. Yet amid this trial, God wants us to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly. He wants us to live by faith in his promises with thankfulness. In the new year 2021, may each of us and our communities fervently read and meditate on the word. May God help us to commit ourselves to deep Bible study. May God bless us to be devoted also to prayer and to striving for the mission of making disciples on campuses worldwide. Amen!