

Living Like Christ is All

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” (Colossians 3:11 ESV)

INTRODUCTION

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. 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 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, *but Christ is all, and in all.*

Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And [above] all these virtues put on love, which binds [everything] together in perfect [harmony].

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you

do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:1-17 NIV/ESV additions)

Here...Christ is all and in all.

It is hard to imagine a deeper, broader, farther-reaching passage than this little phrase packed into one single verse. On August 19th, 1871, Charles Haddon Spurgeon mounted the pulpit at Metropolitan Tabernacle in London to preach on Colossians 3:11. He began with these words:

This little text is yet one of the greatest in the whole Bible, and I feel lost in its boundless expanse. It is like one of those rare gems which are little to look upon, and yet he who carries them bears the price of empires in his hand. It would not be within the compass of arithmetic to set down the value of this sapphire test. I might as soon hope to carry the world in my hand as to grasp all that is contained in these few words. I cannot navigate so huge a sea, my skiff is too small, I can only coast along the shore. Who can compress "all things" into a sermon? I will warrant you that my discourse this morning will be more remarkable for its omissions than for what it contains, and I shall hope indeed that every Christian here will be remarking upon what I do not say; for then I shall have done much good in exciting meditations and reflections. If I were to try to tell you all the meaning of this boundless text, I should require all time and eternity, and even then all tongues, human and angelic, could not avail me to compass the whole. We will swim in this sea though we cannot fathom it, and feast at this table though we cannot reckon up its costliness.¹

Indeed. I, too, will fail to plumb the depths of this rich and powerful verse; It would take a lifetime. But I'm reminded of President Kennedy's inaugural address delivered 62 years ago, when he said “All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days...nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin.”²

I want to begin by talking about love. Jesus taught there were two greatest commands: to love God with all you have, and to love your neighbor as yourself. It's easy to forget how revolutionary that is! As someone has pointed out, in the ancient world, the Greeks taught that the key to life was to know thyself. The Romans said it's to defend thyself. Current pop psychology says it is to understand and embrace thyself. Christ said it is to

¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Christ is All” (August 19, 1871), *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol 17. <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/christ-is-all/#flipbook/>

² John F. Kennedy. Inaugural Address. Jan 20, 1961. <https://www.mfa.org/exhibitions/amalia-pica/transcript-inaugural-address>

deny thyself. And if you deny yourself, you are supposed to replace “you” with something else. Christ said to replace it with love.

The Greek word Jesus chose for “love” is unlike every other word for love. This love Jesus taught is rooted in someone else, directed toward someone else, for the sake of someone else. And that changed everything. Did you know in the ancient world there was no such thing as an organized charity effort? Did you know there was no such thing as a hospital for all in need? Then Jesus came along, healing the sick, and telling parables about what it means to love your neighbor. He even said “as you do to the least of these, you do to me.” And Christianity took notice. Christians began the first organized charity efforts, and the first hospitals for all in need.³ The effect can be seen today. Just look around. From the Salvation Army to the YMCA, from St. Francis of Assisi to Mother Teresa, from Florence Nightingale to Louis Pasteur—Christianity has played a crucial role in the formation of organized care for others. Just think of the closest hospital to the town where you were born and raised: is the name Baptist or Methodist or something similar attached to it? That is not a coincidence. This is what it means to live out of love—love for God, and love for neighbor. A love that is rooted in someone else, directed toward someone else, for the sake of someone else.

Show me what you do, and I’ll tell you what you love.
Show me what you love, and I’ll tell you what you will become.

It was Augustine who said “we become what we love.” Maybe you’ve heard that line before. Francis of Assisi picked it up. His student, Clare of Assisi, also became famous for saying it.

In his book, *The Road to Character*, New York Times columnist David Brooks explained what Augustine meant.

“We become what we love [because] only love compels action. We don’t become better because we acquire new information but because we acquire better loves. We don’t become what we know. Education is a process of love formation. When you go to a school it should offer you new things to love.”

My Christian upbringing did a very good job of telling me what love is not. When I go to the movies or read a novel, I know that the fluttering butterflies welling up in his stomach upon the first sight of her charming beauty may be a lot of things, but that isn’t love.

