

How does being in Christ really make a difference?

Colossians 3:5-15

Pastor Tim Melton

I believe that most of us here today are Christians. We are followers of Christ. We believe. We have been forgiven. We have been born again. We now have access to all the resources of God, but how many of our lives were made any different this week by the fact that we are in Christ?

Being “in Christ” is a huge theme in the New Testament, but so many times we find ourselves missing out on all that we have in Christ because we are not aware, and secondly because we are not walking in this truth.

As one reads scripture, we see that in Christ there is no condemnation. In Christ, we gain eternal life. In Christ, we are counted dead to sin and alive in Christ. In Christ, we have received holiness and redemption. In Christ, we can stand firm. In Christ, grace was poured out on us abundantly. In Christ, joy and gratitude are God’s will for us. In Christ, the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds. In Christ, we have been created for good works. In Christ, we have become the righteousness of God. In Christ, we are sons of God. In Christ, we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. In Christ, we are saints, holy ones. In Christ, we are set free from the law of sin and death. In Christ, we are rooted, built up, and established in the faith. In Christ, we who were once far off have now been brought near. In Christ, we have access to the Father. In Christ, we have purpose. In Christ, there is unity. In Christ, we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit. In Christ we each are new creations. The old has gone and the new has come! In Christ, nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God.

And these are not even all the examples found in scripture. But if being in Christ is so important in the Christian life, how does being in Christ really make a difference?

I would like to start by sharing with you a good example that I saw recently of how to explain what it means to be “in Christ”.

We will start with this middle-sized container on which is written in big letters, “You”. “You” signifies you and me, everyone in this room, everyone in this world. You. I will now put this “You” container inside this larger container.

This large transparent container has “Sin” written on it. The scripture talks of how we are in sin. Lorded over by sin. Sin has dominion over us. Because of the law, we are guilty and condemned by our sin. All mankind are in sin. “You” are now in “Sin”.

Now the story gets even worse. Inside of the “You” middle-sized container is a small container on which is written “Sin.” Some may argue, “We already have a sin container, why do we need another one?” But scripture does not only say that we are in sin, but because of our sin nature, sin is also in us.

That is the difficulty of our situation. The Bible says that we are slaves to sin. Dead in our sin. We can’t save ourselves. The Apostle Paul describes mankind’s need with these words, ***“The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God”*** (Romans 8:7–8). No one is good. No one can seek God on their own. Without God’s help we are destined for judgment, alienated from God, enemies of God who live for this world and our selfish desires. Even if we attend church, read our Bibles, give an offering, try to help others in need, volunteer at a homeless shelter, or house refugees from Ukraine, we are still in sin and sin is in us.

God is holy. We are sinful. Our sin separates us from God. There is nothing that we can do about it.

So, what’s the solution? We need both an outward and an inward change. We are in sin and sin is in us. We need more than just positive thinking, new habits, or some religious rituals. We need a change at the deepest core of who we are. Our positional problem in sin, and our identity problem as a sinner with sin within us has to be taken care of. That is why Jesus came.

When God draws a person to Himself and they turn from their sin and put their faith in Christ, they are made new. The old has gone and the new has come! They become children of God. Forgiven. Righteous. Free. Loved. Treasured. Cherished. Blessed. They are freed from sin and are now alive in Christ.

The large container of their life is changed. They are no longer in sin, but in Christ. The law of sin and death no longer has any power over them. Christ comes in and does a total renovation of their inner life as well. The darkness of sin inside the person is driven out by the light of Christ. As we see with these containers, “You” are now indwelt by Christ as you see by this new smaller container that says “Christ”, and “You” are held in the larger container of Christ.

The penalty of sin and the identity of sinner are now gone, and we are new in Christ!

Colossians 3:3 even tells us that, ***“For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”*** Now that we are in Christ, we are in God. Christ is in us. We are in Christ. And we are in God.

This is a beautiful picture, but we still come back to the original question: ***How does being in Christ really make a difference?***

That is what Paul is talking about in the book of Colossians. Paul has declared that we are “in Christ”. That is great news, but now the question is, **“Now that I am in Christ, how does that make a difference?”** That is what we will seek to answer today as we look at Colossians 3:5-15.

In the previous verses Paul has reminded these new believers, in the church in Colossae, that they have died and have been raised with Christ. Paul then continues with these words:

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.

Why is Paul instructing them to **“put to death what is earthly in you”** if they have already died to sin and to the world? They are already in Christ, and Christ is in them, so why are they needing to be told to stop sinning? Here we find an example of positional truth and functional truth. The now and the not yet. At times Paul talked of their position with Christ, and at other times Paul talked of how they needed to live because of their position with Christ. They are in Christ. They now need to live like it.

