

Greed is idolatry

by Zac Poonen

This sermon emphasizes the importance of being unashamed witnesses for Christ, sharing personal testimonies of boldly identifying with Jesus even in the face of opposition. It delves into the significance of setting our minds on heavenly things, considering our earthly bodies dead to immorality and greed, equating greed with idolatry. The speaker challenges listeners to live in a way that reflects being seated with Christ in heavenly places, seeking to eliminate greed and covetousness from their lives.

Scripture: Colossians 3:1, Ephesians 2:6, Matthew 6:33, 1 Corinthians 10:14, Hebrews 12:1, James 4:3, 1 Timothy 6:10, Philippians 3:20, Romans 12:2

Topics: "Bold Witnessing", "Heavenly Mindset"

Description

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Transcript

It's always a blessing to hear a testimony of someone who came from another religion and spent his life worshipping idols and had to break away from his family in order to come to Christ. With most of us that has not been true, so we've not understood the price one has to pay in such situations. So I always appreciate someone who's come from non-Christian families.

And also I appreciate someone who's not at all ashamed to publicly identify himself with Christ like the way he's put all those verses on his car. Now not everybody's called to do that, but some are. We all witness for Christ in different ways.

Some wear a badge on their shirt or in different ways, but I remember in my life about three or four years after I was converted, the Lord told me to write two verses on my scooter which had two panels on either side when I was in the Navy. And I had two verses. One was, prepare to meet your God, and the other side was Christ died for our sins.

And pretty soon the captain of the naval base called me up and I was asked to take leave my scooter outside the base. I was not permitted to use that because those verses offended them. And I was

discouraged at that time because I wanted to ride around the scooter all over the base and said, Lord, I want everyone to know, first of all, what I stand for.

I'm not ashamed to proclaim that I'm a Christian, and I'm not ashamed to proclaim that everybody must be ready to meet their God, and that the only way is through Christ who died for our sins. So I was discouraged that so quickly it is as if the devil nullified it by making the captain forbid me from riding the scooter. But what happened was I then started riding a bicycle and no naval officer ever rides a bicycle.

That's only ordinary sailors ride it. Naval horses will either ride a car or a scooter because they got earned much more. So everybody began to talk about me.

Why is this Lieutenant Poonen riding a bicycle in the naval base? And then somebody said it's because he had some work to do. He had some verses written on his scooter. And then the question came, what were those verses? And that way those verses spread around the naval base much quicker than if I had written it myself.

That showed me the amazing sovereignty of God. And even 30-40 years later, I met naval officers who retired who would tell me, I remember the verses you wrote on your scooter. So the effect of something like that lasted a long, long time.

And I think only in eternity I will know how many people are affected by it. Now I'm not asking you all to write verses on your car, but all I say is be an unashamed witness for Christ in your office with your relatives. Let them know clearly that you are a disciple of Jesus Christ and not an ordinary nominal Christian.

We should never be ashamed of that because some people are. They're very diplomatic when they are with their relatives and they don't want to be known too much as an out-and-out Christian. And I believe that they suffer the result of it.

And they don't grow spiritually. So the Lord says, if you're ashamed of me and my words in this evil and adulterous generation, I will be ashamed of you when you stand before the Father. Don't let that happen to any of us that the Lord Jesus has to be ashamed of us when he returns because we were ashamed of him now.

So I am thankful for someone like Brother Bala. What I want to share with you today is something from Colossians. It's a very strong word we have here in Colossians chapter 3 and verses 1 onwards.

Colossians chapter 3, verse 1 to 5. I've read this many, many times, but I find even recently when I read it, it challenged me. If you take it seriously, if you have been raised up with Christ, let's stop there. When we are baptized in water, the word baptism is from the Greek word bapto or baptizo, which is an ordinary word in the Greek language meaning immerse.

That's all it means. When the King James Version was translated in 1611, the translators were God-fearing people, but they were afraid to translate it immerse because King James had told those translators don't make any translation that will disturb church traditions and nobody was being immersed in the Church of England. They were all being sprinkled.

