

I. Intro

A. Back when I was a kid... and TV only had three channels, and they used to actually sign off at 2 AM. You just got this test pattern (some of you have never seen a TV test patterns).

B. And shows only played when they played – no DVDs or Hulu or Netflix that allowed you to just keep watching.

C. Back then, Batman was not part of a billion-dollar movie empire with A-list actors, amazing special effects and multidimensional bad guys (like Heath Ledger's Joker). It was a cheesy, thirty-minute, low production weekly show with paper-thin character development, cardboard cut out special effects - during fight scenes they would hold up a sign that said, Kaboom and Wham. And Batman was played by Adam West and Robin – who told the worst jokes – was played by Burt Ward.

D. And every week they ended the show with Batman and Robin caught in a trap that you knew they couldn't possibly get out of. And the narrator would say: what's going to happen to the dynamic duo? Will our fearless caped crusaders be turned into Tapioca by the Riddler's Pudding Making Machine? Tune in next week – same Bat Time, same Bat channel

E. And, last week I went Batman on you. We turned to Paul's letter to the church in Colossae to explore how we grow – how we get better, how we become more like Christ.

1. I argued that better is better. Nicer is nicer. Everyone wins when our character becomes more like that of Christ. When we are shaped by the Holy Spirit and his fruit ripens in our life – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control.

F. I noted that this kind of growth is expected, even promised - most notably in Phil. 1 - but observed that it is not as common as we'd like. Many people seem to not get much better.

G. I commented briefly on the various theories about change, noting: 1) that some say it can't happen – but the Bible says it can; 2) that Enlightenment-based thinkers claim all we need is education – but the Nazis had that; and 3) some claim all we need is Bible knowledge, but the Pharisees had that; and 4) some say we just need to more religious zeal – but Paul had that and ended up railing against religion every bit as loudly as Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins.

H. I noted that what we are after is a changed heart – we do not simply want to act more loving, we want to be more loving. We do not simply want to pretend to be less anxious, we want to experience a deep-unshakable peace. This means we need a change heart, which is what Paul talks about in Colossians 3.

- I. We then:
1. looked at a few passages that talk about how important the heart is: 1) the Deuteronomy passage that Jesus updates in the Gospels – the one calling on us to love Lord your God with all your heart; and 2) Prov. 4:23, where Solomon says, if you ignore everything else I say, guard your heart
 2. noted that biblically speaking, the heart is command central – it’s the essence of our being, the hub of our personality – it represents a lot of things we otherwise attribute to the mind. The heart is the amalgamation of our values, beliefs, thoughts, hopes and dreams.
- J. And I made three points about our hearts:
1. One: It is broken. Corrupted. In Matthew 15 Jesus states that it’s not the food we put into our body that makes us impure, its what is in our heart.
 2. Two: it’s not just corrupted, it’s deceptive. Jeremiah 17:5. “The heart is deceitful above all things.” I spoke about how much denial is out there. Talked about the challenges I have faced seeing myself clearly and how many times as a pastor it’s clear to me that people are thinking way more highly of themselves than they should – and in fact, way more highly of themselves than anyone around them is thinking of them. On this point I cited the Duke study and the book, *The Honest Truth About Dishonesty* – about how often we lie to ourselves.
 3. The final point I made was that unless we are playing spiritual offense, our hearts grow harder not softer over time.
- K. It felt like three strikes and you are out. And then, I asked, What do we do about this? And that is where I went Batman on you and said, “come back next week. Same Bat time, same bat channel.”
- L. And you have to come back. And here you are.
- II. Col. 3:
- A. Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.**
1. This is how far we got last week.
- B. V2: Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. (Some parallelism). For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. (There is the Gospel.)**
- C. Vs. 4: When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**
- D. V5: Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature - and then we get a list - sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.**
1. I am not thrilled with the English translation here. I think the term “earthly nature” is misleading. It’s better than some other versions, which say, “evil desires” or “sinful nature.” But I think they all fail to make the right point.
 2. The Greek word is *epithumia*, which means epi-desire or an over-desire.
 3. It is not a desire for something evil. It’s too much desire for something good. Which is almost always the heart of our problem. This is with leads to idolatry.

4. In Colossians 2 the Pharisees get called out – not because they wanted things off of the “bad list.” They had simply elevated good things beyond their station. They promote good things – like family or work or security or pleasure – to ultimate things.