You could think of it like a snake that is shedding its skin. The skin is dead, but at times the skin is still clinging to the body of the snake. It is the snake’s responsibility to “put off” the dead skin by rubbing on a nearby tree or rock. The skin is dead but still clinging. That is often like our sin. We are dead to it, and yet it clings to us. Paul is calling us to put to death and put away that which is dead.

Those in Colossae who had put their faith in Christ had been forgiven and now were counted righteous before God. They had been changed on the inside. Paul was now telling them that the inside change should bring about an outside change.

Paul then gave them examples of what he was talking about. The Christians in Colossae were to turn away from sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. In reality, all of these are expressions of idolatry. A Christian may not have been bowing down to a pagan god in a pagan temple, but to be involved in these types of sins were evidence that one was not seeking Christ first and that a sinful desire had taken first place in their heart. That, by definition, is idolatry, worshiping something or someone who is not God.

One might wonder why Paul would even have to point out to them these sins that we see as quite obvious, but maybe they thought that coveting was okay since they were not actually stealing. Or their evil desire was okay since they weren’t actually acting on it, or maybe their sexual immorality was okay if it was between two consenting adults. Are we not blind to our sins at times as well? That is why we must draw near to God’s Word with a humble heart, so that the convicting work of the Holy Spirit can take effect and guide us into greater holiness.

Many of these new believers had come out of pagan religions with which these sinful behaviors could co-exist, but as a Christian, everything had changed. To be holy one would have to set aside the sin of the past.

You might wonder how people could call themselves Christians and still be involved in some of these sinful behaviors, but many times in our Christian lives it is less about where we are in the

moment spiritually and more about the direction we are headed. Whether you have been a follower of Christ for a short time or a long time, are you moving towards Christ, or away from Him at this moment in life? In the midst of your imperfections, are you becoming more like Christ or less? Our journey towards holiness will be filled with different degrees of sin until we are finally in the sinless presence of Christ, in heaven. So remember, it is not just where you are, but where you are headed in the Christian life that also matters.

We must also note that some of the false teachers in their church were Gnostics. They taught that the spiritual and the physical worlds were completely disconnected. With this in mind some Gnostics totally separated their spiritual lives from their physical lives. In their view, one could be involved in sin with their physical body, while being close to God in their spirit. At times, if we are not careful, we can be guilty of the same. We sing praises on Sunday and then speak curses on Monday. We give an offering on Sunday, and then we deal unethically with our money during the week. We read our Bible in our devotional time, and then we emerge to yell at the kids. We talk of our desire for holiness in Bible study group and then relate immorally with the person who we are dating.

Paul is calling them out of this way of thinking and living. Christ is to be the Lord of our body, soul, and spirit. The inner reality should always express itself in our outer reality.

Paul is calling them to a Christ-like life, but still they arrive at the same question. Even if they are in total agreement with Paul's words, how will they ever be able to live like Christ? It is the same question that we face. Like them, we are surrounded by a secular, non-Christian culture. We are tempted by our selfish desires on the inside and from the world on the outside. All our lives, before we came to Christ, we were slaves to sin. Now we have been forgiven and made new in Christ, but how do we actually walk in the freedom that we now possess? Paul continues with the answer to that question in verses 8-10:

⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have 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.

In verse 8, Paul instructs them to put away the sins of the world in which they used to walk. Verse 9 then tells the Colossians how this is possible. Paul uses three phrases, ***“put off the old self”, “put on the new self”, “be renewed in knowledge”***. We see this put off, put on, be renewed, in various places in Paul's writings. It was the imagery of putting off and putting on clothing.

In these verses Paul is calling his readers away from sinful behaviors that had grown out of and been supported by their “old self”. The old self was no longer their slave master. The old self, their sinful identity, had now been completely put away. The Colossians were now in Christ and no longer enslaved to sin. Because of this they were now called to put off their old self and put on their new self. For some it must have been difficult to break free from the lifestyle of the past, but Paul is not preaching condemnation and guilt. Paul is first of all letting them know about their sin, and secondly letting them know that it is possible to leave it behind.

It is similar to elephants in the circus that were chained to a stake in the ground when they were still a baby. At that time they tried to pull themselves free, but never could. Now they have grown to be a huge adult elephant. Still they stand, bound by the stake in the ground. They could easily pull it up and walk free, but because of their failures in the past they live as if they are still enslaved to the stake and the chain.

Like the elephants, the Colossians must have felt enslaved to their habitual sins of the past, but Paul is declaring to them that their old self of sin and slavery is dead. The stake and the chain no longer bind them. Because of the freedom they now have in Christ, change is possible.