So these people who translated it, if they had translated it immerse, they would have lost their heads, being chopped off for translating something that disturbed church traditions. So they very cleverly invented

a word which was not found in the English language. Baptism.

Nobody knew what it meant because there was no such word that existed till then. It was a Greek word. They took the word baptizo and changed it into baptism.

And so when the King James Version Bible came out in 1611 and people read it and they read baptism, they said, oh we don't know what that means. Never heard that word in the English. It must be what they do in the church for the little children.

That's how child baptism came to be known. Child baptism, no child is immersed. They just sprinkle water on their head.

So baptism is a symbol of burial, immersed in water. And Jesus himself submitted to that. John the Baptist pushed him in the water and pulled him up.

It's a picture of how we submit to other people putting us to death, believing that God will raise us up. And we choose death to self, believing that God will raise us up spiritually. So here it says, this is speaking of our identification with Christ.

We have died with Christ. We are buried with Christ, spiritually, and raised up with Christ. And not only raised up with Christ, it says here, seated in the heavenly places with Christ.

That's what it says in Ephesians. Dead, buried, raised up, ascended. So spiritually, even though we are physically here on the earth, spiritually we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places.

Ephesians chapter 2 makes that very clear. Now that's not preached very much. What is mostly preached in Christendom is your sins are forgiven, and how you can go to heaven.

And some people add a little more about living a decent life. But the New Testament emphasizes so much on identification with Christ. Baptism symbolizes that.

I've been buried with Christ and raised up, and I'm now united with Christ spiritually in the heavenly places. And that's what the Holy Spirit has come to make real in our hearts. We sing in that song, heaven came down and glory filled my soul.

It's literally true. In another sense, I'm taken up to heaven spiritually, and if, you know, we experience only what we believe. The things in Scripture, for example, if you didn't believe that Christ died for your sins, you'd never experience forgiveness.

What is the difference between you and that nominal Christian who talks about Christ's death and burial, but does not experience the risen, overcoming power of Christ? It's because he doesn't believe. He's there in Scripture, but he doesn't believe it. He nominally believes it.

Now, it's possible for all of us also to nominally believe that we are raised up and seated with Christ in the heavenly places. For example, you think back and ask yourself, when was the last time you seriously thought of the fact that you are seated with Christ in the heavenly places? That you're not actually looking up to heaven, but looking down from heaven spiritually to the things of earth. I remember as a young Christian, when God opened my eyes to this, I pictured it like a rubber band, and I felt that my life till then was like a rubber band tied to the things of earth, and on Sunday morning it will be stretched up when I go to church to the things of heaven, and then once that is over, the rubber band springs back to the things of

earth, the rest of the time, and then maybe a little bit when I read the Bible every morning, stretched up for a little while in the morning when I read the Scriptures, and then when that's over, the rubber band is released to the things of earth.

So most of the time, my mind is on the things of earth, but occasionally like the rubber band being pulled up to the things of heaven on Sunday morning, and when I read the Bible, and then back to the things of earth. But when I read the Scripture, I realized it's to be the other way around. The rubber band is to be tied up to the things of heaven, and that's the difference between a heavenly Christian and an earthly Christian.

And the heavenly Christian, his mind is basically there, and the rubber band is stretched down to the things of earth, maybe eight hours a week, eight hours a day rather, or ten hours a day. A mother at home, many hours a day, stretched down to the things of earth, but once it's released, back up to the things of heaven. In other words, when our mind is finished with earthly things during the day, it should swing back to heaven.

Now that is the way God wants us to live. But I was not living like that. My rubber band was tied to the things of earth, stretched occasionally to heaven, and I said, Lord, this has got to change, and this is why the Holy Spirit has come.

And I had to work on it, and work on it, and work on it, it became more and more real. I want to encourage you, if you are raised up with Christ, Colossians 3.1, keep seeking. Why does it say keep seeking? Because we are constantly tempted to be tied down to the things of earth.

So you've got to fight the battle, fight the battle, keep seeking the things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. In other words, I've got to exercise through the power of the Holy Spirit, my mind to think about the things of heaven, and what is it in heaven. In other words, I have to look down with Christ on the things of earth.

