

“Seeking Things Above”
Colossians 3:1-4 (NRSV)

Paul has trumpeted his warnings **against mere moralistic teaching** that would have robbed the Colossians of their freedom and fulfillment in Christ. Now he provides them with **a positive counterpart** as he gives them **some helpful coaching** to enhance their fullness in Christ, if taken to heart. His coaching can also do the same for us, if we accept it, for although we are separated by more than 2,000 years, the human predicament is still the same, and the same advice can still work.

I must admit **I’m no sports jock**. I was never very good at sports in school -- because I have a so-called “lazy eye” -- and I always seemed to miss catching the ball, whether it was a large football or a soccer ball, or hitting a smaller baseball or golf ball. Maybe that’s why I identify with Schultz’s **Charlie Brown** who started playing baseball in 1950, but never hit a home run until March 30, 1993! But I like watching football and hockey; I occasionally read the sports page and **have learned something about coaching**. Good coaches make for good players. Charlie Brown never had one; Lucy was a poor excuse for a coach. But coaching can make all the difference. Those with the best mentors play the best; even those with good basic abilities and the very best mentors can become great. And this is true for all kinds of teams, all kinds of disciplines.

Good coaches and good coaching can improve even the living of life itself. So, too, those who have heeded Paul’s teaching have gone a long way, because it is coaching from God.

1. Further coaching regarding our fulfillment in Christ (Col. 3:1-2).

“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” (3:1), writes Paul. What are **“the things that are above”**? Certainly, these are **not physical things** like the five different levels of the atmosphere or the vast reaches of space beyond the earth and the other planets in our solar system, filled with stars, constellations, galaxies and nebulae. It isn’t even a literal throne room where God and Jesus Christ and the angels might be found. Paul and the other apostles knew they were using figurative language when they spoke of heavenly things.

Martin Luther, too, railed at the over-zealous detail of the artists of the Middle Ages, “Oh, [that we might look beyond] the heaven of the charlatans, with its golden chair and Christ seated at the Father’s side, vested in a choir cope and a golden robe, as the painters love to portray him!” (Weimer Ausgabe, XXIII, p. 131)

“The things that are above” are not material things, but **spiritual things**. They have to do with **Christ and his sovereign reign** over all things -- as after his resurrection and ascension he fills the universe with his power. “Things above” include his character and compassion, his accomplishments, his continual presence, his intercession for us, and his heavenly joys.

We are not to be seeking heavenly geography, but to focus our attention on **the One who now dwells in glory**.

Another way of describing “**the things that are above**” that we should seek while we are here below on the earth is to speak of them in the terms the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians. “Finally, beloved, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue and if there be any praise, think on these things” (Php. 4:8, KJV). All these things were incarnated and exemplified in the life of Jesus Christ while he was here with us on earth; they were “seen” in the life of Paul (Php. 4:9); and, now, they ought to be found in the life of every believer.

Further, we ought to “**seek the things that are above**” **continuously**. The present imperative tense of the verb to seek implies we are to **seek persistently** and to **keep on seeking “the things that are above.”** Life abounds with examples of the persistence to which we are called.

Albert Einstein’s fascination with mystery led him to become one of the most brilliant scientists ever. “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious,” he said. “It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.” When he was 5 years old, he saw a magnetic compass for the first time; he noticed the needle’s invariable northward swing. He was amazed that the needle seemed to be guided by a strange, invisible force about which he knew nothing. He yearned to know more.

"This experience made a deep and lasting impression on me," he said. "Something deeply hidden had to be behind things." So he read voraciously to learn things about ideas that interested him. Then he'd bolster what he'd gleaned from books with firsthand observation.

Although he was later dismissed from school in Munich, because he was thought to lack interest in his studies, and although he failed to pass an examination to enter a polytechnic school in Zurich, he persisted in his study of physics, and you know how that story ended. In 1921 he was elected as a fellow of the prestigious Royal Society of London and, soon after, he won the Nobel Prize in physics for theoretical work and his work on the photoelectric law. In 1935 he was awarded the Benjamin Franklin Medal of the Franklin Institute, which recognizes outstanding achievement in science and technology. And, in the millennium year of 2000, TIME magazine named him its "Person of the Century."