³ See C. Ben Mitchell, “The Christian Origins of Hospitals.” Bible Mesh. Feb 6, 2012. <https://biblemesh.com/blog/the-christian-origins-of-hospitals/>

A Tennessee preacher by the name of Keith Parker once asked a group of students to define love. One student answered back “Love is a feeling you feel when you feel a feeling you never felt before.” Keith looked at her and said, “Back into an electric fence. You’ll feel a feeling you never felt before. But that ain’t love!”

I know that love is not something you fall into, like some giant pit you never saw coming. Nor is it something you fall out of, as if it were some little boy’s treehouse. Love, as Jesus defines it, involves intentional focus rooted in someone else, directed toward someone else, for the sake of someone else. It’s more than a feeling. I think love is something bigger, something grander than we dare imagine. You see, according to Scripture, love is a way of seeing and a way of knowing. And it doesn’t even have to involve me. We are so used to putting “me” in the center, that we think love starts with me (love myself well), then everything falls into place. But what if love isn’t really about me and my world at all, so much so that I begin to see and know in such a way that God and His world becomes central?

When the Lord lays out for us the two greatest commands, he doesn’t primarily think of two rules, but something bigger—a way of seeing that changes how we think about everything, and, ultimately, helps us become different people.

CHRIST IS ALL

In Colossians 3, Paul describes this new way of seeing in perhaps the most challenging verse so far. He makes two points. Number 1: for the believer, Christ is all.

He isn’t always, though, is he? Randy Harris tells a memorable story of going to conduct a home Bible study for a husband and wife at the wife’s request. The husband was hostile—very hostile! Randy would read with the woman while the husband would come in and out of the room, spitting mad and offering objections. But Randy would keep reading. He agreed to come back. And back. And back. With every meeting, Randy read more of the gospel as the couple encountered Jesus. And he saw the husband growing less angry, and more interested. When the husband heard of the joy and peace of Christ, and it took a hold of his heart, he asked Randy to skip to the bottom line. But Randy refused. “Let’s keep reading.” They got to story of the crucifixion and Jesus giving all, and the man demanded to know if the same was required of him. But Randy kept reading. They got to Acts. They read about the church giving up everything for each other, the apostles undergoing torture for their faith, but rejoicing that nothing in

all the world mattered any more like the Lord Jesus Christ. And he demanded that Randy baptize them then and there. He was ready to give his life to Christ.

And then...the *wife* interjected. She thanked him for his time, but Randy had done enough. It was a nice story but now it was getting a little out of hand. And she begged him to leave. Randy says “suddenly, it hit me like a ton of bricks, and I couldn’t believe I didn’t see it. He was hearing the call of the Kingdom to forsake all for the sake of Christ; she was simply wanting a little religion to add to an already full plate.”

It was Spurgeon who pointed out that for some people Jesus is *much*...but not *all*. He’s a co-pilot, and a help, maybe even a ghost writer for our biography. But it’s *our* story, not his. He is the relief pitcher we call in when we’ve relied on our own strength for the majority of the task, and just need a little help to get over the finish line. He is the putty we use to fill the gaps in our character, and to cover over the pitfalls in our story. As if our good deeds (which count as filthy rags) can add one thing to the finished work of Christ. As if our natural temperament can get us part way, and the Spirit can cover the rest. As if our best ideas, our best intentions, our fine reputation, our ingenuity, and our righteousness cover most of the bill, and Jesus pitches in a generous tip. Yet Jesus stops on the way to Golgotha, carrying his own cross, and turns to face the crowd behind him as he shouts, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:37-38). As Spurgeon said, “If Christ is not all to you he is nothing to you. He will never go into partnership as a part Savior of men. If he be something he must be everything, and if he be not everything he is nothing to you.”

For some people, he is all in some things, but not everything. I trust him with my salvation, but not with my money. I trust him to provide food and clothing for today, but not with my retirement—I’ll take care of that. I rest in his peace when it comes to the things out of my control; but I am filled with worry and anxiety about things within my control, since that is up to me. As someone said regarding how churches acted during segregation: Christ may be the door when it comes to accepting people into heaven; but I am the screen door when it comes to accepting people into my home.