When something happens to me, which is not very good, I have to look at it from heaven's standpoint. Well, how is this going to work out for me now? Maybe I lost my job, maybe somebody treated me badly. Now I can look at it from an earthly standpoint and be in a panic, or get bitter and hate that man, or I can look at it from heaven and say, poor man, that guy's what a wretched man he is that he troubled me like that.

Lord, save his soul, forgive him, he's on his way to hell. I look at it from an entirely different way, or if I've lost my job and say, well, Lord, you will never forsake me, I'm seeking your kingdom and your righteousness, and Jesus was never forsaken by the Father, I will not be forsaken. It makes an entirely different view of circumstances on the earth if I keep, if I recognize my position where I am.

And I'll tell you this, among born-again Christians, I wonder even if 5% of born-again Christians live like this. 95% of born-again Christians, their mind is so much on the things of earth, occasionally pulled up like the rubber band to the things of heaven. Keep seeking the things that are above.

It does not happen automatically, it's an exhortation, and you cannot obey it without the power of the Holy Spirit, and you will not obey it unless you take it seriously. You hear something today, now it was there in your Bible all these years since you were born again, and I'm sure this is not the first time you're hearing Colossians 3.1. You've probably read Colossians many times. I want to ask you honestly, answer this

question to yourself, how many times have you seriously taken that exhortation to keep seeking the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God? Set your mind, again that expression, you've got to keep setting your mind on the things that are above, and not on the things that are on the earth.

I have to live on this earth, I have to think of many things I need on this earth. You've got to think of your job, you've got to think of taking care of your children, you've got to think of your family's needs, you've got to save money for the future, you've got to educate your children. There are 101 things you have to do, but yet the rubber band is my example.

Even if I have to set my mind for most of the time of the day on the many things, on necessary things of earth, once it is over, the rubber band must spring up to the things of heaven. If that has not been true in your life till now, my dear brother and sister, I invite you, exhort you, challenge you, please take this scripture seriously. This could be the reason why your Christian life is so shallow, why you don't get revelation from God on his word, why you're so defeated by sin, why your mind is so earthly minded, why you fight and quarrel about earthly things, why earthly things disturb you so much if you're honest about it.

Set your mind on the things above and not on the things that are on the earth. Now the Holy Spirit is not unrealistic. He's not saying we are never to think about the things of earth, and I find personally, you know, Jesus used illustrations many times, and I find the illustration of the rubber band is the best that I have found for myself, that I can stretch it down to the things of earth even for 10, 12, 15 hours a day, but once it's released, it must go back to hell, and once your day's work is over and you've got nothing more to think about, for example, when you go to bed.

Most of us, when we go to bed, our work for the day is over. Where does your mind go when you go to bed? I'll tell you how it is with many believers. They're thinking of how to make a little more money tomorrow or next week, or somebody who did some harm to them, how in the world I'm going to teach him a lesson or some stupid thing like that, or so many other things they worry and worry and worry about, you know, like somebody said, 90% of the things we worry about never take place.

Unnecessarily, the devil fools us, wasting 90% of our time worrying about things which never happen. If not, if you don't believe that, look back in the past years to all the things you worried about, and I'll tell you 90% of them never took place, but you're still worried about it unnecessarily. Well, we should learn a lesson from that for the future, so that when we finally finish with the things of earth, our mind should swing back to the things of heaven.

Set your mind there, because it says here, now it comes to the baptism here, you have died, and now your life is hidden with Christ and God. You've died, you're buried, and you're raised up, and you're with Christ and God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed one day, you will also be revealed with him in glory.

This is going to happen, but the measure in which we are going to experience that glory in the final day, depends on how much we have set our mind on the things above. I'm absolutely convinced, without any doubt, that everybody in heaven is not going to be equal. Now, you may disagree with me, that's up to you, but Jesus said that everybody will be rewarded according to their faithfulness on earth, and that would have to be, Jesus would have had to tell a lie if everybody's going to be the same in heaven.

We're going to be in heaven, all right, that I agree, born again, but it's not going to be the same. You say, does it matter? Well, I'll tell you. Take an example.