Imagine a young Christian woman who is in Christ, but has been struggling with her identity. Because of this she has been worried about her image and enslaved by an eating disorder. She has participated in gossip and slander of others to make herself look better than others. She has a critical spirit that highlights the imperfections of others. She is in debt because to impress others she has to have the correct brand of clothing and technology . . . And then one day she sits down to have a devotional time and the Holy Spirit through the reading of the Bible reveals to her her identity in Christ. For the first time it all begins to make sense to her. She is loved unconditionally. She is forgiven. She is holy. She is precious. She is valued. She is secure. She is humbled by the size of her sin, but then amazed by the greatness of the grace of God.

In that moment the motivation for her sin, her struggle with identity, is put away. The old has gone and the new has come, but still it will take a while to learn new ways of living, thinking, shopping, speaking, but in time the old life will be put away because the lie which was the driving motivation for her sin has been exposed and put away. And the truth has now entered in. Her mind is being renewed and now she is able and willing to put off the old self and put on the new.

Paul is using this dressing imagery of putting off and putting on to communicate something deeper. It would be like a person who in the past had been angry, violent, rebellious and hateful, and dressed like it. Then imagine that that person puts their faith in Jesus. He is now forgiven, at peace with himself and the world. He is hopeful, helpful and loving. You would not expect him to continue to wear clothing that told everyone how angry, violent, rebellious and hateful he was.

In Christ, they were to do the same. Now that their “inner person” had been made new, their “outer person”, the part that related with the world, needed to show this as well. They no longer were to live in the midst of sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk. They now would live as Christ would have them live, since they were now in Him.

The difficulty accomplishing this is often because of the ways of living that have become life habits for us. So much so that we feel enslaved by these ways of thinking, feeling and behaving.

At salvation we give God ownership of our lives. We are His. In some ways it is like a new homeowner. The house is legally his or hers, but there is still much work to be done to renovate and completely make it theirs. When we put our faith in Jesus Christ we receive the

righteousness of God. At that point, through various experiences, relationships and circumstances in life, God begins to then work out righteousness in each area of our lives.

Part of this process is to put off the old self. We see it in Hebrews 12:1, ***"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles."*** Putting off the old self and its practices is part one to God's reforming work in our lives. Paul then continues:

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

The Colossians are to put off the old self and its practices that used to characterize their lives. They are then to put on the new self, which is Christ. As they do this, the new self will be being renewed. This spiritual changing of clothes would directly impact one of the great tensions in the Colossian church. In the church there were ***"Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ was all, and in all."*** There were so many differences amongst the congregation, but they held three similarities that were important. They all had been sinful and separated from God. They all had turned from their sin and put their faith in Christ. They all would spend eternity together in the presence of God as children of God.

The Gospel has set aside all barriers of nationality or ethnicity. They had been united by the eternal Spirit of Christ, and were to set aside their earthly differences that would fade away as soon as they stepped into eternity.

Imagine that we all came to church one Sunday wearing t-shirts with the name of our countries, educational status, financial status, marital status, legal status, gender, etc. It would highlight all of our differences. There would be reason for suspicion, jealousy, judgment, covetousness, bitterness, competition, comparison, etc. Now picture that we all put off all of these earthly identifiers and put on our eternal identifier, with t-shirts that all said, ***"Forgiven child of God"***.

This was Paul's idea. It was to destroy the void between Jew and Gentile allowing any person, from any nation, who was in Christ to become a brother and sister.

It destroyed the divide between the classes and cultures. The learned Greek could sit by the ignorant barbarian, who sat by the slave, who sat by the widow. In Christ, unity was possible and fellowship could be the norm.

Paul wrote this as a fact that was already done by Christ, in Christ. Not something that they needed to achieve. Paul was stating their new individual and corporate identity as Christians, citizens of heaven, sons of God, possessing the same Spirit and the same eternal home.

As Christians they were not to create race reconciliation, they were to take hold of it. In Christ they had already been reconciled to one another. Because of this they were to set aside all cultural and ethnic divides and come together as brothers and sisters of Christ. They could now love one another as God would have them.

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, 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.¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.

Those in the church in Colossae could now put on compassion, kindness, meekness, and forgiveness. This outer display of the fruit of the Spirit would give testimony to the unity that is found in Christ. In the midst of their diversity, they were to put on an overcoat of love which would bind them together in unity.

We have now looked at putting off and putting on, but there is a third element that brings it all together. We find it in verses 9 and 10:

“ . . . you have put off the old self with its practices¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”

It is interesting that when we look at the original language, the “putting off of the old self” and the “putting on of the new self” are assigned to us, but the “being renewed in knowledge” is the work of God.

In Christ we now have access to the knowledge of God. This knowledge at the level of revelation and conviction comes through the continuous putting off of the old self and putting on of the new. As we put off and put on He renews our hearts more and more.