We don’t let Christ get first *dibs* in church, in our marriage, or in our job. He gets it all. For the believer, Christ *is* the church, Christ *is* our marriage, and Christ *is* the job. Paul once said “for me to live *is* Christ.” Imagine what your colleagues would think, imagine what they would say if you no longer thought of your job as something you do, primarily for God, but rather as a way of getting to know Christ! For us, to work *is* Christ. To raise children *is* Christ. To go grocery shopping, to plant trees, to play in the yard simply is to live and bask in the glory of Christ. It becomes hard to say, “I hate my job,” “my

marriage is boring,” or “my town has nothing to offer.” Has Christ become these things to you? “You did not learn Christ that way.”

No, we learned different. We believe different. So we are different. We don’t worry like the rest of the world, for we have Christ, and Christ is all. We don’t seek after the empty things this world has to offer, because we have Christ and Christ is all. We don’t live, like, and love based on reciprocity—giving only to those who give to us, serving only those who serve us, paying back what has been paid to us—for we see Christ the servant of all and we say “Christ is all” to me. And so, I shall be Christ to you. C. S. Lewis wisely and rightly said:

It is easy to think that the Church has a lot of different objects — education, building, missions, holding services... [but] the Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose.”⁴

As Spurgeon reminds us,

Without Christ ye are nothing, though ye be baptized, though ye be members of churches, though ye be highly esteemed as deacons, elders, pastors. Oh, then, have Christ everywhere in all things, and constrain men to say of you, “To that man Christ is all in all: I have marked him; he has been with Jesus, he has learned of him, for he acts as Jesus did.

Imagine if we believed that Christ is all.

CHRIST IS IN ALL

But the Lord likes to give two related commands, and Paul does too. Paul didn’t just say Christ is *all*, but Christ is *in* all. Yes, it could mean that Christ is in all believers, and in all churchy things. The chapter begins by talking about how Christians have died, and *their* life is now hidden with Christ (Col 3:1-3). But it’s also true, as Paul says elsewhere, that Christians are given fresh eyes to see what is true everywhere; its just that Christians have ears to hear it, and eyes to see it.⁵ As the NRSV translates If anyone

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

⁵ Charles Spurgeon: “Now, as the only distinction which marks the Christian from other men, and the only essential distinction in the new world of grace, is Christ, we are led to see beneath this fact a great

is in Christ—behold, it is a new creation! All things have become new!” (2 Cor 5:17 NRSV). For a variety of reasons, I think the best way to understand these two phrases in Colossians 3:11 is to translate it this way: “for the believer, Christ is everything, and in everything.”

Gerard Manley Hopkins—one of the greatest poets of the Victorian era—summed it up with this line “Christ plays in 10,000 places.” The line is in the final stanza of a poem about how every thing, living up to its essence, displaying what it made to be, reveals the true intentions of the Creator, and thus tells us something about God. Christ, it turns out, is in all living things, and we see him in limbs and eyes that are not his. Starting with everything from rocks to brightly colored birds, he writes:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his going graces;
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is –
Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.⁶

We do not simply imitate a great moral teacher from the past—like those who live in the legacy of Abraham Lincoln, or Ghandi, or MLK. We believe the same Jesus who was born in a manger and died a cruel death on a Roman cross is alive and well—and not only in us, but all around us. We meet him here in worship, and in the bread and wine, but also in the sick and hungry, in the stories of old men and in the faces of little children. As one author puts it, “We meet Him precisely in all of the diversity and

underlying doctrine. In the realm of grace, things are what they seem. Christ is apparently all, because he is actually all. The fact of a man’s possessing Christ is all in all in the church, because in very deed Christ is all in all. All that is real in the Christian, all that is holy, heavenly, pure, abiding, and saving, is of the Lord Jesus. This great granite fact lies at the basis of the whole Christian system, Christ is really truly all in all in his church, and in each individual member of it.”