Think of all the people who are living on the earth. They're all living on the earth, but does it matter that somebody is a homeless man, and does it matter that somebody is living in a mansion? They're living on the earth, but what a world of difference in the way they're living. I don't want to be, I don't want to just go to heaven.

It's not just to live on the earth. I don't want to be a homeless person on the earth. I want to live comfortably on earth.

I don't want to just go to heaven. A lot of people don't think about that. They don't believe that Jesus meant what he said, that he who is faithful will be rewarded.

People think that you've accepted Christ, the one who's absolutely faithful throughout his life, that martyr who laid down his life for Christ, and this lazy Christian who just lived for himself is all going to be the same in heaven. It's not true, because if it is true, God has to be unfaithful. Jesus Christ has to be a liar.

He didn't mean what he said, but I believe with all our hearts that he meant what he said. And now is the time, dear brothers, to wake up, not because, it's not because I want some position in heaven. I'm not looking for a mansion or any such thing in heaven.

You can have my mansions. I'm saying that when I see Jesus face to face, I want to be able to look at him and say, Lord, to the best of my knowledge, to the best of my ability, I live for you. I did not live for myself.

From the time I got understanding of how much you did for me, I did not live one day for myself. I tried my best to live for you. I did not live for money.

I did not live for honor. I lived for you, and I trusted you, and you took care of all my needs. So that's the reason.

So it's more, it's not that I want to have some position in heaven, but that I want to be able to see my Lord's face and look at him and be thankful that I had some opportunity to show my gratitude to him who died for me by having lived for him from the time I got understanding. That should be our desire, brothers and sisters, that when we see Jesus face to face, you have no regrets about how you live. We all have regrets about you.

I know I have regrets about the years when I was backsliding and did not seek earnestly for a life of victory, but I know certainly from the time CFC started just 49 years ago, my life has been different, and I'm extremely thankful that God opened my eyes and baptized me in the Holy Spirit and brought me in fellowship into a body of Christians that enabled me to take my Christian life seriously every day, and it's just been better and better these 49 years. I'm very thankful for that because I know that, like Paul said, we should be able to say at the end of our life, I've finished my course. There's a particular course that God's planned for all of us on this earth from the time we are born again, and I'll tell you this, most people don't finish that course.

They may have accepted Christ, and they may be just sinning and asking God to forgive them and sinning and asking God to forgive them, and they keep on sinning and asking God to forgive them. They get upset with people. They have bitterness with people, and then they ask forgiveness, and they hurt people, and they ask forgiveness, and they get bitter and ask God to forgive them.

Their life is endless like this. When are they going to get over all this bitterness and complaining and getting angry and yelling at husband and wife? When is it all going to get over? That's not the way God wants us to live. Maybe we begin like that, which is like a baby begins crawling, but we don't crawl all our life.

We gradually get on our feet and walk and we run, and that's how we have to grow. That's we need to ask ourselves whether we are growing, whether when we meet our Lord face to face we'll be able to say to Him, like Paul said at the end of his life, I have fought a good fight. I want to ask you, brothers and sisters, as you look back on your life, forget the years of backsliding, but at least since the time you've come to this wonderful church which proclaims the body of Christ, which proclaims a new covenant, since you've come to a CFC church, have you, at least from then on, have you taken seriously the things you've heard here to say, Lord, I want to fight the good fight.

I want to keep the faith. I want to finish my course. It says here, when Christ is revealed, we'll be revealed with Him in glory.

Therefore, what should I do? Is it something I've just got to believe all that? No, here is something very, very important, and I could go for a long time on verse five. How shall I therefore live if my mind is set on the things above? Consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality. That means I must seek to come to the place where, like a dead man, has no sexual temptation, does not respond to sexual temptation.

I must consider my earthly body as dead to immorality. I don't get there overnight. You know, all men will admit sexual temptation is one of the strongest temptations that comes to them, not so much to women but to men.

But it says to come to the place where we work towards that place where we become more and more like dead to immorality. Consider, this is a command of the Lord, consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire. All those four statements relate to sexual sin, particularly sexual sin, immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire.