Or consider the folklore of baseball legend, **Lou Gehrig**, who, as an awkward rookie was observed by Ty Cobb, who said, "Look at those piano legs – he'll never last." But with all his shortcomings, he set an all-time record of 2,130 consecutive games, which lasted for over 50 years. For his sheer consistency in play, he was called the "iron-horse" of baseball.

Or there is the fabled record of **Howard Carter**'s monumental persistence through tons of rubble in the Egyptian desert, discouragement and ridicule that eventually resulted in him finding the tomb and priceless treasure of Tutankhamen.

Admittedly, all such persistence is focused on **earthly rewards**, which, great as they are, cannot hold a candle to "**the things that are above.**"

But, think then, if you will, of the **rescuers in Haiti**, who still search, amid the death and destruction caused by a 7.0 magnitude earthquake on January 12th, and who still find -- as recently as yesterday -- an 84 year-old, a 38 year-old and a 2 year-old survivor, all women, twelve days after the event! Or think of **the survivors themselves**, what persistence and resilience they have shown, often singing and praising God while they are being rescued! One can be persistent in seeking things or working for things that go far beyond any earthly reward.

This **heavenly seeking** is also to be found through **prayer**, as we seek, ask and knock for “the things that are above” (Matt. 7:7; Lk. 18:1-5). This heavenly seeking ought to pervade our conversations, our friendships, our studies, our work -- even our play. And when it does, it will enhance our sense of being fulfilled and finding true freedom in Christ.

The act of seeking depends upon **the set of our minds**: “Set your mind on **things that are above**, not on things that are on earth” (3:2).

As the story goes, the well known, penny-pinching **Jack Benny** was walking along the street when suddenly an armed robber approached him and said, “Your money or your life!” There was a long pause, as Benny did nothing. After what seemed to be an eternity, but which was probably no more than a minute, the robber cried impatiently, “Well?” Jack Benny replied, “Don’t rush me! I’m thinking about it.”

Many people today think their things are their life. I once saw a poster that pictured a coffin, with the usual pallbearers, and also with a number of the deceased person’s possessions following behind, with nine cars, including a Ferrari, a Rolls, an MG, and a Porsche, several motorcycles, a couple of boats on trailers, and a helicopter hovering overhead. The caption underneath said, “**He who has the most toys when he dies, wins.**” Really? Stack that against the things that have happened in Haiti and one has a different perspective. I have a colleague who has recently downsized from a large house with a pool in Burnaby to a 700 square foot condo near Yaletown. “What have you done with all your furniture?” I asked. “Oh,” he replied, “**It’s only stuff.**” True, too true. I’m not there yet, but I’m sure that someday soon I, too, will need to think of things like this.

Paul says that we are not to set our minds on “**things that are on earth.**” This includes not only **material possessions**, but also **immaterial things** like **worldly positions and honours**.

We must note that Paul is not suggesting that the Christian withdraw from worldly activities -- like being involved in business or industry, or teaching, or politics, etc. instead of becoming a pastor or a missionary. Taken to absurdity, then there would never be Christian doctors, nurses and other hospital workers, or dogcatchers or other municipal workers, publishers, lawyers or politicians, and chefs. The difference is that the Christian believer is no longer to see these things as of first importance in and of

themselves. Certainly, wherever these things serve the community, they are Christian “callings” and professions. But these pursuits are not primarily venues for personal achievement and advancement. They are means of serving humanity and “the things that are above.”

Consider **a dog that loves to catch a tennis ball**. Whenever you throw it far away he runs after it, no matter where you throw it, to catch it and bring it back to you for another throw and run. He never seems to get tired of the game. And afterwards, he carries the ball to his water dish, only dropping it to drink. His mind is constantly set on the tennis ball. He even sometimes sleeps with it in his mouth! So it should be with us regarding setting our mind on “the things that are above.”