III. Idolatry is the biggest topic in the Old Testament and it’s at the core of wrong with us.¹ We love something more than God or we find our ultimate value in something other than God.

A. Please understand, we only have two options: (a) we either worship the uncreated true God, or (b) we worship some other created thing as a false god.

1. We are going to worship. I love what David Foster Wallace said here. He was not a Christ-follower, but in a commencement speech about ten years ago he made a profound spiritual observation:

a) In the day to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worship-. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's t truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you.

2. Both Paul and Foster Wallace are saying: we are either going to worship God, or we’re going to worship something else. It’s not possible for our heart to not adore something, not to build its identity on something. Not to build its significance on something. This is what we do.

B. We will not understand ourselves, nor will we be able to make any permanent changes unless we understand this and restore God to his rightful place.

1. Religious people claim that God is their savior and they do not have any idols. Unlikely. Irreligious people say, “I’m a secular person. I do not worship anything. Wrong.

2. What are your idols? These are the things that, if you lost them, you wouldn’t want to live. You’ve made them your life. Your friends may be able to point these out to you. Or you can follow the inordinate desires, the *epithumias* back to their source and you’ll see what these are. And then you see what your identity is – because that is what is changing you. That is what is shaping you. We are shaped by our loves.

C. This sermon is about how to change – the fact is, you do not need to do anything to change. We are all changing. The hard thing is to change in the right direction – to be shaped by Christ. Someone who is loving and gracious. Someone who is not anxious. Someone who can give and not take.

D. We are all changing. What is shaping us – what is giving us our identity – is what we really love and trust.

E. So a key here is to understand our epi-desires. What is it that we love more than God? We must dig down and figure out who we really are! See what’s “down there.” What’s driving you?

F. Reading on – verse 6: **Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.** ⁷ **You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.** ⁸ **But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.** ⁹ **Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices – key word -** ¹⁰ **and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.** ¹¹ **Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.**

G. ¹² **Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.** ¹³ **Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.** ¹⁴ **And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.**

IV. What is the way forward? How do we get better? I see three admonitions here:

V. First, set our heart – our affections, our mind, our life - towards God.

A. We need our first love to be God. We need to get to work so that our identity is found in him. We need to be pulled forward by a love for him, by a hope to know him, to be with him. We need our affections to help us here.

B. You say, but I cannot do that. We love what we love. Ah, how very modern of you to think that way. Today we are told that we need to be honest with ourselves, be true to our inner voice, we cannot suppress what we feel. It’s worth noting – that’s a new idea. And it is not what Paul is saying here or what we thought in the past.

C. A while ago this young girl is throwing a tantrum in the grocery store – full melt down mode.

1. I am sympathetic with parents when their kids do this because we had a child who threw about 700 tantrums. And so we know how frustrating and embarrassing it is. And we knew not to ever give in because then you were reinforcing that behavior – but they didn’t know that.

2. And people would come alongside and say, “you know, if you do not give in they will figure out that this behavior doesn’t work and stop.” Thank you. Would you tell him that! But don’t get too close, because he is a monster and he may bite your face off.

3. I am sympathetic to parents who are not throwing a counter tantrum – who are trying. Well, there was a mom attempting to shape her daughter in the right direction. And she said, “You need to stop screaming and get up off the floor and behave.” And the girl says, “You can’t tell me how to feel.” And the Mom says, “I’m not telling you how to feel, I’m, telling you how to behave.”

D. OK, sounds good. Sounds like Mom is going to get good-Mom points, except, note that Paul is saying something different here. He very much is telling us how to feel.

