

Christ as All in All

by David McCarthy, contributing writer

If there was one person from history you could meet, follow around, get to know—who would it be? Or, if you wanted a role model, someone to emulate from any time in history, who would it be? In answering the first question, most Christians would likely say Jesus. To be able to hear Him teach, see Him minister to the masses, perform incredible miracles - most people would jump at the chance. In answering the second question, many committed Christians would opt for some great Christian figure from the past; but not Jesus Himself. That is because our ability to match up to Jesus seems pretty much out of reach. Believing in Jesus as Savior seems reasonable; believing that I can truly be like Him seems unattainable. And yet, Paul tells us that God predestined those who love Him and are called to His purpose to be conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29). So not only is that God's desire for us, it is something He intends to bring to pass. Our failure to believe it only delays His transformational work.

Paul tells us that God wants to bring us to the place where “*Christ is all and in all*” (Col. 3:11). This means He is all to us and all within us. The last time I checked, “all” means everything, every item under consideration. The Bible never requires or suggests something of us, or for us, that can't be obtained. It may be impossible for us, but not for God. If we are looking to ourselves for some desired outcome, we will likely be disappointed. But if our faith is in what God says about us, the outcome is assured. The focus of our faith makes all the difference.

Before Christ can be our all, He must first be our life (Col. 3:4). There is the fact of Christ as our life, followed by the practical experience of it. It is the application of the fact that causes Christ to be our *all and in all*. And that is what Paul does for us—he makes it practical and speaks of “putting off” from us what is no longer true and “putting on” what is.

Paul says that we have put off the “old man,” the old Adamic life (Col. 3:9). As Christians, we were crucified with Christ and died to our old life and nature (Gal. 2:20, Rom. 6:6). That is the fact. But the self-life wasn't crucified, and if not denied, the fruit of the “old man” can creep back in. That is when we need to practically put off anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language, and lying (Col. 3:8-9). You put them off by denying them; you put them off by putting on Christ in their place. Satan is a master at manufacturing old feelings and thoughts and making them seem like our own. We, in turn, need to become masters at telling Him, “Not so; not anymore.” So when anger rises up within us, we can speak to it; “Sorry, but you died some time ago. Christ is my life now and He doesn't feel that way.” That is faith's practical application of the fact—Christ is now our life.

Paul also reminds us that we have put on the new man (Col. 3:10), who is being renewed according to the Lord's very image. This new man is part of the new creation and comes about by our putting on Christ. Now this word, “put on,” is a single Greek word that means to *be clothed with a garment*, to *put on a garment*. We are to cloth ourselves with the new man, our new life in Christ. It's not something we *do*; it's something we *put on*. It's the same word used for putting on Christ (Gal. 3:27 and Rom. 13:14).

After declaring Christ to be all and in all, Paul begins the next verse with “therefore.” It is because Christ is now our life and He is to be all and in all, that we can put on “tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, bearing with one another, forgiving one another” (Col. 3:12-13). He then completes the package by saying to “put on love,” which Paul calls “*the bond of perfection*” (Col. 3:14). When most Christians read a list of required virtues, their hearts sink. It reminds me when I was young and would hear a preacher say—“You just need faith.” My inner reaction was always, “Well, I know that, but what if I don’t have faith? How do I produce something I don’t have?” Many feel the same way about words like humility, meekness, longsuffering, or forgiving others. But notice Paul uses that same word—*put on*. These are not virtues that we must try to emulate; rather we put them on, just as we put on Christ. If Christ is to be all, then these virtues must be His, and by putting Him on, we put them on, and that is how they become ours. That means we are to put on Christ as our kindness, as our humility, and as all the rest. He has already perfected these virtues. We don’t have to come up with them ourselves—we just let Him be these things in us. It’s that simple. That is letting Him be all.

When ministering to prison inmates, there is an illustration I often use that helps them visualize the difference between our living the human life and Christ living it for us. Imagine your person is an automobile. Before you became a believer, you were alone in the car and did all the driving. But it seemed the car always ended up in the ditch. For at man’s fall, we lost the ability to “drive.” But when we become a believer, Christ comes to live within and is seated there with us. However, as long as we are still behind the wheel, we will end up in the ditch. But that stops the moment we let Jesus do the driving. This is the difference between our being on the throne of our life and Jesus being there. But sometimes things pop up, or we don’t like the way Jesus is driving, and think He needs our help. So we grab the wheel; and predictably, end up in the ditch. This is to let the self, or the flesh, back on the throne of our life. But when we finally tire of the ditch, we’ll let Jesus drive again. To lay aside the elements of our former manner of life is to refuse to grab the wheel any more. Our flesh may want to, but we refuse. Jesus is driving now, and we need to lay aside the itch to do so. This analogy isn’t perfect, but it helps make a point. If we let Jesus live, we live as we should. If we try to do the living, it’s always a disaster.

So if Jesus is the reality of these virtues and all we need to do is put Him on to obtain them, why does Paul enumerate them, i.e. says to put them on, and not simply to put on Christ? Actually, it is helpful to have them listed. Doing so shows us what the Christ-life looks like and what we should expect to see lived out of us when we put Him on. As there is a need for a specific virtue, we have the realization that we can put that on by letting Christ be within us for that very need.

How wonderful when He becomes our all!

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