I must say I have appreciated reading **Thomas More’s** prayer, which he composed and wrote down in 1534 as a series of meditations in the margins of his Psalter in the Tower of London as he faced the end of his life. I suspect this prayer was no last minute work; it reflects his life commitments and thoughts as a lawyer and, finally, as Chancellor of England:

*Give me thy grace, good Lord: to set the world at nought;
 To set my mind fast upon thee, and not to hang upon the blast of men’s mouths;
 To be content to be solitary, not to long for worldly company;
 Little and little utterly to cast off the world, and rid my mind of all the business thereof;
 Not to long to hear of any worldly things,
 But that the hearing of worldly phantasies may be to me displeasent;
 Gladly to be thinking of God, piteously to call for his help;
 To lean unto the comfort of God, busily to labor to love him;
 To know mine own wretchedness,
 To humble and meeke myself under the mighty hand of God;
 To bewail my sins passed, and for the purging of them patiently to suffer adversity;
 Gladly to bear my purgatory here,
 To be joyful of tribulations;
 To walk the narrow way that leadeth to life,
 To bear the cross with Christ;
 To have the last thing in remembrance,
 To have ever afore mine eye my death that is ever at hand;
 To make death no stranger to me, ...
 To pray for pardon before the judge come,*

*To have continually in mind the passion that Christ suffered for me;
 For his benefits unceasingly to give him thanks,
 To buy the time again that I before have lost;
 To abstain from vain confabulations,
 To eschew light foolish mirth and gladness; recreations not necessary — to cut off;
 Of worldly substance, friends, liberty, life and all,
 To set everything at nought for the winning of Christ;
 To think my most enemies my best friends,
 For the brethren of Joseph could never have done him so much good
 with their love and favor as they did him with their malice and hatred.*

*These minds are more to be desired of every man than all the treasure
 of all the princes and kings, Christian and heathen, were it gathered and laid together all upon
 one heap.*

We see in these few verses of Paul the apostle the “Great Divide” in the Christian life. What we set our minds on determines our seeking and thus the direction of our Christian lives. **What do you think of when you have nothing else to do?** Certainly, some commonsense qualifications are in order here, because we all variously daydream about our favourite team, or a coming vacation, or a laundry list of things to do. Sometimes we are under such pressure at home or at work that we can scarcely think of anything else. But these things aside, ask yourselves, **“Does my mind regularly go up to Christ and ‘the things that are above’?”** If not, we may well be missing something. Our spiritual lives may even be in trouble. “For,” Jesus Christ himself said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21; Lk. 12:34). What will the divine postmortem reveal to be our highest priorities?

This mind-set may begin with prayer, “Lord, set my mind on things above.” We must also remember that our mind-set is a deliberate act of the will. We set our hearts and minds on all kinds of things. We can set our minds on “things above.” In addition we need to hold loosely on to the things below, our possessions. There are two ways to hold on to something, with a clenched fist or an open hand. A good exercise for each of us is to give something away that we value very much. Follow this advice, this counsel, this coaching and the fullness of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” will always be growing.

2. **The reasoning behind Paul's instructions** (3:3-4).

Paul's reasoning is based on the past and future history of all true believers. **Our past** is given in verse 3: "... for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." We actually died -- to self, to sin -- when we were baptized into the Body of Christ by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 6:1-5; 1). Our lives as believers have been safely "hidden with Christ" and they will remain that way. Because we are "in Christ," we are inseparable and secure. Our lives are a part of all that is part of "the things that are above." The world will never understand this, but believers have an inkling of what this means.

Our future is described in verse 4: "When Christ who is your life is [finally] revealed, then you will also be revealed with him in glory." Right now our lives are "hidden with Christ," but when he comes again in his glorious, resurrected body, we will also be revealed in glorious and resurrected bodies like his: "... our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to him" (Php. 3:20-21). Again unbelievers cannot understand this, but believers have an inkling of what this means. What a spectacular future awaits us!

Let's covenant not to fix our minds on the temporal, material and immaterial **things of this world**, but to pray for minds set on "**the things that are above**," to hold the coaching of Holy Scripture close to our hearts, to reflect on our past history, and to rejoice in anticipation of our future with him.

"For now [we] see in a mirror, dimly, but then [we] will see face to face. Now [we] know only in part; then [we] will know fully, even as [we] have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

Amen

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