Consider yourself to be dead to that. I want to ask every one of you men sitting here, are you obeying that verse? Do you consider yourself as your rubber band up there in heaven, or is it attached to the things of earth? And there's another one thing which is put in the same category, that is greed. Sex and money, these are the two things that tempt all men.

Money tempts women as well. Greed, the longing to have something which I don't have. Why have you heard me speak so much against registries, baby showers, wedding showers, where I ask people to receive a gift is perfectly okay.

Jesus received gifts, you read that in Luke chapter 8, but to ask people, give me this, give me that, give me that, this is what registries are all about. And amazing, amazing that Christians, all types of Christians in every denomination do it, and this is about the only church where anybody's ever spoken against it. Do you believe Jesus would send out registries asking people to give me this gift, give me that gift, and if he's particularly, let Joseph of Arimathea know, I need an expensive robe, he's a rich man, and particularly when you're in a church like Silicon Valley, you can expect big gifts, because a lot of rich people here, and so you make the wedding registry full of a whole lot of things, expensive things, you would not do that in a poor village in India.

This is 100% greed, g-r-e-e-d, there's no other word for it. I'll tell you what greed is, verse 5, idolatry. There is no difference between the greedy man and that Hindu man who worships idols, zero difference, that chap worships a physical idol, this chap worships gifts from others, there's no difference, that's what the Bible says.

From today onwards, I want to encourage you, consider greed as idolatry, when you're wanting what you do not have, when you're wanting somebody else to give you what you don't have, that is idolatry, it's falling down before an idol and saying, oh idol, I worship you, you are my god. Have you done it? We have all done it in the past in one way or the other, and I'll tell you in my case, I took that very seriously. I went before the Lord and said, Lord, any greed in my life, any desiring what somebody else has, you see somebody else got a better car than you have, greed, I want something like that.

You go to somebody's house and you see something he has in his house which you don't have, greed, you want something like that, you want a house like somebody else's, you want clothes like somebody else's, you want a car like somebody else's, you want a job like somebody else's, greed, greed, greed, call it idolatry from today onwards. Lord, I'm no different from that non-Christian bowing down to an idol, that Muslim who doesn't worship idols is better than me, because I'm worshipping an idol here. Greed, greed, greed.

When you call it by its proper name, idolatry, idolatry, idolatry, you'll be freed from it. I'm telling you from my experience. I had as much greed as anybody else, but I said, Lord, I want to fight this and fight this and fight this.

That's why when I quit my naval job way back 60 years ago nearly, I decided to give every cent I had earned in all those eight years of my service emptied my bank account and said, Lord, I want to be free from greed. I want to serve you and trust you and I want to tell you in all these 56 years that I've been in full-time Christian work without ever receiving a salary from a single CFC church in all these 48 years, God has fulfilled that promise which says, seek the kingdom of God first and all these other things shall be added to you. It has been added.

I want to say this for the glory of God, not for my testimony. We also encourage you that if you put God first, claim his promise, he will keep his word. You will not suffer.

I did not suffer. My children got a good education. They got good jobs.

God took care of all that even though I never in my life asked anybody for money. I never borrowed one cent from anybody in all my life. I never was in debt to anyone, but we live very simply.

Fortunately, God gave me a wife who just had the same attitude. I want to just say to you that if you get rid of greed from your life, your spiritual life will grow in leaps and bounds. Don't look, expect anything.

I remember when I started writing books, everybody told me every Christian author in the world, every Christian author in the world receives royalty for the books they publish. I decided I will not do it. I refused to receive one rupee as royalty from the books I publish.

I said it's all free. God's word is free. I can't take money for distributing God's word.

Have I suffered a lack because of that? Never. Maybe I had to live, my wife and I had to live extremely simply. That's okay, but I didn't worship idols.

Dear brothers and sisters, please take this seriously. Covetousness is idolatry. Greed is idolatry.

If you want to live the Christian life the way God wants you to live it and not play the fool with it, take God's word seriously. Live as one who is seated with Christ in the heavenly places. May God help you and me.

Amen.

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