⁶ Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), “As Kingfishers Catch Fire.”

difficulty of the Christian community,” which Paul calls Christ’s body.⁷ But we don’t just see him in our brothers and sisters. As Hopkins says in another magnificent poem, “the (whole) world is charged with the grandeur of God.” We see Christ in the doe gently caring for her fawn. We see Christ in the homeless man who hasn’t prayed in 40 years but gives the cup of soup he found to another houseless woman he knows is even more hungry than he. We see Christ in every good story that comes out in the news, in every novel that ends in redemption, in every piece of art that reminds us that beauty and truth are real things. As the Apostle John puts it, Jesus is “the true light, which gives light to everyone” (John 1:9 ESV). But this also means that we see Christ in enemies of the cross who critique our religion and shine a light on our hypocrisy. We hear Christ’s challenge in the Roman soldier who would compel us to carry his armor for a mile, as Christ begs us to make it two. And we know that *something* of Christ—something of *Christ*—resides in everyone made in his image, and thus everyone is redeemable. “All things,” writes the Apostle Paul, “were created through Him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16 ESV).

But that can’t be right, can it? Christ cannot be in that demon child at the restaurant. Christ is not in those classmates out to harass and abuse me. He can’t be, can he?

What happens if you see Christ in your next door neighbor? That’s easy if your neighbor is like Kenneth—who was my next door neighbor when Katie and I lived on Caleb Drive. Kenneth would do anything for anyone. All he asked for was a coconut pie. When Jesus says love God and love your neighbor, people assume that means love those who are really good to you. So Jesus clarifies: “I say unto you, love your enemies. . . . If you love only those who love you, what good is that? Even scoundrels do that much. If you are friendly only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even the heathen do that” (Matt 5:46 TLB). To really love your neighbor is to see Christ in your neighbor.

What if we look for Christ even in those people we can’t stand? C. S. Lewis once said, “Don’t waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.”⁸

Let me push a bit further. See Christ in that high school bully you can’t stand. See Christ in that job on the honey-do list you just don’t want to do. See Christ in the political party you think is barely American. See Christ in the boss you loathe, the father who never loved you, the Starbucks barrista who never gets your name right, the person in

⁷ This quote is from Ben who writes at 10000places.com. I am indebted to him for the flow of thoughts in this paragraph. See <https://10000places.com/about-2/about/>

⁸ C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity.

the Ford F150 who cut you off without looking, and the little league coach who never plays your son enough.

What would we call it if we were able to see—truly see Christ in all? Well, we’d begin to understand what it means to love.

Because these two points—that Christ is all, and IN all—is in the context of a love chapter. You may not have seen it at first. We all know what the love chapter is—1 Cor 13: Love is patient, and kind, not self-seeking, rude, or proud. It always trusts, hopes, perseveres. That’s right. But that description sounds mighty similar to the “fruit of the spirit” in Galatians 5: joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control—and what stands at the top (at the very heart) of the description? Love. In fact, Paul introduces that list by giving us another one—a list of actions that are completely absent of love. He tells us about idolatry, and anger, wrath, the whole bit. The kind of actions that arise from a lack of peace, lack of patience, lack of kindness—in short, a lack of love.

We’ll look at our chapter once again. What do we find? In verses 5-9, we have a list of those attitudes of the heart and actions of the body that are devoid of love; put these away, Paul says. Instead, he tells us in verse 12, put on that very description we know so well—compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. And above all these, writes Paul in verse 14, “put on love.” But Paul gives perhaps the richest description of the power of love I’ve ever seen: “love binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Do you know why? Because there is no better description of God than this: God is love. And Christ is ALL and IN All. If God is love, and God, through Christ, is ALL and IN all, then love binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Why do husbands love their wives so? Because you are serving the Lord Christ who is all and in all. That is not just your wife—that is Christ. That is not just your husband; that is Christ. And you are not just enduring a marriage; you are coming face to face with Christ.

How should children respond to their parents, how should servants respond to their bosses? How should we approach every aspect of our life? That in every moment, we are engaging in the practicing the presence of God.

“Learning to love” is “learning Christ.” And for the believer, we are loving to learn; loving to grow; loving to be, and to become what Christ is forming us into. In every relationship he gives us, every job we hold, every person we meet, Christ is ALL and IN all.

Hear the “Christ” Prayer of St. Patrick, a traditional Irish blessing:

“Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.”⁹

Or hear the words of St. Paul to the Thessalonians: “And may the Lord make you increase and about in love, for one another *and for all*, just as we abound in love for you” (1 Thessalonians 3:12).

Show me what you do, and I’ll tell you what you love.
Show me what you love, and I’ll tell you what you will become.

May we become more and more like Christ.

⁹ For the full prayer, see https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Saint_Patrick_Prayer.shtml