

Introduction

I wonder, what are the higher things in life for you? We often use 'higher' as a metaphor for better, more refined or more advanced. What are the things you aspire to in life?

Pause for responses

Paul, in his letter to the Christians at Colossae suggests that we should set our minds on things that are higher (above us).

The things we mostly achieve are those things that we have set our hearts on – because those are the things we put our energy and attention into. Paul reminds his listeners that Jesus has won a new life for them and so, as new beings they should be setting their hearts on the things of heaven, rather than the earthly things that used to occupy them.

It is curious how readily we think of 'up' as being better than 'down'. Although, when we do look up, the sight can indeed be glorious – a beautiful blue sky; sunrise and sunset; and especially the stars at night. To set our minds on higher things implies that we are aiming for the spectacular glory of God – and Paul says that the way to do this is to leave behind the things below. What sorts of things might we want to leave behind us as Christians?

Wait for responses

As Christians, our lives belong to Christ in God, hidden until he is revealed in glory. Therefore, we must turn from lifestyles that are alien to Christ and live as people clothed in 'new creation', where the old distinctions based on race or faith are forgotten.

Getting dressed should be a relatively simple process for most of us. In reality, at least for some, it isn't always that easy.

What is the dress code? Have I worn this before? Do these colours match? Mention the agonies in deciding what to wear to the Archbishop's garden party. The question why did so many wear their dog collars?

Our clothes project an image of who we are to others; and we judge others by their clothing almost as instinctively as we breathe. So why does Paul say that we need to clothe ourselves with our new self? Surely our values and behaviours are more significant than external appearance – they should come from what is inside us. But Paul knows that our natural instinctive behaviour isn't always the healthy or positive one. We have actively to choose the new self rather than the old one. Over time, the new behaviours will become more and more natural, but it can be difficult and require a conscious effort to get right.

Giving in to feel good' is a phrase that psychologists use to describe how our own self-regulation fails. It describes what happens when we know what is in our best interests (in terms of eating, drinking, exercise, etc.) but we avoid the anxiety-inducing behaviour, and do the thing we know we shouldn't. We give in to feel good. In this reading, Paul gives us a list of the things that we shouldn't be doing, and who wouldn't want to get rid of these things? But do we give in to feel good? It can be hard to put these things into practice. It takes constant effort. Through the daily practice of prayer and meditation on Scripture, we can build the spiritual, emotional and mental resilience to get better, bit by bit, at not giving in.

Paul tells his hearers that they should be discarding anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language. These are all things that we can find come naturally to us and it takes a definite act of will to avoid them. Each of these behaviours cause some

kind of alienation between us and other people. One of the distinctions that we make in life is between 'me' and 'you'.

There are times in life when this distinction is important – *ask for some suggestions of when this may be*. But it is often at the root of the kind of 'bad habits' Paul asks us to 'put to death' in order to live our 'renewed' lives.

Read the parable (Luke 11vv.16b-20) ⁶ *Then Jesus told them a story: "A rich man had a fertile farm that produced fine crops. ¹⁷ He said to himself, 'What should I do? I don't have room for all my crops.' ¹⁸ Then he said, 'I know! I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll have room enough to store all my wheat and other goods. ¹⁹ And I'll sit back and say to myself, "My friend, you have enough stored away for years to come. Now take it easy! Eat, drink, and be merry!"*

This reading illustrates the greed Paul calls 'idolatry'. I'm going to read it again. Please would you count how many times you hear the words 'I' or 'my' spoken by the rich man – it reaches double figures! Read it again. In a Christlike community we are called to think in terms of 'we' rather than 'I'. What differences might that make to our daily lives? What would change?

Paul tells the Colossian Christians that they should not only set their hearts on things above but that they should also set their minds on them as well, not on earthly things. What Paul means is that we should be using our minds to contemplate Jesus, to get to know him. What are his likes and dislikes? What pleases him? Who is he –and what does this mean for the world and us? What is there about him that we need to know if we are to grow in maturity?

We are called to be thoughtful, thinking Christians, people who read God's word and struggle to understand it and put it into practice in our lives. Not to be people who simply live by things that we have been told. We need to seek for Jesus for ourselves, to get to know him and to understand his mind and

allow it to affect our daily lives. We are the people who wear the armband WWJD. (*What would Jesus do?*)

If we are called into a knowledge of God, if we are to become God's friends, then, Paul concludes we are called to be holy as God is holy. There is no place in the life of the believer for sinful attitudes and behaviour. Paul looks at these things in depth later on in the letter but for the moment he is simply speaking in general terms and telling us that as God's new creatures we need to deal with the things in us that belong to the old life.

When I was a child we lived in Africa and the Middle East for a while. It meant we had to learn to deal with all sorts of creatures that affected our lives. Before using a loaf of bread we had to bang it on the table to let the ants fall out. Before cooking with flour or maize we had to sieve it to get the little weevils that crawled into the flour, out. It's a bit like that in the Christian life.

When we put our trust in God and the Holy Spirit enters our lives he begins to change us and transform our thinking and our behaviour. But this is not an entirely passive process. As God's new children we have a responsibility to sift our lives and see the things that have not been changed and renewed and to get rid of them. Being a Christian is an act of will and we daily have to decide if we will live as Christians or live as citizens of this world. We need to decide what attitudes and behaviours we will dress ourselves with.