It is not just thinking God thoughts and spiritual ideas. It is a Christ-like way of life. The renewal of our minds is something that God does to us. God makes us holy so that we may walk in obedience. That is why Paul’s descriptions of putting off and putting on were actions to be taken, not just ideas to be meditated upon. Yes, God is rewriting His truth on our hearts throughout this process, one truth at a time, but it is so that we will put on and wear these truths for God’s glory, confirming that we are His.

Those who are in Christ will be drawn, step-by-step, to put on the new self and to walk in increased obedience. If the continuous, ongoing pattern, of one’s life is to refuse to put off the old self, that will be because they are not in Christ.

This “putting off and putting on” is an outward confirmation that we are His. It is not optional. Do not be deceived. There is a holiness without which we will not see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).

So, is Paul really just saying, “as Christians we need to stop doing bad things and start doing good things?” Is that really all Paul is saying? No. There is more to this than that. If we are doing good works in our own power, then the Spirit is not involved at all. Our minds are not then being renewed, because we are working in our flesh like a non-believer could do. But as we humble ourselves and trust God to give us what we need to be able to put off and put on, then God works through our situations and our obedience to reveal Himself more completely. Thus, our minds will be renewed and our knowledge of Christ will be strengthened.

The process then continues over and over again. Through our humble obedience of putting off and putting on, God works in our lives to renew our minds. Even in the midst of failure, we are then

strengthened to obey more completely, to be convicted of our sin more clearly, to be convinced of His grace more personally. This then directs to new levels of putting off and putting on. At each level, as we go deeper in our faith, our minds are renewed and we come to experience Christ like never before.

Through all of this, God reshapes our attitudes, affections and desires that He then tells us to put on. He then ***"works in us to will and to act according to His purpose"*** (Philippians 2:13). It is a divine partnership that is utterly impossible without Him.

As the Apostle Paul said, ***"I worked harder than any of them, nevertheless, it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me"*** (1 Corinthians 15:10).

We are called to obedience that we are responsible for, but that He works in us.

In light of all of this, let's go back to the original question: **How does being in Christ really make a difference?**

If we are to live like Christ, then our minds must be renewed. This begins with a humble heart and teachable spirit. If you are lacking this today, ask God to give it to you. If you are fully yielded to Him, you are well on your way to victory already.

Next, we begin to put off our old self, our patterns of the flesh, and anything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. Ask God to show you what in your life is keeping you from intimacy with Him. Ask those closest to you to help you see behaviors that you need to put off. As we rely on Christ and succeed at putting things off, our faith will be strengthened. In areas where we fail, we will be humbled and made to understand how much we need God's help as we seek future victory over our areas of sin.

Next we put on our new self. These are Christ-like characteristics like the fruit of the Spirit and the love of one another. Immersing ourselves in God's Word, God's people, and disciplines such as prayer, fasting, worship, generosity, service to others, and evangelism. We should seek to surround ourselves with godly influences. Here, too, we must trust God even when we fail, knowing that as we depend on Him He will work victory in us.

As we obediently put off and put on, with a yielded heart, God will work to renew our minds and our spirits. As we begin to live in a greater knowledge of God, He will continue to grant us more faith, reveal more truth, bring more conviction, give us more courage, stir us to greater obedience, and renew our minds, so that we may live like Christ in an ever-increasing manner.

It may be today that you are here, struggling to walk in the ways of Christ. You are hearing the words of the Apostle Paul, and it would be nice to do what he is saying, but sin is really strong and life is really a struggle. Why would a loving God allow that? Why can't we just be saved and holy in the moment? Wouldn't that have been a better way to do it?

I believe we can find our answer in this story of a man, a cocoon and a butterfly:

One day a man saw a cocoon. Interested, he stopped, sat and began to watch. He was so captivated that he began to visit the cocoon each day to check its progress. One day he noticed a small opening and the butterfly trying to force its way out of the cocoon. The man sat and watched for several

hours. At one point, the butterfly appeared stuck, it was making no progress. So, the man decided to help.

The man took a small pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining part of the cocoon. The butterfly then was able to break free. The man felt good about what he had done, until he saw the swollen body of the butterfly and its small shriveled wings. The butterfly would now be condemned to a life of crawling instead of flying.

You see, the man did not understand that the restrictive cocoon and the struggle necessary for the butterfly to free itself was God's way of moving liquid from the body to the wings of the butterfly so it would be prepared to fly. The transformation comes through the struggle.

It is the same in the Christian life. We are in Christ. That is our position. Now as we struggle with sin and the difficulties of life, we come to understand and experience all that it means to be in Christ. In this way being in Christ begins to be the truth that makes the greatest difference in our lives.