1. Today we think that we should never be expected to shape our heart. We demand the right to be true to whoever we are. What we find in the Bible is advice telling us to question our heart and compare how we think and feel against an external standard – an external truth. To conform our heart in a certain direction.
 2. This is what we tried to do in the past. T.S. Eliot – the great poet (who is famous in part for saying that April is the cruelest month). Eliot came to faith in Christ as an adult and later wrote that Christ-followers need to keep asking them two questions: 1) What do I love? And 2) what should I love.
 3. And the implication is that I need to shape my heart to love the right things.
 4. By the way, the Book of Psalms is full of this language. We find the Psalmist talking to himself. Directing his heart. “Be still my soul.” That is not a prayer, that is an effort to shape what we feel.
- E. Second, note that growth involves delaying gratification
1. We are to set our mind on things awaiting us not things here at the moment.
 2. This is more unpleasant news. We want what we want when we want it. And we want it now. But we know it makes sense.
 - a) It’s what we try to teach our kids. When a baby is born he or she is not very patient. Perhaps you have noticed. We try to help them learn to see the value in doing hard things now in order to get better things later.
 3. Part of what we should like is God. We need to learn to focus on God and on eternity.
 4. Jesus calls us to that. And, let me remind you, the Christian faith does not make any sense if what you see is all you get. Read the Sermon on the Mount. It is full of language about not getting what we want now.
- F. Jesus keeps talking about living in light of his coming kingdom
- G. Storing up treasure in heaven.
- VI. A second point – but very much related to the first one – is that we are called to focus on the Gospel. In verse 2 we see a reference to ourselves as “hidden in Christ.”
- A. Last week I talked about my plan to hide behind Jesus for my salvation. We will offer an account of our life. I have no desire to be judged on the basis of my work – I do not want justice. I want grace. I intend to lean into 2 Cor. 5:12 for all I am worth.
 - B. We need to build our identity on the Gospel. This will change us. The Gospel is not just for non-Christians to hear. We need it over and over.
 1. To be not known and loved is shallow
 2. To be known and not loved is our fear
 3. The Gospel is – in Christ we are fully known and loved because our sins are forgiven, and his righteousness is given to us.
 - C. And once we get that, we are set free to relax and begin enjoying life.
 - D. We need to learn to rest in the Gospel. It means we have to get over ourselves because we are not the hero of the story.
- VII. Third: We are told to pursue virtuous behavior.

- A. In the context of advice about how to guard our heart, we receive a list of things to avoid because they pull us down and we see some qualities we need to seek because they lift us up. In verse 9 we are told that there are “practices” – think actions or habits – that we need to start or stop doing.
- B. There are things we can do that help us move closer to God and there are things we do that make us more mindful of his presence.
- VIII. Let me step back and frame it this way:
- A. We are called to change.
- B. This is hard work
1. For starters our will is weak. It’s a muscle that gives up quickly.
 2. And the changes we are after are not something we can do – we are relying on the Spirit of God.
- C. But there are practices – disciplines – that can become habits that help place us in the spot where God changes our heart.
- D. The process of growth is not a mystery. It’s not rocket science. You know the kinds of things that move you more fully into God.
- E. Prayer, reading the Bible, serving others, meditating on Scripture, showing up at church, being baptized and taking communion, being generous with your money, having deep conversations with good friends, having accountability with people
- F. We are not flying blind. T
1. There is such a thing as spiritual wisdom
 2. We have the Bible, the example of Christ, 2000 years of millions of people seeking to follow Christ, many of them earnestly doing so and then writing about what they have learned.
- G. If you do not know how to grow, it’s because you do not want to know.
- H. If you really want to know, there are more resources out there than you can imagine.
- I. Is growth easy? No.
1. It requires surrender – which is often awful.
 2. It requires reflection, which is much harder work than watching TV
 3. There are traps we can fall into – like pride and legalism
 4. Guarding our heart is work
 5. But you have a pretty good idea of what you need to do to place yourself in the current of growth. To place yourself before the Spirit of God so that He will do what only He can do.
- IX. We are turning to communion – one of the things we are called to do.
- A. It’s a time of reflection.
- B. It’s a time of sacred engagement
- C. It’s a time in which we remind ourselves how desperately we need to feed on Christ.
- D. And I want to go here thinking again about the Gospel – which leads to this cane.
- E. Our Col 3 text starts: Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

1. This may not hit you in any special way. We hear over and over about the fact that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God. But priests are not supposed to be seated. They are to stand to do their work and can only sit after their work is done.
2. My trip to Ethiopia .

¹ When you read this passage in Colossians, the word idolatry is only related to the word greed, which means an idolatry of money. However, if you go to the parallel passage in Ephesians 5, it's very clear that the word *epithumia* is attached to everything. What the author, Paul, is saying there is that all our bitterness, all our impurity, all of our malice, all of our problems, everything that troubles us, is a result of idolatry.