

INTRODUCTION

I want to begin this morning by asking you a question. What is the single most important thing that is happening in your life right now? That single most important thing that is happening in your life right now is the same for us all and what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to the passage I read earlier, Colossians 3:5-11, and let's see what it is.

THE SELF

Look first of all at the word "self" in verses 9 and 10. Paul uses that word in other New Testament letters and it refers to the same thing in each. It refers to the person we are inside, our inner dimensions.

What we are inside has been the subject of much controversy and debate and still is. But for our purposes today, we are going to assume that it's the following: our mind and its thoughts; our mind and its feelings; our will, also called our heart; our body as I explained it last week; and finally our soul. Those five inner dimensions make up the self or person that we are and that Paul talks about in this passage.

THE SELF IS FORMED

Looking at verse 10 again, Paul goes on to tell us something about this self that we are. It is *"being renewed."* That statement has a companion in Ephesians 4:22. Paul writes there that the self is *"being corrupted."* Those two statements together teach us a profound psychological insight. The self is formed not found.

I once a young man wearing a t-shirt that said, *"If I look lost, it's because I'm trying to find myself."* A lot of people in our culture talk about finding themselves. I read about a woman who left her husband and children. Her husband finally found her six months later selling chocolates under the palms in Hawaii. When he asked her what she was doing, she replied, *"I'm trying to find myself."* If I were

trying to find myself, I'd look in the same place she did, Hawaii.

I wouldn't find it though and those two statements reveal why. It's because the self is formed not found. It isn't an essence waiting to be discovered through introspection like most people think it is. It's an essence waiting to be conceived and shaped instead. So, it doesn't do any good to search for it, even in Hawaii. It's formed not found.

It's formed in one of two directions. The first, according to Ephesians 4:22, is to corruption. The self can be corrupted. That means that our inner dimensions are diminished. They're made less integrated and functional. The second direction, according to Colossians 3:10, is to renewal. The self can be renewed. That means that our inner dimensions are enhanced. They're made more integrated and functional.

But what is it that forms the self in those two directions? It's two things more than any other - our choices and experiences. The things that we decide and the things that we go through shape our thoughts, feelings, will, body, and soul into what they are.

My father died just after I had turned six-years old. One of my most vivid childhood memories is riding to his funeral in the front seat of my uncle's car. I looked up, saw tears running down my uncle's cheeks, and felt disappointed in him. Men don't cry, I thought to myself. So I vowed that I wouldn't and didn't. I had an experience, my father's death, and made a choice, not to cry, that formed the self that I was.

That illustrates several things, one of which is this. All of us have experienced formation. The thousands of choices we've made and experiences we've gone through over the years have shaped our inner dimensions. They have made us the self or person that we are. All of us *have experienced* formation.

But all of us also *are experiencing* it right now. The verb "***being***" in Ephesians 4:22 and Colossians 3:10 makes that perfectly clear. The self that all of us are is being formed. The process of formation doesn't occur and then just stop. It continues on instead. The choices that we continue to make and the experiences that we continue to go through

continue to shape and develop our inner dimensions.

There are no exceptions to this. Alice Evans is 99 years old. She is still being formed. My brother-in-law Jim is a paraplegic. He is still being formed. Nothing stops our formation. You and I are being formed and will continue to be until the day that we die.

The implication of that is staggering. Remembering that formation is in the direction of corruption or renewal, the implication is that you and I are, right now, becoming a better or worse person. Next week and next month and next year at this time, the self that we are will be either better or worse than it is now. Our inner dimensions will be either more integrated and functional or less than they are now.

WHAT WE ARE DETERMINES WHAT WE DO

So, which is it for you and me? Is the self that we are becoming better or worse? The answer to that is all-important and here's why.

Many years ago, God told Jay Alford to do a curious thing, *"Read through the gospels, Matthew through John, and continue doing so until I tell you to stop."* So he did that until God told him to stop 18 months later. Jay now says that one truth in the gospels stood out to him more than any other as a result of reading them scores of times. That one truth is that what we are determines what we do.

That was one of the primary emphases of Jesus. What we are determines what we do. Or to say it more accurately, what we are determines how we act and react. Suppose that someone tailgates you or that people praise you or that you're diagnosed with cancer or that you make more money than you need or that someone slanders you? How will you act or react to those things? The self that you are will determine that. That shows us two things.

First, the self that we are determines our destiny, now and forever. More than anything else, it dictates how poorly or well our earthly and eternal lives will go. Abundance and joy now and forever are inseparably linked with the condition of our inner dimensions.

Second, the self that we are conditions the destiny of others. The condition of our inner dimensions always touches others for good or ill. Why does someone give sacrificially to the poor for instance? Or why does someone make the life of his or her spouse unbearable? The answer is the same. It's the condition of their inner dimensions.

It's true then. What we are does determine what we do. The condition of our inner dimensions determines how we act and react.

BECOMING LIKE JESUS

That is one of the most significant facts about us and it makes our calling crystal clear. Be like Jesus. Notice the phrase in verse 10, *"renewed according to the image of the One who created Him."* Because what we are determines what we do, be like Jesus.

One of the most popular Christian slogans of the 90's was "WWJD." That stood for "What would Jesus do?" But that isn't the Bible's slogan. The Bible's slogan is "WWJB," what would Jesus be. So many Christians focus on what we do. But the Bible, as Jay Alford learned from reading the gospels, focuses on what we are. It calls us to be like Jesus, in our inner dimensions. That's because those who are like He is on the inside will just naturally do what He does on the outside. So, be like Jesus!

The good news is that we can. When we are following Jesus, the Holy Spirit works in our inner dimensions. One of the things that He does is form them into the image of Jesus. Formation into Christlikeness is first and foremost the work of the Holy Spirit.

But it's our work as well. It is something that we are responsible for before God. It's something that we have a hand in - that we can and must set about achieving in a sensible manner. There are things that we have to do in other words. I've already preached about two of those - practicing the presence of God and practicing spiritual disciplines. Paul tells us two more things that we have to do here.

First, according to verse 5, we must consider our body as dead to sinful things. He adds a further detail in Romans 6:11, *"Even so*

consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive God in Christ Jesus."

The word "consider" or "reckon" means to purposely regard our selves as something. In this case, that something is dead to sin and alive to God. In Jesus, we have the psychological power to direct how we think. So we do just that. We direct how we think in our everyday lives - in two ways.

One is that we regard ourselves as dead to sin. We choose not to dwell on thoughts that come from our old self, from the sinful nature that is in us. This is largely a matter of dismissing wrong thoughts.

We direct how we think a second way. We regard ourselves as alive to God. We choose to dwell on thoughts that come from our new self, from the godly nature that is in us as a result of following Jesus. This is largely a matter of embracing right thoughts.

Just this past week, a lethargic clerk at a BP gas station basically wouldn't wait on me. She was shooting the breeze with a friend on the phone and neglecting her work. My first thought was *"How dare she ignore me like that."* But I immediately considered myself as dead to sin and dismissed that egocentric thought. At the same time, I considered myself as alive to God and embraced the Biblical thought. She is an immortal for whom Jesus died. I then left with a loving spirit instead of the angry spirit that the first thought was leading to.

So that's the first thing this passage teaches us to do to become like Jesus. We must consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God. We must dismiss wrong thoughts and embrace right thoughts.

The second thing that it teaches us to do is to put off and put on. Those are the terms Paul uses in verses 8-10. The Greek words here refer to putting off and putting on clothing. Just as we take off old clothing and put on new clothing, Paul says, so should we put off what corrupts and put on what renews. Doing that requires three things.

First, we must understand our inner dimensions. Nothing enters our mind, for instance, without affecting it for good or ill. Or our thoughts and feelings are inseparably linked. Those are critical insights about our inner dimensions. We need to know them and many others. I'm

beginning a Sunday school class in March that will teach those to you.

There's a second thing that taking off what corrupts and putting on what renews requires. We must be constantly aware that all of our choices and experiences are forming us. We should remind ourselves of that fact on a regular basis.

Putting off what corrupts and putting on what renews requires a third thing. We must reject choices and experiences that corrupt and embrace choices and experiences that renew. The first two things enable us to do that. They enable us to discern that the choice or experience before us is going to corrupt or renew us. If it is going to corrupt us, we purposely reject it. If it is going to renew us, we purposely embrace it.

About two years ago, for instance, I quit watching television news, for the most part at least. 90% of the news we watch is either gossip or bad news that we can do nothing about. Since nothing enters our mind without affecting it for good or ill and since our thoughts and feelings are inseparably linked, watching the news was corrupting me. It created negative thoughts and thus negative feelings in me. So, I purposely put it off. I quit watching it. And I can tell you that I'm thinking and feeling a lot better because I have.

You can see that I did all three of those things that putting off what corrupts and putting on what renews requires. First, I understood my inner dimensions. Second, I was aware that something was corrupting me. And third, I purposely rejected that something.

CONCLUSION

I began by asking a question. I close by answering it. The question - what is the single most important thing that is happening in your life right now? The answer - the kind of person you're becoming. But what kind of person is that? What kind of person are you and I becoming right now? Decide to be a disciple of Jesus, consider yourself dead to sin and alive to Him, and put off what corrupts and put on what renews. The answer to that question will be "like Jesus" if we do.